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Business Continuity

Ensuring your business can operate in the event of a disaster

Call: 0800 915 6916 | Visit: www.star.co.uk | Email: info@star.net.uk

Business continuity is a kind of insurance; the worst may never happen, but you must be prepared.

Statistics from the BERR Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Forum Information Security Breaches Survey (2008) state that a staggering 97% of UK businesses have a broadband connection to the Internet for business communications and operations; reinforcing the heavy reliance placed upon IT infrastructure to enable a business to operate effectively.

Surprisingly, the survey reveals that more than a quarter of UK companies do not have a disaster recovery plan in place and nearly half of those that have plans (48%) had not tested them in the last year.

Business Continuity is becoming a key issue for businesses and recent events have forced many of them to question whether they could continue to operate in the event of an unexpected crisis or disaster. We don't have to look too far back to see instances of how a robust business continuity plan could pay real dividends. In early 2009, the UK experienced the disruptive effects of unusually heavy snow fall which suspended travel and forced many businesses to shut down their operations for the day at a cost of £1.2bn to the British economy. Similarly the London Tube Strike in summer 2009 brought gridlock to London and meant that many workers were unable to reach the office.

Most recently the world has been faced with the effects of a flu pandemic which has impelled business managers to examine how they would cope if there was a sudden increase of workers off sick or requesting to work from home. In all these instances, effective business continuity planning could help to safeguard an organisation from the disruptive effects of unavoidable, external events.

Business Continuity Planning

The ability to anticipate and effectively manage potential threats is a key part of the business planning process. When a crisis arises, knowing how to react and respond is critical as it can result in either success or failure and ultimately determine whether or not your business is able to survive and prosper.

A series of 'what if' questions should be considered:

What would you do if your Internet connection was unavailable?

How would you enable your people to effectively work from home at short notice?

What would you do if you were unable to access your building or computer systems?

What would you do if a virus invaded your system or corrupted the data held?

What would happen if you were unable to communicate with customers, partners or suppliers?

These questions all require a specific answer and to deal with them successfully requires effective planning. Talking to IT providers is a good place to start as they generally have business continuity and disaster recovery plans in place to ensure that they can continue to deliver IT services to their customers in the event of a disaster.

How would your business cope?

For many organisations, the loss of IT infrastructure including: email and Internet facilities, web sites, databases, documents and the ability to communicate and function as a business is one of their greatest vulnerabilities. Such a scenario could occur through a natural disaster such as a flood, through to routine road works where fibre cabling in the ground is accidentally damaged.

Recent research conducted by Star found that two thirds (65%) of companies think that, due to rising customer expectations, the impact of Internet downtime on their business is more serious than ever. In addition to this, on average, an Internet outage will become potentially disastrous for a company within 6 hours (5 hours if the company sells through the Internet). Star SMB 'Growing Pains' Research 2008.

Enabling Remote Working

One of the key ingredients in effective business continuity planning is enabling workers to connect to their corporate systems from wherever they may be working. Businesses that do not have remote working facilities, or that only provide remote access to corporate email, will find it extremely difficult to remain operational in the event of a disaster. The good news is that there are now cost-effective solutions available which can enable businesses of all sizes to quickly make use of remote working technologies to avoid the consequences, and potential loss of business, of unexpected events that would cause employees to have to work away from their usual place of work.

Next Steps

In order to protect your organisation there are a number of common sense steps you can take. Perhaps the simplest and most important is to back up and maintain the information and systems that are important to your business offsite. Then if a crisis hits your primary location, your business critical information and intellectual property will be safe. IT providers can suggest a number of cost effective services which enable data to be backed up and stored off-site. This is a small price to pay when comparing the potential impact of loss of revenue, productivity and damage to your business reputation when disaster strikes.

By placing your systems in the hands of experienced IT providers you can expect 24/7 monitoring and support, helping to identify and eliminate problems before they occur. The physical strength, resilience and security that they can offer provide you with additional peace of mind. Star provides a range of flexible solutions that can help safeguard your business, including resilient connections, offsite business systems such as email, document management and CRM through to full disaster recovery and remote working solutions.

In the long run it is usually most cost effective to outsource your business continuity requirements. Your IT partner will be able to maximise its economies of scale to provide your business with the most up-to-date solutions and the expertise to implement them at a fraction of the cost compared to you managing it in-house.

Given all the above, cost is key factor in considering how far you are likely to go in preparing a business continuity plan. It can be a false economy to entrust business tools and mission critical applications such as email to providers which deliver consumer- grade offerings. Opting for business grade services, backed up with service level agreements, provides users with the peace of mind of guaranteed delivery, availability and security of the service.

Key considerations for business continuity

1. Identify the systems that are critical to your business operations in the event of a disaster. Consider how your business would operate in a number of disaster scenarios and identify what is the minimum you need to continue to function.
2. Back up and maintain offsite the information that is important to your business.
3. Consider the implications to your business of having to enable employees to work effectively from home at short notice.
4. Consider the implications to your business if you lose your intellectual property.
5. Talk to your IT partner about business continuity and disaster recovery plans and the backup services they can provide.

About Star

Star is the largest independent business to business Internet Services Provider in the UK, serving over 500,000 business users. The company has over 13 years' experience in providing practical Internet-driven services for UK businesses.

By listening, understanding and responding to the needs of customers, solutions are constantly being developed to help tackle your key IT issues. Security, hosting, connectivity and email have been brought together to provide the broadest range of integrated, business ready technology services.

Star invests in safety and security, giving 100% protection against known and unknown viruses. A range of flexible, packaged, assured solutions provide resiliency and continuity guaranteeing 24/7 accessibility, 365 days a year.

In order to deliver the most appropriate technology solution for your business, Star takes time to listen to you and understand the challenges you face. By sharing knowledge and experience with you, Star can deliver the most effective services to help grow your business.