Lions, and tigers, and bears... oh, my! Dorothy didn’t know anything about disaster recovery, but what she did know is that disaster looms around every corner and can strike in a moment’s notice. Fire, hurricane, earthquake, tornado and flood are just a few, but every part of the country is prone to some sort of natural disaster. But wait, Mother Nature is not to blame for everything. Manmade disasters can easily be as destructive and cause as much loss as any natural disaster, whether it is sabotage, a computer virus or simply the sprinkler guy cutting the fiber into the building. The point is, ample opportunity exists for disaster to happen to your organization. An organization can take the Dorothy approach, tip-toeing through the woods hoping that nothing is going to happen, or IT professionals can establish a plan that gives stakeholders confidence that if something happens, the business will recover and survive.

What is a Disaster Recovery Plan (DRP)?

A good disaster recovery plan focuses on restoring systems that support mission critical functions. The goal of the plan is to return the organization to normal as quickly as financially possible. Since technology plays such a key role in many operations, the DRP is typically IT focused. However, it is critical to understand that a DRP is simply a component of the business continuity plan. The business continuity plan encompasses the people, technology and facilities that are required in the event of a disaster.

Why is a DRP Important?

The keys to running a successful gaming and entertainment company are customer loyalty and customer service that deliver the ultimate entertainment experience. That said, today’s casino management teams are now focusing more resources on the technology that supports customer facing systems - systems responsible for driving loyalty and service. If these basic systems are not operational, casinos run the risk of customers taking their entertainment dollars to the competition.

Not surprisingly, 24x7 uptime, data protection and business continuity are increasingly getting the attention of casino IT managers around the country. Information regarding every customer, every bet and every transaction needs to be processed, stored and protected in the event of data loss. The disaster recovery plan helps ensure that operations can be restored quickly and effectively, mitigating the financial impact.

Increased competition across the country has enabled the customer to quickly take their business elsewhere should a significant loss of operations occur. Poor customer experiences can ruin reputations and negatively affect the casino’s business. In fact, research from Gartner, Inc. says that 93 percent of organizations that have experienced a significant data loss are out of business within five years (Cramer, Bob. “Business continuity metrics: How much can you afford to lose?” Computer World, May 4, 2004).

The Approach

Step 1 – Assess Your Organization

First, you must have an understanding of what your business expects in the event of a disaster. Start out with a few high-level questions like the following:

- What are the disaster scenarios that could occur to your organization?
- What is the likelihood of each scenario happening?
- How long can your operations be down in the event of a disaster?
- What amount of data loss is acceptable and will not severely hinder the organization going forward?

These questions seem simple at the surface, but what is quickly concluded is that no one in the organization really knows. This makes the initial step the most critical, and the most difficult, to achieve. Organizations must be completely honest with themselves when establishing how a disaster impacts them.

Step 2 – Define a Budget

The top brass will immediately state that the business can accept no down time and zero data loss; however, very few organizations can actually afford what is required to meet such a demand. In fact, most executive managers understand that having a disaster recovery plan is important, but the reality is most plans fail due to lack of funding or focus.

Disaster recovery budgets vary, but typically run between 2 and 8 percent of the overall IT budget. Technology-dependent companies for which system availability is crucial, like casinos, are usually on the higher end of the scale. Low-tech companies with manual processes are on the lower end of the scale. High-tech companies with large IT shops, telecommunication or Internet search companies, for example, typically apply 15 percent to disaster recovery as a best practice.
Step 3 – Develop the Plan

The answers to the questions in Step 1 define your DRP procedures. If management determines a 72-hour window for the business to return to operations, then the plan, and its procedures and technology, must enable you to meet that required timeframe. The plan should be written in detail and coordinate all the necessary tasks. The disaster recovery team must be identified from the IT staff and specific tasks defined to each member. While difficult to think about, it is also critical to have alternative resources identified in the event that the primary resources are impacted by the disaster. Additionally, it is imperative that you plan for the loss of various aspects of the IT infrastructure and know in what order the infrastructure must be brought back online. Finally, develop a checklist that requires sign off by executive management and functional business group leaders confirming that operations are, indeed, back to normal once the recovery process is completed.

Step 4 – Test & Revise the Plan

The last step is typically the most forgotten step. Organizations that go through the grueling task of creating a DRP let the plan become old and outdated because they do not test or revise the plan. More likely than not, your initial plan will have holes or oversights that need attention. These holes are easily identified if the process is tested on a frequent basis. Additionally, the plan will only represent a moment in time and must be revised often to be current. Active IT departments are changing configurations and adding new systems on a weekly or monthly basis. Therefore, you must incorporate the DRP into your change management process to keep the plan a living and breathing document.

As most of you know, Dorothy makes it back to Kansas without experiencing disaster. The odds are in your favor that you and your organization will not. However, with so much at stake are you willing to make that bet?

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