How to Ensure Business Continuity Plans are Effective

Reasons for Implementing Business Continuity Plans

There are many factors that influence the adoption of business continuity plans (BCPs) within an organisation. These factors may be externally driven such as the need to meet legal and regulatory requirements, or the requirements of existing or prospective clients. Alternatively, it may be internally driven where senior management is concerned about the capabilities of the organisation to continue delivering its products and/or services during and following an incident.

Key questions, however, for every organisation are:

- Where do we start?
- How do we ensure we are focussing on/recovering the right things?
- How do we ensure that our plan gives confidence to our clients?

The simple answer to all 3 questions is 'by conducting a business impact analysis (BIA)'.

Business Impact Analysis (BIA)

In order to ensure that the organisation focuses on those activities that are critical to its ongoing survival, it is vital that it identifies a scope for business continuity management and conducts a BIA. The BIA is an essential process in ensuring that all the key products and/or services within scope are identified. Many organisations waste considerable time, effort and money trying to ensure that everything can be recovered, which is often not the case.

By undertaking a comprehensive BIA, the organisation will obtain a thorough understanding of its key products and/or services and underlying critical activities and resources, along with an understanding of which are important to ongoing service/product delivery. These areas are where time, effort, cost and focus should be directed. Essential questions to be asked throughout the BIA include what needs to be recovered and by when?

Risk Assessment

Once an understanding has been obtained of which products and/or services along with associated activities/resources are essential to the organisation, the focus moves on to trying to reduce the risk of failure within the resource groups; people, premises, technology, information and supply chain. Where possible, results of the risk assessment should be integrated into the organisation's overall risk assessment framework. Key questions throughout the risk assessment include what could cause the organisation to invoke its business continuity plans and if it did, what would hamper the organisations' ability to recover its identified key products and/or services?

Horizon scanning can also play a vital role in ensuring the organisation is able to identify, evaluate and respond to an ever-changing threat landscape.

Strategies

Strategies are required for all key resource groups to ensure the organisation can recover within its identified recovery times. It goes without saying that in order to enable home working, an appropriate remote access technology solution will be required. Equally, if a single point of failure is identified in the supply chain, appropriate action will need to be taken. Security of information at any fall back site should at least be the equivalent of the normal place of work.

Business Continuity Response

Once the BIA and risk assessment is complete and strategies identified, the findings/conclusions need to be identified in the form of a BCP. It is vital to ensure that only the relevant information is in the

plan and it doesn't become an unwieldy document. Some plans can be a mere 2 pages! Checklists are a sensible inclusion to serve as prompts.

It is important to be aware that an organisation's business continuity response should consist of more than just a BCP. The purpose of a BCP is to enable the organisation to recover its critical resources in order to continue conducting those activities necessary for product and/or service delivery. However, just as important is the ability to manage the incident and deal with external parties, such as media and key stakeholders, and address any major injury and insurance issues. Further, without an aligned IT disaster recovery plan, the organisation's ability to recovery critical activities will not be effective as it could be. A misaligned response structure, at minimum, can cause severe delays during recovery and lead to poor communications, both internally and externally.

The other critical aspect of ensuring BCPs are effective is the need for exercising. It is one thing to have a documented business continuity response (BCP, incident management plan, disaster recovery plan), it is another to ensure that the response will be effective when actually required. Exercising of the response structure is essential in order to provide assurances that the structure focuses on the right areas for recovery and in effect, validates whether the BIA and chosen strategies are effective. Exercising also provides the recovery team members with invaluable experience and confidence of deploying plans and dealing with unforeseen circumstances.

Summary

To be effective, organisations need to ensure that their plans focus on what is important. Organisations should take time to fully understand priorities for recovery through the undertaking of a thorough BIA, which itself should be followed up with a detailed risk assessment which focusses not only on what could go wrong, but if something did, what subsequently would cause delays during plan invocation. Key resources need to be recovered in the right order and in a controlled manner.

A BCP should be a key consideration for all organisations that are interested in ensuring continued service and/or product delivery, but in themselves, are not an answer, rather they are a component part of the organisation's overall response structure.

It is important to consider exercising too. Exercising plays a key role in checking that the overall response structure is aligned, challenging assumptions and ensuring that the plans are focussing on the recovery of important areas of the business which were identified during the BIA.