



Lessons from PPS Plus Software

Contributed by John Shinn and the Gulfport CARRI Team

PPS Plus Software

John Shinn, founder and CEO of PPS Plus Software, learned many new lessons in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. These lessons were gained by running his small business in the wake of the most destructive natural disaster in U.S. history, with no formal disaster plan in place.

PPS Plus had to deal with immediate customer service issues following the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. Unable to provide normal service to its 600+ customers across the country, Shinn's company was in a very serious predicament. While clients were understanding about the company's losses, they also needed the software, support, and services they depended on from PPS Plus to operate their businesses. It was imperative that PPS Plus reopen for business as quickly as possible.

Fortunately for PPS Plus, whose offices were located on the eighth floor of the Markham building in downtown Gulfport, Mississippi, the computing equipment was not damaged. The PPS Plus IT manager had stayed in the area during the storm and called Shinn with a damage report the very next day. That weekend, before downtown Gulfport was locked down, Shinn and key staff members were able to enter the Markham building to retrieve the computers and salvage what they could. In a dark building filled with debris and without electricity, they moved all the company's essential equipment

down eight flights of stairs.

Since essential utilities would not be available in Gulfport for a significant amount of time, Shinn established a temporary office in Jackson, Mississippi, before selecting his new location in neighboring Biloxi. Without any advance arrangements for office space, Shinn knocked on the door of the business incubator in Jackson. As a graduate of Harrison County's small business incubator, he knew that the Jackson incubator might have available space already equipped with power and phones, which would allow PPS Plus to open the business without having to obtain permits. Luckily, Shinn's instinct was correct, and PPS Plus was up and running just five business days after the storm.

Learning from this difficult experience, Shinn has made the following significant changes to his company's operations since Hurricane Katrina.

- All PPS Plus information systems are now backed up and replicated online so that they are accessible from any computer with internet access. The company also converted to an online customer relationship management system which allows staff, regardless of their location, to access current and prospective customer information through the web.
- Shinn maintains contact information for his vendors and clients on his own phone so he can send text messages to them in the event of an emergency. He may also consider using Twitter to broadcast information to clients, vendors, and his staff.

Responding to the desires of Gulfport, Mississippi, citizens to share their Hurricane Katrina experience with other communities, the CARRI Gulfport Team, including researchers at The University of Southern Mississippi–Gulf Coast, worked with community members to document their stories. The essay presented here, part of CARRI's Gulfport Resilience series, captures a key lesson learned from the Gulfport community's daunting experience with the hurricane.

- Shinn also keeps up-to-date contact information on all of his employees, including personal cell phone numbers and e-mail addresses. If a hurricane warning is issued, he collects more detailed information regarding who on staff is leaving the area and where they are heading.
- Updated company personnel policies tell employees what they are expected to do during a natural disaster. These new policies include information on payroll, vacation days, and how to communicate with other staff members. Employees are also strongly urged to arrange for direct deposit of their payroll checks, so that they are not depending on receipt of a physical check during a time of emergency.

Along with communication and personnel issues, Shinn noted other important operational concerns that came to light during the Katrina experience. Mail delivery was a major concern for the company. Since the majority of his customers pay by check, Shinn had his mail forwarded to his temporary office in Jackson. This was a mistake. By the time forwarded mail began to arrive in Jackson, PPS Plus had already relocated to a new office in Biloxi, and Shinn experienced an immediate cash flow problem which lasted for about 30 days. In retrospect, Shinn realized that mail delivery is an important consideration in a disaster situation and that he will avoid forwarding mail to a temporary address in the event of a future disaster.

Banking also proved to be a vital component. Although banks in the Gulfport area were quick to recover after the hurricane, Shinn had temporarily moved his office to Jackson and was without immediate access to his bank. He opened a new account with a bank in Jackson and continues to maintain a small balance in that account so that he will be able to transfer funds if necessary in a future emergency situation.

Shinn now advocates that even the smallest businesses consider disaster recovery and business continuity. Businesses dependent on local customers can be particularly hard hit. Shinn made an effort to maintain communications and place orders with smaller, local businesses. Such actions can be critical to their survival and to stabilizing the local small business community.

Finally, businesses need to check with the IRS and their state tax authorities after a natural disaster to find out if they have modified due dates for business taxes. Contact information for these agencies needs to be readily available to business owners to help them verify payment schedules.

Hurricane Katrina taught John Shinn many valuable lessons that are not typically covered in textbook business courses taught in colleges and universities. He is using this experience to enhance PPS Plus Software's emergency response operations and help it to become a better company.

John Shinn, founder and CEO of PPS Plus Software, served as a charter member of the CARRI Gulfport Advisory Group. He was also a panelist at the June 2009 University of Southern Mississippi Ghosts of Katrina Conference, where he and others shared stories of their businesses' experiences in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. CARRI would like to thank John for his many contributions and especially for his assistance in the development of this resilience lesson.