

Can You Run Your Business Without Technology?

A Short Primer on Being Prepared for Outages

Recently I visited a small business that was being challenged by their computer technology being down. Lines were out the door, staff was struggling to take manual orders, handle credit cards, and adequately serve customers. Meanwhile customers were getting frustrated and walking out the door. It was a problem that with a little pre-planning work could have been greatly reduced.

Have you thought about how your business would survive something simple like a power outage, an internet outage, server down, or god forbid a large scale disaster like wildfires or floods? Planning for long time or large scale disasters is a function of disaster recovery planning. SCORE has a number of tools to help you with disaster recovery planning for your business, visit score.org and search on “disaster recovery” for tools, and articles.

This article’s focus will be handling those smaller information technology (IT) disasters be it technology failures, service failures or power failures. The first thing you need to do is to find a quiet place and virtually walk through your business noting where technology is needed to complete a process (such as taking an order). Don’t worry about detail at this point just identify and write down the impacted processes.

Once you have identified all the processes, go back and rank them on 2 factors: how dependent are they on technology and how long could you go without them? Use a scale that you are comfortable with such as 1 for little impact and 5 if your business cannot operate. As an example, your business needs to have customer support available to keep your customers operating, but orders don’t need to be recorded until the end of the day. Customer service is ranked as a 5 and time is set to 2 hours (which is your advertised call back time). Orders are ranked a 1 and time is set to 8 hours.

Once you have ranked all your processes, you want to focus on the highest value with lowest time to impact ratings. These are the ones that need to first be addressed with manual processes. Carefully walk through the process and record the steps manually that you would take as a workaround. Once you have the steps, test them and see if they work correctly or need to be revised. Once you are comfortable the steps are correct, document them put them in a binder marked “Manual Operation Processes” and tab each process separately. Then train your employees on the manual processes, where to get them (not off a server), and how they should react in an emergency. For complex processes, you should practice them once a year. In addition you need to review your binder at least yearly to keep it updated.

For processes with a low priority or a long time to impact, you want to include them in your overall DR planning, but realize that they will only be impacted by a severe disruption to your business.

With a little pre-planning a server going down, or your internet supplier having issues should not impact your business operations in the short term.

Now back to that business with the technology outage that I visited. What could that business had done to better survive their server outage? For less than \$100 they could have run much more seamlessly. A visit to an office supply store for some manual order books (with carbon copy), a couple of printing calculators (since their cash registers did not have the ability to work offline), paper credit card slips, and an old fashioned credit card imprinter would have given them the tools they needed to take orders. Documented manual processes with at least key employees trained in how to operate, would have allowed them to put those manual tools to use. Yes, they would have been slower taking the manual orders, but they would still be able to serve their customers in a timely manner. Instead they had customers that left and were not happy, or who endured the long wait and still were not happy with their experience.

A bit of planning goes a long ways to make sure your business is ready. Today we are more decadent on technology than ever, but we cannot lose our ability to operate without it. Your business depends on it.