



Disaster Planning for the Dental Office

Sometimes bad things happen to good people. Unfortunately, according to Murphy's Law, it will also happen at the most inopportune time and at a maximum cost. There really isn't much you can do to stop it. Bad things do happen – even to good people. What you can do is prepare for it.

Sometimes bad things happen on a geographic scale.

Consider the earthquakes in California a couple years back. There were dental and medical offices that were totally flattened. There was nothing left to salvage in the practice – just rubble. No charts, no chairs, no computer systems. Whole offices were just flattened and gone. Nothing to recover.

Hurricane Katrina resulted in a similar situation for the offices in New Orleans. Everything was destroyed – not just wet, but destroyed. The charts were totally unusable. The computer systems were not salvageable and no data on them was retrievable.

Sometimes the catastrophe will be more local.

It is not uncommon for a burglary to greatly disrupt a dental or medical office routine. An office manager arrives in the morning to find the door broken open and the place a mess. Papers scattered on the floor can be cleaned up fairly easily, the stolen computer can also be replaced. But the information on it might very well be a different story.

Then there is the technical problem. Something like a hard disc or controller card goes bad and scrambles all the data on your server. This type of problem can take hours or days just to diagnose. By then the cost of the hardware failure is 100 times as expensive

as the part. Days of lost production and wasted staff time add up very quickly. It is not uncommon for a hardware problem to cost an office several weeks, or even months of clinic profits. Just what you want to do is work a month for free. It makes you worry about the quality of your backup tapes.

These examples are simply put forward to demonstrate that things do break. It doesn't matter how expensive or what brand of computer hardware you purchase; it's not even an issue of Mac vs. PC. Every piece of hardware will eventually break. The question is not "if" but "when". If every piece of hardware will break at some time, then doesn't it make sense to plan for and expect it to break, instead of hope that it won't?

Preparation is the key.

Preparing for a disaster just makes sense. As the saying goes, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure".

Consider the prevention plan needed to accommodate for the potential computer theft or computer component failure in a client/server architected system. There are many points that need to be addressed. You will need a second server, equal in capacity and speed to the first. Additionally, a separate power source should be secured so that power to your building would not be a single point of failure. Further, you need to have sophisticated software that manages storing and retrieving duplicate data from two separate servers to ensure that if one fails, the other is ready to take over. Also, those two servers should be located in different physical locations, sufficiently separated to ensure that a fire or earthquake or flood would not take both of them out.

In short, to prepare for uninterrupted service for a client/server system, a dentist would need to spend

five to ten times as much money on equipment, configuration, line and power services, monitoring, etc. and then hire some very bright IT guy who would spend a lot of time to get this done. After it is all setup, the whole system needs to be maintained and monitored. That's a lot of life energy to spend on this problem.

It is just not reasonable for a dentist to put these resources towards the problem of making a client/server based system sufficiently redundant to accommodate even the most minor of disasters.

Does that mean that you just have to live with the risk? If you are using a Client/server based dental software system, the answer is "yes". You just have to live with the risk. There are things you can do to help mitigate incrementally, but you cannot, for a reasonable price, craft a solution that addresses the core issue.

Consider a Web-Based alternative to dental software.

With a Web-based system, you don't have a server in your office with patient data on it – your data is located on the Web. No server to be flattened in a collapsed building, no server to be destroyed by a flood, no server to be stolen by an intruder, no server hardware to fail, no patient data to lose, no backup tapes to make or restore. You only have a very simple wire to the internet.

If there is any event that makes your office computers inoperable, you simply find a new computer with internet access. In the case of a geographic disaster, your office may be gone, but your patient clinical and billing information is intact and insurance collections can continue. In the case of a stolen computer you simply go to your favorite computer store for a replacement and plug it in. You are back up and running that fast (any other hardware failure, same story).

About Curve Dental

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Some offices choose to have a spare computer on hand for just such a situation.

Now, what about your data? Is it secure? With a web-based solution, it's all kept in totally redundant Network Operations Centers (NOC's) located in separate regions of the continent. All information is being stored simultaneously in both places and if, for any reason, one of them is made inoperable (geographic disaster), the other picks up the slack and you don't even miss a beat (or a byte depending on your point of view). Hard drives and other computer components are expected to break. The system is designed to accommodate any piece or combination of hardware or computer failure, and will still work. You don't even know there was an issue.

These redundant operations make the need for restoring data from backups extremely rare. It is not uncommon for a robust web-based system to never have the need to resort to backups. However, in the unlikely event that a backup is needed, they are made every hour of every day (and night). Nobody has to remember to make the backup and they don't need to be taken home for "off-site" protection. They are automatically backed up and electronically taken off-site. Each backup is verified to ensure that it will work if needed.

No dentist can build this type of infrastructure on their own. No client/server system can offer this type of redundancy and data protection. It's just not feasible using a client/server technology.

Conclusion

Bad things do happen to good dental offices. Client/server systems present risks that cannot be reasonably addressed. Appropriately architected Web-based systems are inherently more secure and available than client/server based systems.