Seven enablers of effective disaster recovery for SMEs

Key facilitators to make effective DR more straightforward

By Tony Lock, May 2012

Originally published by

ComputerWeekly.com

In a nutshell:

Recent research carried out by Freeform Dynamics identified seven key facilitators that help make Disaster Recovery (DR) easier to undertake.
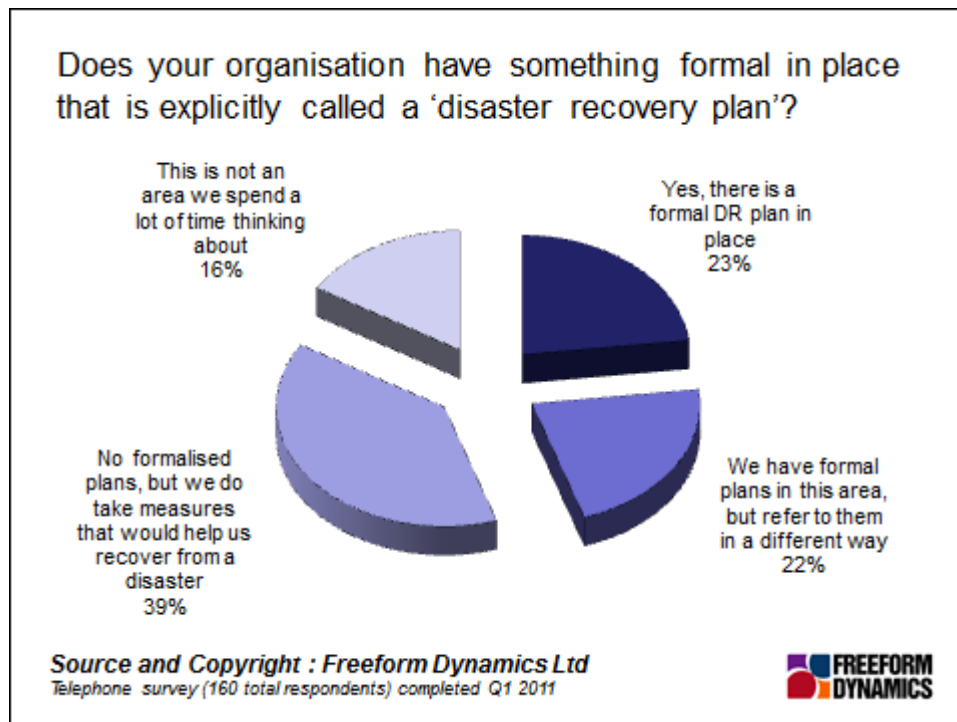
Key points:

- Few small businesses have 'formal' plans in place to handle disaster recovery.

- Many think that 'new', 'sophisticated' data and storage protection solutions are beyond their means or will be too difficult to operate.

- Large investments are not required to improve DR capabilities.

- We have identified seven characteristics common to SMBs that are confident in their ability to recover from IT systems failures.

Recent research [1] carried out by Freeform Dynamics into how SMBs undertake disaster recovery (DR), highlights that few have formal plans in place to tackle a crisis. This article considers the current status of DR in small and mid-size businesses (SMBs) and then highlights a few simple steps every organisation can take to ensure it is better able to address such challenges.

Over the course of the last ten years IT based systems have become ever more deeply embedded in the processes of many small organisations, often running applications and services essential for the business to operate effectively. The importance of such systems is easy to overlook, as the uses to which they are placed have often grown stepwise over long periods of time. Unfortunately, this can also mean that the protection they receive may not have been re-visited for many years.

A glance at the chart below illustrates the current situation with regard to 'formal' DR planning to deal with incidents experienced by the organisation as a whole or by IT systems in particular. This does not mean that the SMBs surveyed, and by inference their peers in the wider business community, are completely unready to tackle recovery of operations. In fact it is clear that a majority of SMBs do have some notions of how to handle emergencies.

Does your organisation have something formal in place that is explicitly called a 'disaster recovery plan'?

- This is not an area we spend a lot of time thinking about — 16%
- Yes, there is a formal DR plan in place — 23%
- No formalised plans, but we do take measures that would help us recover from a disaster — 39%
- We have formal plans in this area, but refer to them in a different way — 22%

