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Microsoft 365 Outage Response Plan

A fill-in plan for small businesses. Complete it before you need it, print it, and keep a copy where an outage can't reach it.

Plan details

Organization

Plan owner (name and mobile)

Backup owner (name and mobile)

Date completed

Next review date

Printed copies are kept at

Digital copy kept outside Microsoft 365 at (for example, a password manager note or a USB drive in the safe)

How to use this plan

- Fill it in on screen (most PDF readers can type into the fields and save) or print it and fill it in by hand.
- Don't keep it only in OneDrive, SharePoint or email. During an outage, you won't be able to open it. Print it and keep a second copy somewhere that doesn't depend on Microsoft 365.
- Don't write passwords on it. Write where they're kept and who can get to them.
- Review it twice a year, whenever someone named in it leaves or changes roles, and after every outage.
- Sections 1 to 6 are the work you do now. Sections 7 and 8, and the outage log in section 10, are for the day it happens. Section 9 is for the week after.

BEFORE

1 Who's in charge

One person decides that you're in an outage and runs this plan. Everyone else knows who that is and how to reach them without Microsoft 365.

Role	Name	Mobile	Other way to reach them
Outage lead			
Backup lead			
IT provider or MSP			
Microsoft 365 partner			
Leadership to keep informed			

IT provider's after-hours support line

Support contract or customer number

Tenant name (for example, contoso.onmicrosoft.com)

Tenant ID (Microsoft Entra admin center, Overview page)

- [ ] We buy Microsoft 365 directly from Microsoft.
- [ ] We buy Microsoft 365 through a partner (also called a CSP or reseller). Partner name:
- [ ] The outage lead can declare an outage when (for example: email or Teams has been down for 30 minutes and Microsoft's Service health or status page confirms a problem):

BEFORE

2 How we reach people without Microsoft 365

If email and Teams are down, so is your usual way of telling people that email and Teams are down. Pick a channel that doesn't run on Microsoft 365 and test it once.

- [ ] Group text message from the outage lead's phone.
- [ ] A phone tree (each person calls the next two).
- [ ] A messaging app that doesn't run on Microsoft 365. Which one:
- [ ] Personal email addresses, only for staff who agreed to share one.

Who sends the first message

Where the contact list is kept (printed, and outside Microsoft 365)

Staff contact list

Personal phone numbers are personal information. Ask before you record them, and store this page as carefully as you'd store a payroll file.

Name	Role	Mobile	Backup channel or handle

Customers, partners and vendors to notify

The people who will notice first that you've gone quiet: customers waiting on a quote, a vendor expecting an order, the bank.

Who	Phone	Why they need to know	Who calls them

BEFORE

3 Where we check Microsoft's status

Most outages announce themselves as "my email isn't working." Know where to look so you can tell a Microsoft problem from a problem of your own in five minutes.

Service health	Microsoft 365 admin center, Health > Service health (admin.microsoft.com). Shows the issues that affect your tenant and the incident ID. Needs an admin role that can view service health.
Microsoft 365 status page	status.cloud.microsoft. Microsoft's backup page for when you can't sign in to the admin center.
Microsoft 365 Status on X	@MSFT365Status. Updates on some events.
Microsoft 365 Admin app	On a phone, with push notifications turned on.

Set these up now

- [ ] Service health email alerts are on, and at least one of the two addresses is outside Microsoft 365. (Health > Service health > Customize > Email. Each admin can add up to two addresses.) Address outside Microsoft 365:

- [ ] The Microsoft 365 Admin app is installed, with notifications on, on these phones:

- [ ] At least two people can see Service health. Who:

- [ ] We know the quick test: check the sources above, then try Outlook on the web from a phone on cellular data. If it fails there too, it isn't our office network.

BEFORE

4 What still works when Microsoft 365 doesn't

Some work can carry on from copies already on your devices. Check these settings now. You can't download a copy during the outage.

- [ ] Classic Outlook for Windows uses Cached Exchange Mode (the default), which keeps a copy of the mailbox on the PC. Months of mail kept offline (the default is 1, 3 or 12 months, depending on disk size):

- [ ] The new Outlook for Windows has offline access on. Days of email saved (the default is 30):

- [ ] The files people can't work without are set to "Always keep on this device" in OneDrive. Which folders, on which devices:

- [ ] Key reference material exists on paper or offline (price lists, customer phone numbers, the on-call list, this plan). What and where:

- [ ] Our phones keep working if Teams is down, or we have a fallback (forwarding to mobiles, a backup number). Plan:

- [ ] We've listed the other systems that use Microsoft 365 sign-in or email (line-of-business apps, scanners that send email, booking systems, the alarm company's alerts):

Remember: Outlook can show what it has already downloaded, but it can't send. Messages written during the outage wait in the Outbox and go out when the service is back.

