

## INTRODUCTION

A disaster, large or small, is the most devastating event in the life of a library or museum. A disaster can be a mishap or a catastrophe. Disasters can result from a faulty air handling system, a broken water pipe, or roof leak. They can be as major as a hurricane that breaks all the windows, a fire or bomb blast, or a flood that leaves six feet of standing water on the first floor. Events of the last few years have shown that "It will never happen to my library" is the wrong attitude. Disasters must be considered and prepared for. The same is true of the company, governing body, and even the building where you rent space.

A fire in the building could soak an entire collection: books, periodicals, microfilm, and computers. And the fire might be on another floor. If the sprinkler system is not "smart," a trash can fire could set off the entire floor, soaking your entire collection. Even if the policy of your institution is to replace every thing with new copies or upgraded technology, there is often not enough money to do this, nor sufficient insurance to cover the loss; especially if the loss is more than the library/information center.

Poor air circulation and a high rate of humidity could set off a spurt of mold growth that can infect the collection and physically discomfort the staff, not to mention make them sick. What will you do if the building has to abate asbestos and some of it is in the library? How does your institution deal with sick building syndrome, or multiple chemical sensitivity? Do they ignore health complaints until they are critical or try to get to the root of the problem? In the meantime, what can you do for your staff? How can you mitigate or reduce the problem?

In the last 10 years, collections in libraries and information centers have expanded beyond the traditional paper, photographs, and microfilm/fiche formats. Now there are CD-ROM, computer systems, and complicated LANs/WANs. E-mail, voicemail, and faxes are commonplace and often indispensable. Many special libraries have three-dimensional objects and artifacts, museum objects, and artwork that are easily damaged by water, fire, and changes in environment. Some libraries have invisible walls and are in a variety of locations, sometimes in the same city or state; often across the country and the world. Computers and telecommunications hook everything together. What happens when there is a break in the system? What can be done to keep everything up and running?

Despite the attitudes of some administrations that the library is a black hole into which vast sums of money are thrown every year, libraries provide information

and support that are integral for the daily functioning of the institution. Many information centers provide data that aid in decision making, financial investments, and future directions for the organization. Without these services, the organization must seek information in other places, often outside. So when there is an interruption in power, telecommunications services, computer access, or even access to the building, the library should consider what services will be provided with a minimum of interruption. How will these services be restored and in what order? How will the staff of the company find the library? Has the administration included the information center in the overall disaster response plan? If the overall plan has been delegated to the MIS department, then the information center/library should establish a solid working relationship with them. In this way, computer resources and equipment are also allocated to the information center during times of crisis.

Think about what the staff will do during a disaster. Where will they report when the building is closed? Who is capable of functioning under stress? This stress is different from the type experienced day-to-day in the office. What will the administration expect? Can you exceed their expectation by planning for your own survival? The head and staff of the library/information center have to be aware of what the "entire company" is doing. They will have to fight for equipment, space, and funds while everyone else is scrambling to get the company back together again.