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DISASTER RECOVERY: Just a Power Outage

By Janine Sylvas & Nancy Claypool

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Editor's note: *In August, our colleagues in the Gulf Coast braced for a possible encore of Katrina's fury. Fortunately, Hurricanes Gustav and Ike did not arrive with the same wrath as their notorious predecessor. Once safely on higher ground, we asked what they did differently in 2008 from 2005. Photo: Nancy Claypool, Janine Sylvas & Connie Nichols, taken in February 2006, in the 9th Ward.*

Hurricane Gustav was a power outage storm, as opposed to Katrina, which was primarily a flood. Most of Baton Rouge, and much of New Orleans and the rest of the state of Louisiana, was without power.

WHAT WORKED

1. *Redundancy.* We issued a survey to all personnel asking for opinions about our disaster plan. Our personnel told us they consulted the following tools to get information:

- √ Disaster Employee Forum.
- √ Disaster binder (paper and CD formats).
- √ Cell phones, BlackBerrys, text messaging.
- √ Landlines, including "Employee Information Lines," in a remote location.
- √ Website.

2. *Disaster recovery site.* We now have servers in a data center in Austin using Neverfail Ltd.'s namesake software for real-time replication. We arranged with Project Leadership Associates, our outside integrators, to make the servers in the data center the primary servers the day before the storm when everyone was evacuating. By doing a switchover, we had a more controlled environment — which was "win win" for our lawyers, IT staff, and integrators.

Everyone knew when this would take place and our support staff and integrators actively monitored the process. The switchover went quickly and well, and helped our professionals work on documents no matter where they decided to evacuate.

We never lost power in our building; therefore, our servers in New Orleans and Austin were synchronized. We switched back to New Orleans the second day after the storm.

By switching back before everyone re-entered New Orleans, we were, again, inconveniencing the lawyers for the least amount of time.

3. *IT staff dispersed in different locations.* If one person was experiencing power problems, another was in an area with power.

4. *Enacting the plan.*

- √ Communications. Since the beginning of the 2008 hurricane season, we reminded all personnel to keep one of their two disaster binders at home, the other in the trunk of their car, and their CD in a location of their choosing. This finally seemed to work, everyone had materials handy.
- √ Employee disaster forum. We reminded everyone to log on to our Disaster Forum Site to test that they could access it.



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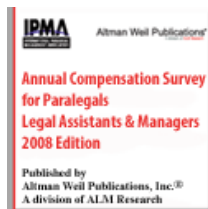
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Our communications manager made many personal visits to lawyers to help with passwords, reset passwords, and otherwise make sure that they had at least one experience logging on. We had very good participation during Gustav — people posted their whereabouts and other messages.

√ Backups. When a key person in a department was unavailable or without power, a secondary person was empowered to make decisions and carry out plans. In several situations, the person who took the lead during Katrina had no power during Gustav, so the back up took the lead.

√ Doing as much as possible ahead of time. We created special lists of contact and evacuation information for our management committee, section heads, and all managers and supervisors — even if some of it was tentative — before leaving.

No one had to scramble to piece this together later. For the firm's telephone greeting, we planned ahead to leave the message open ended so that we didn't have to change it on a daily basis to give clients and staff updates (since we did not know where the storm would hit or what the exact aftermath would be).

We recorded messages, such as "If you are getting this message and it's after September 2, our office is still closed because of Hurricane Gustav."

With key support staff in locations without power, landlines down, and spotty cell phone coverage (which would create a poor recording), this was one more thing that we did not need to keep up with. Plus, it sounded professional.

√ Incentives for employees to return to work. While we stated that our firm would officially reopen on Monday, September 8, lawyers who did not evacuate were back at work on Wednesday, August 27, others were back Thursday, the 28th. We told everyone they could wear hurricane attire to the office until Monday, i.e., shorts, flip flops and jeans were acceptable. Even our lawyers appreciated being told affirmatively that this was acceptable. We told all non-lawyer support staff that, if they reported to work on Friday, they had their choice of an extra day of pay or an extra vacation day to take at their convenience.

We had a tremendous turnout of people and were almost fully staffed. Personnel who still didn't have power enjoyed coming to an air-conditioned building for the day, enjoyed getting everything situated before Monday, and, of course, sharing their stories.

√ Bring on the food. We announced Friday that we would treat the whole firm to pizza and salad on Monday. This was well received. Rather than just a nice gesture, we received feedback that it was truly helpful, as many had emptied refrigerators or were out of cash.

√ Management. The IT director and network administrator were in constant communication with the executive director, anticipating what needed to be done. This information was constantly communicated to the management committee.

Keeping steps ahead let the IT staff maintain more control.

