

Business Continuity Through a Pandemic and Beyond

Business Continuity Planning is a discipline that usually comes to the forefront when a disaster is imminent. The end result of such planning is a documented organization-wide understanding of what each business unit does in an emergency in order to ensure corporate goals can continue to be met. For instance, the H1N1 virus has caused much talk on pandemic planning. Some organizations have started to scramble to assemble their plans so that they are 'prepared'. Others take the risky route of dealing with the situation as it comes. Even fewer companies can relax a bit because they actually do have a plan.

No one asks 'why don't we have a business continuity plan?'

In its very basic form, a business continuity plan (BCP) is established to address strategies to keep the business going. There are many aspects that need to be addressed but the two most fundamental parts are mitigation and recovery strategies. Fundamentally an organization needs to establish an overall business continuity management framework that fits the organization's culture. This in turn provides the necessary guidance to effectively proceed with planning efforts including but not limited to; understanding the risk the organization can handle (risk appetite), the consequences of a major incident such as the current pandemic i.e. reduction of workforce, the changes that can be brought about to reduce the risk (mitigation strategy), and plans that will allow the organization to continue its business until normal operations are restored (recovery strategies). The BCP needs to be simple, easy to understand and easy to execute. It should contain elements such as what is essential versus non-essential; what is needed and what can be done without during a defined period; in the case of a pandemic, who is needed and where do we find alternates in case of absenteeism; what communication strategies (both internal and external) need to be put in place; what training is needed and how much testing should be conducted. One of the planning fundamentals often overlooked is the harmonizing of many related plans such as emergency response, technology recovery, risk management and crisis management. This harmonizing of plans (plan integration) is important to any organization to avoid the potential of chaos.

Organizations do not realize that once they have established a BCP, it can be modified to fit almost any 'incident'. A pandemic is just one scenario in the area of business continuity. It should actually be considered a high rate of employee absenteeism rather than a pandemic because that is the consequence that companies are dealing with. This thinking allows the plan to go beyond the current pandemic situation and be useful for any similar situation that involves worker absenteeism.

Stakeholders and employees are trusting organizations to be prepared immediately. If your organization does not have a BCP, you should consider creating an Employee Absenteeism Plan now to deal with the immediate H1N1 threat and then expanding the Employee Absenteeism Plan into a BCP in the future. The H1N1 outbreak can be viewed as a marshalling event that propels people to create a BCP that not only addresses the consequences from a pandemic but also provides a plan that deals with the consequences from all sorts of incidents.

It is crucial for organizations to consider policies surrounding incidents. Policies should answer all expected questions of employees and should be communicated to everyone in the organization. For example, in a pandemic scenario, employees will have many questions concerning sickness and what to do. Do they stay home and do they still get paid? These types of questions will be asked no matter what incident is at hand because it is a time of unfamiliarity for employees. The organization's response to these questions should be definite and not leave room for uncertainty. Communication of where your organization stands on these issues well before the incident can prevent much panic and confusion. H1N1 is a current threat that should prompt all organizations, large or small, to create a BCP. The value gained from the process of creating a BCP will show through this pandemic and beyond.

Other than H1N1, Why Should Your Business Have a BCP?

Business staffing is clearly vulnerable to the impact of H1N1, but other business disruptions can also have a major impact on day to day operations and future profitability. Factors such as increased dependency on

technology and just-in-time approaches all the way through the supply chain, have made businesses more sensitive to even minor disruptions. Some examples of minor non-staffing disruptive events are power outages, IT system failures, manufacturing equipment failures, hazardous material contamination, voice and data communication failure, and computer viruses. Over the past decade, the risks of natural disasters, technical and accidental failures, and malicious activities have increased the possibility of business disruptions and their potential impact.

Serious consequences of seemingly minor business disruptions can be avoided through a plan. A business continuity plan for non-staff related disruptions will be a document that contains procedures and guidelines to help staff recover and restore disrupted processes and resources to normal operational status within an acceptable time frame....similar in development and content to the H1N1 plan.

BCP can help businesses survive disruptive events by protecting key areas of vulnerability, such as:

- Loss of or injury to Personnel
- Implications of Rules and Regulations
- Loss of Revenue
- Physical Damage to Critical Resources
- Loss of Customers
- Civil and Criminal Liability
- Damage to Reputation

The methodology for developing, maintaining, and implementing any business continuity plan incorporates people, business processes and resources. A BCP cannot be developed or function effectively without the collective efforts of all people involved.

Management too often neglect disaster planning or business continuity planning. The most common reasons are: lack of time and resources, lack of top management support, lack of money, too many causes of disasters to plan for effectively, little awareness of potential hazards, and lack of knowledge in developing a plan. We have all heard at least one of these reasons for not having a plan, but are any of them really good enough to risk the consequences of not being prepared? Perhaps the success some companies will have with their H1N1 plan will finally prompt them to use their new process planning skills to plan for other equally disruptive and critical situations.

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