



Implementing a voice disaster recovery plan

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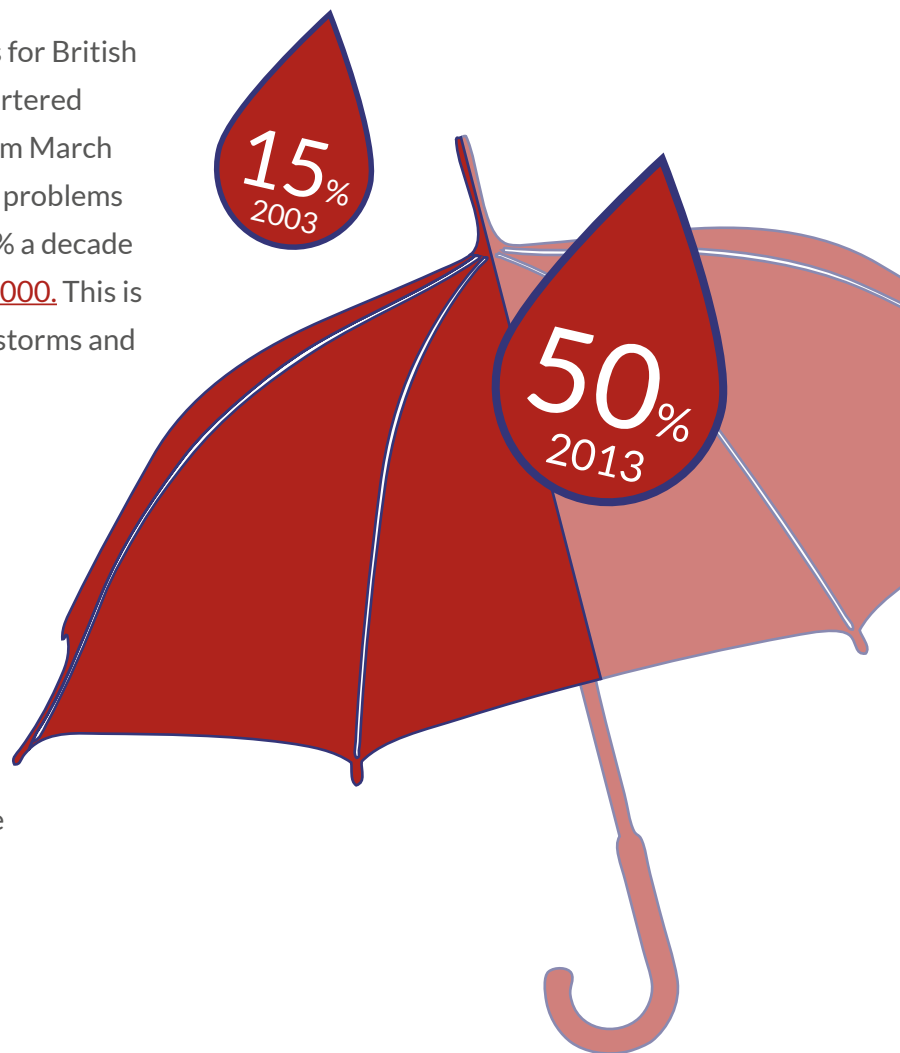
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After the 2014 winter storms, thousands of homes and businesses were left without a working phone. In some areas service was down for weeks, leaving local firms substantially out of pocket.

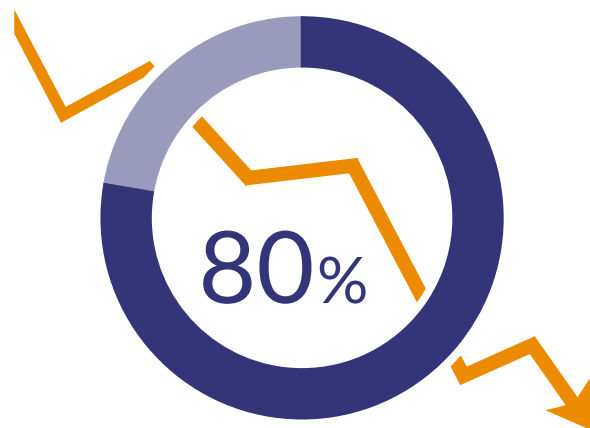
Bad weather is increasingly causing problems for British businesses, according to figures from the Chartered Management Institute (CMI). In its survey from March 2013, almost half reported that it had caused problems of some sort last year, compared with just 15% a decade ago, with incidents costing an average of £52,000. This is certain to rise when statistics from the 2014 storms and floods have been compiled.

And there are plenty of other ways that telephone service can be disrupted, from accidents to technical failure. Criminals too, can do their bit: the rising price of copper has meant a sharp increase in cable theft. For example residents and business owners in Flitch Green, in Essex, woke to find themselves without phone or internet service after thieves made away with a stretch of cabling.



An expense you don't want

The cost of such incidents goes way beyond the loss of productivity or sales, with many companies struggling to recover from the damage to their reputation. Loss of new business opportunities and media scrutiny can also take their toll. As a result, by some estimates, as many as four-fifths of businesses that suffer a major disaster go under within a year.



Despite such risks, though, only 63% of UK businesses have a business continuity plan in place.*



It's a situation that even concerns the Government. The previous Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform, Chloe Smith, commented: "The resilience of SMEs matters. SMEs are the life-blood of the economy, providing employment and growth, and critical services and products to larger companies. They're also vital in supporting their local communities in coping with disasters. The quicker they can be up and running again after problems hit, the quicker whole communities can recover."

