



Restoring key documents damaged by fire and flood can make the difference between the life and death of a company, says Georgine Thorburn



Documentary evidence

WHEN A business is involved in a major fire or flood, the human and financial losses can be huge. Such an incident can also result in businesses losing clients and information, which can have enormous implications for business continuity and the survival of a company.

Figures show that almost 45% of companies that suffer significant loss of key data go out of business within six months. Despite the IT revolution, a significant percentage of critical information is still kept in hard copy format – for example, financial records, legal documents, research, files holding personnel and medical information, and customer care correspondence. In addition, information that is too sensitive to put at risk from computer hackers is now kept under lock and key in hard copy or paper format.

Even if a business survives, the consequences of damaged documentation can be serious: loss of short-term profit, consequential loss, failure to meet statutory regulations and even bankruptcy.

Risk and continuity managers are increasingly looking to business continuity specialists that can restore key business-critical documents – a crucial service to reduce the cost of claims for consequential loss. On-site teams have been introduced to assist companies that have no business continuity plans and have no idea what documents they will require for business resumption. By setting up within the damaged offices, staff can request specific files on an *ad hoc* basis, thereby virtually negating business interruption.

While many firms have some sort of disaster recovery plan, very few of those plans include the recovery of paper documentation. Paperwork can have a crucial role in daily business transactions, especially where there are problems with IT resumption. In one case, a Midlands-based company that suffered a fire was fined and subsequently closed because it was unable to file its VAT returns, and a fire is not considered to be a legitimate excuse.

Restoring information

Up to 95% of fire-damaged books and paperwork can be restored. Tightly-packed files and books do not burn like the proverbial bonfire, since there is no air between the pages to keep the fire burning. Most of the damage is usually from smoke.

The secret is knowing what needs reinstating and in what timeframe. Companies should highlight the key information that is required to keep them in business in the event of a flood or fire. Some of these documents – such as financial audit information – can be raised to high priority during certain periods of the year. The week following an audit, the financial records fall back into non-critical information. In the case of advocates, certain cases would be more important than others, according to court bookings and appearances. Floor plans are a much used tool in the post-disaster meeting. This enables swift identification of damaged areas within a property, available areas for displaced staff and locations of key files and documents. This is very useful for



the salvage teams as they go in to rescue, log and pack information for restoration. Pedantic logging ensures that any file, at any time, can be requested by the client and returned for meetings and deadlines. If the restorer does not consider the business continuity needs of the company, the restoration could be potentially worthless.

Whether the crisis is caused by flood or fire, there will always be water damage. Mould can develop within 12 to 24 hours, presenting a further health and safety problem. In order to prevent this, wet paper must be moved into frost storage immediately. Once it is stabilised, decisions can be made as to priorities and costs of restoration. This is usually where the loss adjuster, representing the insurance companies, becomes involved.

There are two methods of drying damp or saturated paper: select air drying or freeze vacuum drying. Freeze vacuum drying also involves tightly packing the paperwork, which makes it inaccessible for at least two weeks during treatment. While an excellent method for antiquarian books, it is impractical for commercial restoration.

Flash flooding

Flood damage caused by flash flooding is defined as black water. It may contain sewage contamination and needs special treatment. Paperwork may become covered in E-coli and coliform spores, which may lie dormant when dried. These spores can be re-activated when they become damp. High humidity, or even an inadvertently spilled coffee, could reactivate the spores. In flash flood incidents, documents will need to be soaked, or thoroughly sprayed, with virucidal disinfectants and bacterial inhibitors to make them safe, before being dried and returned.

Developments in the industry have been driven by insurers and loss adjusters looking for ways to mitigate losses. Just how commercial document restoration achieves this aim is easy to demonstrate. Following an arson attack in a building in a London council, over 100,000 irreplaceable fire-damaged files were recovered from the premises, which had been razed to the ground, and successfully reinstated. In a separate incident at a public library, some £500,000 worth of books – the entire stock – was reinstated, mitigating the loss by over 90%. Although these examples are impressive, the losses could well have been further mitigated had the companies been aware of the specialist services available and incorporated them in their business continuity or disaster management plans.

It is worth scrutinising business continuity plans and insurance policies again to see if the provision for the reinstatement of hard copy information is adequate or can be improved. Timely action now may mean the difference between the life and death of a company when disaster strikes □

**Georgine Thorburn is managing director
of Document SOS**

*Document SOS can be contacted on tel: +44 (0)20 7498 8080;
web: www.document-sos.co.uk*

**To advertise in
FP & FEJ
please contact:**

**Wendy Otway
Publishing & Exhibition Services
The Old Coach Station
38 Preston Street
Faversham
Kent ME13 8PE**

**Tel: +44 (0)1795 538 792
Fax: +44 (0)871 433 5043
Mobile: +44(0)7791 067 433**

E-mail: wendy.otway@PEXS.net