BEFORE

5 Emergency admin access

Some outages are sign-in outages, and some lockouts are self-inflicted. Microsoft recommends at least two emergency access accounts so you can always get into your own tenant.

- [ ] We have two cloud-only emergency access accounts with the Global Administrator role, not assigned to any one person.
- [ ] At least one of them is excluded from Conditional Access policies, as Microsoft recommends.
- [ ] Their sign-in method doesn't depend on one person's phone or email.
- [ ] Someone is alerted whenever they're used. Who:

Where the credentials are stored (never on this form)

Who can get to them

Last tested (at least every 90 days, says Microsoft)

Next test due

Tested by

BEFORE

6 What happens to email, and our continuity decision

Mail sent to you during an outage usually isn't lost. The sender's mail server holds it and keeps retrying. How long it keeps trying depends on the sender's server:

Exchange Online	Holds deferred messages for one day.
Exchange Server	Gives up after two days by default.
The email standard	RFC 5321 says the give-up time generally needs to be at least four to five days.

After that, the sender gets a bounce. In a long outage, assume some people got one, and plan to ask the important ones to send again. Microsoft can stretch its own limits during a big incident, but don't count on it.

The decision to make now: some third-party email services sell continuity, which lets people keep sending and receiving while Microsoft 365 is down. It costs money every month. Decide on purpose, and write down why.

- [ ] We accept the risk. A day or two without email is survivable for us because:

- [ ] We pay for email continuity.

Provider	Cost per month	Decided by	Date

DURING

7 Step by step on the day

Work down the list. Write the time each step is done. If anything suggests a security incident (sign-ins you don't recognize, a ransom note, Microsoft calling it malicious), stop and follow your security incident plan instead.

- [ ] **1. Confirm it's Microsoft, not you.** Check Service health or the status page, then the phone-on-cellular test. Time:

- [ ] **2. Write down the incident ID** from Service health (it looks like MO123456 or EX123456) and the time the problem started.

- [ ] **3. Declare the outage** and tell staff through the backup channel, using the staff message in section 8. Time:

- [ ] **4. Tell the customers and vendors** on your list who need to know. Time:

- [ ] **5. Switch to the workarounds** in section 4: phones, offline copies, paper. Time:

- [ ] **6. Don't change DNS or MX records.** Changes take time to spread and can send mail to the wrong place once the service is back.
- [ ] **7. Don't delete Outlook profiles or reinstall Office.** A new profile has to download the mailbox again, which it can't do during the outage, and you lose the offline copy you were relying on.
- [ ] **8. Check for updates** every _____ minutes and note them in the outage log (section 10).
- [ ] **9. If it lasts longer than _____ hours,** we will:

- [ ] **10. When the service is back,** send the all-clear message in section 8. Time:

DURING

8 Messages, written in advance

Nobody writes well in a crisis. Edit these now so they're ready to paste or read out.

To staff. Suggested wording:

> *"Microsoft 365 (email, Teams and shared files) is down. It's a Microsoft problem, not ours. Don't change settings or reinstall anything. Delayed email will arrive on its own once it's fixed, so don't click links in any email about the outage, even one that looks like it's from Microsoft. Updates will come by [channel]. For anything urgent, call [name] at [number]. Next update at [time]."*

Our staff message

To customers (also for the phone greeting or a website banner). Suggested wording:

> *"Our email is affected by a Microsoft outage. If you sent us something time-sensitive since [time], please call us at [number]. We'll let you know when email is back."*

Our customer message

The all-clear. Suggested wording:

> *"Microsoft 365 is back. Delayed email may keep arriving for a few hours. If something you sent us bounced, please send it again."*

Our all-clear message

AFTER

9 The week after

Close it out properly. This is where the plan gets better.

- [ ] Mail flows both ways: send a test to and from an address outside the company.
- [ ] Everyone has checked their Outbox for messages that didn't go out.
- [ ] Key customers and vendors have been asked to resend anything time-sensitive.
- [ ] We read Microsoft's post-incident report when it was published (Service health > Issue history; the issue's status changes to "Post-incident report published").
- [ ] We decided whether to claim a service credit. You'll need the tenant ID and the incident ID. If you buy through a partner, Microsoft's partner rules say the request must be made within one month of the end of the billing month the outage happened in, so ask early. If you buy directly, see the Claims section of Microsoft's Service Level Agreement for Online Services.

Claim deadline

Claim filed on

Filed by

Review meeting (30 minutes, within a week)

What happened, in two sentences

What worked

What didn't

What we'll change	Owner	Due

- [ ] This plan was updated after the review. Date:

This plan is general guidance, not legal or contractual advice. Microsoft changes its portals, defaults and terms, so check the current Microsoft documentation when you review it. Free to use and adapt for your own business.

DURING

10 Outage log

Write it down as it happens. You'll need it for a service credit claim and for the review afterwards. Print extra copies of this page for a long outage.

Time	What happened, or what we did	Who