We worked hard to keep regular lines of responsibility and authority in operation, even when moving quickly and needing fast decisions. For example, by pausing to consult with the H.R. director on employee return-to-work incentives, we came up with better options than if we made decisions without having the benefit of her experience.

5. Lessons learned, Round 2.

√ Cell phones/BlackBerrys: You must have a car charger. When power goes out, you can recharge your cell phone/ PDA in your car.

√ Text Messaging: If you know a storm is coming, ask personnel to call their providers to upgrade at least temporarily to unlimited text messages.

Advise everyone to keep text messages brief so people who pay by the character/message don't have to pay for wordy communications.

√ Deja vu — not: Don't think you're going to just follow the drill from last time. While our plan was much improved over our Katrina experience, many thought our Baton Rouge office would be a good fallback because it wouldn't flood there. But those who evacuated to Baton Rouge ended up being closer to the eye of the storm.

Our Baton Rouge office fared well, but Gustav was the worst storm on record for Baton Rouge. We need to scatter key personnel further away from New Orleans.

√ More communications. We still need to post messages and leave information in multiple locations. People called our

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employee information line, got on our Employee Disaster Site, e-mailed, and spread information through text messaging.

Often, people were only able to use one option, so redundancy remains key. Don't narrow down the communication options.

Personnel want firm decisions faster. While this is difficult awaiting decisions from civil authorities, we will consider posting more updates, even if they are interim messages.

People want more frequent updates even if the message is "There are no updates since the last message."

Janine Sylvas (JSylvas@stonepigman) is IT director & **Nancy Claypool** (NClaypool@stonepigman) is executive director of Stone Pigman Walther Wittman.

QUICK TAKES

Servers located in other cities! Better communication with employees, levees holding, and most importantly ... we didn't take a direct hit!

— *Connie Nichols*
Co-owner, Docusource

- Proactively moved data from one datacenter to another.
- Installed 24x7 monitoring with alerts, so there was intelligent awareness to up/down network activity.
- Routed e-mail through external cache servers with redundant paths to inbound servers.
- Configured multiple gateways for user mobile phones, never lost connections.
- Put full mesh network in, connecting each city to each other city, never lost synchronization between offices.
- Developed full business continuance documentation and rehearsed disaster scenarios every six months.
- Retained external IT assistance, so our IT could take care of family first.
- Full disaster packet for all employees.
- Resource website for employees.
- Toll-free 800 number hosted by outside phone system.
- Daily management conference calls.

— *Ray LoCicero*
Administrator, Gordon, Arata, McCollam, Duplantis, & Eagan

With three years of thinking and mild tweaking I was ready for Hurricane Gustav. What did I do differently? little, but really not too much.

All of my documents are digital (as they were pre-Katrina). But, now I had them backed up in two computers, as well as online. So had absolutely no worries about getting to my key data. Also, I use a web-based time and billing system so I wasn't worried about being able to capture time or send out bills.

My e-mail is hosted by Google and never went down. My websites are hosted by Typepad, same result. My office phone is an internet-based system that worked fine. When I lost power and my internet connection was lost, the calls rolled to my cellphone, which is an AT&T iPhone. It worked fine except for about 18 hours after the storm. I posted updates to the internet via my Amazon Kindle, which has a rudimentary browser.

It took five days for my power to be restored, but I didn't mind being subject to darkness and curfews. Turns out my Kindle had all the spark I needed to weather what our hapless mayor termed "The Mother of All Storms." And a little bit of planning didn't hurt either.

— *Ernie Svenson, solo*

The temperature has lowered, the wind has shifted and is out of the north and the flood surge is receding. We can all take a deep breath and see what needs to be done next to get back on our feet and reflect on what we did better this time around.

We obviously did a lot better. After the one-two punch of Gustav and Ike, property damage in the Gulf area will be in the billions, but officials report less than 200 deaths in 10 states linked to the hurricanes. To me that's the big difference. People.

I preach it constantly in my speaking engagements: It's not about the technology it's about the people. So how did the people handle things differently? Well let's use that one simple word to illustrate how.

P: Preparation. We were ready this time. We planned ahead, we watched the weather reports, we believed bad things could happen and acted accordingly. We set up web-based office systems (not just back ups but application); access to the web through smart phones and air card; portable power sources (not just generators but also cars); and made sure we had the ability to move quickly and decisively.

E: Evacuation. We left before the storms hit — two million in Louisiana, one million in southern Texas. Most of the deaths that occurred were people who didn't leave.

O: Organization. Cities and states had plans. Not always good ones, and there were problems, but if anything emerged as a trend it was the organizational level of the states, as governors stepped forward to coordinate regional activities and did not wait for the federal government to do something.

