

Acronis



SOPs for SMBs

Standardizing operating procedures for productivity
and consistency at any size

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Introduction

Just because you're a small business doesn't mean you face small challenges. In fact, as an IT leader in a small business, you probably have more responsibility — and more varied responsibilities — than someone in a parallel position with a bigger company.

In smaller organizations, IT departments often lack resources while working to accomplish just as much as larger enterprises. IT is becoming more complex in many ways and organizations of all sizes struggle to keep up.

Many small- and medium-sized businesses are moving toward adopting a business strategy once seen only in the military and large corporations. The term "standard operating procedure" (SOP) refers to more than just a list of instructions — particularly when it is coupled with automation.

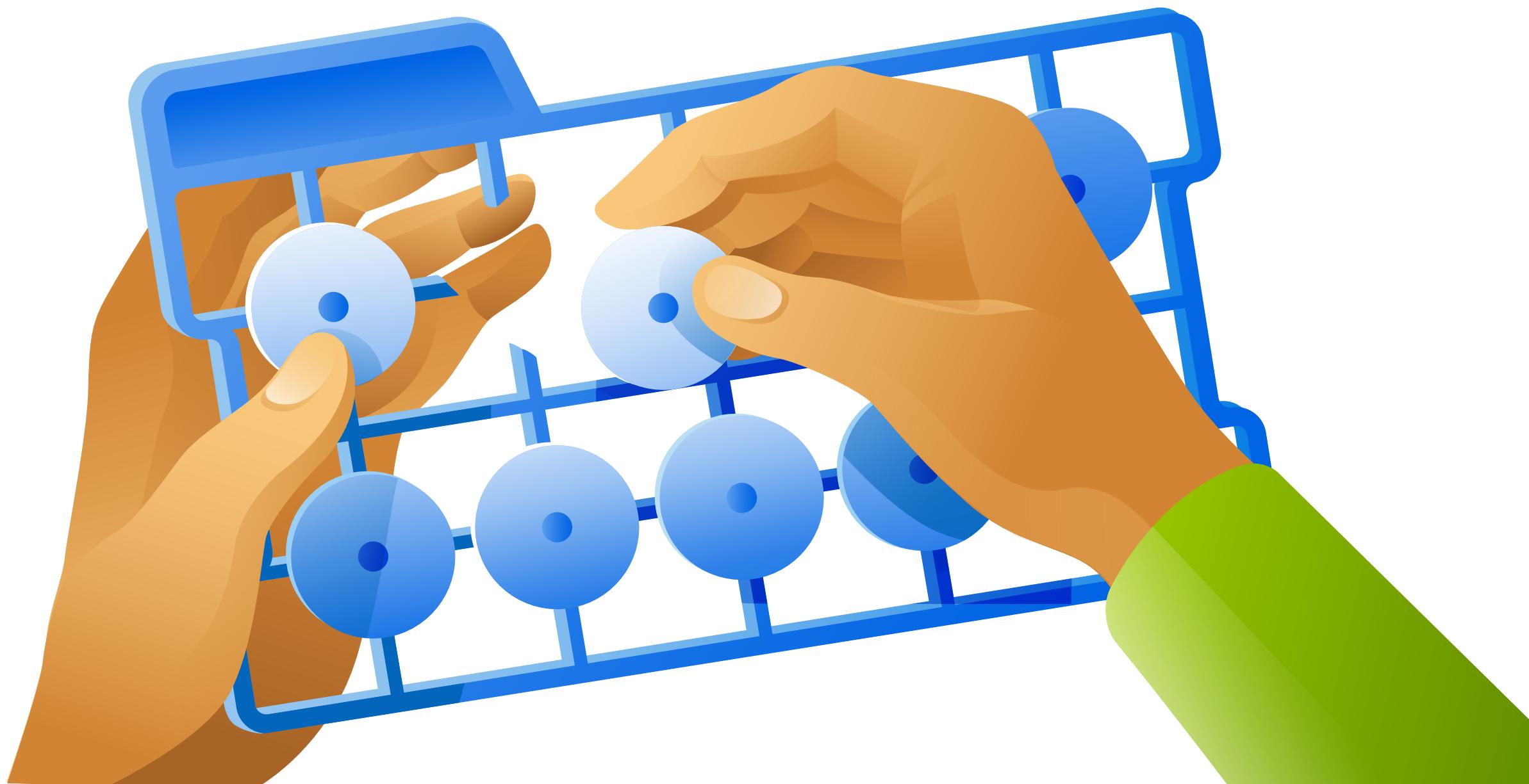
This e-book will explore some of the challenges that SMB IT departments confront today, and how SOPs can introduce standardization and rigor while building business continuity and resilience.