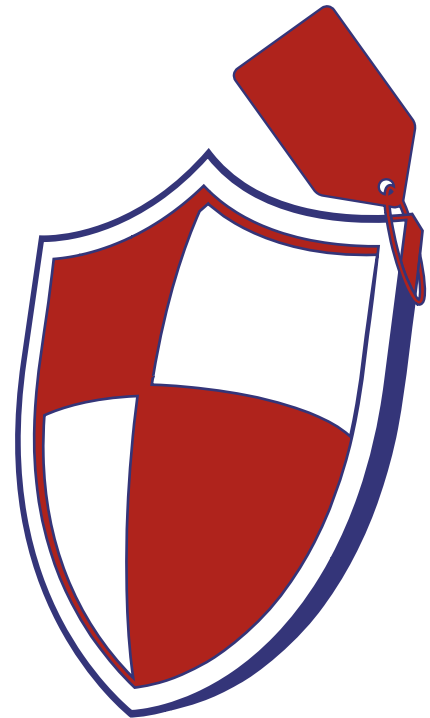
The CMI report found that loss of telecommunications was highlighted by more than half the managers it surveyed; indeed it represented their third biggest worry after loss of IT and loss of access to the site.

*CMI 2013 Business Continuity Management Survey 'Weathering the storm'.

Protect your telephone system

However many small businesses believe, wrongly, that protecting their telephone system against disasters is simply too difficult and expensive. But this really isn't the case. If sitting and waiting for your telecoms provider to get authorisation for call diverts doesn't appeal, there are other options.

A hosted telephony solution or using SIP trunking means that calls are managed in the cloud, rather than using a physical switchboard. This can have big cost advantages even when things are running normally and in a disaster it can be a lifesaver. Diverts to alternative offices can be activated and call plans and voicemail announcements changed - in real time, from any location, using a simple web interface.

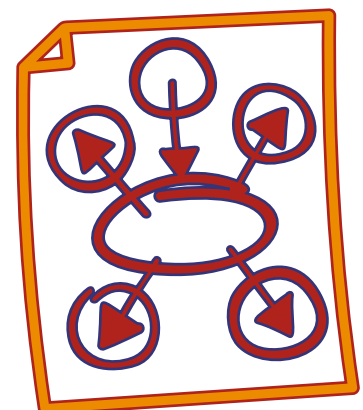


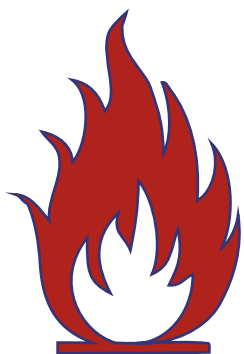
Alternatively, businesses can opt for a provider that offers a business continuity app. This too allows voice services to be managed on-the-fly using a mobile device. It can be particularly suitable for smaller organisations, allowing a manager to manage the situation while, for example, out on the road.

Both methods offer business owners total control over call services. But this is only half the story. All the control in the world won't do you much good if you're running around like a headless chicken, unprepared.

What you need is a plan...

There's plenty of help out there when it comes to building a plan. [Business continuity training](#) is becoming more readily available and there are useful resources on the [gov.uk website](#). Like any disaster recovery plan, creating a telephony-specific version has certain key elements: risk assessment, impact assessment, creation of a strategy, documentation and testing. It should also go without saying that the final plan should be kept up to date.

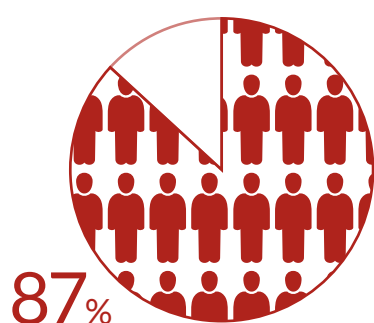




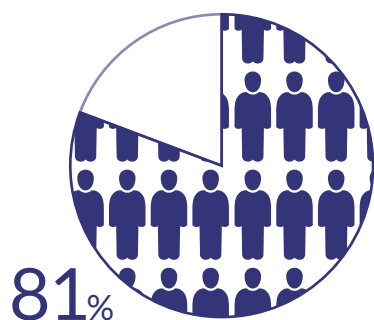
The plan should first lay out the circumstances under which it should be triggered. A single faulty phone line clearly shouldn't merit the same response as an entire office going up in flames. Here it's important to define who's actually responsible for declaring an emergency and who should be contacted. Next, it's necessary to consider the appropriate actions for each possible scenario, focusing on activities rather than technology - 'A to communicate with B', for example, rather than 'A to telephone B'.

This then leads on to a specific range of options; for example, heavy snow could mean staff working from home, with the help of appropriate telephone diverts. The closure of one office could see calls routed to another with an appropriate announcement to callers. Here it may be possible to come up with a range of layered options with every plan having an alternative fall-back option.

It's vital to make sure that all staff are aware of the plan and know what to do in a disaster. And rehearse it; almost half of organisations that had a business continuity plan told the CMI that doing this had uncovered flaws.



Many SMEs are required by other parts of their supply chain to have a business continuity plan in place; many others have seen the advantages for themselves. Still though, a large proportion only put together a business continuity plan after they've experienced a major problem - an expensive lesson to learn.



But those that do have a plan in place tend to reap the benefits, recovering more quickly from disruption. In the CMI survey, 87% of managers with recent experience of activating their business continuity arrangements agreed that it effectively reduced disruption, with 81% saying that the cost of the plan was justified by its benefits. Perhaps because it's such a basic necessity, the telephone is often taken for granted. But it's the lifeline of many, if not most, small businesses. And, when a disaster does occur, it's frequently the most useful tool in managing events - maintaining service really should be a priority.



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