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A Wakeup Call

Hurricane Charley reinforced the need for disaster planning, especially for companies that deal in electronic communication and data collection.

By DAVE GUSSOW,
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Hurricane Charley was just the latest wakeup call for businesses about disaster planning, particularly companies that operate in a world of 24/7 expectations and whose survival requires constant electrical power.

Inventories may be damaged and documents may blow away, but conventional companies may still have the skeleton of a business on which to rebuild. But for companies that traffic in electronic communication and data collection, what's lost may never be re-created.

Sadly, only about 60 percent of businesses are doing some kind of disaster recovery planning, according to John Jackson, vice president of business continuity and recovery services for IBM. But as Charley approached, businesses that had a plan put them into effect, moving staff and making sure communications, including e-mail, would be available.

Even lawyers need communications during a hurricane. For the **Holland & Knight** law firm, that meant making sure e-mail, electronic calendars and contact lists all remained available.



[Times photo: Willie J. Allen Jr.]

Verizon Wireless set up a spot in a shopping center parking lot in Port Charlotte where people could make cell calls. The first day it was operational, more than 2,000 people used the site, the company says.

"Business continuation is very important to us and servicing our clients is a primary goal," said Ralph Barber, the firm's chief information officer.

other electronic links to the firm within hours. **The company has a contract with MessageOne in Austin, Texas, to provide Emergency Messaging Service.**

"Holland & Knight is focused on providing world class client service and support 7/24. As one of the largest law firms in the world – with more than 3,500 partners, attorneys and staff around the globe – we need the ability to communicate via e-mail, no matter what. We've come to rely on MessageOne's Emergency Messaging System (EMS) and they've not let us down. Last week's Hurricane Charley was no exception – we're confident that with EMS we will always have e-mail dial tone."

**Ralph Barber,
Chief Information Officer, Holland & Knight LLP**

The international law firm, which has its roots in the Tampa Bay area, has more lawyers outside Florida than in the state. Lawyers in different offices might be working on the same case.

Clients from other areas may need to contact one of the firm's lawyers here, storm or no storm.

Holland & Knight's experience after 9/11 sent it looking for a backup system. Its New York office across from the World Trade Center was out of commission for 70 days. After moving to a hotel, it took a couple of days to restore e-mail.

Today, Barber said a temporary set-up in a hotel could be powered up with e-mail and

The night before Charley hit, the firm knew its downtown Tampa office would be closed and power likely would be lost. That's where the lawyers' Blackberry mobile e-mail devices and MessageOne system came into play.

When the service is activated, it alerts employees and e-mail is rerouted to secure servers. When it is deactivated, all messages sent or received

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are sent to the firm's primary e-mail server. In fact, a few weeks before the hurricane, the system kicked in during a hardware failure at the firm's Miami office.

It does require power and Internet access, but Mike Rosenfelt, executive vice president of MessageOne, says critical employees can be sent to areas where power won't be affected by a storm.

"Some customers are telling us that it's more critical to get e-mail and instant messaging up than phones up because that's how they communicate," said Jackson of IBM.



Verizon Wireless charges cell phones for Port Charlotte residents who do not have electricity after Hurricane Charley.

Chuck Goodspeed thought his Cape Coral business was in good shape at 4 a.m. on the day Hurricane Charley approached. So he went home after spending most of the night backing up data.

By 6 p.m., Goodspeed faced a disaster. The office roof was gone, water ran down the stairs and the electricity was out. Alvion Technologies, an e-commerce and data hosting company, was offline.

Goodspeed and some of his staff spent most of Aug. 14 carrying the company's 75 servers down five flights of stairs. They handcranked an elevator to get one load down and then hauled everything to Tampa.

By 9 a.m. two days later, the servers were powered up and Alvion was back in business hosting data for companies such as Equifax and Dun & Bradstreet. Goodspeed's new high-tech home was Peak 10, a data services center that specializes in hosting, storing and disaster recovery for businesses.

"By having the availability of that site, we turned what would have been very much an economic disaster to us to a near miss," said Goodspeed, Alvion's president and chief technology officer.

He estimates the company lost only 5 to 10 percent of its normal business during the time it was out because the shutdown occurred over a weekend.

Alvion had done research on having a backup site in case something such as Charley happened. But, like a lot of companies, Alvion didn't follow through, which Goodspeed says won't be repeated. Alvion intends to keep its primary equipment at Peak 10 permanently and will look for a backup site, just in case.

The COWs moved in shortly after Charley passed through southwest Florida.

"Cell on wheels" mobile transmission sites helped keep cell phone communications going even with power out over a wide area. The cell industry also used COLTs, or cell on light trucks.

The mobile sites not only replaced coverage for downed towers, but also provided additional capacity as call volume increased after the storm.

"They are a stopgap measure," said John Walls, vice president of public affairs for the Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association.

But it's a stopgap Walls used to confirm that his parents in Punta Gorda came through the storm okay. "They have to go around to different spots" to get reception, Walls said. "It's a little spotty, but we're able to talk."

The wireless industry says most of its network stayed operational through the storm, even with the loss of cell towers. Afterward, many carriers offered free service to allow people to call relatives, insurers, pharmacists and others. They also gave handsets to emergency workers and others.

Verizon Wireless set up a tent in a shopping center parking lot in Port Charlotte where people could make calls. The first day it was operational, more than 2,000 people used the site, according to Verizon Wireless spokesman Chuck Hamby.

Verizon Wireless had run a mock hurricane disaster in May, with a storm making landfall in Tampa and crossing to Jacksonville, to test its emergency preparedness.



Therese Moore, 65, uses a free cell phone service offered by Verizon Wireless to call her daughter in Milwaukee for the first time since Hurricane Charley.

"You can plan all you want," Hamby said last week while helping out with the recovery efforts. "But nothing can prepare you for the real thing."

Forty-eight hours before Charley was expected to hit, GunnAllen Financial of Tampa set its emergency plan into effect.

The company, which has a network of more than 800 brokers nationwide, sent a six-member information technology team to Peak 10's Tampa office to maintain its computers and Internet access. And it set up a business command center for executives north and well inland of Tampa.

"Charley was the first time we've truly had to move people with the expectation that this storm was going to cause some damage here," said Frank Biciolis, the company's chief information officer.

Previously, the company had gone on alert when tropical storms were brewing. But as with Holland & Knight, maintaining communications and staying in business are critical. Losing phone service would not have been as bad as losing its Internet communications, Biciolis says.

"The plan worked as we had hoped," Biciolis said. "However, any exercise such as this always presents opportunities to improve the plan for the next event. We're currently going through a post mortem review, what worked well, what occurred that we didn't anticipate, what do we need to do to review the plan for any subsequent storms that come through."

IBM's Jackson, who has been in the disaster recovery field for 20 years, says there are four key steps businesses need to take to prepare.

First, back up and protect data, both electronic and paper, and store it off-site. "The one thing they can't do is re-create their information if they lost it," he said.

Then, have a place to get back in business, prepare a disaster recovery plan and know where employees will be and how to regroup.

Some of the hardest lessons were learned after 9/11, he says. Businesses struggled because they lost key employees, as well as irreplaceable paper documents.

"You've got to re-create your business environment," Jackson said. "While you're doing that, you have to provide some assurance to employees and your customers that things are okay."

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