Source and Copyright : Freeform Dynamics Ltd
Telephone survey (160 total respondents) completed Q1 2011
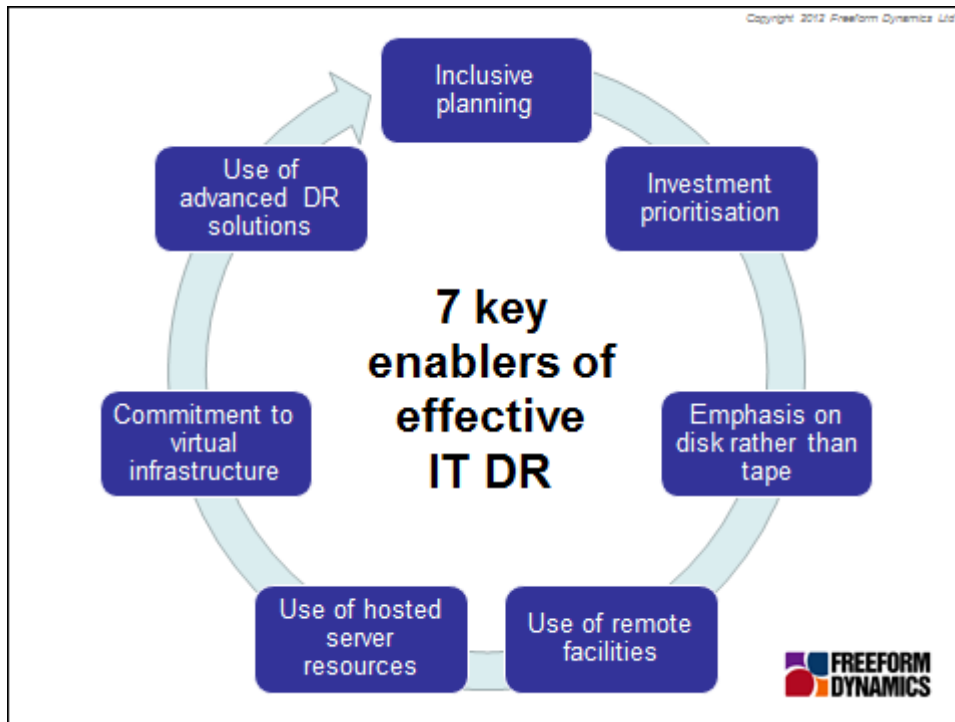
FREEFORM DYNAMICS

The research went on to investigate just what approaches to disaster recovery SMBs employ today and found, unsurprisingly, that the vast majority of those surveyed depend on the use of backup to tape solutions that have long been the backbone of IT recovery processes. The results highlighted that with the exception of backup and recovery using disks rather than tape, very few of disaster recovery solutions developed in recent years have gained much traction at all in organisations within the size-band surveyed (50 to 1,000 employees). This is despite the fact that significant numbers report having major reservations concerning the robustness, reliability and speed of the 'traditional' backup and recovery systems and processes on which they depend.

In fact, when questioned more deeply on 'modern' DR solutions - such as data replication, point in time snapshots, continuous data protection (CDP) solutions, remote business continuity systems, managed DR services, recovery to hosted and / or 'cloud' systems etc. - very few SMBs have much experience or knowledge of what's available. Furthermore, significant numbers of those surveyed consider such 'modern' solutions to be either unsuited to their requirements, too expensive for them to use or too complicated for them to manage effectively.

This last point is important as it illustrates that the vendors of data protection and DR solutions have much work to do in educating huge numbers of SMBs on the suitability of solutions for their organisations. Equally, those looking after IT systems in SMBs would do well to take as look at some of the tools and techniques available to address the shortcomings they acknowledge exist in their current approaches to DR. For example, even virtualisation of x86 servers, which can ease and speed both the recovery and DR testing process, has only been embraced by around half of SMBs, despite the remarkable coverage it has enjoyed in recent years.

Taking a step back from the detail, the research overall highlighted 7 key enablers that were more common amongst SMBs who are particularly confident in their ability to recover from IT disasters and interruptions compared with their peers. None of the enablers should be beyond the reach of the vast majority of SMB's IT departments, even if they consist of one person.

7 key enablers of effective IT DR

Amongst the enablers are to be found inclusive planning, prioritisation and funding, an emphasis on disk rather than tape, the use of remote facilities, a use of hosted services, commitment to virtualisation, and the smart use of modern DR technologies and solutions.

Walking through these, the starting point is often going to be putting in place some form of plan to cover the DR situations that are most likely to be encountered. Clearly this requires time more than budget, so it's something most IT professionals will be able to get into without seeking explicit funding.

From there, there are likely to be areas that the planning will show need to be addressed, which may require some form of investment, although the sums involved may not be overly large. Having said this, it's clear that some DR enablers will already be on the IT agenda to service other needs, e.g. using disks as backup targets rather than tape is already growing rapidly in SMBs for reasons of operational efficiency. Equally, significant numbers of organisations already employ some form of hosted services, perhaps running their mail systems, collaboration services or web presence, and some of the suppliers of these services may be able to extend data protection offerings.

Where more significant investment and effort is likely to be required, again needs other than DR can be served. With this in mind we would particularly highlight that making more use of virtualisation, that may require the allocation of explicit budget and resource, holds the potential to raise availability, improve responsiveness to new business requirements, and drive down overall operational costs.

IT professionals in SMBs have a lot to do keeping their systems operational even when things are going well. Following some of the principals identified here has the potential to make it more straightforward for them to be ready to recover systems quickly if things go disastrously wrong.

[1] The research referred to in this article was conducted independently by Freeform Dynamics under the Community Research Programme. A full report entitled "Enabling Rapid and Effective IT Recovery" is available for download here http://www.freeformdynamics.com/fullarticle.asp?aid=1383

About Freeform Dynamics

Freeform Dynamics is a research and analysis firm. We track and report on the business impact of developments in the IT and communications sectors.

As part of this, we use an innovative research methodology to gather feedback directly from those involved in IT strategy, planning, procurement and implementation. Our output is therefore grounded in real-world practicality for use by mainstream business and IT professionals.

For further information or to subscribe to the Freeform Dynamics free research service, please visit www.freeformdynamics.com or contact us via info@freeformdynamics.com.