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# Avoiding Telecom Sabotage, Part 1 of 2

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Jun 15, 2009

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Leo A. Wrobel and Sharon M. Wrobel, specialists in disaster recovery and business resumption planning, remind us that not only are some disasters not natural - they're actually deliberate. In part 1 of this two-part series, they consider the wide-ranging effects of telecom sabotage, including business losses and interruption of emergency services.

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Public safety officials in California recently declared a major emergency, but not for an earthquake or other natural disaster. On April 9, 2009 someone deliberately cut an underground fiber-optic cable in south San Jose, throwing the area into chaos and causing wireline and wireless phone service outages in southern Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties. Spokespersons for AT&T stated that someone apparently opened a manhole in South San Jose, climbed down eight to ten feet, and cut four or five fiber-optic cables. Other reports also indicated underground cables being cut in San Carlos.

Authorities believe that the perpetrator(s) climbed down manholes in the early morning on Thursday, forcing AT&T workers to drive from manhole to manhole searching for severed cables. AT&T is offering a \$250,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person(s) responsible. In this two-part series, we'll consider the effects of such deliberate sabotage, and what users in the area could have done in advance to mitigate a disaster of this type.

## This Isn't the First Such Event

For many people in California, it may have seemed like the end of modern civilization when their phones, PDAs, and computers went dark. But this type of event has occurred many times previously:

- In 1986, an AT&T union contract year, someone cut a fiber-optic cable in Texas (using a hacksaw), in a manner that made repairs difficult. That act of sabotage blacked out most of AT&T's digital communications capacity to the West Coast. This event occurred during a strike. [1]
- In 1989, unruly picket lines were suspected of causing similar damage in New Jersey, by specifically targeting fiber-optic cables, this time during a New York Telephone (now Verizon) strike. Again, the cables were mangled in a way that made repair difficult, apparently by someone who knew exactly how to create the worst problems.

Before I continue, please realize that I mean no offense to the hundreds of thousands of union telephone workers in the U.S., who are truly some of the finest and most skilled craftsmen I know. The serious disaster-recovery planner simply must consider all contingencies, including the fact that, every three to five years, the major phone companies engage in contract negotiations. The stresses and publicity of these negotiations invariably bring out the lunatic fringe. Case in point: Years ago, I worked at AT&T. When the company employees went out on strike, the news media often broadcast the following message:

"AT&T has gone out on strike. As a result, AT&T telephone operators are being overwhelmed with harassing phone calls."

In the AT&T operator centers, you could set your watch by these broadcasts, because the operator centers invariably were overwhelmed but only after the TV stations made the broadcast. Were the calls made by AT&T employees out on strike? In most cases, no, but the media coverage did manage to bring out every nutcase and "breather" who decided at that moment it was a good idea to harass the

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telephone operators. Anyhow, with this understanding, and certainly *not* with the intent to malign AT&T, Verizon, or other phone company employees, let's continue.

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