

LEADING A ROBUST BCP APPROACH

Before we dive into leading a robust BCP approach and some of the best practices, there are some misperceptions that need to be addressed upfront: Business Continuity and Disaster Recovery are the same thing? Business Continuity is an IT function? BCP is not a priority?

What Is Business Continuity Planning (BCP)?

According to Wikipedia, BCP is the process of creating systems of prevention and recovery to deal with potential threats to a company.

Often used together, the terms Business Continuity and Disaster Recovery are very different. Business Continuity refers to the ability of a business to continue critical functions and business processes during and after the occurrence of a disaster, whereas Disaster Recovery refers specifically to the Information Technology (IT) and data-centric functions of the business, and is a subset of Business Continuity.

BCP involves defining all potential risks that could negatively affect the organisation's operations (such as supply chain interruption), making it an important part of the organisation's risk management strategy. Risks may include natural disasters such as fire, flood, or weather-related events; pandemic such as the coronavirus crisis we are all going through now; and cyber-attacks or ransomware that many organisations are increasingly being hit in today's digital world.

A Business Continuity Plan is a documented description of the actions to be taken, the resources to be used, personnel to be involved and processes to be followed before, during and after a disaster which renders part(s) or all of the organisation's business functions to be unavailable. As a result, BCP belongs and needs to be owned by every function and business unit in the organisation.

Having said that, as technology has become an integral part of most business operations nowadays and the IT function has the end-to-end visibility of all major business processes that cut across the functional silos, CIO often is the well-positioned leader to champion the BCP initiative with the right C-level and Board sponsorship.

BCP is not a Priority?

Many of you may still recall conversations earlier in your career with business leaders about the need to do BCP. Often times, the responses would be: we are too busy with our business priorities; we don't have time and resources; BCP is not our priority now and we could wait. Planning for business continuity is a process that takes place before a disaster occurs. It is like buying insurance for the business. The organisation should not wait until the disaster hits and the business operations come to a halt before it starts to look for the business continuity plan. Because by then, the available option could either be very limited or very costly, and the impacts could be highly stressful and damaging to the organisation. The key objectives of the plan are to reduce the impact of a disaster to an acceptable level, and to enable the organisation to recover its critical business functions within their tolerable outage period in an organized manner.

Recently, Toll Group, an Australian transportation and logistics company with global operations across 1,200 locations in more than 50 countries, has revealed it is suffering a second ransomware attack this year which resulted in the need to bring down some of its critical customer-facing systems. Good news is Toll Group has business continuity plan in place and could quickly activate the plan to ensure it keeps services moving for its customers and reduce the impacts to the services level. (Source: itnews.com.au May 4, 2020)

For organisations that focus on daily operational needs at the expense of investing in business continuity planning and digitizing the business for long-term resilience, it is not difficult to imagine that they must be going through challenging times now to cope with the impacts of the current coronavirus crisis. Even they may be “lucky” enough to have escaped cybersecurity breaches till now, Covid-19 is definitely a wake-up call to many organisations.

How to Make BCP Sustainable and Replicable?

Disasters are unpredictable and when occurred, may have different impacts to different parts of the organisation. Thus, every business division within the organisation will require to establish business continuity plan relevant to their critical business operations and supporting people, processes, systems and data. The efforts required for this organisation-wide BCP program will seem daunting. In order to provide consistency in action and clarity in communication with the different stakeholders, it is important to have a consistent framework replicable across the whole organisation.

In CIO Connect, we have a 3-steps approach to guide your organisation through developing the business continuity plan in a sustainable and replicable way.

1. Identify your Vulnerabilities

First and foremost, for any project and BCP is no exception, there needs to be an initial planning stage. This stage will ensure that the BCP Steering Committee and the project team and roles & responsibilities are formalized, the project charter and timeline and governance established, and the awareness programme performed.

Now the project team is ready to start by identifying what are the potential vulnerabilities of the organisation and their respective prioritization. As mentioned above, disasters can come in many different forms such as natural disasters; pandemic; cyber-attacks or ransomware etc. For the same type of disaster, the likelihood of it happening and the criticality of business impacts when it happens will vary for different divisions within an organisation. Like flooding as an example, the likelihood of it happening in a Manila sales office will be much higher than in a Singapore head office. Yet the business impacts of flooding (resulting in either destruction of the office premise or making the office inaccessible for a period of time) for a Manila sales office will be much lower than in a Singapore head office. Thus, the project team needs to take into consideration both likelihood and business impact to determine the prioritization of vulnerabilities to be addressed.

Besides, if one is thinking from a functional silo, chances are there will be some gaps that falls through the crack and there will be disconnect across different functions. So, it's better to have different workstreams assigned to think from an end-to-end process perspective.

2. Develop your Strategy

It may not be possible or practical to restore all business operations to normal service levels during or immediately after a disaster. Therefore, based on the identified vulnerabilities and their prioritization to the organisation, the BCP Steering Committee will need to agree on the scope to be covered by the business continuity plan.

Having aligned on the recovery scope and requirements, the different workstreams should then develop and document the detailed recovery strategies covering all aspects such as People and their roles; Location and Facilities; Procedures; Systems and Data.

It is also advisable to create a BCP Champion role within each business division through the "Train-the-Trainer" approach. It is more likely for employees to listen to their peers and support them. The BCP Champion will be the natural "owner" of the continuity plan for its division, to be the trainer, and to seek stakeholders buy-in.

3. Refine your Plan

Once the business continuity plan is developed, it needs to be tested to cover all the different scenarios so as to make sure all the different parts work according to plan and all staffs are clear of their roles under the different scenarios. The outcomes of the scenario tests will be used to refine the plan. By now, the organisation could be rest assured that it is prepared when a disaster is going to hit.

Last but not least, it is important to keep the plan current. As organisations are not going to be in a standstill. The business will evolve, people will change roles and external ecosystem will also change. It is the role of the BCP Champions to keep the plan current and lead the BCP rehearsal on a regular basis at least annually. In the case that a BCP Champion is moving on to a new role, a successor has to be assigned with proper handover training.

Our Recommended Best Practices

Finally, some best practices advice for organisations either currently going through or about to kickstart their BCP journey:

- Ownership - Ensure right sponsorship at C-level and the Board, and clear ownership of BCP to keep the plan "current".
- Common Language - Having a consistent framework makes stakeholders communication and knowledge transfer simple, and makes it scalable across different business divisions.
- Speed - No plan could be "Perfect". Avoid over-thinking. Deliver 1st cut BCP and socialize to refine the plan and obtain buy-in.

- Rehearsal - Testing makes the plan real, ensure everyone knows what to do, and adjust the plan to close off any missing gaps.
- Buy-in - Communicate, Communicate, Communicate!

If you are still feeling overwhelmed and have struggled on how to get started such as: soliciting the C-level and Board sponsorship; agreeing on scope; establishing the framework and the right project team, we could advise and guide you through our 3-steps approach in CIO Connect to help you produce a viable business continuity plan in a realistic timeframe.