



Planning for and Managing During a
Paper Document Disaster

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The disaster recovery and restoration industry in the United States is big business, and to the detriment of those who need such services, business is good.

Whether disasters are natural or man-made, one thing is certain: storms, fires, and floods happen practically every day, and they are costly. According to statistics on the Insurance Information Institute website, insurance payouts for U.S. natural catastrophe losses totaled \$15.4 billion in 2014 and for domestic man-made catastrophes were \$12.9 billion in 2013.

Imagining a Common Scenario

Imagine 1,000 records center containers soaked by sewage water. Empirical data from industry veterans indicate that the treatments required to restore them to usable, as near to pre-loss condition as possible, can *easily* cost a quarter of a million dollars.

Now imagine those records belong to your company or organization. Moreover, they are permanent, warrant long-term retention, or are mission-critical. Because they do not exist elsewhere in any format, these records must be salvaged by restoring the paper.

Imagine having either no insurance to cover the costs of recovery or coverage that falls short in fully funding restoration. Having an exorbitant amount of insurance coverage may not be a panacea, either, as the amount of coverage and the amount the insurance company is actually willing to pay out on a loss claim may not be the same. The payout may hinge on the impression the organization makes on its insurance carrier. An adjuster that sees evidence of poor records management may challenge why it is necessary to recover these materials.

The ramifications of these scenarios, with respect to business continuity and fiscal solvency in forcibly absorbing this type of loss, are staggering.

Beginning with a RIM Foundation

While the importance of carrying proper insurance coverage in the event of a disaster cannot be overstated, records and information management (RIM) professionals must do more than just review their organization's insurance policies and hope for the best.

An organization that can show it maintains physical and intellectual control over the records it creates and holds; has clean and organized stacks, file rooms, and storage areas; monitors its storage conditions, including its temperature and humidity; and has kept its building in good repair is more likely to have a favorable insur-



ance settlement. In addition, these best practices that existed before the disaster promote an economy of movement in response to emergency conditions.

Certain preparations need to be made before disaster strikes, specifically, developing a thorough disaster plan that includes measures that will enable an organization to resume or maintain operations while the recovery unfolds. In short, the better prepared an organization is *before* a disaster, the quicker it will recover from the incident.

Note: *Because of space constraints, the scope of this article is limited to developing a basic disaster plan, using it to recover from a disaster that involves wet paper records, and managing the recovery.*

Developing a Basic Disaster Plan

The absence of disaster planning prior to an incident practically guarantees undue delay, the inefficient allocation of resources, and increased costs once the event occurs. Every organization needs a disaster plan that is up-to-date, readily accessible, disseminated throughout the organization, and easily understood.

A well-thought-out disaster plan contains realistic scenarios that depict varying types of incidents (fire, water damage, contamination) and the steps necessary to mitigate their effects. Like following a plane's pre-flight checklist, following the plan ensures that important things are not overlooked. Following are some of the basic topics that must be addressed in a disaster plan.

Roles and Responsibilities

As the "game plan" for handling various incidents, a disaster plan has a "team roster" that identifies the players and their responsibilities. This includes, of course, third-party vendors and service providers. For example, the plan might describe these roles and responsibilities:

- Facilities management will abate standing water.
- The emergency services contractor will bring in fans and dehumidifiers.
- The document restoration contractor will remove and restore damaged paper records.
- Facilities management will move furniture, equipment, and other contents after records have been removed.
- The general contractor will do general cleanup, debris removal, and demolition (removal of wet wallboard, carpeting).

Information Value, Location

Having intellectual and physical control over record holdings is crucial to a good disaster plan. For example,

the organization must document:

- The size or volume of its holdings in linear or cubic feet
- A list of all records series
- The value of its records and in what priority they are to be recovered. For example, vital records, which are critical to business continuity, and materials with long-term or permanent retention should have the highest priority.
- The location of records to be recovered
- The format of records to be recovered

The well-prepared organization is one that knows, literally, what records are in which box and which

shelf each box is on, regardless of the total number of boxes or storage locations.

The plan must include floor plans and office diagrams that show what records are stored where. It is important that the building itself, rooms, and cubicles are clearly marked with numbers or occupants name that mirror the information on the floor plan.

Having this information readily available will assist decision-making and optimize recovery efforts, saving both time and money.

Alternate Office Site

What many organizations overlook in contingency planning is their potential need for a “hot site” or “cold

site” – an alternate facility equipped either with or without computers (hot site and cold site, respectively) – and other resources they will need to resume operations quickly.

Unless there is no reliance on hard copies, temporary central file rooms, stack areas, etc. might need to be set up and undamaged paper records relocated so they will be accessible while the damaged office space is repaired.

Communication Plan

A disaster plan should include an organizational phone tree so everyone affected by the event can be notified. Although smart phones are commonplace and many people routinely send and receive e-mail on mobile devices, it might be a better idea to call people (or at least leave a voice mail message) in addition to sending out a general e-mail. Remember, it may not be possible to reach people by e-mail if the incident brought down the organization’s network.

