

REFERENCE DESK

Using Tech in Disaster Planning & Management

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Whether it's earthquakes, hurricanes, wildfires, or a malicious malware attack on your institution, disasters—both natural and manmade—can strike at any time and you need to be able to adapt and find new ways to do your job. Is your institution prepared to function on a remote basis? Our Reference Desk columnists offer advice when it comes to planning for and managing disaster situations at your organization.

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I work in an area that is often affected by hurricanes and other inclement weather. How can I use technology to stay productive when I have to relocate or otherwise be away from my office for extended periods of time?

DOLLY: You may have heard a bit about the Thomas fire that spread from Ventura County to Santa Barbara County this past December, becoming the largest fire in modern California history. There were also the subsequent mudslides in Santa Barbara County one month later, where 23 people lost their lives. In California, the cycle of droughts, fires, floods, mudslides (with the occasional earthquake) is not totally unfamiliar, but the rapid nature of these disasters this winter, together with the lives lost, the homes and buildings destroyed, and the interruptions to daily lives, has really taken a toll on the area and the community. For our library, because many of our users are members of the public, not being able to be open or be available made it difficult to accomplish anything productive. We were closed the rest of the week after the fires broke out, with several staff (including myself) impacted by the fires. At one point, after evacuating my neighborhood in Ventura, the fire briefly closed the freeway between where I was staying in Santa Barbara and Ventura, making it impossible to get to my house, much less the library. After the mudslides, the same freeway was closed for nearly two weeks.

In this situation, for a circulating library that is open to the public, I was glad that I kept notes on login credentials to our website, social media sites, and the Integrated Library System in case I needed to access them remotely; this allowed me to communicate our library's status to our patrons in a



shifting and complex situation. It also kept them from getting automated notices.

I definitely learned my lesson about keeping similar documentation about our telephone system, which is one of those things I'd never thought to have somewhere other than my office. I knew the manufacturer of the system, at least, and was able to use a guide I found online to regularly update our phones with more information on our status and to get messages from patrons.

We have a small staff, and I kept in regular contact with them throughout the days we were closed. Having

everyone's number handy and knowing where everyone lived not only allowed me to keep in touch, but it also helped me to know who else might have been evacuated or displaced. We did have a staff member lose their home. Many members of the local legal community lost their homes as well; living or working in Ventura meant knowing people who were impacted.

As our community recovers—from the fire as well as the mudslide—we have a good chance to look back on how we responded to these disasters and plan accordingly for the next time. We definitely benefited from hearing

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about how our friends in Northern California had responded to their experience of the Tubbs fire earlier in the year. For those of you fortunate to have not experienced a large disaster situation, there's no time like the present to make a plan—we all need to expect the unexpected.

LIZ: Now, let's step over into the world of academics and scheduled classes, something not near as dire as the wildfires in California, for sure. But, most everyone can agree that you are truly an adult when you are actively wishing against having a snow day. Snow days often lead to anxiety for both professors and students. However, technology may save you in these instances. If you have a snow day or otherwise need to cancel class (perhaps you are stuck somewhere out of town due to inclement weather, or simply at a conference), consider using Webex to hold a synchronized class. A synchronized class is basically a large conference call or Webex with your entire class. You could also hold a class asynchronously, which means you could record your materials and then post them for your class to review independently. I generally use Camtasia to record shorter videos of instruction (no more than 10 minutes) and then ask the students to produce some kind of follow-up work product based on the instruction. The overarching theme here is that sometimes your same goals can be accomplished outside the face-to-face instruction. While not always ideal, technology can be your friend when you are stuck between a rock and hard place, or rather between snow and ice.

MARIBEL: Regardless of inclement weather, many law firms have set up

an infrastructure for working remotely and accessing resources or documents by connecting to a VPN, or virtual private network. We have invested heavily in electronic resources. Training is done primarily via webinar, and reference queries are mostly conducted via email. At very large law firms, such as ours, when one office is closed for inclement weather, the librarians in that office either work from home, or, if they are unable to do so, the work is absorbed by the librarians in unaffected offices. In cases of extreme weather disasters, firms may even relocate staff and attorneys to safer locations, providing temporary housing and work environments. It may hurt a bit, but generally, the work gets done.

When technology goes down it makes staying productive more difficult. Having a plan to deal with the loss of technology is equally as important as having a plan to deal with natural disasters. Last summer, our law firm was affected by a malware attack that essentially shut down our network for several days. Simply establishing communication among our staff and making sure everyone was aware of what was happening became a major project. I would recommend maintaining a local copy of a phone list for current staff and establishing a phone tree to make sure that all library staff members are notified as soon as possible of a technology issue. Make a plan for group communication, such as a group text chain, if firm email is not available, and make sure everyone on staff is included. In addition, each office should maintain a local copy of a current list of vendor contacts. Attorneys will still need to do research using electronic resources, so if they are not able to access those resources

through IP-authentication or an internal password management system, the library quickly needs to work with vendors to retrieve or reset passwords for the attorneys, or to otherwise give them the ability to access resources. Became an expert at knowing how to set up a personal hotspot. Walk around the office and provide roving reference services where you can. Librarians can be among the most tech-savvy people in an office, and careful planning and organization during a technology crisis can be an opportunity for the department to show its value in unexpected ways.

While not all problems are opportunities for technology solutions, as librarians we need to adapt to old and new technology. Take a look at your organization. How can you help with its disaster and emergency planning and management? ■



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