

Communicating When Weather Strikes

Any organization serious about securing its business interests knows a contingency plan for emergencies is essential. Yet many contingency plans lack a critical piece to connect their individual components: The ability to communicate effectively. Communications technologies play a vital role in business contingency planning and an equally important role in emergency preparedness for safety.

Recent crises continue to expose our vulnerabilities to natural and weather-related disasters. When business continuity, the safety of employees, and the ability to execute standard business procedures are at stake, communication lapses can pose critical threats to the overall well being of an organization.

The unleashed fury of Mother Nature sometimes comes without warning, and when it does, how prepared will you be? Weather crises may require operations be shut down, evacuation plans to be executed, and emergency procedures to be activated. Safety of the people involved and restoration of normal operations will be the main objectives. In critical Mother Nature-related circumstances, communications-enabled organizations are proven to have advantages in the execution of their contingency plan, and thus benefit their overall disaster recovery process.

Since avoiding a weather crisis is not usually possible, a communications plan is essential to minimize the time and resources lost when business interruption does occur. Aftereffects of the Asia tsunami disaster, Florida hurricanes, and mudslides in California shed light on and provide real life examples of the importance of communications in crisis and response situations.

The earthquake and horrific tsunami in Southeast Asia took hundreds of thousands of lives, and devastated countless properties and businesses. Once the tsunami struck on December 26, 2004, the first teams of global forensic scientists, mortuary technicians, and other experts were dispatched within 24 hours. When a natural disaster of this magnitude strikes, manpower and time cannot be spared for manual phone calls and e-mails blasts.

Administrators of this global disaster organization began using an automated notification system to disseminate messages, which allowed them to track team members' responses and determine which communication device each individual was using. Message delivery and receipt was efficient and instantaneous. In a crisis with such huge infrastructure damage as the tsunami, communications technology helped administrators removed by thousands of miles determine which communication paths were still operable.

Automated notification systems also are useful in distributing messages before disaster strikes. During the Florida hurricanes in September 2004, a Florida retirement community employed an automated notification system to communicate a warning message to its residents of the impending Hurricane Charley. Residents were provided storm updates and action instructions.

Tasked with assuring the safety of the community, the community executive director's duties were made easier with the aid of a technology that could send out a message to the entire community quickly and report back the confirmations. Since the system tracked responses and generated a distribution report, the executive director was able to account for the safety of each resident.

An automated notification system that can handle high-volume message distribution across contact paths allows organizations to easily and instantly communicate with key constituencies, which is essential during crisis times.

A large Internet service provider (ISP) in the Southeastern United States implemented such an automated notification system and reaped the benefit of the system during Hurricane Jeanne. The ISP successfully distributed a message with a weather update and action instructions to more than 100 employees about a power outage caused by Hurricane Jeanne within minutes, resulting in prevention of many problems.

Examining the real-world situations above elucidates the holes inherent in some existing emergency response plans, and how automated notification systems can provide a universal solution. Though each organization differed, each had to rely on fast communications to protect lives and vital assets. They all faced the immediacy and urgency imposed by uncontrollable environmental forces. The success of their disaster plans relied heavily upon their abilities to communicate fast and accurately.

Proper planning for contingency must include an effective communications plan. No amount of emergency planning and preparation will be sufficient if the right communications tools are not in place to convey instructions. Natural disasters and weather emergencies pose situations beyond an organization's control. Executives must act now, during the quiet before the next storm, to implement the right communications tools to ensure safety and continuity when disaster strikes. **CI**

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