Responding to an Environmental Disaster

The organization’s role in a disaster’s aftermath is to follow its plan, adjust measures and actions as necessary, and see the plan through to completion. Incorporating the following actions into the plan are critical.

Determine Site Safety

In the aftermath of a fire or a flood, there likely will be contaminants. The smoke residue and black carbon soot from partial-combustion fires can contain multiple types of corrosive acids and carcinogens. Similarly, storm surge, floodwater, and sewage contain a host of impurities.

Contact an industrial hygienist or environmental testing company (which should be listed in the disaster plan) and have the area tested. Do not allow anyone in the disaster area unless testing declares it safe or protective equipment measures have been determined and are implemented.



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Touch Base with Contractors

If possible, have a general briefing or meeting where all parties involved with the recovery – internal and external – are brought together. Although the contractors listed in the disaster plan should have been thoroughly vetted as part of your organization’s selection process, ask questions about their processes and their projected progress. Good contractors should be able to articulate what they will be doing, why they will be doing it, and how long it should take.

Document recovery, general site cleanup, and damage abatement can proceed remarkably fast if they are coordinated properly and contractors’ efforts are unimpeded.

Limit Access to the Disaster Area

When notifying office staffers of the incident, set a location and time for them to assemble as a group to be briefed on the situation. They will need their active files and items from their desks, so give them a specific time when they will be allowed – as a group – to have access to their areas to retrieve them. For safety and liability reasons, materials inside the affected area should not be released until they have been verified as safe to handle.

Best practices favor a controlled site versus a “revolving door” where people are allowed to enter freely and mill about. After the staffers’ window of opportunity to visit expires, the site should be declared off limits to everyone except document recovery and contractor personnel and relatively few people from the organization. Allowing others onsite could put them in danger and interrupt document recovery operations and other contractors’ work.

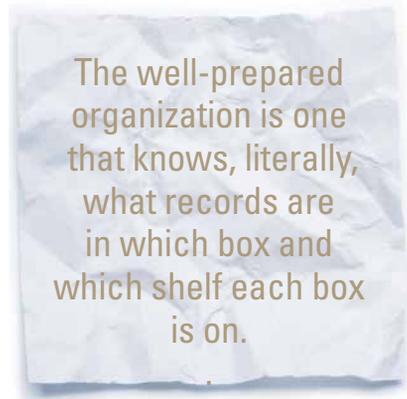
Establish a ‘No Touch’ Policy

The results of environmental testing often provide a lot of good reasons to refrain from touching damaged documents. Conditions range from plain old nasty to downright harmful

or dangerous. For these reasons, it is highly recommended that only document recovery personnel handle damaged records and that a “no touch” rule applies to everyone else.

Do not touch or move contaminated materials without protective equipment, and don’t move them to an unaffected area of the disaster site, as this could cause cross-contamination.

If files must be moved by persons other than document recovery specialists, have them move only the dry documents and leave the wet ones, as these can be easily damaged if handled or moved improperly. It’s also important to maintain the records’ original order and not allow them to stray from their offices of origin.



Restoring Documents

A document restoration contractor provides two vital services: physical records recovery, as discussed above, and restorative treatment. The contractor will respond to the incident, find the damaged paper records, and remove them. This is commonly referred to as a “pack out,” and the purpose is to prevent further damage by removing materials from the scene. In addition to removing damaged materials, a conscientious document recovery company will strongly recommend removing undamaged records from any site with environmental conditions that pose a threat.

This is particularly time-sensitive when water is involved; per the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s

“A Brief Guide to Mold, Moisture, and Your Home,” wet records should be dried within 24-48 hours of water exposure due to the risk of mold. The same tenet applies when smoke, soot, mold, and other contaminants are involved, as dry paper will absorb moisture and contaminants from the environment.

Because time is of the essence, records removal should be done as soon as the affected areas are accessible and ahead of all other abatement and repair work. This will prevent potential further damage to wet paper records.

After the contractor takes the damaged records to a document treatment facility, their physical condition will be assessed and a treatment regimen that will mitigate or reverse the damage will be recommended and executed.

For records tainted by sewage, for example, typical restorative measures include dehydration (specifically, water removal by vacuum freeze-drying), decontamination, deodorization, and surface cleaning. Document restoration also may include physical replacement of folders and boxes.

Succeeding By Design

The absolute, worst-case scenario would be to have a disaster without having a disaster plan. Akin to possessing adequate insurance to fund the costs of document restoration, the importance of a well-crafted disaster plan also cannot be overstated.

Best when coupled with money to fund recovery efforts, the plan states how the recovery will be conducted, but the organization must manage the process, making adjustments as necessary as the situation progresses. Only then will its response to the incident be effective – and it will not be by luck, but by design. **END**

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