

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)**Survive Your Next Network Outage**
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If you're like most people, when your Internet's down, your business is paralyzed. Keep things moving with these tips for preventing and responding to a severed connection.

By: MATT ALDERTON

When he started his home-based business, Houston-based darbyDarnit Public Relations, Petri Darby wanted to be on the cutting edge. A self-described "early adopter," he also wanted to save himself money. So, Darby bundled all of his high-tech home utilities together—his cable TV, his Internet, his phone, his fax and even his home security system—in order to turn his house into an all-cable home.



Photo by: iStockphoto

"I thought I was being really progressive and that I was going to be ahead of the curve," he says. "I didn't really think about the fact that all the kinks in the system might not have been worked out yet."

In fact, they weren't. Darby, therefore, experienced a service outage almost daily. And without access to phone, e-mail or fax, he was left with virtually no way to communicate with his clients, except inconveniently, via his handheld. His only option was to flee his home office in pursuit of wireless connectivity at his local coffee shop.

"It was incredibly frustrating on a personal level," he says, "but it also impacted my productivity. I found myself without access to e-mail for a day, sometimes two, and that's unacceptable when you're working in an industry where you have minute-by-minute issues."

While it may be "unacceptable," the dreaded network outage is also unavoidable. Whether you work from your home or an office proper, there are bound to be days when you find yourself without access to Internet, e-mail or phone. The question on those days is, will your business panic, stall and sputter, or will it rise to the connectivity challenge with productive, problem-solving prowess?

Causes and Effects

The reasons for network downtime are many. Sometimes, it's a software problem. Sometimes, it's a hardware problem. Oftentimes, it's a server issue, either locally, on your own network, or remotely, on your e-mail host's network, for example.

Perhaps most frequently, though, network outages are caused by kinks within your Internet Service Provider's (ISP) system. Maybe they're weather related, and you're experiencing problems after a rough storm. Maybe they're structural, and the ISP is experiencing an outage while they repair their cable infrastructure. Maybe they're even man-made, and your neighbor's cable guy accidentally disconnected your lines. Regardless of their cause, though, ISP kinks are out of your control.

Still, while the cause isn't always yours to manage, the effect most certainly is, according to David Birk, partner at Network Doctor, an Englewood Cliffs, N.J.-based IT consulting firm.

"Most companies start off with a break-fix type of attitude," he says. "When you're doing break-fix, you're just addressing one issue at a time. So, when a network outage does come along, it throws everybody into total and utter chaos."

Plan in Order to Prevent

Chaos isn't requisite, however, as 99 percent of network failures are generally preventable, according to Birk. And those that aren't? Well, they can definitely be planned for, he suggests.

"I recommend taking a more proactive approach," Birk says. That means checking your connections when they're up, not just when they're down, and testing your equipment when it's functioning, not just when it's broken.

For small businesses that work on a local network, operating off of a server, it also means investing in preventive maintenance. "You have to evaluate the cost of a loss in productivity versus the cost of taking proactive measures," Birk says.

Matt Knee knows a lot about the costs of wounded productivity, and about the benefits of planning against it. As president of MyNewCompany.com, a Las Vegas-based business that provides online business filing services for small start-ups, he's experienced firsthand the frustrations of a network outage. In fact, he's experienced several.

"The impact of downtime can be devastating," he says. "The longest we've had was almost two entire days."

After confronting unreliable connectivity, and witnessing its crippling effects on his business, Knee created and implemented a "disaster plan" to help his company navigate network malfunctions. "Planning is definitely the best way to prevent and deal with disasters," he says. "The process of developing a plan forces you to anticipate the worst and come up with effective strategies for dealing with disasters as they happen."

Don't Blow Your Fuse

Knee's disaster plan includes several strategies not only for preventing network disasters, but also for responding and reacting to them. The key to surviving them, he suggests, is keeping your cool. Just because your network has short-circuited,

after all, doesn't mean you have to, as well.

In order to prepare for and cope with network blackouts, and keep your company ticking during downtimes, consider these 10 expert suggestions:

- **Get a second ISP.** "We really encourage clients that have very high needs for constant Internet access to get dual Internet connectivity," Birk says. Knee agrees. While he relies primarily on a high-speed connection, for instance, he has a second connection, a dial-up, to use should his primary one cut out. Having a router or a firewall that can automatically manage two ISPs—plugging into one upon failure of the other—is an ideal solution for getting emergency Internet access via two separate providers.
- **Back up your files.** If you use an internal file server, consider storing electronic copies of your files locally on your hard drive, or on disc, in case you lose your network connection. "As a backup to our backup," Knee says, "we have a portable hard drive that we back up weekly that is kept off site."
- **Build a tech toolbox.** Knee recommends making tech solutions accessible for all of your employees so that anyone can help solve potential network problems when they arise. "We have centralized all of our technical manuals into a 'techbox' so all employees have access to manuals for things like modems, routers, switches, printers, etc."
- **Stay current.** Crossed wires aren't the only things that can interfere with your connectivity. Hardware and software can cause problems, too. As such, make sure you're current when it comes to firmware updates, antivirus protection, etc.
- **Plan for downtime.** Outages are inevitable. In order to get through them, your company should have a plan for keeping employees on task—with or without an Internet connection. "Employees in most firms tend to see [an outage] as an excuse to take a break," Knee says. "At our firm, however, we have specific 'downtime tasks' for employees. This means that our employees always have something to do, regardless if the network is down or up."
- **Have an alternate office.** If you work in an office, make sure your home office is set up to accommodate you if you have to spend a few days working there. Meanwhile, if you work at home, scout out locations in your area that have wireless connections—coffee shops, libraries, etc.—where you would be comfortable working in case of an emergency.
- **Press "Print."** You'll be better equipped for working offline when you're not online if you keep hard copies of key documents that you may store online, including important information that you might store via Web-based CRM or bookkeeping programs.
- **Invest in extra power.** Your connection isn't the only thing that can keep you from getting online. Electricity—or a lack therefore—can also fail you. As such, Birk recommends keeping back-up battery power on hand that will enable you to run your server in the event of a power failure, or at least keep it operational long enough to properly shut it down and back it up.
- **Keep a laptop handy.** A natural battery and data backup, according to Birk, is a laptop computer. Make sure you have one available in order to make your mobile life easier in the event of a power or network failure.
- **Turn a challenge into an opportunity.** Of course, a network failure doesn't have to be a bad thing. "Feeling disconnected can be refreshing for a moment," Knee acknowledges. Without access to e-mail or Google, take some time to bond with your employees, to engage in team-building exercises together or to call your clients on the phone—all the things you otherwise feel too busy to do.

Of course, sometimes the best way to manage a network explosion is to simply unplug yourself before you get unplugged. Just ask Darby. Tired of crossed wires and clipped connections, he finally gave up his high-tech home office. "I'm back to paying higher prices," he says, "but I also have almost 100 percent connectivity, and that to me is more important than being progressive."

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