Challenges facing SMB IT

Generally speaking, the bigger a company is, the more focused an individual's job will be. As part of a big team handling IT, individual employees can afford to specialize and hone their skills.

On the other hand, the IT manager at an SMB is all things to all teams. The challenges SMB IT teams face come with the volume and variety of responsibilities, with every team member filling numerous roles, and often switching between them on a moment-to-moment basis.



Some common challenges facing IT teams across industries today include:

- Broadly distributed networks that make monitoring difficult or impossible
- Unpredictable endpoints as a result of work from home and BYOD
- Constant vigilance against complex and sophisticated cyberattacks that threaten an organization's environment(s) — ransomware, malware, phishing
- Coordinating with HR for employee and user onboarding or offboarding
- Coordinating numerous vendors - licensing agreements, management consoles
- Hardware and software builds and rebuilds
- Driving health monitoring
- Administering routine backup and restore, testing, and handling failures
- Managing password resets
- Budgeting for maintenance and new purchases (CAPEX and OPEX)
- Managing license keys
- Following up on security alerts and performing forensics and incident reporting
- Ensuring ongoing regulatory compliance and responding to audits
- Rolling out patches for OS and third-party vendor software

All of these tasks make handling IT more difficult than ever for SMBs. There's so much to track, it's no surprise that many essential processes are set aside when something more urgent comes up, or are neglected altogether.

Evolution of standard operating procedures

Many people working in IT today come to their positions with an evolving awareness of IT as represented by the ITIL framework. This framework establishes best practices for IT as a whole. While it originated with a focus on client needs, it has evolved to encapsulate a more holistic approach for IT service management (ITSM).

Within ITIL, organizations create maintenance plans — SOPs — that offer standard, concise definitions of routine IT tasks. You may also be familiar with SOPs under other names: playbooks, blueprints, user guides, or process documents.

Though the concept of standardizing operating procedures originated in the military and fields of scientific research, it has quickly become indispensable across a range of industries. This is because SOPs unite teams toward common, clearly-defined purposes.

SOPs have historically been more common in larger enterprises, but today, professionals coming from the ITIL/ITSM background are bringing the SOP mindset to SMB IT departments as well, especially given the ever-increasing challenges they face.

In large organizations, especially those with high turnover and advancement, SOPs help ensure business continuity. However, in smaller organizations, they can serve a useful role in creating consistency and continuous improvement.

Focusing on the core IT tasks listed above, SOPs can help drive stronger performance by:

- Ensuring business continuity during staff turnover
- Achieving business goals, such as growth targets or optimization
- Reducing training costs and empowering new hires
- Driving consistent responses across an entire team
- Improving employee morale and retention by facilitating shared workloads



What SOPs look like

Within your IT department, a SOP can cover one or more of the following: tuned monitoring and alerts, ticket handling, documentation, or remediation steps.

There's no one right way for a SOP to look, and the format will vary from organization to organization, depending on the nature of your business and the stakeholders involved. That said, here are a few common formats:

- **Procedure documents (the most common option by far)**
- **Checklists or hierarchical lists**
- **Flow charts**
- **Infographics**
- **Internal Wiki documents**

Regardless of which format your organization chooses, most SOPs will include a few standard elements:

- **Purpose**
- **Procedures**
- **Scope**
- **Responsibilities**
- **Accountability measures**



Developing a procedure for challenging existing SOPs as they become outdated should be built into the process of creating them — including regular audits to ensure procedures remain current.

Many organizations find it helpful to first create standardized templates to help them begin documenting processes more efficiently across the organization. It's also important to train team members in these processes and foster an environment where everyone is responsible for following and maintaining them. Whatever you call them, and whatever they look like, by standardizing your procedures, you'll give your IT department an edge, and help the entire business stay competitive and resilient.

