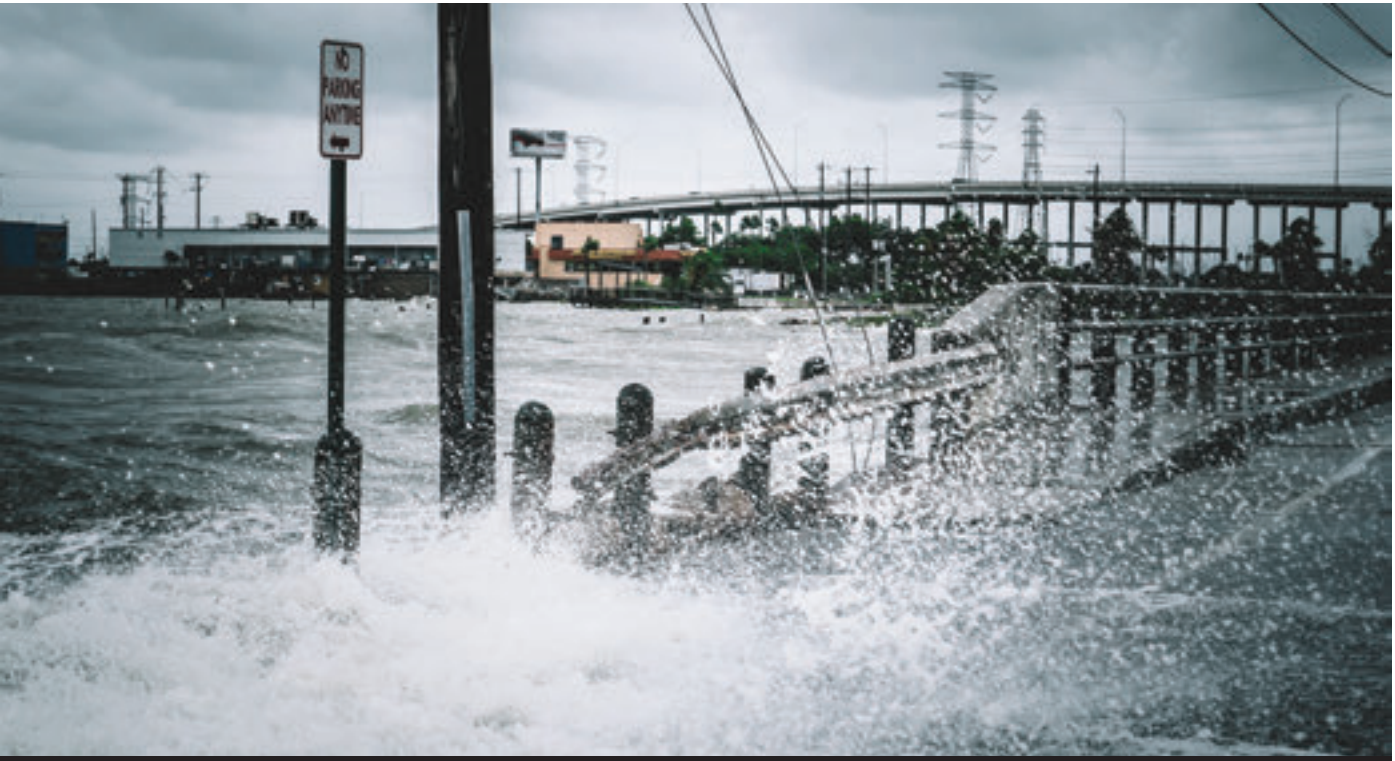


## PARTNER'S GUIDE TO A Season of Disaster



In the late summer of 2017, nature reminded the United States of its unpredictable power with unprecedented rainfall in Texas, a massive classic hurricane hitting Florida and epic western wildfires. For MSPs, some of the necessary steps are the same as they've been for a decade or more. In other ways, major shifts in technology make the disaster preparedness and response playbook very different. **By Scott Bekker**

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**W**hat is the ideal role of a managed services provider (MSP) when natural disasters loom? That question became more than hypothetical this August and September for North American MSPs in a lot of states, including Texas, Louisiana, Florida, California, Washington, Oregon and Montana, as well as the Canadian province of British Columbia and several Caribbean islands.

Texas and Louisiana faced Hurricane Harvey, which made landfall at Rockport, Texas, as a Category 4 hurricane, but delivered its biggest punch over the following week in the form of epic rainfall across Texas and Louisiana that totaled more than 50 inches in some places.

Unlike Harvey, which rapidly developed from a tropical depression into a major hurricane just before making landfall, Florida sustained a well-telegraphed blow from

Hurricane Irma. That second hurricane broke records, including having the highest wind speeds yet recorded for a hurricane in the open Atlantic Ocean. Once it entered the Caribbean, Irma smashed through some islands and sideswiped others at Category 4 and 5. Its landfall in the United States on the Florida Keys Sept. 10 marked the first time in 166 years of weather records that two Category 4 storms have struck the United States in one season.

Shifting west, a welcome wet winter might have seemed like it would lead to a tamer wildfire season. Instead, the winter rains spurred an explosion of grass growth. Experts say that when heat waves hit in the summer, the grass dried and became fuel—alongside excessive dead trees from previous years' drought conditions and insect invasions—for the exceptional number of wildfires burning across California, Washington, Oregon, Montana and British Columbia in August and September.

This season of disasters is providing an unwelcome reminder of all the things MSPs need to do for customers in times of trouble.

