

Disaster Recovery Planning — The Essentials

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Bad things happen to good data

Disasters can be anything from malware attacks to weather phenomena. They usually come as a surprise, and they can be devastating. However, fast, effective recovery is possible and the damage, expense, difficulty, downtime, and stress can be minimized.

If, and only if, you have a solid plan.

Creating and implementing an effective disaster recovery plan takes time, effort, and buy-in by everyone in the organization. Every so often, employees will be required to bring their work to a halt, and as you well know, interruptions of this kind are especially problematic in the fast-moving 3PL and trucking company environment.

Disaster recovery plans are not created equal. A good plan is carefully devised, updated regularly to reflect changes in procedures, systems and regulations, and thoroughly tested on a scheduled basis. For 3PL and trucking companies, it is imperative that the plan takes into account the unique nature of the business, such as the fact that 3PL and trucking employees tend to be the communications hub for all parties and need the ability to react quickly to emergencies.

Even the best plans are useless if they stay on the shelf. Not only should plans be presented to staff soon after their completion, they should be reviewed regularly for improvements, updates to components, and changes within the workplace. Plans should also be communicated to users through an ongoing training program. Because 3PL and trucking company employees are so assiduous, it may take some extra push to get people to put things on hold even for a short time.

Prepare for disaster

You should calculate your total survivable downtime. The cost of disasters can be measured by the amount of downtime you incur, so begin your disaster recovery planning by determining how much you can withstand. To do so, you must add up how much the loss of each main function will be over a given period. The total for your company could be seconds or days, with 3PL and trucking companies requiring high speed.

The next step is to identify the importance of each app. Separate your applications into three groups. Tier 1 apps must be restored as rapidly as possible. Tier 2 apps are important but not as urgent, and can be put on hold for a while. Tier 3 apps can wait for a few days if necessary. Some apps will become more important or less so over time, thus changing tiers.

After you have identified the importance of each app, you should then set recovery objectives. For each application, determine a recovery point objective (RPO) and a recovery time objective (RTO). These can be daunting tasks in organizations as complex as 3PL and trucking companies, so do not hesitate to ask for advice internally as well as from your vendors.

Don't forget other costs:

- **Normal operations:** When disaster strikes, all the expenses of running a business continue without interruption.
- **Lost data:** Downtime can damage or destroy data, often resulting in interrupted operations. And your customers' data can also be endangered.
- **Damage to reputation:** When normal operations come to a halt, public perceptions begin to slide, which may mean lost customers.
- **Expense of recovery:** Restoring normal operations comes at a price, but a good recovery plan keeps those expenses down.

Thoroughly inventory all hardware and software. Leave nothing out because any item could be an entry point for disaster. Keep a spreadsheet of your inventory and make sure it is always kept current.

Product data such as manuals, contracts and product descriptions should be kept with your inventory records, along with any relevant articles, blog posts or reviews regarding your hardware and software products. Reexamine the document every quarter for completeness and accuracy.

Stay in touch with your vendors so that if you need their help; they will be quick to respond. If your service level agreements do not cover disasters, make sure that you change the terms. Vendor companies should be contractually obligated to start solving problems within a specified time. You may be able to secure agreements on how long it should take for repairs to be made.

Take time to fully understand your data

Know the answers to these questions concerning every category of data:

- How important is each category of data to your operations and to your customers?
- How hard would it be to replace the data?
- How sensitive is the data and what level of confidentiality is needed? Take this requirement extremely seriously.

Once again, the complexity of 3PL and trucking

companies' operations can make this step difficult.

Make every employee—and every key vendor—a part of the disaster recovery plan

This way, everyone has skin in the game, everyone is aware of the potential dangers, everyone knows what to do in a crisis, and everyone has ownership. Give each person a specific assignment and be certain that there are designated backup people for when major players are away.

Establish a method for determining if a disaster has occurred, and appoint a group that makes the decision. Make sure the decision tree is well-understood by all concerned, and that accountabilities are clear. Set up a formal method for notifying all parties that disaster has struck.

A formal notification procedure, in both electronic and paper form, should be ready to go at a moment's notice. Internal email and telephone services may be compromised, so alternate platforms should be available. Also, everyone needs to know when and how to switch to safe communication methods.

Schedule ongoing recovery drills, which are not the easiest thing to do in 3PL and trucking companies. When you are certain that a disaster is real, consider sending out an official statement on company web sites and social media. Most of the content can be prepared in advance, so that details can be added quickly.

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Cover-ups make any disaster worse

Tell the public the truth. More than most businesses, successful 3PL and trucking companies rely on a strong reputation for integrity. Responses to a disaster show the public what you are made of. Do not cover up. Do not understate the damage and potential risks. Do not issue wishful-thinking announcements saying "Don't worry, everything will soon be just fine." Make only realistic statements about the anticipated recovery, and if early estimates cannot be met, get the word out quickly. Make every effort to stay ahead of the rumor mill.

Be ready to get out of Dodge

It may be necessary to move your operations to a separate, safe location. Setting this place up should be a crucial part of your plan, and should include all the workspaces, amenities, communications, systems and equipment you require to keep functioning. You need to be able to transport your people to the location quickly and efficiently and for them to be sufficiently familiar with the emergency setup to begin working as soon as they arrive. If the disaster is on an area-wide scale, such as an extreme weather event, your people should be prepared to telework productively. This critical activity is one of the most challenging steps for 3PL and trucking companies, but without it even a well-conceived plan can fail.

Test, test, test

As you see, planning for disaster recovery is elaborate and time consuming, but you will be well prepared if you follow these steps. However, no preparations are perfect and even with the best plan ever devised, disaster is possible. The weak point could be something small, like a single human error, an overlooked rogue email or a carelessly installed minor app. The best defense against such possibilities is periodic testing, at least quarterly.

Here are some points to remember:

- Ensure that your testing methods support your RTO and RPO goals.
- Validate the skills of everyone who works with the system.
- Keep in mind that a testing failure is not a bad thing, since it reveals flaws in your readiness.
- The only testing error that you need to fear is failing to test at all.

Planning for disaster recovery is complicated, and there is a great deal more to know than can be described here.

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