SOPs for regulatory and voluntary industry standards

Depending on your industry, SOPs are also sometimes a core piece of regulatory requirements.

For example, the words “**Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act**” (**HIPAA**) can strike fear into the hearts of SMB IT teams. The HIPAA code is exhaustive — including separate rule categories for privacy, security, and breach notification — with the goal of making identifiable, health-related patient data more secure.

As just one example, the **Administrative Safeguards of HIPAA’s Security Rule** require organizations handling electronic protected health information (ePHI) to establish a contingency plan. This includes a disaster recovery plan, operation plan, and criticality analysis, along with a data backup plan to store “retrievable exact copies of electronic protected health information.”

For HIPAA-covered entities and associated third parties, HIPAA compliance is

exactly the type of use case that adapts perfectly to SOPs. But SOPs are also useful for meeting standards in other industries, such as ISO 9001 in the manufacturing sector. When it comes to any type of compliance audit, having documented procedures will replace a big administrative headache in your IT department through the relatively simple task of sharing those SOPs with the auditing body.

Yet as enterprise IT operations are increasingly automated — including tasks like backup, cybersecurity alerting, and remediation — SMBs are often left behind, relying on manual IT processes because they lack the powerful tools available to larger businesses. As a result, in some cases, SMBs hoping to reap the benefits of SOPs create documents that establish unrealistic demands.

When that happens, the problem is not the SOPs themselves, but the fact that SMBs do not have the tools at their disposal — including automation — to handle all of their IT tasks. Fortunately, today, third-party tools are available that make SOPs far simpler to implement — even on an SMB budget.

With auto-discovery of assets and network topology, these tools can help you meet your SOP goals, and keep your inventory complete with less hassle. Here are five of the most important ways that SOPs can help your SMB IT department get out from under that workload. This section will also explore what the most important features to look for are when you’re upgrading your IT tools and platforms in order to simplify your SOP implementation.

Top five SOP use cases for your SMB

As an IT leader with a SMB, you probably have a small team — or even a single individual working across all your teams — with a roster of regular tasks that need to be done, and done consistently. Indeed, the more consistency you can introduce, the better. Yet as you've probably discovered, there isn't enough time to deal with manual processes, customized procedures, and configurations for every single device you're responsible for maintaining.

