

Who better to ask about dealing with backup plans and disaster recovery than someone who lived through, and recovered her business from, the largest natural disaster in U.S. history? Many of you may recall *In Katrina's Wake*, the award winning LTN story about the effects of Hurricane Katrina on the New Orleans legal community and, since I reside in the Crescent City, I decided to ask one of the people featured in that article about her experiences.

Janine Sylvas is the IT Director at Stone Pigman Walther Wittmann, a 60 attorney firm based in a building in the heart of downtown New Orleans based firm known throughout the Gulf South for its litigation and business practice. I sat down with her to talk about her experiences in recovering from Katrina and how that influenced the firms current backup and recovery procedures.

Q. Tell us what happened to the firm in Katrina?

A. Even though there was wind damage and the building had been vandalized, it did not flood. All of our equipment was safe and secure. The crux of the problem was that no one could enter into the city because of the levee failures which caused devastation and flooding to occur in so many areas. Due to these circumstances, the firm opened a new office from scratch in Baton Rouge and continued with daily operations.

Q. When you did get back in place what did you resolve to do differently?

A. After Katrina, we knew it was imperative to implement a business continuity solution that involved a general strategy of distributing backup and mirroring servers in other location. So before going back to the New Orleans office we began the planning process and decided to replicate our critical data to a data center in a different state that was out of harms way.

We also realized that we needed to add our Accounting server as a critical server. It was important during that time to be able to run conflicts checks if we were going to continue doing business and obtaining new clients.

We didn't replace any software, but we did purchase some new software and hardware to accomplish our goal of setting up critical servers in a data center.

Q. So you were able to do that?

A. Yes.

Q. And what specifically have you purchased and installed to further that goal?

A. We purchased three new file servers for our critical applications during Katrina. We purchased Neverfail software in order to replicate the information from our New Orleans office

to the data center in Texas. We later increased bandwidth to support the amount of data that was being replicated offsite.

Q. Is there anything you thought you were going to do that you decided not to do?

A. There was one thing we contemplated doing and didn't do until after Hurricane Gustav in 2008. The firm's management committee approved the purchase of hurricane shutters for the IT Department. Our IT Department sits on the second floor in a corner surrounded by windows whereas most IT Departments at law firms are in the middle of the building.

Q. That brings up a great point. What happened during Gustav last year to show you how this worked and/or what you might still need to improve?

A. Hurricane Gustav gave us confirmation that we were on the right track. Our plan worked very well last year during Gustav. It was obvious people were more prepared for Hurricane Gustav. Everyone had disaster recovery manuals that gave them detailed instructions regarding the firm's expectations, where to find information, and how to access the firm's network

We utilized the servers sitting in the data center in Austin, Texas which were fully replicated using Neverfail. We performed a switchover on Saturday at noon, the day before Gustav was projected to make landfall. Switching over meant the servers in the data center would become the firm's primary (or active) servers. We informed everyone as to when the switchover would occur so they would not access the system during that time. Within a 30 minute period, the switchover had taken place and personnel had access to the firm's information. Lawyers continued to draft and modify documents and send emails. The servers in New Orleans and Austin remained synchronized because we never lost power or Internet connectivity which made switching back to New Orleans very easy.

We also made some significant improvements in our disaster procedures. An important one was the instructions in our disaster recovery manuals for employees with cell phones or PDA's. We already had instructions in the manual outlining what to do after the switchover for BlackBerry users so we updated those instructions for personnel who have iPhones, Treos, or Windows Mobile Devices. This allowed all of them to continue to receive email without interruption after the switchover.

Q. So what were the biggest lessons learned from Katrina about planning for future disasters?

A. Specifically, every time we purchase software for the firm, we now think about whether or not the software is a critical application. If it is considered to be a critical app, we discuss if it should be web based and hosted on or offsite. If the application is not hosted offsite, we make sure the application and database are replicated to the data center.

But in the bigger picture, going through Katrina taught the firm a lot of lessons that we actually implemented. Key personnel know who they are and we now have an emergency website which includes the information in our DR manuals. People know they can use text messaging to communicate if they can't do so by telephone.

The firm is now very proactive during hurricane season. Every year, we update the disaster binders and make sure everyone receives a new copy. We remind everyone of the employee disaster forum and how to log into the site. People now take hurricane preparation a lot more seriously. We no longer have the attitude that we are just missing a day or two from work. We realize the severity of being affected by a major hurricane and the aftermath that can occur.