8x8, Inc.

eGuide

When Disaster Tests Your Business, Cloud Communications Can Save It

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IT director, WQIS

Cloud communications technology not only offers more flexible ways to communicate and collaborate, but it's your best bet for business continuity in the face of disaster.

In the wake of Hurricane Sandy and a host of other recent natural disasters, many small and medium businesses (SMBs) are finding a silver lining in the Cloud: the kind of geographical diversity in communications and backup that can keep a business running, even when the immediate area around their office is devastated.

"Even if you've planned ahead, if you're using a traditional premises-based phone system, your business could still be disrupted by an outage or natural disaster," says Mehdi Salour, VP of network operations for 8x8, Inc., which offers cloud-based communications services for businesses. "For example, if something happens to

your building, such as an extended power outage—or the phone lines and communications systems in your area go down—your organization appears to the outside world to be out of business," he says.

"But, if your entire communications solution is running in the Cloud, as long as you or one of your employees can access a mobile phone or the Internet from anywhere, you're still in business, while everyone else is scrambling to react," states Salour. "To your customers, your business can still appear to be functioning normally. Calls can be routed to mobile devices or remote employees' computers, and you can still receive and respond to voicemail messages."

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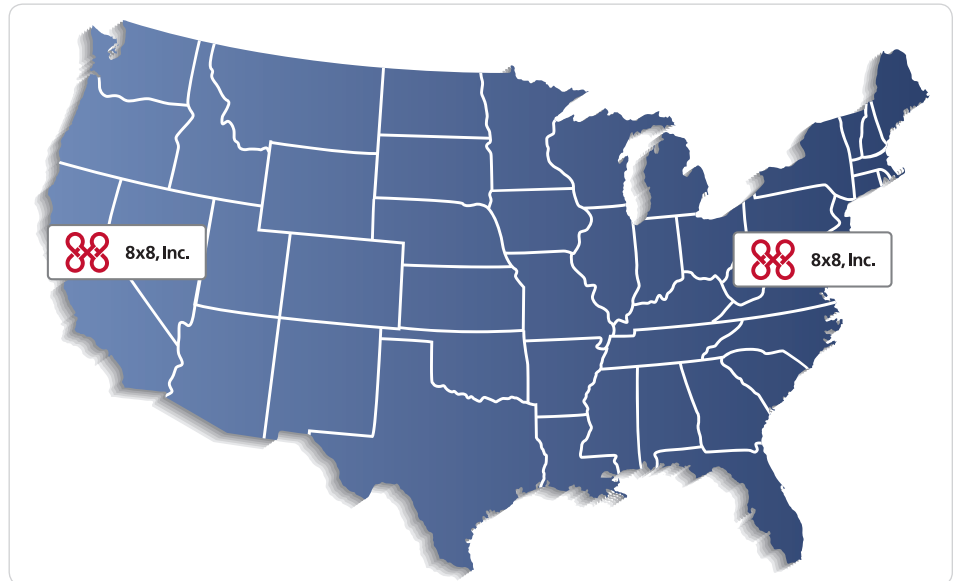
Don't wait, plan today, business owners caution

Some business managers find out the hard way the missed opportunities of implementing a cloud-based communications solution sooner. "Hurricane Sandy has opened our eyes to the vulnerability and limitations of the premises-based communications system we had in place," says John Imor, IT director of Manhattan-based Water Quality Insurance Syndicate (WQIS), the largest underwriter of pollution liability insurance for marine vessels in the United States. Like many firms on the East Coast, WQIS experienced severe flooding.

"Had we been using 8x8 [cloud-based] service previously, we would not have been tied to one physical location," says Imor. "Our employees would have been able to simply plug their desk phone into their home Internet connection or use a PC softphone to conduct business just as if they were in the office." Rather than re-establish phone service with their former provider, Imor says the company will now be installing 8x8 Virtual Office business phone and fax services, which are entirely cloud-based.

Make sure your cloud provider is prepared

But what if a cloud services provider goes down? That's more than a remote theoretical possibility; large-area disasters such as Sandy affected most of the Eastern Seaboard, as well as thousands of square miles of inland states, and even many cloud providers could be knocked out at the precise moment when you need them the most. That's why 8x8 uses two redundant data centers, one on each coast, with unique failover capability designed to seamlessly transfer control to the unaffected center within 30 seconds.

It's never too late—even during unfolding disaster

And although it's always better to plan ahead, some offices find out there's still time to implement a cloud service such as 8x8 even after disaster has struck—because of its nearly limitless flexibility.