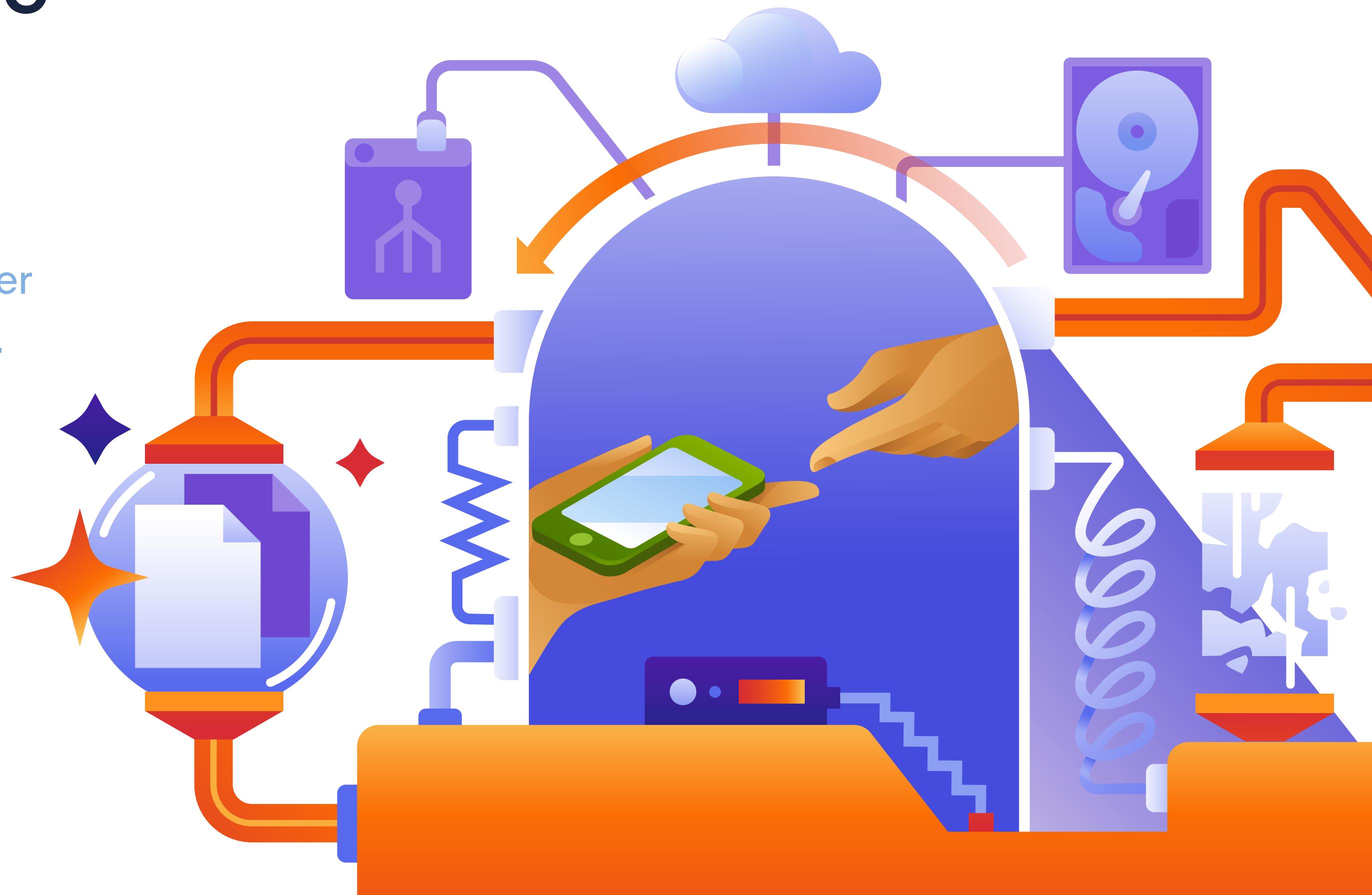
That's where a good SOP can shine. Here are a few areas where SOPs will truly optimize your IT operations.

1. Operations and maintenance

In a Kinsey survey of IT leaders, only 44% said that their department could effectively self-evaluate their performance. Putting SOPs in place can help you define metrics, KPIs, and specify measurement frequency in order to provide ongoing IT department ROI and accountability.

Here are a few ways your IT team can harness SOPs within this area of operations and maintenance:

- Create and maintain a list of all IT department responsibilities
- Define metrics and measurement frequency for standard IT and operations tasks
- Document all hardware and software used within the organization
- Establish a portable and BYOD device policy
- Acquire and dispose of equipment across the organization



SOP tip for success:

Choose IT tools and platforms that provide auto-discovery of assets and network topology to keep your inventory complete with less hassle.

2. Security

Having SOPs in place for security can simplify IT and network security oversight while supporting today's distributed environments, including a remote workforce.

Here are a few ways your IT team can harness SOPs within the area of security:

- Standardize procedures related to password, access levels, and authentication
- Initiate and maintain a rigorous vulnerability assessment and patching program
- Provide access for visibility into network assets and status
- Control security infrastructure, such as VPNs, firewalls, and virus protection



SOP tip for success:

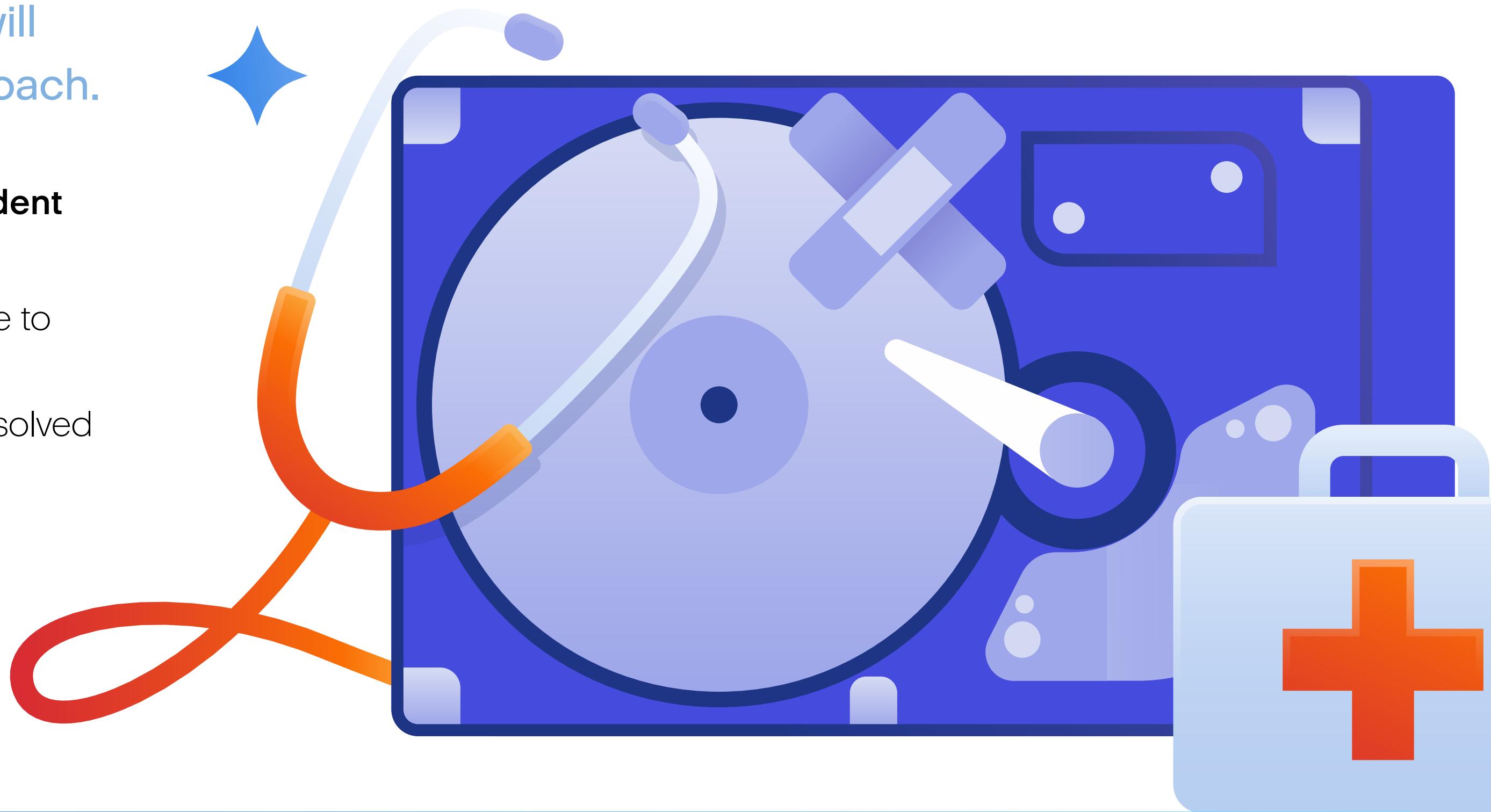
Choose IT tools and platforms that provide clear, understandable dashboards that allow you to drill down for increased granularity, as well as cloud-ready tools that integrate seamlessly with your existing security tools (while avoiding costly, dangerous vendor lock-in).

3. Incident management

SOPs can guide you as you introduce or integrate an existing ticketing system to streamline incident resolution. This will ensure your team isn't taking a haphazard, manual approach.

Here are a few ways your IT team can harness SOPs for better incident management:

- Create a thorough response playbook to ensure as close as possible to zero downtime
- Standardize how incidents or problems are recorded, analyzed, and resolved



SOP tip for success:

Choose IT tools and platforms that provide a single agent console; that way, you can protect and manage multiple systems with a unified, consistent approach.

4. Backup and restore

Having SOPs in place can help you automate rote, time-consuming back up tasks and routine errors — such as “disk full” or “backup failure to run.”

Here are a few ways your IT team can harness SOPs for backup and recovery functionality:

- Describe and clarify all backup methods, including online and offline (cold storage) techniques to secure data
- Determine how backup jobs are created, maintained, and verified
- Document procedures for testing of backup and restore walk-throughs



SOP tip for success:

Choose IT tools and platforms that offer flexibility — for instance, a backup platform that gets you back to work faster by letting you restore to any hardware.

