

“Business Continuity Management: Ensuring a viable future”

In recent years, organizations have shown an increased interest in Business Continuity, an area that had not previously received its fair share of attention. Not so long ago, people thought that Business Continuity was a thing to be handled solely by the technical departments of an organization. Times, however, have changed...

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Business Continuity is becoming more relevant now that uncertainty is the only certainty. Business Continuity is an organization's ability to continue producing goods and services in acceptable, predefined levels after a major event. Business Continuity deals with the critical and vital functions of a business, and its ultimate goal is to create truly resilient organizations.

The main idea behind Business Continuity (BC) is simple: It involves the timely planning and preparations a business must make in order to deal with unforeseeable events that could seriously disrupt its smooth operation, having unpredictable consequences and even threatening its viability.

The foundations of Business Continuity were laid in the US in the 1970s, when natural disasters such as hurricanes forced several IT companies to draw up emergency and disaster recovery plans in order to deal with technical and operational risks to their systems.

In the following years, major events - such as terrorist acts and natural disasters - pushed governments, organizations and businesses to become involved in the whole spectre of preparation and dealing with such widespread-impact events in a structured and systematic way. For example, in early 2000 the British government obliged public organizations, bodies and vital service providers (telecommunications, energy, water, etc.), as well as local governments, to develop and implement not just emergency plans but complete business continuity systems in a way that would allow interoperability among organizations during an emergency.

In view of recent political, social and economic developments, as well as frequent extreme weather (apparently a consequence of climate change), the international community has showed a renewed interest in BC. As a result of the hard realization that major events can seriously affect not only an organization's IT systems but also its buildings, employees, products and, principally, its image and reputation, BC is no longer considered solely the responsibility of technical units. Business Continuity has now developed into an integrated management system (BCMS) with global recognition and acceptance, based on the pillars of preparedness, incident management, crisis management, communications crisis management, and operational recovery. BCM adopts a holistic approach, dealing with the organization as a whole. It includes elements of risk management, as it acknowledges possible threats, assesses their impact and prepares the organization to face them. The system aims at creating a protective framework for the organization's critical operations. What does this mean, practically? That the organization, having an in-depth knowledge of its operations, sets its priorities beforehand and knows exactly which processes are absolutely vital so that the organization will be able to operate immediately after a major incident. Critical operations involve people, buildings, technological infrastructure, systems, and business processes.

Moreover, this system deals with unpredictable occurrences and ensures that critical and vital operations recover and resume as soon as possible, within a predetermined and commonly acceptable timeframe. Business Continuity contributes to the achievement of strategic and operational goals, creating the conditions that allow a company to continue to provide products or services under adverse circumstances, thus proving its resilience to interested parties, safeguarding their interests and protecting the business brand name. Here is a typical scenario:

Let's assume that an aircraft loses an engine in flight. The pilot must put the emergency plan into operation in order to get the passengers to their destination safely and without them realizing that something's wrong. Thanks to sound planning and proper training for the pilot and crew, the airplane reaches its destination safely and passengers get off the plane satisfied, thinking that they will choose the same airline for their next journey. The aircraft pilot and crew, on their part, are happy to have been able to save the passengers, the airline's property, and themselves.

From the above, it becomes clear that today every organization must have a well-structured business continuity system in place. In practice, this involves risk and impact analysis, processes of emergency response and crisis and communication crisis management, and disaster recovery plans, with the relevant economic investments.

However, the system's success also depends on a series of additional prerequisites that have mainly to do with the human factor.

Management commitment

The extent to which a business is prepared to incorporate a Business Continuity System to its corporate strategy depends mainly on the voluntary commitment of its higher management. The latter must assess the level of acceptable risk it is willing to take for a series of issues, as well as the broader significance of Business Continuity as an investment to the future viability of the organization, especially in times of recession.

Communication and education as major factors in the creation of a Business Continuity culture

Even the best BC plans will never be successful if people within the organization are not convinced of the system's real value and do not have relative firsthand experiences. Supplying information, raising awareness and providing education are vital for consolidating the system within the organization. The more people become familiar with BC culture the bigger its chances of success. Every organization, depending on its needs and demands, should carefully study the ways and channels of communication it will use to approach employees and groups involved in BC. It is important that employees get the right messages from the start, messages that will not intimidate them or leave them uninterested. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that every completed phase in the BC cycle helps people understand the system itself and the advantages it has to offer. Experience has shown that, as units cooperate to carry out a sensible and effective Business Continuity plan, team spirit is enhanced and the culture of business prevention and continuity is consolidated within the organization.

Testing is of paramount importance

In order for BCM to be and remain effective, it must be checked regularly. Based on the obligations arising from adopting standards such as ISO 22301, a schedule should be created for checking and testing all critical systems and infrastructures. The ultimate goal of testing is to detect gaps and omissions. But is it worth it for an organization to make compromises for reasons of cost, time and resources, resulting in the non-implementation of the testing schedule? Absolutely not! Only through exercises can the organization correct possible flaws and weaknesses, so that it will not have to deal with them when crisis strikes.

Close cooperation among different units of the organization

One of the main obstacles for the implementation of an integrated and successful Business Continuity Management system is that companies overlook the fact that there many functions in the company, such as Health & Safety Management, Risk Management or Security, which although different, have a common objective, namely to enhance organizational resilience.

The global tendency - and the future in businesses and organizations abroad - is the direct cooperation of these units in order to achieve common operational and strategic aims, so that we may speak not just of a BCM system, but of an integrated system offering resilience to the organization. It is a fact that organizations implementing BCM systems have an advantage over their rivals, not because they see ahead, but because they *are* ahead.

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