Agility

How to Put Your Business Continuity Plans into Action

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Introduction

Actionable business continuity planning is essential for organizational resiliency. To be resilient, an organization needs to be able to adopt and absorb a large impact quickly. This is achieved through the ability to rapidly respond to business disruptions and safeguard people and assets, while maintaining continuous business operations.

Resilient companies anticipate threats. They know a crisis will come, and they prepare by looking for vulnerabilities and putting controls in place to mitigate negative impact. They plan for crisis and continuing operations even during a crisis. A good way to ensure this is with easy-to-follow plans so employees know what to do if there is a business disruption and understand their roles in the incident.

The pandemic proved that during a crisis, successful organizations are led by strong leaders who have continual communications with all stakeholders with plans that are flexible enough to allow for changes to be made on the fly.

Characteristics of Actionable Business Continuity Plans

Start by creating your plans based on impact – not the cause. Instead of focusing on all threats – of which there are more than ever before – utilize an all-hazards approach and focus on the impacts from the threats of most common concern to your company per your risk assessment.

The most important impacts to focus on are:

- Loss of facility
- Loss of technology
- Loss of personnel
- Loss of vendor/supply chain disruption
- Cyber incidents (ransomware, phishing, attacks, etc.)

Ensure an escalation structure is in place and widely understood. The plan should have steps that the company will take to determine if they are in a disaster and need to activate their plan.

To be able to react quickly, save time by prioritizing business processes beforehand so you know the most important actions to take for your business to continue operations. This will help you build actionable plans that provide team members with just the tasks they need to focus on and in what timeframes.

Make sure that your plans are kept up to date. The data needs to be current since the team members are relying on the information when an incident occurs. Plan maintenance can be made easier with automation, such as using automatic uploads for data like personnel and technology. Having the business process owners and subject matter experts update their part of the plan helps to engage others with the organization's BCP.

Building awareness across the organization and exercising regularly will also make your plans more actionable. Ensure everyone understands their roles during a disaster and is ready to act. The better people know the plan, the quicker and more agile they will be.

During COVID-19, we learned the importance of incorporating your personnel's well-being into plans. Recognize that your people are critical to continuing your organization's operations, and consider ways of avoiding disaster fatigue.

Steps to Build an Actionable Business Continuity Plan

So, you need a BCP. What now?

Define What Plans You Need

You'll need different plans to focus on different impacts. These plans may all be enacted at once, but each type will drill down to the particular response for that type of impact. Types of plans may include disaster recovery, pandemic, crisis or incident management, and more. For the purposes of this guide, we are focusing on business continuity plans.

Identify and Prioritize

Who and what will you need, and when will you need it? Identify and prioritize your critical business processes and their needed resources, such as technology and staff, and when they're needed; this is done through conducting a business impact analysis (BIA). A BIA also enables you to align business processes with technology and see their dependencies and interdependencies. This information becomes the foundation of your plan, helping you develop your recovery capabilities and plans.

Build Your Plans

Use your BIA to build your plans. Determine and document recovery strategies, like where people will work if the facility is unavailable. Build the appropriate teams for the plan, and lay out how teams will work together, communicate, and delegate tasks.

Ensure Awareness

Training and awareness among your teams are critical for actionable plans. Validate plans with periodic exercises to uncover gaps, fix problems, and find vulnerabilities, making your plans more viable.

The Keys of Actionable Business Continuity Plans

Make your plan actionable, not aspirational
Plans need to focus on continuing the business at acceptable levels, not necessarily at the production levels you'd expect under normal conditions.

Make your plan scenario independent (all-hazards approach)
Focus on impacts (the effects), not the causes. However, if there are certain tasks that would only need to be done in a particular scenario, you can note that in the plan.

Make your plan a guide
Actionable BCPs aren't procedure books; you should assume your personnel knows how to do their jobs, so BCPs should only provide them with a list of what needs to get done under the circumstances and in what timeframes. That doesn't mean plans can't have files attached with procedures. When creating your plans, define items like scope and assumptions, but when disaster strikes, team members will respond more quickly with a simplified version of the plan that provides tasks to focus on and when.

Understand priorities by conducting a BIA
A BIA is a critical phase of the BCM life cycle and a great analytical tool. It serves as the foundation of actionable plans, prioritizing functions based on company goals and mitigating impacts of most concern to the company.

Define continuity strategies before a disaster happens
Consider alternate locations, even for your employees' home offices that they may have set up during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Maintain risk assessments, BIAs, and BCPs
Don't let your data get stale.

A business continuity plan should be able to provide a playbook that outlines the steps needed to continue business in the event of any disruption in normal circumstances.

What's in the Actionable Part of a BCP?

Teams and Team Members

People are critical since they will put your BCPs into action. For the actionable part of a BCP, you need to create teams. Teams will be comprised of different roles deployed at different phases of an incident. For example, in the beginning, the assessment and crisis management teams may be active, and once a disaster is declared, the production and restoration teams will begin working.

Determine when team members are needed. For employees on production teams, look to your BIAs for guidance as to when the business functions they work on are needed. Provide the work location for each employee with their contact information.

Name a team lead, alternate team leaders, and team members. Identify team members by name or skillset required. When thinking about alternate team members, think about who else can do the business process. If there isn't anyone, consider cross-training and having that key person document what they do.

Business Processes

Identify the mission-critical business processes for each team, their priorities, and when they must be continued to keep the business running within established timeframes (RTOs). Before the pandemic, designing a BCP was more focused on the critical processes that fall in the first or second RTO. The pandemic showed us that we also need plans focusing on long-term planning.

