



Pro Drive Data access Disaster recovery

Data access and disaster recovery are vital for Special Products' life saving medicines

With patient safety paramount, pharmaceutical firm Special Products relies on robust IT systems for rapid access to product data and to keep the business operational in the event of a disaster.

Having already supported Special Products through two office relocations, Pro Drive was tasked with setting up an off-site backup facility, using Microsoft proprietary replication technologies to create a fully-operational standby for vital systems and data.

Pro Drive has created a robust infrastructure that supports regulatory compliance, with dramatically improved data integrity and greatly reduced disaster recovery times.

Special Products Ltd is a wholesale pharmaceutical company formed in 1997 specifically to develop and distribute a limited range of 'specials' (unlicensed medicines) to improve the therapy available to patients with rare disorders, which had previously been neglected.

The firm also distributes and exports its products through other wholesalers who specialise in the distribution of 'specials' in the UK and overseas.

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Growth and regulation

Pro Drive's relationship with Special Products began in 2005, when the firm relocated from Addlestone in Surrey to nearby Woking.

Pro Drive was contracted to set up a new email system and server and to establish a more robust network to meet the needs of a growing company.

The relationship continued when Special Products relocated again in 2009 to a new headquarters and warehouse facility in Weybridge, Surrey, to enhance customer service and to provide capacity for the company's continued growth.

"We've grown from an original staff of five to more than 40 people, and the business has moved into a much bigger pharmaceutical region as an increasing number of our products have become licensed," explains Joe Braitch, Special Products Business Development Director.

"Given the nature of the business, our needs are very exacting and Pro Drive has delivered solutions to a very high standard.

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"With increasing regulatory challenges we had a greater need for quality control, and it became essential that we would be able to run the company in the event of any disaster, for example if premises burnt down," says Braitch. Vital medications,

Vital data

Some of Special Products' medicines are used from day one for newborn babies, so lives could be at risk if the firm was unable to access vital data, explains Braitch.

"One of our well-known medicines prevents epileptic seizure, a potentially life-threatening condition, so we simply have to have the relevant data available.

Every medicine has a batch number when it's made and an expiry date. If anything goes wrong with a medicine - for example if it appeared cloudy rather than clear - then we would have to comply with the MHRA's medical information requirements."

If ever a serious issue arose, it is conceivable that every product from a particular batch of medicine would need to be recalled, so the availability of data is crucial.

Braitch says this would be resource intensive with a paper-based system so a software programme has been developed for this purpose.

"While we haven't ever needed to issue a product recall for a major event, the system means that regulatory information is available on tap and can be accessed within minutes."

The key to recovery

Special Products works closely with all the specialist hospitals in the UK, including Great Ormond Street in London, the Birmingham Children's Hospital and Sheffield Children's Hospital, along with many others worldwide.

Medicines are supplied to about 30 countries, with another 8 to 10 being added during 2010.

In all, the business supplies 250 hospitals and 2000 pharmacies, and there are 20 distributors that act as wholesalers for its products, just in the UK.

"With a customer base and distribution network of this nature, we are reliant on data access and continuity of operations, which is also important from a commercial viewpoint," asserts Braitch.

"It's clear that we need a good infrastructure that is robust and has some fall back capacity."

Having retained its original premises in Addlestone, Special Products engaged Pro Drive to develop it as a back-up centre, in the event of a major disaster at their primary site, with complete replication of systems and data replicated to the site on a continuous basis.

"If operations at Weybridge went down for any reason, we can literally walk into the Addlestone site and be up and running within half hour of reconfiguring the systems," says Braitch.

"Due to space constraints the system also enables a number of people to work remotely, so it's a fairly sophisticated and flexible set up."

A successful disaster recovery (DR) test was conducted at the Addlestone facility earlier this year and another is due shortly as part of the firm's Quality Assurance requirements.

"In some ways it feels like a heavyweight response for a business of our size, but it's very important because of the regulatory weight and life saving aspect of our products," comments Braitch.

Business continuity

Pro Drive set up a replicated server infrastructure at the standby site with the facility to replicate data from the live site using Microsoft proprietary replication technologies.

Alerts were configured to confirm if the site link was interrupted, with scripts to monitor the performance of the replication. Pro Drive also produced the necessary technical documentation on the recovery process for the DR plan.

A separate area was set up at Addlestone with servers for email, accounts and the regulatory folder system, basically creating a duplicate of the Weybridge facilities and allowing remote access to be conducted from both sites.

"Essentially it's a complete replication, ensuring there's no breakdown in our ability to operate," says Braitch.

This meets the need for high levels of compliance, and to have data available almost immediately, Braitch explains.

"Previously we were taking back-up tapes off site but as the company grew, we needed a more robust system with the ability to achieve replication and keep data bang up-to-date. It's also part of our insurers' conditions that we have a sound DR option."

Cost-effective solution

Pro Drive's solution has dramatically improved DR times on key systems from several days to a few hours and significantly reduced the data loss window.

The project plan made cost effective use of 'built in' Microsoft technologies and overall the installation has been easily affordable for an SME, costing less than a hosted back-up service would do in two years.

While uptime is high, Special Products has encountered a partial breakdown of the Blackberry server in Weybridge and a problem with the email system.

"We were able to switch over and continue operations, so for customers it remains a seamless service," remarks Braitch.

"At any time we could receive a panic order for medicines but have the assurance that urgent requests can be met quickly, regardless of any system issues."

Braitch credits Pro Drive for the robust set-up at Weybridge and also for the success of the back-up systems at Addlestone.

"They've always done a good job for us and have some really good quality engineers."

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About a third of businesses that burn down don't recover but that simply isn't an option when you are relied upon for life saving medications."

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