

Nuno Filipe Cardoso explores the key drivers of downtime and why emergency response processes are key to minimising it

Hardware failure, human error, software failure and natural disasters are just some of the drivers of downtime in a business, however hardware failure is the number one cause; it can have a significant impact on productivity, ultimately affecting the bottom line. As a result, it's vital businesses have flexibility built into their teams in order to react quickly to emergency operations and limit any damage.

Not to be overlooked, lost opportunities are also a major consequence of downtime to a business. Most business functions are electronic and carried out over a network, and so there's always a danger that any damage to this network can result in lost transactions or queries. We live in an age whereby information is everything and so a loss of data can mean a loss of a client or customer – they may go elsewhere if they are unaware of the system failure. It's also a question of confidence; the loss of company information could imply that there's been a data breach, which is incredibly topical right now and front of mind for customers and clients. It can present serious reputational risk and therefore managing correctly – or avoiding at all - is key.

And of course, there's productivity – having an idle team because a server or machine has failed not only costs money, but leads to a disengaged team that is unproductive. It's not always easy to know the length of time it will take to restore a network, for example, and so businesses need to have a contingency plan as they continue to pay employees regardless.

Considering these factors, damage control is key to preserving reputation and retaining clients. Most will forgive some downtime if managed appropriately and communication with key stakeholders is good; without these however, there's a risk of lack of confidence in the business to deliver. Even long-standing partners can become impatient if a system failure impacts their business and the right controls and communication aren't in place to show progression in fixing the issue.

In simple terms, the areas to consider when responding to an emergency project include: assembling a strong team; completing necessary paperwork; briefings with clients and the team; safety checks; executing the job; and reporting progress to the client. The absence of any of these elements will result in an incomplete or inefficient operation - they form the foundations of any project.

To demonstrate this, we conducted an emergency response operation which took place on Sunday 24th June. We received an email late the evening prior explaining that due to a fire, our client's critical space needed an immediate clean and restoration. They informed us that the UPS power supply had caught fire in the plant room and that it was most likely due to an overheated server. We responded by email immediately and then quickly assessed where team members could be redeployed from less critical operations to work on the site.

After a team had been formed, paperwork was the next point of call. Without this in place, a job can't be carried out – every active employee needs to be equipped with a pack comprising all relevant manuals and protocol documents. Once the paperwork was completed, we met with the client to align on our approach. Together, we did a walk-through on-site, identified hazardous areas and agreed priorities for the technical clean. It became clear that our speedy response was appreciated – it was now Sunday and downtime was simply not an option as any hangover into Monday would lead to loss of earnings for the business.

Next, health and safety checks were carried out on site. This is vital – it has to happen before any work can begin - to ensure the safety of employees on site. These checks included dynamic risk assessments and ensuring the fire alarm and water supply were isolated. It was fundamental to identify the water detection systems, sensitive dust particles and fibre optic cables. Checking whether the system is live and what power supply is available to use is important before beginning the operation. Once we had completed the checks and established there were no hazards, the team got to work on the job at hand.

The project involved cleaning, vacuuming and wiping floor voids, micro vacuuming internal and external racks and vacuuming and mopping all corridors and stairs down to basement level. Our team also offered our client component cleaning which was agreed and carried out on the day.

By 5pm the server and plant rooms were fully operational and ready for the working week to begin the following day. Our client was relieved the issue had been resolved in such a timely manner, and considered it a job well done. So much so, we were asked to return and clean another plant room on site the following Tuesday. All paperwork was then completed and finalised, before being shared with the client to wrap up the project.

Reacting to emergency projects is a key element of our business, and one that we do well, even in sometimes incredibly challenging circumstances. It's where our strict adherence to protocol results in seamless and efficient delivery – it ultimately works in everyone's favour.

I was very proud of the team for their efficient, hard work in getting this critical site up back up and running for the business in such a short time frame over the weekend. I was even more impressed that their commitment to going above and beyond was recognised by the client and resulted in an additional project. In summary, downtime can be a serious issue for businesses but having the right specialist team with the right systems in place as support can reduce a business's exposure to risk and ultimately, minimise its impact on the bottom line.