For a pandemic plan, the recommendation from Homeland Security is for a year or more. Those processes in the categories of "not time sensitive," "not critical," or with an RTO of 30+ days need to be brought into the plan; plans need to exist for their recovery, and they need to be a part of exercises. All RTOs need to be accounted for.

Critical Dates

Are there certain times of the quarter, month, or year that make a particular function more critical? Perhaps you have non-routine processes that need to be done occasionally. These should be identified in the plans of those performing those processes, as they most likely will modify the priority of the business process. For instance, financial reporting may only become a priority at the end of a quarter and year.

Technology Dependencies

Each team/team member will need technologies to carry out their responsibilities and continue the processes for which they're responsible. Look to your BIAs for this information.

Continuity Tasks

Create a list of responsibilities for each team member that occur because of the incident, such as "keep an event log" or "provide ongoing updates to the production team leader."

Key Vendors/Suppliers

Each team should have a list of their key vendors and suppliers that provide a product or service related to their critical business processes. List what they provide and how to contact them. This information should be collected during the BIA phase.

Vital Records

Include records that you'd need to support the prioritized processes during an activated event. Helpful information to include in your plan is document name, media type of record, where it is stored, and the record custodian.

Special Equipment

If there is any unique equipment required to execute priority processes, make sure it is included.

Attachments

Attach to your plan any departmental information, procedures, or instructions that team members want or people filling in may need.

Exercising Plans

Exercising your plans is an opportunity for your personnel to understand the roles, responsibilities, and recovery procedures you have in place. It will familiarize them with who does what and when and educates everyone on the communication flow and authorization processes they should follow during a disaster.

Exercising is a powerful tool for embedding resiliency within your organization. It will improve your plans, prepare your personnel, and benefit the organization.

Exercises will help you:

- Evaluate communications between different teams
- Validate your continuity strategies
- Assess the adequacy of the allocation of resources and manpower
- Validate current procedures and policies
- Build muscle memory among different teams and improve individual performance and confidence
- Improve employees' strategic thinking and decision-making in a time of chaos

Exercising isn't a pass/fail exam; it's a learning exercise. A resilient organization needs to continually learn and improve upon plans.

Diagram source: Homeland Security
Exercise and Evaluation Program
(HSEEP), January 2020, Figure 1.1

Awareness, Training, and Exercising

Consistent training for all employees and crisis team members is essential. There are numerous types of exercises, including:

- Discussion-based exercises, such as walkthrough and tabletop exercises. These provide an overall collaborative orientation to the plan.
- Operational-based exercises, such as functional and full-scale exercises. Operational exercises may be done at alternate sites to validate the recovery process or simulate the business function(s) under this condition.

Given the increased number of threats, there is a greater need to use scenarios that include multiple events leading to multiple impacts, such as a hurricane during a pandemic.

An exercise has no expectation of a pass or fail in order to promote collaboration, discussion, and brainstorming. However, there are pass/fail types of tests; examples are disaster recovery tests and drills like a notification drill to test your notification system and how to contact people.

In addition to exercising, you can conduct training sessions or awareness programs through online learning, webinars, and presentations.

Create an exercise schedule. You don't have to exercise an entire plan all at once. With an exercise schedule, you can plan out the progression of your exercises and how you will exercise all the different plans you may have. It will be easier to get budget and time on participants' schedules. And, remember to bring in 3rd party vendors whenever possible.

> "Plans should include automated and centralized data collection, analytics, and reporting dashboards so that teams can be synchronized with the larger organizational picture."
> - BCP Manager, Hospital Network

Bringing Plans to Life

1 **Report Incident**
It's important to create a record you can come back to and work from, as well as reference later for lessons learned. Think of the details you'll miss if you try to create the record days or weeks after. This is relevant for managing the incident as well as learning from it and making changes to your program for future incidents.

2 **Connect and Collaborate**
You need multiple ways to communicate with your crisis teams. Ensure that they are aware of their tasks and what to do, and document anyone you are unable to get in contact with.

Communications planning is a key part of your incident plan. The pandemic showed us that communicating with your employees and external contacts is key for morale and confidence in the organization.

Prepare and tailor your messaging for all types of circumstances. Based on the different types of scenarios, such as an active shooter or security incident, utilize different pre-defined emergency communication messages to a pre-defined audience.

In your communication plans, consider messaging with:
- Employees and key workgroups/teams
- Stakeholders
- The public
- Third parties

Finally, have backup forms of communications, like ENS, social media, Teams, or Slack.

3 **Mobilize Recovery Efforts**
Start by working your priority list. Execute on the business continuity plans you already created, tested, and trained on, and stay organized and on track so you can meet RTOs. Make sure completion and tracking is visible to all parties involved.

Bringing Plans to Life

4 ### Prioritize and Solve
Complete the most critical tasks first. Plan for the long term, not just the next 30 days. Leverage your BIA data and manage your recovery by RTO, keeping critical dates in mind.

5 ### Stay Informed
Organizations benefit from having data and metrics at their fingertips. Track progress real time with dashboards, set up past-due notifications, and document results and lessons learned so you can make updates to your plans.

Conclusion

To be resilient, your company needs the ability to deliver critical operations through disruption. The strategies we outlined will assist you.

Here are a few actions you can take today to help you on your journey to operational resilience:

- Review the current state of your BCPs and incident response
- Do you have the plans you need? Are they actionable? Can you break them down into playbooks?
- If you haven't conducted a BIA, do so
- Make updates to your plans, BIAs, and risk assessments with the lessons learned and potential operational changes due to COVID-19
- Review the training and/or exercises you've done over the past 12 months and set a training/exercise plan for the next 12-36 months

Anticipate, prepare, respond, adopt, and learn.