

✓ Software firm took hard hit, kept on ticking



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Borland President Phillippe Kahn and daughter Laura inspect plant's earthquake damage.

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SCOTTS VALLEY — For Borland International, the Oct. 17 earthquake could hardly have hit at a more critical time.

Workers at the Scotts Valley-based software company were in the last stages of testing the Quattro Pro spreadsheet program, one of their biggest products ever, when the quake hit and crippled one of their two main buildings.

Water pipes in the ceilings and floors sheared, drenching the two main office buildings — and sensitive computer equipment — with several inches of water. Three-foot thick supporting beams in the research and development building cracked, making the structure unsafe for use.

But what could have been a demoralizing setback for the company was turned into a triumph by Borland employees.

Within 18 hours of the quake, company representatives were on the phone to customers around the world, and within two days workers resumed shipping software.

By dint of a round-the-clock effort, the first shipments of Quattro Pro were sent out ahead of schedule instead of being delayed.

Once the dust had settled and everybody had been accounted for, company management put together a plan to save as much data as possible.

"The data was the most important thing to save," said Dick O'Donnell, director of corporate communications for Borland. "We don't have gigantic manufacturing facilities here, we deal in intellectual property."

Employees pitched in with a will. The morning after the quake, over 300 of Borland's 450 local employees reported for work. With six telephones set on tables in the parking lot, some workers began contacting customers around the world and letting them know that Borland was temporarily down, but not out.

Other workers began entering the damaged building, no more than two at a time, and removing hundreds of personal computers, which were spread in the sun on the company's tennis court to dry. "Some of those PCs had water lines 12 inches deep on them," O'Donnell said. "But we only lost about half a dozen of them."

Philippe Kahn, Borland's president, chairman and CEO, directed the emergency response from Australia for several days before heading home. Kahn, who recently moved to Scotts Valley, returned to a damaged home as well as a shaken company.

The drive to finish testing Quattro Pro and get the product out on time became a rallying point for the workers. Employees worked literally around the clock for several days to make up for lost time, and succeeded in beating the company's initial deadline.

The new program, which will compete directly with the popular Lotus 1,2,3 spreadsheet program, has already received raves from industry reviewers.

But while Borland workers put in an inspired effort to save their company, an unnamed prankster angered the entire industry by striking the company while it was down.

An employee of Microsoft, a Borland competitor, wrote an offensive message on the CompuServe electronic mail system that was read by hundreds of people over the course of three days.

"California Earthquake does NOT affect Microsoft's CIS support," the message read, in part. "Unlike Brand X (grin), the earthquake can't affect Microsoft...We're still here to answer our questions."

The message brought a flood of damning editorial comment in local computer magazines, as well as a terse letter to Microsoft from Borland's legal counsel. Microsoft officials have apologized profusely for the incident, and Borland CEO Kahn has accepted, company officials say.

Construction workers are now working to restore the two damaged buildings, which are located on Green Hills Road. The company owns three other buildings which house its shipping and maintenance divisions.

The research and development building should be habitable by December, O'Donnell said, but in the meanwhile quarters could be a little cramped. Fortunately, the company was in the midst of leasing an adjacent building when the earthquake hit. The lease was quickly signed and some workers have already taken up residence there, O'Donnell said.

Officials have no dollar estimate for the damage so far, but the company had both earthquake insurance and interruption of business insurance, O'Donnell said.