Law Firm Business Continuity and Contingency Planning

Establishing contingency plans to maintain daily access to your critical information and ensure that your business functions are available to customers, no matter what, lays a solid foundation and prepares your firm for any disaster, natural or manmade.

For small law firms, the need to keep your doors open for business and to protect data goes beyond your own practice and financial information. You are also entrusted with confidential client information such as birthdates, Social Security and driver’s license numbers, birth certificates, passports, medical files, banking information, tax returns, and the like. There are legal ramifications as to how this data is stored, secured, and protected and sanctions for not meeting client and court obligations. Not being able to access your client data or court docket obligations because of a service disruption is no excuse.

Setting priorities

For some small law firms, recovering from a disaster can be a catch-22. What comes first: finding new equipment, renting a new space, or recovering case-critical data? As a best practice, the primary objective should be to get back to the main thing that drives your business, doing whatever it takes to resume work on your client cases as quickly as possible.

To build an efficient recovery plan, consider all the processes involved in your business—everything from research to calendaring, all the way through accounting and billing—and determine the required service levels for each. You may need to restore your calendaring tools within just a few hours to keep deadlines on track. Meanwhile, you may be able to wait a few days before restoring your accounts payable function.

Prioritizing your activities will help you take the most logical steps to move forward—something you may not be able to think of under duress.

Threats from other sources

Large natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, wildfires in California, and flooding in the Midwest have taught us that it’s important to take a proactive approach to business continuity planning and disaster recovery. But threats don’t have to be physical. Threats can also include a crashed hard drive or a computer virus. It is a good idea to identify the kinds of disaster risks that you might face and develop an appropriate plan for each one.
Protecting your data

When it comes to keeping your business-critical information available, it is always a good plan to assume the worst. First of all, don’t take data backups for granted. You may be backing up every night, but if it’s not being done right, you’ll have a false sense of security. Horror stories abound about firms that copied over previously used tapes or saved the wrong data and didn’t realize it until it was too late. Run periodic tests—once a month at least—to make sure that your backups are effective.

Next, think outside your four walls. Many law firms will keep their backup systems right next to their server, but if something happens to your building, it will probably take your server with it. The same theory applies to storing data in your home, but floods, power outages, and other disasters can be far reaching and could affect you there as well.

A best practice is to store your backups online. Then, you can buy a new computer, contact a software vendor, download your safely stored data and be up and running again in no time.

A LexisNexis customer in New Orleans had for years stored critical data offsite. As a result, they were able to relocate to Baton Rouge and get back to business within a week after Hurricane Katrina hit their city.

As an added measure, start making the move to a paperless office as soon as possible. This way you can scan documents into e-copies which can be backed up and stored offline. Once you realize that information is safer in a cloud than in your file cabinet, you’ll be ready for anything.

Why LexisNexis

At LexisNexis we are committed to helping you spend more time practicing law and less time worrying about the business of law. Our award-winning software includes Time Matters® and PCLaw™ automatic backup that gives you the flexibility to schedule data backups to take place during non-work or off-peak times. Gain the security of backing up vital client and financial data without disrupting billable work, all the while knowing that you are supported by a highly experienced and dedicated team of experts to keep your firm running strong.

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