Preparing your Fixed Voice Continuity Plan

Your business landline (fixed voice service) can be a critical business asset. If your fixed voice service failed, would your business continue to operate effectively?

Back-up (or failover) solutions for fixed voice services vary considerably depending on the size of your organisation and the purposes for which you use these services. Most small businesses are highly dependent on their fixed voice services so a continuity plan is important.

To minimise risk to your business from failure of your fixed voice services you should:

A Perform a 'risk assessment' for your business's use of telecommunications

B Obtain the most reliable fixed voice service that you can afford – to match the level of risk.

C Write an action plan for what you would do in the event of a disruption to this service (outage)

A. Perform a risk assessment for your business use of telecommunications

A risk assessment will identify all your uses of fixed voice services and assess the likelihood and impact of it failing or working poorly. Where a degraded or failed service is likely, the following steps are recommended.

B. Obtain the most reliable fixed voice service that you can afford – to match the level of risk.

Explain to your provider your business situation

It is important that your provider knows that your telecommunications infrastructure is 'business critical' – this sets the service level expectation.

Review and select from the following failover options:

Install alternative fixed voice lines

Although quite expensive, it is possible to order/connect failover lines to your phone system. Remember, the failover lines need to be provided from a different telephone exchange and linked to the phone system via a different path into your building or it is highly likely they will be affected by any problem with your usual fixed voice service.

Arrange a quote from your provider for this option (including a separate path into the building and lines via an alternate exchange) so that you can make an informed decision.

Forward calls to a voice announcement

During a phone system outage it may be sufficient to forward your primary phone number to a voice announcement. This typically advises callers there is a problem and requests them to call back or leave a message. The announcement can also provide the status of your phone service, the expected time of service restoration, and refer callers to a company web site and/or another office or a mobile phone. You will need to arrange this service in advance with your provider.

Provide a web site announcement and email options

In all cases where fixed voice services are interrupted (and there has been no seamless failover implemented) it is important to alert callers to the outage on your company web site. Estimated return-to-service time and alternate options such as email, other office or mobile numbers should also be provided. If other office or mobile numbers are provided, remember to notify the people who will be answering these calls.

Forward calls to a mobile phone

Small businesses may wish to forward calls to a mobile phone, but remember to have an appropriate voicemail message on the mobile phone.

IP Telephony

IP Telephony is where your fixed voice services are carried over a data network, such as the internet or a Virtual Private Network (VPN). A VPN has the advantage that the provider manages the service and the network link.

Providers of these services will usually offer a business grade service with contracted service levels.

Failover services for IP Telephony should be considered when producing your Broadband Business Continuity Plan.

C. Write an action plan for what you would do in the event of a disruption to this service

Refer to ACCAN's Tip Sheet – 'Preparing your Business Continuity Plan (BCP)'. Some key points are:

- Make a short list of critical business activities and make sure they can function during a fixed voice outage

- Identify those activities that can be performed once your failover service is implemented and/or normal services are restored. For example, capture customer details manually and leave online processing for when systems resume.

- Make sure you include contact details – especially after hours – of all the people needed to help restore your services and details of where your off-site data backup is located.

- Include a list of IT, network and telephony equipment and if possible, a diagram of your IT configuration. Include names and contact details of any service providers you use

- Outline the steps you will take when vital computers and communications services are not available and who will perform them.

You will need access to someone who knows the technical configuration of your IT services to help prepare this action plan. In addition to the BCP tips listed above, the action plan will take into account specific steps that arise from item 'B' in this tip sheet.

You should display this plan prominently in your office and regularly review and update it.

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SMALL BUSINESS TIPSHEET

FIXED VOICE CONTINUITY PLAN