

Could a Natural Disaster Destroy Your Law Firm? Five Simple Tips to Prepare

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While the world will likely not end in 2012, the outbreaks of severe weather that have plagued much of the country this summer can certainly make the most level-headed lawyer wonder if the Mayans were really on to something.

While many Americans have an extra supply of food and water stashed away, very [few law firms have a disaster plan](#) in place to deal with a hurricane, earthquake, or flood. According to the Insurance Institute for Home and Business Safety, one in four small businesses forced to close because of a disaster never reopens. Moreover, businesses that are able to implement a [business continuity plan](#) typically experience less damage, loss, and downtime than businesses without a plan.

As the name suggests, a disaster plan is designed to help ensure that your law firm will continue to function in the aftermath of a natural disaster. If your firm is not up and running, how will you be able to help your clients and sustain your business?

Below are five key tips to help keep your law firm operating and meeting your clients' needs in the wake of a disaster:

- **Evaluate the risks.** Consider the different types of disasters—fire, flood, tornado, etc.—that can occur in your area and how well you are prepared to respond. For instance, would your firm be able to survive in the event you are displaced for a week, a month, or longer? This also means evaluating your insurance policies to ensure that they provide adequate protection in the event of a disaster.
- **Develop a plan.** While many law firms have considered the risks, very few have a formal disaster plan. The plan should clearly outline how the firm will respond to a disaster, including where the firm will operate if it is displaced and how the firm will communicate with employees. The plan should also establish a succession of management for the company, clearly outlining who will manage the company if key leaders are unavailable.
- **Train your staff.** All staff members should understand their roles in the event of a disaster, i.e. who to call, where to report, etc. Also, it is important to designate a few key staff members to serve as a point of contact for co-workers, clients, the courts, and vendors. It will be their job to explain what has happened, and provide status reports regarding any pending matters.
- **Regularly inventory your assets.** To make sure you are compensated for any business losses, it is important to have a complete and up-to-date inventory of your assets, including office furniture, equipment, and supplies. With today's technology, it is easy to video or photograph your office.

- **Backup your documents.** In order to keep your firm up and running, you will need to be able to access client files as well as personnel, payroll, and other essential records at an off-site location. Therefore, it is imperative to regularly make back-up copies of important files and documents. Copies of key paper documents should also be stored off-site.

While preparing for the end of the world may seem ridiculous, making sure your law firm can survive a serious storm, fire, or other unexpected event makes good business sense.