

DAMAGED DOCUMENT RECOVERY

Separating Fact from Fiction

BY JOE PERKO

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Every month, countless U.S. offices and other commercial establishments experience some form of damage to critical documents as the result of fire, flood, or mold caused by excessive moisture. The process of recovering and restoring these damaged documents is as important to adjusters, insurers, and their clients as it is arcane.

The ability to take appropriate action based on fact rather than myth can be critical in successfully recovering damaged documents, ensuring business continuity, and controlling costs. Joe Perko, a document recovery expert and director of field services for Rapid Refile, recently took the time to verify the facts and debunk the myths of this highly specialized field for the readers of Claims.

Fact: Mold can begin to grow on documents within 48 hours of exposure to moisture.

Time is of the essence when recovering and restoring moisture-damaged documents. Ambient conditions after water damage are often ripe for microbial growth and mold can easily begin growing on documents within 48 hours. The mold problem can quickly accelerate in these situations because humidity and temperature typically rise rapidly, even when dehumidification and remediation services are immediately employed. The mold problem is exacerbated because paper documents are highly porous and remain wet longer than other materials, particularly when compacted in boxes, file cabinets, and other storage containers. In addition, wet documents can significantly hinder dehumidification efforts and cause expensive secondary damage as mold growth contaminates the surrounding environment.

Myth: Damaged documents must be shipped off site for reclamation or remediation.

On-site document recovery is possible for businesses with special chain of custody requirements – although not all document recovery firms offer these services. There are tradeoffs for businesses wanting to keep their damaged documents on-site during the recovery process. On-site document recovery can be significantly more expensive because the site must be secured and risks escalate with inexperienced local labor.

Myth: Vacuum freeze drying is the best method for reclaiming water-damaged documents.

Vacuum freeze drying arguably produces the best aesthetic results when reclaiming damaged documents and books and clay-coated paper must be vacuum freeze dried to prevent warping and adhesion. However, desiccant drying can be a far better solution for office files and many other documents. A well-constructed and monitored desiccant chamber, which produces a slightly more wrinkled product, can dry thousands of boxes of documents at once and provide constant access to the files. Speed and document access can be vital to law and accounting firms, medical facilities, and other businesses that rely heavily on their records for business continuity and meeting client or customer needs. The results of desiccant drying will vary greatly depending on the nature of the water damage, length of exposure, and the experience of the firm using the desiccant method.

Fact: Recovering or reclaiming documents that have been damaged by exposure to fire and smoke is very time sensitive.

Documents, being porous, absorb moisture and odor from their environment. The longer documents are left at a loss site with elevated humidity and soot particulates in the air, the greater the chance of microbial growth and permanent staining and/or odor. Best results are achieved if the damaged documents can be treated within 48 hours of exposure to fire and smoke. There is a direct correlation between the speed with which fire and smoke-damaged documents are treated and overall document reclamation costs. The quicker the documents are treated, the lower the cost.

Myth: Water-damaged books or documents can be recovered by moving them to areas where they are exposed to fresh or circulating air.

Attempting to “sun-dry” documents by spreading them out on a conference table, fanning them, or allowing groups or boxes of documents to dry out naturally are not optimal ways to recover water-damaged documents. In addition, placing boxes of wet documents in a room being dehumidified will not successfully address saturation and wicking. Documents handled in these fashions tend to dry on their edges, which adhere to adjacent pages, leaving the core of the documents wet. Touching damaged documents — particularly those that have been saturated — can further damage them.

Myth: All document recovery firms are the same.

The differences among document recovery firms can be fairly significant and there are many considerations involved in selecting the most efficient and effective firm to recover documents. Document recovery firms often differ on pricing structure -- some bill clients based on inclusive unit costs, while others opt to bill based on time and materials. Another differentiator is the speed at which the documents can be recovered. The document recovery business is very competitive and firms eager for business will be willing to establish a suitable timeframe for completing the work and getting their client back in business as quickly as possible. The ability to provide access to critical documents during the recovery process can set some firms apart from others. The best firms will commit to both inventory the damaged documents before they are removed from the loss site and a process for enabling client access to them during recovery. Finally, many companies that restore structures do not have in-house document recovery capabilities, opting to subcontract the work to outside specialists. This can lead to unnecessary cost markups and complicate direct communications between the document restorer and the client, which can be an issue when documents need to be accessed during the recovery process.

Myth: Reproduction is the only option for recovering documents damaged by water and/or fire.

Cleaning can be a better option than reproduction depending on the specific situation. For example, active patient charts damaged in a medical facility fire may require the more expensive option of reproduction. On the other hand, cleaning may be the better option for arresting damage and preserving tax documents that have been archived for historical back-up. Document recovery should always be need driven and focus on the most reasonable solution to specific problems posed by each document loss.

Fact: Documents damaged by grey water from sprinkler systems or sewage water can be effectively cleaned.

Grey water or sewer water may introduce hazardous materials, which can be retained in paper fibers. These documents can be recovered. Reclamation firms should certify that biohazards have been treated and no carcinogenic chemicals were used on the documents. Gamma irradiation has proven to be a suitable alternative to carcinogenic chemicals. In some instances, documents can be cleaned using HEPA vacuums and chemical sponges. However, it is impossible to completely clean debris, mold, and other contaminants from paper fibers.

Fact: Water-damaged X-rays and other film-based documents can be salvaged.

X-rays and film-based documents begin to adhere to each other, or the paper jackets in which they are stored, when they become wet and their emulsion softens. As the X-rays or films dry, the emulsion hardens again and makes the adherence more permanent. Depending on the ambient conditions after the water damage, properly stabilized and treated X-rays and film can be effectively separated and salvaged if they are treated in a timely fashion. The documents or films will not be in pre-loss condition, but they will satisfy local, state, or federal retention requirements.

Fact: Document recovery should be part of every business’s emergency preparedness plan.

Every business should have an emergency preparedness plan and document recovery should be an element of it, including sufficient valuable papers coverage and contact information for document recovery firms. Time is of the essence during calamitous situations and advance preparation will go a long way in ensuring that damage to critical documents is minimized and business continuity and client service are maximized.

Joe Perko is director of field services at Rapid Refile. He may be reached at jperko@rapidrefile.com. Rapid Refile is a recognized leader in the salvage and partial or complete recovery of hard copy critical records and electronic media.