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### 1. CHECK BACKUPS BEFORE THE EVENT

With a slow-motion catastrophe like an approaching hurricane, an MSP's role in the days before landfall is part technical, part psychological.

Patrick Murray, a senior consultant with Houston-based ERGOS, one of the largest MSPs in South Texas, fielded a lot of requests as Hurricane Harvey approached the Lone Star state.

"The No. 1 question I got two days prior to the storm, since we anticipated things so much, was, 'Hey, are my backups working?' The second question was, 'Are my off-site backups working?'" Murray said. "I probably answered 50 of the same questions from internal colleagues and associates, as well as customers directly."

When a storm approaches, there's only so much anyone can control. Making sure that the data portion of disaster preparedness is lined up is a solid business approach. But it also

helps customers and colleagues relax to check things off their list of concerns.

Whether or not customers and colleagues are calling to check on their backups, it's smart to have those checks as part of an ongoing, regular process.

### 2. PUT SAFETY FIRST

It's always worth reminding customers, coworkers and business owners that safety is more important than their business. Sure there are statistics that a certain percentage of companies go out of business after a disaster-related outage—and those are extremely alarming. Good data protection, backup and disaster recovery processes will prevent corporate data and IT systems, at least, from being the cause of a business failing after a disaster. Yet it's also worth remembering that only survivors can start new businesses.

One MSP in Beaumont, Texas, combined his family's safety with customer care. Flooding affected Tim Beard's house, so the CEO of NetWorthy Systems moved his family to the dry company office to ride out the storm and the aftermath.

### 3. STAND BY FOR MINOR DATA TROUBLES

Much of the work in the wake of a disaster is run-of-the-mill recovery of a couple of files.

Speaking a few days after Harvey made landfall, Murray said, "We've had to do some mild file restores here and there where some customer offices are down due to power or due to flooding."

Those types of recoveries tend to be easy for modern MSPs to handle, but that doesn't make them any less valuable. Having staff ramped up for the days after an emergency hits, when customers realize what half-finished files may have fallen through the cracks, is the time when a lot of MSPs prove their value.

### 4. STAND BY FOR MAJOR DATA TROUBLES

Having that staff ramped up in safe or remote locations is also critical for when MSPs really earn their keep, in the case of a full-on office outage. Modern techniques for spinning up complete virtual versions of the office environment can mean that the digital portion of a customer's business can operate from almost any location for any length of time. That's especially useful in a case like Harvey, where damage from the massive flooding is likely to keep some businesses out of a main location for weeks or even months.

### 5. PHYSICALLY REBUILD CUSTOMERS AFTERWARD

After the disaster passes, the MSP's next step is to act as the trusted adviser in helping the customer get the digital components of its operations back in business. From helping to fix equipment or orchestrate fixes, to reordering or advising on

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replacement equipment, there can be a lot of recovery-related work after a disaster.

#### 6. RETHINK POWER

Many times when a disaster is on the way, it's too late to do much about the power situation. The customer's infrastructure is either ready for some outages at that point, or it's not—and massive, sustained power outages on the order of Superstorm Sandy in the Northeast in 2012 are outside the scope of what most small to midsize businesses can address anyway.

But the aftermath of a big outage, like the 6 million customers who reportedly lost power as Hurricane Irma swept through Florida, are a good conversation starter about whether improvements can be made in a customer's use of technologies like uninterruptible power supplies, backup power supplies and generators.

#### 7. GET CUSTOMERS TO THE CLOUD

The shift in customer preference to cloud-based infrastructure over the last few years has been unmistakable. There's been a huge move from small business servers in data closets to e-mail residing in the Office 365 cloud and other data and business applications sitting in Amazon Web Services or Azure or on Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) vendors' infrastructure. It's early yet for an assessment, but it seems like a good guess that that digital data-related damage of big disaster events would have to decline in inverse proportion to the amount of the data that's primarily stored in the cloud.

Any post-disaster discussion between MSPs and customers who have been reluctant to put their infrastructure in the cloud will be an opportunity to revisit that reticence.

#### 8. MAKE END-USER SYSTEMS MOBILE

On a related note, recovery from a disaster is a good time to look at shifting a company's end-user devices to laptops and getting appli-

cations either built or configured for use on mobile devices. For a company to be fully disaster-ready, its employees need to be able to work from anywhere, and that's much more easily done if they work from laptops already.

Going further, the more work employees can do from smartphones, the more effective they can be in an extended office-downtime situation. Those devices tend to have better battery life on average than a laptop, and tend to charge more quickly. Additionally, smartphones are much easier to grab and pack. In a case like Irma when an estimated 5 million people are ordered to evacuate in short order, that can be an important factor.

The post-disaster conversation can be an opportunity to look anew at re-architecting business processes and applications around SaaS and cloud applications that will make the customer's business more productive in the short term and more agile the next time a disaster rolls through.

MSPs have a significant role to play in shoring up their customers to be more robust in cases of disaster. The less that customers have to worry about their systems and data, the more they can tend to their personal safety and be confident that whenever and wherever it's time to get back to work, their systems will be ready. In the United States, these aren't just lessons for next year, either. Wildfire season is far from over in the West. In the East, Hurricane Irma made landfall right at the peak of hurricane season with another few months to go.

U.S.-based MSPs have another few months to play their vital role in helping customers prepare for, respond to and rebuild from disasters. •

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