

# Disaster Notification – The Missing Link

## White Paper

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**Effective communication is important in any scenario, but *in a crisis it's essential.***

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### Preface

Many companies go to great lengths to develop and test their Disaster Recovery (DR) and Business Continuity (BC) Plans. They are confident that they can restore the systems and infrastructure in a timely manner with a minimal loss of data, thus allowing business operations to resume. Usually there are call lists or “trees” for management teams and the assumption is that the Managers will be able to communicate with their teams in a timely manner as needed.

But is that really such a good assumption? In an era of privacy will these people have all of the information at their fingertips that is needed? Will they have it under all circumstances, such as being out of town or while attending a personal event?

One of the basic tenets of DR / BC planning is making the assumption that your facilities and everything in them will be completely inaccessible. You won't be able to go back to your office to get something. You won't be able to access the corporate systems from your VPN at home. Everything is gone – literally or figuratively.

The truth is that most companies plan for a disaster knowing that the odds are in their favor that a major disaster will never occur. But what happens when they are wrong?

## Types of Contacts

Some people will need to be reached in order to start executing a DR / BC plan while others will need to be notified to stay home, or to go to an alternate facility. Some people will need to be contacted for their business or technical knowledge. Suppliers and vendors may also need to be contacted to support the recovery efforts or divert shipments. And the management teams will need to be in contact with each other to coordinate activities and exchange information.

No matter what the reason for the contact, it is important to be able to reach those people. Moreover, you will need a way of determining who has been contacted and who still needs to be contacted.

## Methods of Contact

In today's wired world there are multiple ways to reach a person, and the effectiveness and preference of contact could vary from person to person. You need to have multiple means of contacting a person with a system flexible enough to allow for multiple types of contact and intelligent enough to keep trying the various methods until successful. Contact methods could include:

- Telephone (home, mobile, alternate numbers)
- Email (local ISP account, Yahoo or Hotmail, anything that would work if they don't have access to corporate email accounts)
- Instant Messaging
- Pagers (both text and numeric)
- PDA / SMS
- Fax

## Teams are Dynamic

It is very likely that the team working with you today will be different than the team working with you a year from now. Even if the same members are present their contact information could have changed. Yes, all of that data is contained within the HR system, but the RTO (recovery time objective) for the HR system is 24 hours from the point of disaster. What are you going to do in the meantime?

In a crisis you will need access to that information immediately. Your notification system will need to be robust enough to accommodate changes when needed and reliable enough to provide that information on demand. It will also need to be simple to use to be effective in a time when mistakes and delays could be especially costly.

## Effective Communication

In order for communication to be effective, the message needs to be clear, directed at the right audience, and able to reach a high percentage of that audience. Sure, you may be able to get some information out using public media, but that is not very focused and may not be as clear or detailed as it needs to be. There needs to be the ability to both broadcast generic messages and to tailor specific messages to individuals or groups.

Next, you need to determine if the desired recipient has received that message. If not it could be assumed that something has happened to that person. You might need to have someone look for them and/or you might need to contact a backup resource. However, without a means of tracking contacts it is all just speculation – not ideal for effective communication.

In addition, remember that true communication is an interactive process. You might want to receive a reply from someone being contacted. Can they participate in the recovery? How long will it take them to reach a specified location? Have they been injured? Having the ability to interact is an important but sometimes forgotten dimension of crisis communication.

## What is the Answer?

While there are many ways to address Disaster Notification, the best solution is one that is not dependent on your own systems. If there is a disaster in your facility then any “home grown” system will probably be affected. The ideal system is independent of your operations, and is robust and fault tolerant by design.

How will you access the system? Ideally, there will be a toll free number that is manned 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This makes access easy. A web-based interface is also extremely helpful but it should not be the sole access point for a notification system since Internet access might not be available, or a rich application might not be supported by your PDA or web-enabled mobile phone.

The system should also be flexible enough to address your true needs. For instance, if there is a chemical spill at a manufacturing plant it might be necessary to communicate with people near that plant. The ability to contact based on geographic location could be of primary importance to some companies. In this type of scenario, time is of the essence. A bank of 5 or 10 people making phone calls will not be sufficient. You need a system that can perform mass contacts quickly and effectively.

The notification system should also authenticate the person requesting access to ensure that false notification is not given. In the true spirit of eliminating single points of failure there should be several people identified having the authority to broadcast from this system. To reduce hesitation to activate the system there should be a clearly defined policy of what constitutes an emergency and a procedure to execute the plan(s). People designated as being responsible for these activities should be trained in the procedures and tools used and have that training reinforced on a regular basis.

There are a few vendors that provide this type of robust notification system. The products include InstaCom from 3n ([www.3nonline.com](http://www.3nonline.com)) and AlertFind from MessageOne ([www.messageone.com](http://www.messageone.com)). Selecting an established vendor with a robust product that is easy to use and flexible will help ensure that the system is regularly maintained and tested, and that it is ready for use when needed. Ease of ongoing maintenance will help ensure that accurate data is available, and ease of use will be critical in times of stress.

## Additional Benefits of a Disaster Notification System

There may be other benefits from having this type of notification system that can be realized in times of non-crisis. Any time that reliable contact with confirmation is required this type of system could prove beneficial. It is quick, easy, and should be relatively cost effective.

## Summary

Disaster notification / crisis communication is an important yet often forgotten aspect of Disaster Recovery and Business Continuity Planning. It is the missing (or weak) link because disasters are often viewed as unlikely events. But over the past several years we have learned that this is not the case. Disasters come in many forms but they are indeed real and do need to be adequately planned for. Effective communication is key to proper execution of plans and restoration of business.

Please see our other White Papers on Disaster Recovery Planning, Business Continuity Planning, and Project Management at <http://www.comp-soln.com/whitepapers/>

## About the Author

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