

Assessing Tools for Maintaining Command and Control in a Disaster



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It's 11:00 PM on a warm Los Angeles evening when it hits: a magnitude 6.5 earthquake. You instinctively turn on the television when the ground stops shaking, only to see live coverage of your place of business in flames. You pick up your phone to mobilize your Disaster Recovery team, but there is no dial tone. You try your wireless phone, but all circuits are busy. Now what? There really are ways to avoid these problems if you are ahead: Leo Wrobel shows you some tricks in this article.

In a disaster, there is no substitute for instant reliable communications with those who can help. Conversely, there is no more lonely a feeling than when cut off and alone. Imagine a hospital, bank, reservations center, travel agency help desk, 911 center, or large retailer. Millions of dollars course through facilities like these every day in cities just like yours. But what if there were an interruption in telephone service? What if there was a fire, an earthquake, a tornado, or terrorism? Even in cases where money is not the main concern, lives could well depend on the continuance of services you provide. What is your plan if disaster strikes? Who would you call? How would you contact them? Where would you send your inbound calls?

"Houston, We Have a Problem."oAstronaut Jim Lovell, Apollo 13, April 13, 1970

We just finished three articles about using satellite communications in a disaster. In one of those articles, I offered you a bit of a teaser. I asked this question: How can a business or other organization redirect its inbound calls after a disaster? I also asked this: How can an organization restore its inbound telephone calls and ensure that its customers (as well as those that are dependent on its service) can still get through?

In this article, I will share a few technologies as well as techniques I have discovered that simplify this process and that are readily available fairly cheaply besides:

"Failure is Not an Option"

Some things you just "gotta" have, and one is the ability to call the people you need to after a disaster. Remember, whether you are a commercial or government entity, an emergency response plan truly means life or death both in terms of your organization and your people. Can you restore the communications necessary to recover and to conduct business as usual?

Surprisingly, few organizations are prepared to recover what the military calls **4Ci** (**C**ommand, **C**ontrol, **C**ommunications, **C**omputers, and intelligence) after a catastrophic event.

Even fewer are truly prepared to conduct business with their customers by phone after a disaster. You must have one to have the other. You must establish **4Ci**, no matter what the circumstances, as the first step in any emergency response.

The technology exists today to do this. However, we must first consider the common problems faced by all organizations immediately following a disaster to deploy it effectively.

The Problem of Staying in Control in a Disaster

The two most immediate challenges after a disaster involve (1) alerting the appropriate individuals to the disaster, and

(2) delivering instructions to orchestrate a safe and effective response. Corporations, campuses, or government must quickly organize and disseminate information to every first responder, using every conceivable type of technology.

NOTE

Response teams often include executives, building managers, security, fire and EMS/grief counselors, legal, transportation, finance, information technology, telecommunications, and more.

The technology used to notify these teams includes telephones, wireless phones, laptops, PDAs, email, and two-way radio. The technology used depends primarily on who is being notified, why they are being notified, and where they are. Even much smaller firms, however, cannot survive a prolonged outage of a telephone cable cut for example without a plan.

The real issue quickly becomes how any organization, large or small, can remain in control of the recovery process and establish 4C when phones are down. What if the telephone company is busy elsewhere or has a disaster itself? What if an organization plans for one disaster, but a different one occurs? Can it plan change quickly? It's all but almost impossible...until now.

Several firms are beginning to tackle this long-neglected issue. Some provide technology as simple as a "hosted PBX" solution. With the advent of VoIP, some companies have used open code software and readily available hardware to create a PBX that resides *off site* from your organization.

A hosted PBX system delivers PBX functionality as a service instead of having one on site. Instead of buying PBX equipment, users contract for PBX services from a hosted PBX service provider.

Many hosted PBXs are surprisingly feature-rich and useful in a disaster. Functions such as "find-me, follow-me" calling, actually came about in the hosted PBX world before they became available in traditional PBXs.

In fact, these days it is possible to get hosted PBX service that includes far more features than you probably have now if your present PBX is more than a few years old.

What makes these systems appealing in a disaster, however, is that they are not in your building like your PBX; they reside off site. With some creative engineering, they become very useful.

A user of a hosted PBX solution does not install any PBX equipment, and there is no capital investment. Instead, the hosted PBX equipment is maintained by the service provider, who then shares access to the system among many customers.

