BY DEB CANNING

Protect Business-Critical Data Before Disaster Strikes

With hurricane season in full swing, many contractors in the southeastern United States are understandably concerned about the potential impact of a natural disaster on their business. In other parts of the country, tornados and flooding are a risk, and everyone worries about a fire.

Although most contractors have business continuity insurance against losses associated with damage to their property and equipment, not all have reliable disaster recovery plans for their data. In fact, even if wind, heat, smoke or water do not damage a building and IT system, a subsequent power outage can make critical business data inaccessible.

Data recovery specialists can attempt to access damaged PCs and servers; however, even in the best-case scenario, some data will be lost.

Companies without a disaster recovery plan that experience an IT outage lasting more than 10 days are unlikely to recover financially. Many will spend so much time compensating for lost revenue that they fold within five years. Even an outage that lasts only a few days can result in broken contracts, schedule delays, lost credibility and an inability to attract new customers.

Today's economic climate requires construction companies to plan ahead to allocate resources and manage materials to maximize profitability. Financial transactions and documentation must be available at all times so business interruption does not result in even more significant risks than in the past.

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FIRST THINGS FIRST

There is no substitute for preparedness. Contractors must be ready for disasters and planned IT outages, including system upgrades and application maintenance. Taking a few steps now can ensure the company's IT system is secure.

- Store computer servers in a secure, windowless room.
- Schedule backups to meet the company's level of risk. Most contractors schedule a nightly backup of new data and a comprehensive backup each week.
- Store no more than one month of data tapes onsite in a locked, fireproof, watertight box.
- At least once a month, send data tapes to a secure offsite data archiving and storage company. These data archiving and storage companies typically return tapes after an appropriate period of time. Typically, weekly tapes are returned after two or three months, while monthly tapes are stored for a year (or permanently so they are available in the event of a contract dispute).

ONLINE BACKUP

Online services enable contractors to back up data to their servers via the Internet. Some IT experts are wary of this solution due to the potential vulnerability of financial data sent electronically. With that in mind, be sure to carefully scrutinize vendors to ensure they provide password protection, data encryption and a secure host server.

Putting in place the right disaster recovery solution is essential for contractors to ensure business continuity and avoid the financial impact of lost data.

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