P: Power. The biggest problems in the two storms was damage caused primarily by wind. Downtown areas — with underground power lines — that didn't face severe flooding stayed mostly intact. Suburban and rural areas were hit hard. So big firms are back up, while solos and small firms may still be in the dark if they didn't prepare ahead.

L: Levees. They held. Some overflowed but only one or two broke. Given the experience of this spring and summer, maybe Congress will finally look at the entire levee system as an organic structure requiring national oversight.

E: Emergency Services. Ready to go before the storms hit. There was National Guard presence in New Orleans days before Gustav. Shelters were ready to go in Texas days before Ike. Power and phone companies lined up trucks ahead of the storms, so they were ready to move quickly as soon as winds died down.

Our biggest problem now is — that's right — people. I've been thru four hurricanes, two earthquakes, and, growing up in upstate Vermont, numerous blizzards. The mental disruption that occurs after these events is the mental disruption that occurs when peoples lives are turned upside down.

Your law firm may be open for business but your support staff still has no power in their homes, grocery stores aren't restocked, and their children can't sleep. Technology can't help that — only you can.

I took the warnings seriously, got my wife Gayle on a plane out of New Orleans, and then headed for Pensacola two days before the storm hit.

I worked the entire time and even took calls the day of the storm from people who didn't realize I lived in New Orleans. I followed the news on twitter feeds from Ernie Svenson and others who stayed. I got live updates off the web, to learn when I could return home. Five days later I was back and helping clear power lines and get food and water to people with no electricity. Was I special? No. Just prepared, organized and informed

— Tom O'Connor
Director, Gulf Coast Legal Technology Center

On the three-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina's landfall, New Orleans attorneys faced the first serious test of business continuity measures they implemented in the wake of that devastating storm. The situation seemed eerily familiar: a major hurricane moving in over a weekend that provided no business days in which to prepare.

Prior to Katrina, few New Orleans law offices could have dealt with lack of access to office files and computers while simultaneously severing communications among management, attorneys and staff. Post-Katrina, local firms were determined to not repeat the nightmare of operating offices in hastily rented temporary quarters with uprooted employees.

In 2005, once employees returned, the evolution of emergency procedures began. We procured emergency contact information from all employees, including landlines, cell phones, two e-mail addresses, names of relatives, and identification of planned emergency evacuation sites. We established employee check-in procedures and backup web-based e-mail access. Electronic file management and retention became compulsory.

Our colleagues in small firms co-located backup servers in safe areas, while larger ones mirrored file server contents in other cities where they had offices. Firms typically circulated instructions for use of these emergency systems to all attorneys and staff and provided all employees with reminder instructions for their use on cards that the employees could carry.

Lawyers and employees were trained in remote access to the firm's files and were encouraged to work remotely in order to familiarize themselves with the procedures.

Then came Gustav. Using newly-developed hurricane response plans, most office buildings in the Central Business District announced that they would close at midnight on Friday August 29, despite a projected storm arrival date of Tuesday, Sept. 2.

In our office, because most of the emergency planning had already taken place, the procedure was largely transparent to employees. We did circulate an extra update notice for contact information, asking all employees to identify their intended evacuation location and to verify the accuracy of contact information. Employees were also provided a quick refresher course on how to manage a remote work day, including clock in directions, email, file server login, and timekeeping.

Our emergency planning involved redundant backup systems all designed to permit the continuation of normal work from disparate locations. We anticipated that the most likely emergency scenario would be a hurricane that forced business closures and evacuation but did not result in a direct hit that caused loss of system power.

While we wanted to encourage all employees to obey recommended evacuation orders from local authorities, we also wanted to ensure business continuity. Our personnel are accustomed to remote login for work, and our emergency system was designed to permit such remote log-ins so long as power remains on at our offices.

In the event of a power loss, the employee's usual remote log-in takes them to a co-located site where power remains available. The emergency transfer is completely transparent. In the event that access to the co-located server fails, a third set of servers kicks in — a web-based e-mail server and a second FTP site replicating the firm's file server. Fortunately, the Central Business District never lost electric power or telephone service during Gustav, though our employees had scattered all over the country over the weekend. Our employees never lost touch with the office, and we maintained ready contact via phone and internet on a readily accessible basis. Communications media was not any more reliable than during Katrina (we endured the same failures, especially of jammed and/or damaged cellular lines, during Gustav), but web-based access to communications permitted ready location of all personnel and permitted continued

instructions between lawyers and staff.

— *Perry Staub Jr.*
Partner, Taggart Morton Ogden Staub Rougelot & O'Brien

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