As with premise-based PBX systems, key functions that can be provided by a basic hosted PBX include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Custom greetings
- Dial name directories such as connecting to a specific extension or department, or dialing based on a user's name
- Automatic Call Distribution (ACD)
- Music on hold while callers wait for an available department or employee
- Voice mail
- Call transfer between users or extensions
- Conference calls

With just a little forethought, these solutions become useful in a disaster. Even so, not all of these functions are available from every provider of hosted PBX services. You should determine what functions best match your organization's needs. Nonetheless, a little effort on your part will pay great dividends in your organization's capability to respond to a disaster and maintain 4C.

A couple of companies that pop up quickly on a web search for "Hosted PBX" include [Onebox](#), [VirtualPBX](#), and *many* others. Find one that works for you and improve your recovery plan for very little money and no capital investment!

"The Right Stuff"

Other companies use a conceptual cousin to this technology, but have tailored it directly to disaster recovery. These firms have the advantage of a tailored product geared primarily to business resumption. A good one can actually help you organize your recovery effort and keep you in control by helping you get the word out immediately about an emergency, including severe weather, fire, sabotage and terrorism, system failures and more.

One such firm, Telecom Recovery Inc., offers one system that leverages your existing network after a disaster. It provides features designed to maintain 4Ci, and to get the right people back to work now. It also answers or directs your inbound calls in order to maintain "business as usual" in the eyes of your clients and customers. All local, long distance, and 800 services stay with your present provider and do not need to change.

Checklist for "Johnson Space Center" Quality Disaster Recovery

After evaluating this firm and other available solutions for any hosted PBX or telecom disaster recovery service, you should ask the following:

- Can the service move your main inbound numbers instantly to any working telephone number, whether a branch office, home, wireless, VoIP, or satellite phone *without having to call the phone company*?
- Can the service duplicate the same call prompts (Press 1 for Sales, 2 for Customer Service, and so on) that exist today in your network?
- Can the service initiate your emergency response plan through a web connection, touch-tone phone, and PDA? Will the service provider do it for you if you are completely cut off?
- Does the service offer "find me, follow me" features? Whether at home, in the office, in the car, or via pager, PDA or text message, can you ensure that you will never lose touch with key first responders? The "find me, follow me" feature tries all these devices until the person is found.
- Will "find me, follow me" work by dialing the person's *regular office number* (as opposed to a new one you have to remember and document)?
- Will the service broadcast to numerous users? Can emergency notification messages (ENMs) be set up by you and then broadcast to hundreds of responders based on the disaster?
- What kind of feature-richness can you expect on ENMs? One system I have found actually lets the recipient press a digit after hearing the recording, to be instantly placed into a voice conference with other members of the recovery team, to be connected with a live person, or to hear more detailed instructions. That is a very useful feature in a disaster.
- Can ENMs be sent to any network-connected device (phone, PDA, pager, text, and so on)?
- Can ENMs be recorded with specific information organized by message recipient, recovery team, department or other criteria based on their role in the emergency response?
- What if you plan for one disaster, but another disaster happens? Can ENMs and call menus be changed quickly? Can this be accomplished by a touch-tone phone if you cannot get to a PC, vice versa?
- Can voice conference bridges be activated instantly by you, based on department, telephone number, individual persons, or recovery team?
- Can the system forward your faxes? Can it forward to email accounts? Hold fax machines? Hold them in storage for later retrieval?
- Can the system send faxes including *broadcasting* to hundreds of locations?
- Have you identified hotels in your area with high-speed Internet access? Why send people hundreds of miles to find work space and lodging? Any nearby hotel with high-speed Internet access can be a recovery center with a solution like the one discussed here.

Summary

In summary, the 4Ci aspects of disaster recovery just got a lot easier, thanks to VIP, managed PBXs, and some good old-fashioned innovation. These solutions offer a quantum leap in recovery technology at zero capital expense and a manageable monthly cost. In my opinion, no recovery plan today is complete without an evaluation of what's available in this area.

I hope this information was useful to you. I look forward to visiting with you again next month with more tips on how to augment your recovery plan. Just remember that each incremental improvement you make, through innovations like these, protects your organization and your career. Best of luck in your pursuits.