5. Disaster recovery

With SOPs detailing disaster recovery procedures within your organization, you'll be able to move toward a higher level of maturity.

Here are a few ways your IT team can harness SOPs for optimal disaster recovery:

- Create clear definitions of disasters and provide guidance to prevent or reduce downtime and minimize reputational damage
- Prioritize data, systems, and applications for a clear order of restoring business services and functions based on any interdependencies
- Provide alternate system and point-of-contact information in the event of a normal operations shutdown
- Establish a schedule for regular disaster recovery testing

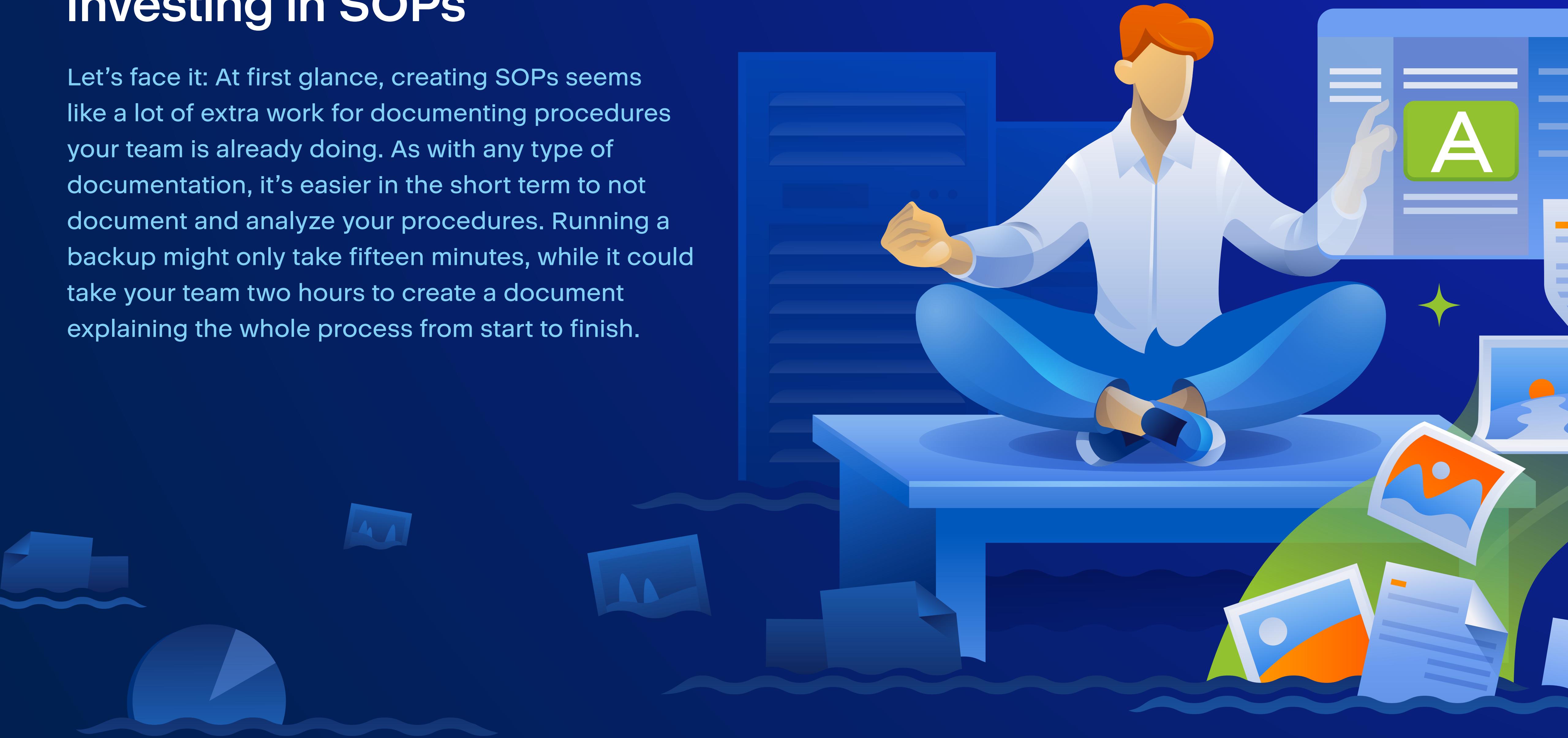


SOP tip for success:

