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Gulf SMBs Flirting with Disaster

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By Karen D. Schwartz, eWEEK

As Hurricane Katrina ripped through the heart of the central U.S. Gulf Coast it threatened every company in the area. But small- and medium-sized businesses faced a more severe threat than larger companies.

Unlike larger organizations, which usually have remote data centers storing all mission-critical data at regular intervals, smaller companies often don't have the resources, experience or foresight to set up a disaster recovery or business continuance plan until the unimaginable—in the form of a natural disaster, crippling virus, utility interruption or even an act of terrorism—strikes.

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"Although large companies sometimes have inadequate disaster recovery, we don't see much of any type of disaster recovery for data implemented for SMBs," said Mike Piltoff, senior vice president of solution marketing for Champion Solutions Group, a solution provider and managed services provider in Boca Raton, Fla.

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But even if a company has nothing more than a rudimentary disaster recovery plan in place—even one that simply consists of backing up data once a week—small businesses can

take some steps to ensure that their data damage in the event of a disaster is mitigated to the greatest extent possible.

For disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and others for which there is at least a day or two to prepare, companies should immediately increase the rate of backups to once daily to capture as much data as possible, even if the company isn't generally in the habit of doing full backups every day, Piltoff said. Taking tapes or auxiliary disks off site is another sensible move, he said.

For disasters where no preparation time is available, such as earthquakes, terrorist attacks and fires, companies are at the mercy of the recovery point objectives and recovery time objectives they have previously set for their companies.

"If you take backup tapes off site every Friday and the disaster happens on a Thursday, you'll have to deal with losing four days worth of data," said Jim Addlesberger, president of NavigateStorage, a Concord, Mass.-based reseller specializing in data protection solutions.

Although companies can't prepare for a sudden disaster, they can take some steps during the course of normal business planning to help mitigate the disaster, including remote replication of data using continuous data protection (CDP).

"It's easy to do these days; you just replicate from one server to another, and that server can be local or remote," Addlesberger said. "And it's not even that expensive. We can back up SQL databases, for example, for as little as \$3,500 including the software."

Companies concerned about the cost of disaster recovery solutions also should realize that they don't have to put the same resources into disaster recovery planning as larger enterprises.

"You don't have to replicate to a big Level 5 data center," Addlesberger said. "Put a server in your president's home and remote replicate to there. At least it gets the data out of the building."

Another option is signing up with a managed services provider, which can perform all of the monitoring and management necessary without any human resource consumption on the part of the small business, Piltoff said.

But perhaps the most important advice is the simplest—and cheapest.

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"Some companies don't know where they keep the program diskettes or backup tapes. It's a simple thing, but not so easy to figure out in the middle of an emergency," Addlesberger said.

To address the issue, "have your key CDs, programs and backup tapes in a place that's easy to find quickly, and know where your data is kept on the computer, too. Sometimes you aren't in the habit of backing up every piece of data, but when you know a disaster is pending, you may want to back up every piece of data and to do that, you need to know where it all is."

The most prudent advice, however—to implement a full disaster recovery plan—won't do much to help small businesses that have fallen prey to a disaster that has caused them to lose data or shutter their doors for any length of time.

"If you haven't thought about how you would protect your data, not much is going to help when disaster strikes short of taking your servers, putting them on a truck and getting out of Dodge," Addlesberger said.

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