

Business Continuity Planning

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A couple of weeks ago a plane crashed into a building in New York City. It turns out to have been a small aircraft, with modest damage and only a few casualties. But for one frozen moment many New Yorkers instantly went back five years. I happened to be in the offices of a client when this happened. Someone breathlessly ran into Jim's office and reported the first, very fragmentary news. After a few anxious minutes, it became clear that this was a tragic accident, not some new terrorist violence.

Jim and I talked about the incident and about how and whether businesses were doing a better job of being more prepared for business interruptions. From a constant low-level awareness of the potential for some attack, to the apparently increasing level of violent weather such as hurricanes, concern about business continuity seems to be rising. Partly, this is based on perceptions of increasing natural and manmade threats; partly it's the increasingly important role that fast, reliable communications have on how we get business done. Whatever the reasons, companies are paying attention to disaster recovery and business continuity planning issues more than ever.

This is especially true for contact centers. They are often an increasingly cost effective way to link companies to customers and supply chain partners. Because of that growing importance, the need for comprehensive business continuity planning becomes more urgent.

IP, of course, can play an important role in helping to minimize the impact of many types of interruptions. Today's column will consider the broader issues of business continuity, and discuss special cases for contact centers and the role of IP.

Business Continuity and Disaster Recovery

There are two terms that are often said together as though they were synonymous: business continuity and disaster recovery. While they are certainly related, they don't mean the same thing. Disaster recovery generally focuses on technology and system infrastructure - re-establishing communications links, and getting critical data systems up and running. It's often thought of as an activity after some catastrophic event.

Business continuity planning is more comprehensive. It focuses on maintaining or re-establishing all critical business functions following a disruption. The goal of business continuity is to assure the survival of the company. Certainly the systems issues that are the scope of disaster recovery are part of business continuity. But there is much more - assuring the continued flow of orders from customers, ongoing supply of goods and services, keeping cash flowing, seeing to the well-being of the employees, and much more. This means that the planning has to extend beyond technology, to look at the impacts on all aspects of the business and its staff, as well as the impacts on interactions with suppliers, banking relationships, and customers.

Planning for Business Continuity

There are many elements in creating a comprehensive plan. Let me discuss a few key components, how they impact the contact center, and how IP can play an important role.

One of the first steps is to understand, assess, and prioritize the various risks the company and the contact center is facing. In general, there are two approaches to this. One involves thinking through scenarios. What happens if there is a fire, a bomb threat, a hurricane? This approach is the one more typically done, because in thinking through a plan our minds tend to gravitate toward "What happened?". The other method is to consider the impact, irrespective of the cause. What is the impact if:

- The contact center doesn't have voice communications? Or data communications? For a day? For a week? For four months while it's rebuilt?
- The center is operational (say, in a hardened facility), but no one can access it? For varying amounts of time?
- The center is operational and accessible, but a few, some, or most of the staff will have personal crises to deal with (as in some of the recent hurricanes)?

In our experience, "impact" planning is more difficult, but more effective. The "scenarios" can be helpful in identifying and thinking through potential impacts. But we find that scenario plans are rarely comprehensive, and too often the particular calamity that occurs doesn't fall neatly into one of the scenarios that have been thought through. Classifying the impacts may be harder to visualize, but usually results in more comprehensive plans.

Once the specific situations are identified, there are a number of steps needed to create the plan. In summary, each must be assessed, alternative approaches evaluated, and a course of action determined. Then for each situation, a plan is devised that lays out the step-by-step activities needed to put the approach selected in place. The plan covers everything: how the situation is identified; the people, process, systems, operations, etc. steps that have to be implemented; and finally, when and how to restart normal practices.

A second element is communication. In looking at how a number of situations have played out during recent business interruptions, a recurring success factor is the ability to have planned, proactive communication throughout the situation – to employees, to business partners, and to customers. For employees, it's crucial for management to be able to communicate what is happening and what course of action the company is taking. It's equally important that employees understand what they are to do – where to go and what responsibilities they have. Of course that's all spelled out in the plan, but few have likely memorized it!

So a means of communications needs to be set up in advance. Old-style telephone trees are fraught with problems. Consider a secure website, or one of a number of systems available that deliver messages in voice through outbound dialing, audiotext systems, or using SMS or PDA addresses. It's also important that the employees can let the company know about their availability, so that appropriate coverage for critical functions can be arranged. All of this communication is very important, especially in the first few days of an emergency situation.

This means that the systems and processes need to be in place well in advance of that emergency.

It's equally important to be able to communicate with customer, with suppliers, and with other business partners. What goods and services are available and where? How do we maintain supply lines with vendors and cash flow from customers? Also, what should be told to the media of what happened? Have public relations plans in place.

Keeping the Center Running

For the centers themselves, there are many options to evaluate. Many are well known. Shift load (and probably people) to other contact center sites. One of our clients lost their center in Florida to Hurricane Ivan. They put many of their contact center staff on buses for a road trip to another of the company's centers in the Midwest. As the temporarily transplanted staff got into place and technical staff hooked up additional phones, the carrier shifted call volumes to the Midwest facility.

Maybe, depending on the situation, the best answer is to move staff to an alternate facility within the same general area. Hotels, meeting halls, conference facilities have all been used for such purposes. Some companies work out "pairing" arrangements with other organizations, perhaps selecting a partner company with a different peak season. Working at home is another option. Agents working at home can call in, register with the switch, and start receiving calls. Depending on equipment, the audio can be on traditional PSTN lines, or over broadband, possibly using a VPN connection.

While TDM configurations can be designed to accomplish the telephony connections in any of these scenarios, IP frequently is easier, more flexible, or less expensive. IP can be a real asset to ease the rapid changeovers that are needed in an emergency situation. Consider a multi-site environment where IP enables a virtual system with a single (but redundant) call controller. In the event of the sudden loss of a facility or communication line, the backup controller can be enabled, and all the endpoint phones quickly register on the new controller. Depending on the architecture and supplier, even calls in progress need not be affected.

Outsourcing has been a traditional option in business continuity planning. More recently, we are seeing the growth of hosting services taking off. In situations where the company's center is affected, the use of a hosted solution can be a flexible, cost effective alternative. The advantage is that any agent who can reach an internet connection, from anywhere, can log into the hosted facility. Of course, planning is needed to assure not only telephony access, but also data access issues. Having browser-enabled, thin client access to critical data sources may be an important planning step.

There are other innovative schemes that have been developed, too. For example, companies can get a call center infrastructure built into an eighteen-wheeler. Roll it into a convenient parking lot, establish a satellite hookup, provide cabling to desks in a meeting hall, or conceivably hook it into to a WiFi VoIP network. The advantage is that companies can quickly establish a convenient, temporary location, perhaps right in the company parking lot, and have much of the functionality of the center readily available while the center itself is rebuilt.

Finally, availability and presence take on added importance in an emergency. Many of the new unified communications capabilities, such as presence-enabled status, instant messaging, and access to multiple media, will be important for collaboration and coordination during emergencies.

Plan Now

For Jim, the recent hurricane seasons were a wake-up call on business continuity planning. He'd had a good disaster recovery plan in place, but it was too narrowly focused. With the widespread devastation, it was clear that more than functional and working technology and systems were needed to assure that the business would survive. In response, he created an action team to expand his previous plan to encompass the company's staff, their suppliers, and their customers. After that first news about the plane crash in New York flashed through his office, our talk turned to business continuity. He said he was glad that he didn't need to put his plan in place, but that he was ready.

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