Blog Post

When disaster strikes

Destructive hurricanes in the US shine a light on the need for disaster recovery, and we should be just as mindful here in Australia

Executive summary

After two major hurricanes destroyed property and damaged critical infra-structure in the US, one technology company wanted to remind customers that such events could happen anywhere at any time – and encourage them to be ready.

Client:

Zeno Group

Content type:

Blog post

Brief:

To ghost write a first person account by a technology executive about how current events should encourage businesses to reconsider their disaster recovery plans.

Deliverable:

6-700 word written piece about the need for disaster planning.

It's easy to feel a little bit complacent (not to mention lucky) here at home watching the devastating effects of two tropical cyclones across the US in as many months, with staggering losses from Hurricanes Harvey across Texas and Irma across Florida.

We live in a large, sparsely populated and geologically stable country with few large populations centres threatened by regular natural disasters. Our data centres – like most of our people – are mostly out of harm's way.

But tell that to the residents of the NSW Blue Mountains, who lost 500 buildings and $94m in property damage in October 2013, or the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires across Victoria which resulted in over 3,500 buildings and 173 lives lost.

Catastrophe, we must remember, can strike anywhere at any time. The residents of Newcastle probably felt quite safe on the morning of December 28, 1989 before a huge earthquake struck, killing 13 and causing $4bn worth of damage up and down the NSW coast.

When lives or livelihoods are threatened, the last thing anyone wants to worry about (or ask our dedicated emergency services to protect) is data storage or transmission systems. Disaster Recovery (DR) isn't about tempting fate or expecting the worst, it's about getting up and running again as fast and smoothly as possible – if disaster strikes, there'll be far more pressing concerns.

The Aussie data centre market isn't as expansive as that of the US, Asia or Europe, but that might make a DR plan even more urgent. With fewer nodes available to rely on it's even more critical to deploy backed-up data at another location. Today Newcastle is home to at least two data centres – facilities an earthquake measuring 5.6 like the one in 1989 would almost certainly damage or destroy.

Plan for it, don't wait for it

When you put a DR plan together, don't leave out the human element. Step one should be letting your people leave a danger zone immediately – no data is worth a life.

A backup of your live data on site is good for a software or PC fault inside the organisation, but remote backup is critical, and that doesn't mean having the CTO take hard drives or backup tapes home, either. In the case of Harvey and Irma, the damage path encompassed entire cities – much wider than the average staff member commute home.

Today, the live backup of data to a location dozens if not hundreds of miles away should be pivotal to your DR plan, something cloud computing makes easy for even the smallest organisation.

But it's not enough just to have a DR plan – you have to test it vigourously. Here at Veeam we've lost count of the number of clients who have errors in data that prevents recovery. The time to discover you might have one too isn't when the business depends on it, so formalise the regular recovery of samples files to make sure you'll be okay if or when the time comes.

And look further than just your own perimeter. You pay good money for access, storage and processing from external providers so ask them hard questions about their DR plans too. Ask (and expect) them whether they adhere to the same backup DR regime you're instituting. Do they maintain several live copies of client data, including at least one remotely? Do they have an emergency power system? Fire control?

Datacentermap.com lists 75 data centres in Australia. Like our houses, property and business, any one of them might be in the path of a natural disaster when we least expect it. Every summer we make our household preparations in case of bushfire, and we shouldn't do any less for our data. ■