

Preserving documents, preserving business

Contributed by Georgine Thorburn, Managing Director, Document SOS, July 2006

Paper documents are of crucial importance to most organisations, so the services of a document recovery specialist can prove invaluable in getting the business up and running quickly and efficiently in the aftermath of a flood, fire or other disaster.

Despite our reliance on IT, paper-based information still plays a vital role in almost all companies and organisations. Especially important are finance, legal, personnel and compliance documentation, all of which have to be kept under statutory obligation for varying numbers of years. Also, as scanning is impractical for many organisations, paper documents (hard copy) track correspondence and uphold evidence in our times of increased litigation.

For this reason when water pours through a building from internal piping, external exposure or from a fire brigade drenching in the aftermath of a fire, document recovery plays a vital role in getting the business up and running as quickly and efficiently as possible. Contrary to popular belief, paper does not disintegrate in water nor burn easily in a fire, so the majority of files can be restored and if needed restoration can be carried out onsite with key files restored in as little as two hours. After an incident it is often the facilities manager who is expected to provide solutions in case of disaster.

They should therefore consider their disaster recovery plan where an essential element is inclusion of documents that the company will need at any one time. The records manager or archivist should compile a list of key documents used daily by the business and assign a timeframe within which they are required. For example, a private client department in an investment bank would need records to be available within 24, 36, 72 hours, then one week, two weeks, one month etc. In finance departments, certain records are desperately important leading up to a financial audit but not afterwards.

Location is also a critical consideration in a disaster plan. If a building is in a flood zone or watershed area, then it is prudent to have a priority list of what to remove from the premises. It could be backup tapes, if not already off-site, key financial information, essential legal records, work in progress and most importantly, telephone contact numbers. A company in Cardiff had a major disaster at its offices and lost all its backup tapes. They had posted all their invoices the night before and they had no idea who owed them money. Thankfully, a quick-thinking employee went to stand beside the post box and retrieved them when the postman arrived.

An added precaution, especially for valuable collections, is a good rapport with the fire brigade. They will visit to acquaint themselves with the premises, so if there is a fire, they will know to try to avoid mass water suppression or use other measures. In one school in Essex, the fire officers covered a grand piano with plastic sheeting to protect it as they doused a nearby fire, which greatly reduced damage. It should be noted, though, that they are not likely to assist with removing even historically valuable items, as their priority lies with preserving life.

Health and safety are paramount in dealing with floods, and appropriate precautions are needed for staff and other personnel involved in the clean-up. Flooded sewers often contaminate flash or riverine flood water, the telltale sign of which is a thin skim of a brown, mud like substance, which has the one benefit of not smelling as one expects. The moment the water has subsided or has been pumped out, there should be a water sample sent to the laboratory to give some indication of what micro-organisms are present. Other health and safety issues to be aware of are live electrical currents and sharp objects like shards of glass and nails.

The key to a successful recovery after an incident is:

- Knowing what information is required to keep business in business - both in soft and hard copy;
 - Knowing the timeframes within which that information is required;
 - Knowing who to call. Bring in the specialists
- One of the crucial elements of a disaster recovery plan is a directory of disaster recovery specialists who can be alerted or retained to arrive at any time to assist with physical restoration and keep the business running. The advantage of this is to form a relationship in advance of an incident so that they know your immediate requirements and the key areas that must be re-instated to continue business swiftly and efficiently.

During the flood or on discovery of water damage, it is important to invoke your disaster response plan and call in the appointed disaster recovery company to halt the damage and implement measures to get business up and running without delay.

Some document recovery services offer round-the-clock services that enable pre-appointment, prior to an incident. They can restore original files within hours of an incident to provide seamless continuity. Restoration can take place on-site at any location anywhere in the world as long as there is a base to work from.

Where there is no pre-appointed disaster recovery company, the insurers' loss adjuster will see what restoration work can be undertaken and call in disaster recovery specialists. Historically, the firm employed has been a matter of choice largely by the loss adjuster. Now, as a result of Financial Services Authority (FSA) regulations, all disaster response companies have to be vetted for compliance criteria. This does not mean they are infallible, and if the policyholder is not

satisfied with their services, it has the right to insist on the company it would rather use.

First aid for water-damaged documents, books and plans

- Water from above: if you cannot stop the flow of water, cover files and books with plastic sheeting and start to remove material at risk to a dry area.
 - Water rising through the floor: remove material immediately at risk from lower shelves or filing cabinets but if the shelves are free-standing then simultaneously remove from the top shelves to prevent them toppling over.
 - Books and documents already submerged: leave them in place and remove those next in line for damage.
 - If the water has filled the area, await pumping out, then open all available windows to keep air circulating to prevent mould growth.
 - Install dehumidifiers as soon as possible.
 - Contact document restorer.
 - Do not open, unfurl or unfold anything wet.
- Important: Check that all electricity is turned off. Wear rubber boots. Wear protective gloves, masks and eye protectors in case of sewage contaminated water.

Case study I Shelley Wandsworth, who is the facilities manager for a global law firm, received a telephone call from her security manager at 11.00pm on a Sunday night to say that hot and cold water was pouring through five floors of the building. It cascaded through the communications room, all the partners' offices and into the archives in the basement. He said later he didn't know whether to grab the computers or the legal files; it was all happening so fast. Thanks to their disaster control plan and being able to invoke their 24/7 disaster response membership, he took a methodical approach to mitigate the damage while waiting for Shelley to arrive.

However, it was 11.00pm on a Sunday night and she could not get a taxi for two hours. When she did arrive, she and the security manager reviewed the floor plans that they held and highlighted the affected floor areas within the building. They could then clearly ascertain which partners' offices had been damaged, and the key areas required for business continuity. Their pre-appointed disaster recovery experts were in by 1.00am.

The recovery operation commenced with the installation of blowers and de-humidifiers throughout the water damaged areas; the documents were prioritised, logged and removed for drying. An electronic, fast-track system was introduced, so that any files that were required for immediate use could be located, dried and sent back within as little as 12 hours.

Case study IIA large engineering company experienced a fire that filled the third floor of their building with smoke and water from an enthusiastic fire brigade. The newly appointed facilities manager was in charge of the disaster recovery; luckily the company were part of the a 24/7 disaster recovery membership programme, which meant the dedicated disaster facilitator had a full understanding of their business needs, priorities and deadlines in advance, providing seamless business continuity and leaving the company staff and management to focus on their daily business.

Their disaster recovery company recovered and restored 95 per cent of the fire-damaged documents as well as cleaning, restoring and deodorising the building fabric and contents, ensuring swift recovery whilst mitigating insurance claims and financial losses.

Further information

Please visit www.documentsos.com/