

# Preserving Documents, Preserving Business

By Georgine Thorburn

Despite our reliance on IT, paper documents still play a vital role in most companies and organisations, and they are especially important to certain finance businesses, law firms, and historical and art collections. When water is pouring through a building from internal piping or external exposure or everything is drenched in the aftermath of a fire, document recovery plays a vital role in getting the business back to normal as quickly and efficiently as possible.

An essential element of the disaster recovery plan is identification of which information you will need at any one time. It is often the facilities manager who is expected to provide solutions in case of disaster. He or she or can work alongside the records manager or archivist to compile a list of documents and a time frame. For example, with private client departments in investment banks, certain records must be available within 24, 36 or 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 back-up 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 thinks it will. 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.

### 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 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. Specialist restoration of paper based data has meant that business documents can be restored in as little as 24 hours of a disaster, providing access to critical files. 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 a 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 applicable from October 2004, 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.



Ceiling collapse damage

### First Aid for Books and Documents

- \* 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 from lower shelves or filing cabinets.
- \* 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.

### Important

Check that all electricity is turned off. Wear rubber boots. Wear protective gloves, masks and eye protectors in case of sewage contaminated water.

### Water Damaged Books and Paperwork

- \* Do not open, unfurl or unfold anything wet.
- \* Leave pictures in frames and do not remove glass
- \* Immediately separate colour photographs and lay flat colour side up.

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### Case study

Shirley de Roche, who is the facilities manager for a global law firm, received a telephone call from her security manager to say that hot water was pouring through five floors of the building, through the communications room and all the offices, and into the archives in the basement. He said later he didn't know where to start rescuing stuff; it was all happening so fast. Thanks to their disaster recovery plan, he took a methodical approach to mitigate the damage while waiting for Shirley to arrive.

However, it was 11 pm on a Saturday 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 am, and they contacted the document restoration specialists who arrived by 3 am.

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 briefs that were required for immediate use could be plucked, dried and sent back within as little as 12 hours.