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TECHNOLOGY

New Trends in Backup: Is Your Disaster Recovery Plan Keeping Up?

Column: The eSecurity Advisor

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For many years, every accounting firm's disaster recovery plans have involved using tape backup systems as the cornerstone for data recovery in the event of a disaster, and many are still doing so. Over the past four years, however, many things have changed in the disaster recovery area including the name. Disaster recovery is now called business continuity.

What is Business Continuity?

Business continuity is the new term for disaster recovery, which expands our disaster recovery plans to include any type of business interruption. Business continuity ensures that a company continues to operate or returns to operation as quickly as possible after an event that disrupts the normal operations of the business. Business continuity not only includes disaster recovery plans but also addresses issues that may not be a disaster such as power outages, employee death or injury, snow emergencies, or building issues unrelated to an act of nature. Business continuity plans are designed to address these issues as well as the larger disasters that are the result of an act of nature. Do you have a business continuity plan? If not, now is a great time to start working on one.

A good business continuity plan is developed by providing guidelines of what people should do in the event something happens that is covered by the plan. The components that make up the business continuity plan will either be step-by-step instructions or general guidelines that allow for interpretation based on the circumstances. Generally, the guidelines will be used for major events where the situation is changing rapidly and employees working on the situation have to use judgment when making decisions. The step-by-step items will cover more routine tasks that need to be done in a certain order, or procedures that need to be followed in an exact methodology.

What's New in Backup?

Now that we have an idea about business continuity plans, we should look at the large number of new developments in backup technology, which are a significant component in any business continuity plan for data protection. Disk-based backup, server-based backup and online backup are starting to replace tape backup as the primary means of creating backups for business continuity.

Redundancy is another concept that has become a part of backup solutions to ensure successful business continuity. The availability of other options at a reasonable cost, such as those mentioned here, makes it easy to implement two backup solutions. The software used for backup (Backup Exec and ARCserve) have been developed to support multiple types of backup devices. With all these new options, we are easily able to build in redundancy to our business continuity plans.

Disk-Based Backup

Disk-based backup works by using portable or removable hard drives to make backups of the servers and data on our networks. By using these devices combined with ARCserve or Backup Exec, the backups are created on these portable disk drives. Using multiple portable disk devices, a rotation can be created and at least one backup can be taken off site. The backup data stored on disk is less prone to problems and errors. Tape backup can have defects in the tape or deteriorate over time and is more likely to suffer a failure versus a disk-based backup. This does not mean that disk-based backup will be problem free, but the medium is much more stable than tape and the data written to the disk will remain on the disk longer than tape.

The other benefit of disk-based backup is that capacities are larger than tape-based systems. The recent increase in portable disk drive sizes to over two terabytes of storage significantly exceeds tape capacities. Only autoloaders can match the capacities of portable disk drives. This allows for multiple rotation backups on a single unit. This capability provides many new options for backup that did not exist four years ago.

Server-Based Backup

Server-based backup is using a server with large disk capacity to backup data on the other servers and workstations in the network. The data on this server is then copied to portable disks or tape for storage offsite. This solution allows for server-to-server replication. Using a second server located at an offsite location and specialized software to replicate the data from one server to another over the Internet allows you to copy the data from the backup server to the offsite server. The server replication option works well for those firms with multiple offices.

The benefit of using server-based backup accrues to those firms who have large amounts of data. The speed of the backup is enhanced because server-based disk drives are much faster than tape or portable disks. In addition, the disk sizes on the server are much larger than what is currently available on portable drives. Server-based backup also allows for the copy process to take place during the day when the other servers are being used for productive work.

Online Backup

Online backup uses the Internet and a secure (or encrypted) connection to backup data on the network to a third-party provider's server storage system.

The backup data is generally compressed and in many services is encrypted to secure the data both on the provider's server and while it is going across the Internet to the provider. Online backup is generally slower than the other two forms of backup because it uses the Internet to transfer data to the third party.

Online backup is best used for business critical data such as the firm's client list and the accounts receivable information. Because the online backup services have monthly fees and charge by the amount of data space used on the third-party's system, it is important to keep this data at a minimum so costs are reasonable. The ability to access business-critical data immediately

in the event of a large business continuity occurrence, such as a building fire, increases the value of this backup format.

Summary

The rapid change in technology brings new options for firms in terms of backup. If you are using tape for backup, there is nothing wrong with continuing to use it as long as it continues to function for you. The new technologies available today can be implemented as additional options and supplements to tape-based backup. Having redundancy in your business continuity plan provides options in the event there is an equipment failure in the primary device.

The newer formats of backup provide new ways of enhancing the business continuity plan for your firm. Adding one or more of these backup formats to the firm's network enhances the business continuity plan. The redundancy provided by using a secondary backup solution makes sense by eliminating a single point of failure. The security provided by a solid backup plan and solid business continuity plan is important to your firm's continuity.

Example of Business Continuity Plan Guidelines

Recently, Capital One created a set of guidelines for its high transaction business. It's reproduced here to give you some ideas in developing your business continuity plans. Many of these ideas are applicable to any business, not just Capital One. These items will be things that you can consider putting into your business continuity plan:

- Identify your risks (the kinds of business interruptions you're most likely to experience).
- Prioritize critical business functions and how quickly these must be recovered.
- Identify which aspects of operations can be suspended temporarily and which must be maintained.
- List the business tools you will need to perform operations essential to sustaining business during a disaster and the recovery period that follows.
- Review communications capabilities for maintaining contact with employees. E-mail and text messaging should play a large role in employee communications planning.
- Establish a location where employees may work off-site and access critical backup systems, records and supplies.

- Equip your backup operations site with critical equipment, data files and supplies, including power generators, computers and software, critical computer data files (payroll, accounts payable and receivable, customer orders, inventory), phones/radios/TVs, equipment and spare parts, digital cameras, common supplies, supplies unique to your business (order forms, contracts, and so on), basic first aid/sanitary supplies, food and water.
- Review your backup and recovery plan at least annually.
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