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EXCLUSIVE REPORTS

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Quick action means life or death for businesses when disaster hits

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Herb Coin had a front-row view in the early morning hours of Aug. 5 watching his business go up in flames.

The six-alarm fire at 414 N. Rock Island destroyed the building that had been remodeled by Murdock Companies Inc. just three years ago.

Susan Armstrong, president and CEO of Armstrong Shank Advertising, huddled with her family in a storm shelter in May 1999 while a tornado damaged the agency's building.

And just like the business owners looking at the destruction left this week by Hurricane Charley, Coin and Armstrong found themselves facing the task of rebuilding and trying to keep their businesses alive.

Coin, owner and president of Murdock Cos., knew it was critical to get the business moving even before the six-alarm fire was out.

"We had cell phones by 9 o'clock the next morning to answer our phones," Coin says. "And we started calling our customers, telling them what happened and the fact that we were still able to handle a lot of their business."

The main office reopened in old space at 800 E. Central that the company had been trying to sell.

The company's various units sell electric motors, v-belts, bearings, hoses, cutting tools and other industrial supplies.

Data recovery was a major challenge. The burned-out building had a concrete tornado room to protect employees and phone and computer equipment. But the computers -- along with its customer and supplier data -- were buried in the rubble, and there was no backup.

"Get your records backed up and off site." Coin says. "We come out with our data intact, but we've got a lot more files we'd like to get out of the building."

Through the years, Armstrong had worked with her clients on crisis communication plans. But like many businesses there was no written disaster plan at her company before the May 3, 1999 tornado that ripped through Haysville and heavily damaged Armstrong Shank.

Employees retrieved computers and telephones from the rubble as the agency borrowed space from other businesses. It moved into a temporary location to keep client work moving. It took nearly two and a half months to rebuild.

"We were able to pick up where we left off and we didn't miss a deadline," Armstrong says.

There is no way to plan for a particular type of disaster, according to Brenda Jones, chairwoman and CEO of the Association of Contingency Planners, a nonprofit group that helps businesses create a business continuation plan.

Jones says determine critical functions and the employees and equipment needed. Write procedures that even a novice can follow to keep the critical functions working smoothly without relying on someone's memory. Then make sure all data is backed up and stored off site.

"Disaster recovery business continuity planning is an insurance policy," Jones says. "You hope you never need to use it."

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