

Insight: Business Continuity Plan Testing

Introduction

- A Business Continuity Plan (BCP) must be tested and updated on a regular basis to ensure business relevance and effectiveness in the event of a disaster. To be successful, BCP testing requires careful planning including the following considerations:
- What are the BCP test objectives – what is expected to be learned from the exercises?
- What type of testing to be undertaken (i.e. see below)?
- Who are the required test participants (i.e. whole/part of crisis management team, which departments, etc.)?
- Which part of the BCP should be tested (i.e. which are the highest perceived stress points to exercise)?
- Who will oversee, evaluate, and facilitate the testing?
- How will the current BCP plan be updated to correct any weaknesses identified from the testing?
- It is essential that each BCP be fully tested at least annually?

Types of Tests

There are various methods of testing and exercise protocols that are practiced in the corporate world and some government environments. Each testing approach has its pros and cons. And each is intended to test a different approach to business continuity problems and restorative responses. These include:

Plan Review - This is similar to a plan audit, where the team will work through all components of the plan to determine if any elements are missing or inconsistent. This is beneficial in training new team members but does not go far enough to adequately test the plan.

Simple / Basic - A simple test includes testing the activation of the staff call tree, checking of suppliers/customers details and other contacts, etc. This ensures all relevant details are kept updated. While this is a practical test it is limited in its extent to fully test a plan implementation.

Desktop - In this instance all members of the crisis management team or BCP committee, etc. gather in a single location or virtual platform to work through set scenarios to test written plans in a stress-free environment. Scenarios are posed to the team with specific time frames and parameters which the team follows through using the plans documented actions. This type of test enables a company to document any errors or inconsistencies as well as determine if team members know their duties and if increased training is warranted.

Simulation - This is the closest test to full plan implementation. It will most accurately assist in determining if the procedures and resources work. With this test, a scenario will be provided, and the team and the plan will be run through with the actual (not simulated) resources established in the BCP- for example, separate disaster recovery sites, alternative equipment, and services from a third party/'buddy' sites. It can also involve sending teams to other locations to set-up and reestablish technology (i.e. full regeneration of IT data back-ups) or business functions (lab testing in an alternative location, etc.).

This method enables identification of any staff concerns with regard to their role/nature of their role, missing or insufficient resources, and critical errors or omissions.

Priorities

It is important to keep the scenarios plausible and relevant. Parameters and time frames (for example, action which would be taken in the first 4 hours, 24 hours, week, etc.) should be set. Small scale issues will be just as useful when testing the plan as large-scale disasters.

As the primary purpose of testing is to identify the effectiveness and possible limitations of the plan, the most important element of the plan test is the debrief. At this stage the group and the facilitator should discuss what worked well, what was missing and any participant concerns. The plan should be updated to reflect these findings.

Selecting the Exercise Type

You will need to decide the type of exercise that would best meet your objectives. The availability of resources is typically a major bearing on how a plan exercise is completed. As with most things, the more complex an exercise is, the more it will cost to run and the longer it will take to plan and deliver. And the more critical the facility, the more consideration should be given to the extent of testing completed.

Test Facilitator

The test facilitator is a critical role in the BCP test. They must be familiar with the BCP being tested and ideally be independent of both the BCP developers and standing team members. The facilitator coordinates the test's execution scenario and provides spontaneous feedback as the testing is completed to help plan execution throughout the test scope. The facilitator is also in charge of all test elements, provides oversight to the process, and is the final arbiter.

The Test Debriefing

The after-action review and debriefing is critical. If a review and actions from test lessons learned are not taken, the expense and time of this exercise was wasted. The purpose of the debriefing is to:

- Review and evaluate the test
- Provide feedback to management and coordinators
- Review lessons learned from the test
- Obtain feedback from all participants on what worked and what didn't work

As part of the debrief, three key questions must be asked: Was the test adequate in scope? What worked well with the BCP? What did not work well with the BCP?

The Test Debriefing

- Top level support and involvement
- Realistic test scenario's
- Clear introduction and instructions
- Detailed participant feedback at debriefing
- Action taken on debriefing findings

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