

Dick Youngblood: He helps prevent disasters from turning a business to ashes

A former Minneapolis police officer has built a thriving business creating disaster recovery plans.

By Dick Youngblood, Star Tribune

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Bob Huber

Dick Youngblood

[USG Inc.](#)

As one of the police officers handling crowd control when a 1982 fire destroyed the Northwestern National Bank building in downtown Minneapolis, Bob Huber witnessed a brief exchange between a bank official and a firefighter that helped inspire a business he would start nearly 20 years later.

"He asked the fireman to redirect some of the hoses from the bank to the building across the street," Huber recalled.

"When I asked the fireman why, he said the man wanted to protect that building because it was the emergency recovery headquarters where the bank had backed up critical documents and equipment needed in case of just such a disaster."

Huber thus was introduced to one of the first corporate emergency recovery plans in the country, a concept he later turned into a business that generated nearly \$1 million of revenue last year.

Huber, 60, is founder of Bloomington-based USG Inc., an unusual business that develops detailed emergency and disaster recovery plans for corporate and government clients, then shepherds their employees through intensive training designed to make their responses automatic.

The objective: to get the business up and running within 48 to 72 hours.

Huber's business benefits from a growing web of regulations imposed by the Securities and Exchange Commission, the IRS and other agencies requiring many companies to create detailed recovery plans.

USG is not alone in the field: Huber competes with IBM and the major accounting firms. Yet his client list includes the blue-chip likes of General Mills, Best Buy and Travelers locally and RJR Nabisco, Motorola and General Dynamics nationally.

The attraction is a patent-pending process that can be applied to virtually any enterprise. It involves face-to-face dialogue rather than questionnaires to gain an acute understanding of a client's operations and needs and to identify key personnel in each area to lead the recovery effort.

The result is a customized recovery plan that can run up to 300 pages -- but is not meant to gather dust until a disaster strikes.

"I was shot at as a police officer, and I can tell you that you'd better know what to do when it happens because you don't have time to pull out the department manual," Huber said. "It's the same with emergency recovery; it takes training to make it automatic."

It's a hands-on, seven-day training process during which recovery teams are established to cover everything from mobilization, damage assessment and recovery strategy to stabilization, restoration and a return to full operations.

Computer and telephone service must be restored at a preselected recovery site; employees, clients and vendors must be notified; arrangements for fund transfers and accounts payable and receivable transactions must be made.

The service is not cheap: On average, Huber charges about \$60,000 for a client with 700 employees. The fees can go as low as \$30,000 for a smaller enterprise and as high as \$600,000 for a multinational defense contractor.

But it apparently is worth the price. Consider this note that Huber received from Dale Kunz, vice president of BI Worldwide, after fire hit one of its office buildings in Edina.

"We were fortunate to have a process in place, and everyone knew what to do," said Kunz, noting that BI's recovery teams were assembled in just 45 minutes after the 4 a.m. fire alarm was sounded. "The ROI [return on investment] on our continuity plan was validated 10-fold on this one occasion."

Said Ken Boschwitz, vice president of Home Valu Interiors in Fridley: "The plan we're working on [with Huber] has us thinking about emergencies in a completely different way. It's some of the best business planning we've ever done."

Farzad Omariaie, engineering IT manager for Motorola's automotive communications and electronic systems business, put it most succinctly: "I can describe the feeling about the value USG delivered in one word: confidence."

Huber's work has attracted national attention: A recovery plan he wrote for Dakota County in 2003 was named best in the country by the National Association of Counties. And a book he published last fall titled "Response: Planning & Training for Emergency Recovery" has been accepted as a textbook in business classes at St. Petersburg College in Florida, where Huber lectured earlier this month.

Huber followed a long and interesting path to entrepreneurship, including 21 years as a police officer in Brooklyn Center and Minneapolis. He also earned a degree in computer science at the University of Minnesota and worked on computer fraud investigations.

That led to an FBI course in computer crime investigation and occasional stints as an FBI instructor on computer security topics.

He later moved to IBM to write disaster recovery plans for its clients. He wound up at EMC Corp. working on data backup issues, a job that disappeared in the fallout from the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Whereupon he spent three months designing the process with which he started USG in 2001. Since then his revenue has been growing at nearly a 27 percent annual clip, reaching \$950,000 in 2006.

And the potential for further growth is apparent: "It's scary how unprepared [for disaster] some companies are," Huber said. "In fact, many don't even have their computer data backed up off site."

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