Keeping Business Moving:
A CONTINUITY CHECKLIST FOR SMALL BUSINESSES

Is your small business ready to get back up and running quickly after unexpected system downtime? Have you seriously considered all of the events – from minor accidental deletions to major natural disasters – that might cause mission-critical systems to go offline? Would you be prepared to get back in business?

If you answered 'no' to any of those questions, it's time to create a comprehensive business continuity plan. Continuity planning ensures an organization's critical functions will continue to operate – or be brought back online within a reasonable period of time – following serious incidents or disasters. In short, it helps ensure that your business will stay in business.

If your company needs to get started on a business continuity plan, you've come to the right place. Here's a handy business continuity checklist designed specifically for smaller organizations:

First steps

Appoint a business continuity project manager

Depending on how small your organization is, this person might be you. The business continuity project manager is the person in charge of making sure a comprehensive plan is created, tested and communicated to the right people. If you're a slightly larger organization, consider creating a business continuity committee with representatives from each team who can work together to answer questions and iron out any wrinkles that might pop up during the planning process.

Conduct an initial assessment

Take a good look at your business and identify the types of events that would be completely disruptive if they were to happen. For example, if your building and IT systems were badly damaged, would your files and business-critical data still be accessible from other places? Is your data backed up to an offsite location or to the cloud? Will people be able to work from home? The answers to these questions will help you prioritize the planning process.

Protecting people, property and business processes

Define and communicate basic emergency procedures

Disaster planning is a major component of ensuring business continuity. That's why it's important to have basic emergency procedures established and documented. This includes things like making sure your employees understand your building's evacuation routes; what to do if a fire breaks out; and what to do if a colleague suffers an injury. Training and regular practice are essential to making sure emergency processes are carried out properly.

Designate an alternative site of operation

Do you have another location where key employees can conduct critical business functions in the event of a disaster? If you have the means, identify at least two separate locations, one of which should be at least an hour away from your current location. If your business can't afford a separate location, take steps to make sure employees can work from home.

Establish a chain of command

What if your leaders are unreachable or injured during a disaster? It is vital to select and train employees to perform emergency operations and run the business if company leaders are unavailable.

Put together a communications plan

Determine who needs to be contacted in case of an outage or emergency. Consider your employees, vendors, clients, local authorities, utilities and service providers, etc. Depending on the type, severity or potential length of outage, you may want to let customers know you are operating at some level of reduced capacity if that's the case. Build a contact plan that reaches these people and make sure there are hard copies available. The plan should include phone numbers and personal email addresses. You might also consider including social media information. Periodically update the list to ensure the accuracy of contact information.

Set up telephony

Will your customers have a way to reach your business if the phones go down? One way to address this issue is to use call forwarding technology to reach employees on cell phones, at home, or in your company's designated alternate work location.

Protecting data

Determine recovery time objectives

A recovery time objective (RTO) is the maximum tolerable length of time that a computer, system, network, application or business process can be down following a failure. For example, a transactional database that processes credit card orders may be critical to your revenue stream and will need to be up and running quickly. But the company's time card system can probably wait. RTOs will help people focus on what's most important following unexpected outages.

Invest in a quality backup system

Small businesses essentially have three options when it comes to backup: They can back up and store data on-premises. They can back up data to the cloud. Or they can take a hybrid approach and do both. The advantage of storing backup data onsite is that you can get it back quickly. But if there is a natural disaster and the building is badly damaged, on-site backup may not be much help. Information stored off-premises may take a bit longer to recover, but you will still have all of your data. Carbonite recommends a hybrid approach because it offers the best of both worlds.

Practice recovering files from backup

A backup system is only as good as its ability to restore data that would have otherwise been lost. That's why testing the backup system's restore capabilities on a regular basis is a must. All you need to do is identify some important files and retrieve them from your backup system. Once restored, open the file as you would the original to make sure it was restored properly. Database-driven applications can be more finicky and may require complete sets of files to be restored to ensure that there are no problems, but it's worth testing before your business has to depend on it to run.

Use servers with redundant hard drives

If you run your own IT systems, it's a good idea to have servers with redundant hard drives. You can configure the second hard drive to mirror the first using RAID technology. The key is to stay on top of it and make sure it's always working properly. While redundant hard drives are common in server hardware, it's easy to forget to configure them properly.

Back up your data constantly

Make sure you find a backup service that works seamlessly and automatically in the background. Doing so can do more than save you time and money; it can literally save your company. Carbonite transmits your protected files offsite to secure severs to ensure your files safe from theft, fire, spills, power spikes, power outages, physical accidents and just about anything else that might happen in your office.

Final steps

Write it all down

Once you have a business continuity plan figured out, make sure it's well-documented and that there are hard copies available. Then share it with employees, partners, suppliers and any other key stakeholders.

Test all aspects of your plan regularly

While it may generate some eye-rolling, companies that walk through business continuity plans have a far greater chance of a quick and successful recovery. Simulations allow flaws to be noticed — and fixed — before disaster strikes.

Keep your plan current

The business continuity plan should be treated as a living document. Your business is constantly evolving and the continuity plan should evolve with it. Be careful not to fall into the trap of being very excited about business continuity planning at first, only to let interest taper off. Be sure to review the plan regularly and share it with the organization as changes are made.

Data is the lifeblood of today's small businesses and must be protected to ensure continuity. With Carbonite, you can protect every laptop and desktop in your business for as little as $270 a year. That's a small price to pay for peace of mind.

For more on how Carbonite backup, recovery & business continuity solutions can benefit your small business, visit our website:
CARBONITE.COM/ONLINE-BUSINESS-BACKUP-PLANS