"Although our office did not suffer any physical damage from the hurricane, the power to our building was down and, as a result, our normal communications systems were down. We had no idea how long it would be before they were restored," said

Keep Your Business in Business with 8x8 Cloud Communications

8x8's flexible, cloud-based solutions can help keep your business running:

- **Virtual Office Mobile App.** 8x8's mobile app for iPhone, iPad, iPod or Android devices lets you make and receive calls, check messages, and manage call forwarding. The app works over your cellular or WiFi connection.

- **Virtual Meetings.** Meet with coworkers and customers using our 8x8 Virtual Meeting web conferencing feature available with Virtual Office Pro.

- **Log in anywhere.** You can use any computer with Internet access to log in to your 8x8 extension and update call forwarding rules, make and take calls, and check messages.

- **Manage your account remotely.** With 8x8's web-based Account Manager, you can make real-time updates to your phone system. Record new greetings and prompts to let customers know office hours have changed, or forward extensions to cell phones so your employees can work from home or another remote location.

Ken Katz, president of ICS—a private family-owned medical records software business based in Oceanside, New York, shortly after Hurricane Sandy.

But the Cloud—and 8x8 communications services—came through. "Rather than wait for our internal systems to be back online, we decided to sign up with 8x8's business phone service so that our employees could immediately begin working from home using softphones," says Katz.

Some firms see it coming—just barely—and that's enough to literally weather the storm well. Rockville, Maryland-based Preferred Computing Resources (PCR Educator), a leader in the school information systems and databases market, became an 8x8 customer just in the nick of time. Days before Hurricane Sandy hit, CEO Tom deBettencourt and his team decided it was time to get rid of the PBX phone system they had sitting in the closet and move to a 100% web-based hosted PBX telephony environment.

"With the threat of Sandy upon us, we didn't want our business to suffer as a result of storm damage that could disable our PBX equipment," said deBettencourt. "We are now not tied to any one device with our 8x8 service, not even desk phones, as we are all using PCs and iPhones for our business communications. We've also been able to add valuable features, like after hours emergency ring groups, to improve customer responsiveness."

Up and running in minutes

Service can be activated quickly, a godsend when companies really need it. "Rather than wait for our internal systems to be back online, we decided to sign up with 8x8's business phone service so that our employees could immediately begin working from home using softphones," says ICS's Katz.

And because of cloud-based tech, there's no need to wait for phones to be delivered to get back to work. Employees can download apps to their phones or laptops that give them instant access to the same communications and teleconferencing capabilities that they used before the disaster, says Angela York, 8x8's director of customer marketing and loyalty programs.

"They can call us and we can activate service right away," she says. "Their physical office phones can catch up with them a day or two later."

Does that mean you should put off planning for business interruption? Of course not; one of the most important aspects of minimizing business interruption is practice. Salour recommends conducting practice drills—and group post-mortems afterward—to see how closely you can continue normal business operations in the event of a disaster.

Practice makes perfect

These practices need not be business-disrupting exercises, and can be as simple as notifying employees that they should work from home for the first hour of a designated workday. You'll undoubtedly find areas for improvement, and it's easier to address them when nobody's upset, worried, or preoccupied with basic survival.

Could disaster put extra demands on your business?

For some businesses, disaster hits them at the same time as increased opportunity. For example, after Katrina, construction and landscaping businesses whose customers could still reach them experienced a mini-boom, clearing fallen trees and making repairs as quickly as possible. 8x8 can help in such situations, with the capability to add new extensions in minutes, handling increased demand and providing employees with mobile apps that let calls ring through, even when they're literally up a tree.

Mobile app keeps workers going

Some companies are also taking advantage of 8x8 mobility, particularly its mobile apps. "We have snow storms here that can keep us from coming into the office for days at a time, so it is critical that we can work from home," says Michelle Ziontz, customer care manager at Synergy HomeCare.

"8x8 lets us stay at home and work just like we do at our office. It is so convenient and easy to use, we love it," says Ziontz. And that's a great deal, even in good times, and before business interruptions occur. Just ask ICS's Ken Katz, who has says that 8x8 phone service will be with his firm long after the East Coast returns to normalcy.

"This capability will serve us well not just in this crisis but beyond, as we'll not only be able to quickly recover from future business disruptions, we'll also have a lot more features and flexibility than we had with our previous phone system," he concludes.

To learn more, call 866-862-2811 or visit www.8x8.com

8x8, Inc.

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