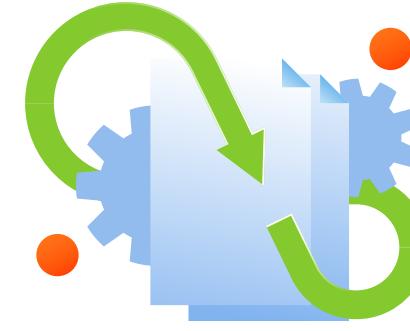
Choose IT tools and platforms that handle failover orchestration to streamline required tasks and minimize human error. You'll also want tools that integrate fully with your other cyber protection platforms, which will help reduce complexity in emerging situations where keeping your systems up and running is most critical.

Investing in SOPs

Let's face it: At first glance, creating SOPs seems like a lot of extra work for documenting procedures your team is already doing. As with any type of documentation, it's easier in the short term to not document and analyze your procedures. Running a backup might only take fifteen minutes, while it could take your team two hours to create a document explaining the whole process from start to finish.



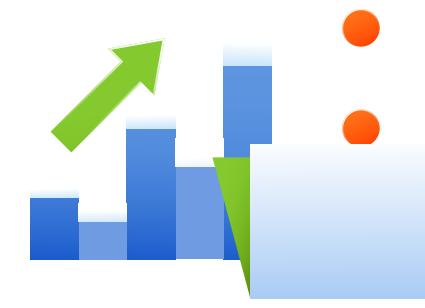
But longevity requires adopting a big-picture perspective and taking more time in the present to create long-lasting improvements. Ultimately, SOPs are an investment in your organization's future. **Creating SOPs will help you:**



Identify inefficiencies and redundancies
(That 15-minute backup may actually take half an hour to get ready — undocumented time plus an opportunity to optimize.)



Create an organizational culture that values each person's contribution



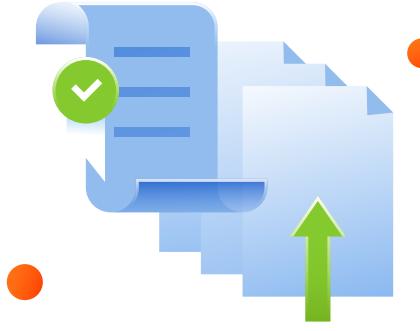
Provide a clear chain of responsibility and easy-to-follow steps



Locate opportunities for automation (and other improvements over time, like analytics — e.g., AIOps)



Enforce best practices and provide scalability as you grow



Ensure continuity when handing over tasks and training new employees

Whether you're trying to meet regulatory requirements or simply expand your IT security to a higher level of maturity, implementing SOPs is an important step toward building more rigorous standards into your IT program. They also provide the added benefit of decreased risk and simplified disaster recovery that comes with that higher maturity level.

Acronis is a global leader in solutions to preserve the data, applications, systems, and productivity of all organizations, regardless of size. Affordable, accessible solutions like Acronis Cyber Protect aim to fill the gap SMBs face when it comes to providing comprehensive IT services.

Acronis



About Acronis

Acronis unifies data protection and cybersecurity to deliver integrated, automated cyber protection that solves the safety, accessibility, privacy, authenticity, and security (SAPAS) challenges of the modern digital world. With flexible deployment models that fit the demands of service providers and IT professionals, Acronis provides superior cyber protection for data, applications, and systems with innovative next-generation antivirus, backup, disaster recovery, and endpoint protection management solutions powered by AI. With advanced anti-malware powered by cutting-edge machine intelligence and blockchain based data authentication technologies, Acronis protects any environment – from cloud to hybrid to on premises – at a low and predictable cost.

Founded in Singapore in 2003 and incorporated in Switzerland in 2008, Acronis now has more than 1,700 employees in 34 locations in 19 countries. Its solutions are trusted by more than 5.5 million home users and 500,000 companies, and top-tier professional sports teams. Acronis products are available through over 50,000 partners and service providers in over 150 countries and 25 languages. For more information, visit www.acronis.com