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Business continue with disaster planning

Software that automates backing up your records can Gavin Wright suggests, seriously impact your business's ability to recover if a devastation earthquake strikes.



It's a fact that conventional financial wisdom can be applied to the worst, most

unexpected scenarios in life. For instance, unforeseeable bush-fires, floods, tornados and earthquakes can be survived better if you've diversified your circumstances.

Diversifying investments minimises your risks. Business people, including those in healthcare have had cause to consider this over the past few years. We often talk about diversification business, but some types of diversification can be

critical – such as the Christchurch earthquake of February 2011.

Take a minute to imagine how your organisation would cope with such a massive local emergency. Think of on-going implications such a disaster would have on your ability to continue providing quality services. Risk assessments and contingency plans must be taken seriously. Many Christchurch health-care providers, their contingency planning have been dramatically tested.

Providing health care, in the chaos confusion and devastation of an earthquake, is no small matter. Shock renders people incapable of knowing what to do and logic is displaced until

order returns after the event. Hard and soft copies of business continuity plans, within the business and at different locations, and well conceived emergency procedures worked out, and even rehearsed can help enormously.

Individual circumstances faced by staff can be hard to plan for, but business structures can be set up to protect against losses and to minimise disruption. Data loss, for instance, can be avoided.

Many Christchurch organisations have learnt the value of tailored, automated IT system with appropriate disaster recovery plans that include offsite, data back-ups. Such systems

can ensure core functions are able to operate virtually unhindered on offsite systems, even if the normal business site is falling apart. With every record backed-up, the business is in a better position to mitigate many of the problems of missing or injured key staff. If the system is comprehensive enough they can even help the business recover, contact staff or families, and even keep operating.

Christchurch hospital and healthcare facilities have had to overcome uniquely challenging circumstances.

For example, two of my not-for-profit health organisation clients were immediately physically displaced in the disaster. Three months on, they still are.

The client Cholmondeley a residential child care facility in Governor's Bay and the Canterbury /West Coast Division of the Cancer Society, both had IT disaster plans in place.

Cholmondeley's GM Shane Murdoch (pictured)

describes the afternoon of February 22, 2011 as "chaotic." The facility, established almost a century ago as a centre of nurture and education for children whose family are in difficult circumstances, suffered much physical damage during the quake. But that wasn't in itself the most disquieting factor.

"We do this job here because we like and choose to work with children, and it wasn't pleasant to see the fear they were experiencing."

The children were taken to non-damaged classrooms after the quake. Murdoch says he managed to have the FileVision office system up and running within an hour of power coming back on. A much better result than after last year's September quake, where getting hold of people took several days. Staff were immediately able to contact families, because of disaster plans ensured availability of hard copies of all

residence. Having such information on-hand, enabled cancelling of bookings, and facilitated reasonable hand over of children to their parents or guardians. Parents either arrived to collect their children or children were delivered to their parents that very afternoon.

"Thanks to a committed and quick acting team we managed to hold it together very well," Murdoch says. "If we learnt anything from the first earthquake it was that preparation is key. The children want to be with their parents or caregivers at a time like this. If mum and dad had lost their home and had to stay at a Welfare Centre, it didn't matter. They just wanted to be with each other" he says

Administration-wise, Murdoch is thankful his IT data-base systems, sponsored by ShapeIT, are backed up



off-site, (outside the CBD cordon.) It meant he was quickly able to arrange a temporary new 'home' for the Cholmondeley children. Prior to the quake Cholmondeley had embarked on developing an adventure based learning programme (ABL) "I'm pleased to say that we have been able to get back to business as usual very quickly. The programme development is progressing well and strategically we are on track, despite everything", Murdoch says.

Currently, staff and children are enjoying the facilities of an alternative centre at Living Springs, while they await a decision on whether their residential facility will be re-build or repaired.

"We are really fortunate that there's a lot of enthusiasm backing up what we do from the Canterbury community, so while there's urgency about the future of our buildings, we have huge support from Canterbury. We are totally confident Cholmondeley will continue as normal into the future," he says.

of the Cancer Society also faced very stressful circumstances. Three of their core locations were de-activated as a result of the quake. The main office was inside Christchurch's cordoned-off area, and was inaccessible.

Fortunately, a nearby residence was not badly damaged, so patients were transferred there from the CBD.

Elizabeth Chesterman, Divisional CEO, believes in geographically dispersing back-ups for data, but says facilities further afield were "red-stickered", because of the quake.

Locally, the society moved to support affected locations, client and staff. First, were attempts to get the branch's free call phone number diverted, a process made slightly easier because of the availability of critical telecommunications contacts. Chesterman say though this was challenging because "the system which diverts calls was in Christchurch and not functioning."

She says the society's accounts staff-member was able to work from home as an office computer was made available, with the necessary systems to ensure staff were paid without delay.

Since the quake, staff have been able to use the society's FileVision database to offer a reactive service only. Working from a temporary base, in a motel bedroom, arranging patient accommodation can still be achieved.

"The demand for our services hasn't diminished in any way. We've been busier than ever," Chesterman adds.

The message is simple. Businesses rely on IT to function. Installing systems such as FileVision with appropriate contingencies will help your business do business sooner, if disaster strikes. Plan for it. It might never happen. But then again it might.

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