Businesses are vulnerable to disruption from all sorts of calamities, from power outages to pandemics. But in today’s tech-driven economy, where data is the true currency of success, protecting and quickly restoring the billions of bits and bytes that your company depends on has to be at the center of any business continuity plan.

“Loss of access to information can be crippling,” says Joellyn Sargent, president of Claravon Consulting Group. “Your business continuity plan should include a strategy for quickly authorizing or expanding access to remote data so employees can get back to work right away.”

To their credit, small and medium-sized businesses do recognize that data-related issues rank as one of their biggest concerns. SMBs surveyed for the latest IDC Business Continuity Study (2015) ranked data security and data center failure as the top threats to their business continuity, reports Laura DuBois, program vice president for storage at IDC.

Data loss can be triggered by events “as big as an act of God or as small as a spilled cup of coffee,” notes Mohamad Ali, CEO of Carbonite, a leading provider of business continuity solutions. But physical threats to your data are not the only reason you need a business continuity plan. Compliance, audits, and other contractual obligations also now are driving companies to get serious about planning for the worst.

DuBois advises that an effective plan start with an assessment of the systems and applications that are mission-critical to your business—those that generate revenue, keep you connected to your customers, or enable you to ship products, for example. Generally, less than 20 percent of all SMB applications are mission-critical, but knowing which ones are is the first step.

You also need to identify what types of events would be most disruptive to your business, Ali adds. The list of risks you are most likely to face will depend on location (your vulnerability to weather events, for example) and your line of business, among other factors.

Next, you need to determine a recovery-time objective (RTO) for your mission-critical systems. More than 60 percent of the SMBs surveyed by IDC had an RTO of four hours or less. “Now a technical discussion can occur about how to enable those recovery needs,” DuBois says, and that discussion needs to ensure adequate alternative data center or IT facilities in the event a data center-wide issue occurs.

Businesses have the option of storing data on-site, which is fast and convenient but high-risk; off-site, which can mean a slightly longer data-recovery time; or both. Carbonite recommends the last option: A hybrid strategy that combines the best of both on- and off-site storage. “Your data is backed up locally—on our device or yours—as well as in the Carbonite cloud,” Ali says. “This approach provides peace of mind that you can get back up and running as fast as possible, no matter what challenges you face.”

Ali stresses that business continuity plans should be living documents. “Your business is constantly changing, and your continuity plan should reflect those changes. Review it regularly, update as needed, share it with new employees, and do dry runs periodically,” he says. “And, of course, back up your data regularly.”
One thing I’ve learned is this: There’s no upside to downtime. It’s not in my business plan. But it is on my radar. I lose my data. I lose my business. Simple.

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