

Business Continuity Planning: **A must-have, Not a luxury**

Business continuity planning is not an alien concept anymore. In recent times we have witnessed a lot of events that only serve to further intensify the need for business continuity planning. Examples include natural calamities like hurricanes, floods, wildfires, untoward events like terror attacks or even pandemics like the recent Covid-19 outbreak. While a business continuity plan cannot completely safeguard your business from all these events, it can certainly minimize the damage inflicted on your business due to them. Top business consultants urge their clients to first develop a business continuity plan as they consider it a part of the best practices for running a business. A business continuity plan can make the difference between survival and shutdown of a business during a crisis situation.

What is Business Continuity Planning?

Business continuity planning is the process of creating a blueprint that helps your business respond and recover effectively from an unforeseen mishap. As discussed before, the unforeseen event could range from natural disasters to pandemics, or even accidents that affect just your place of business like a fire or even a cybercrime attack directed at your business in particular--basically, any event that can paralyze your business.

A business continuity plan serves as a step-by-step guide that you can follow during an emergency to keep your business running smoothly. True, a business continuity plan is not a sure shot method to survive a crisis, it won't instantly eliminate the impact of the disaster, but it gives you the best chances of survival.

A Business Continuity Plan help you in the following ways in the event of a crisis-

It helps retain clients

As a business, if you have problems functioning, it will definitely affect your clients. For example, if your servers are down or your supply-chain mechanism is affected or your delivery process breaks, you won't be able to fulfill your promise to your clients. Even worse, in some situations you may not even be in a position to communicate about the crisis to your clients adding to their frustration. A business continuity plan addresses these issues beforehand and can help reduce client dissatisfaction.

Salvaging brand image and reputation

There are certain events that end up affecting only your business. For example, ransomware attacks, virus attacks, data leaks, etc. Having a business continuity plan that addresses such events can be a blessing in times of such crisis.

Minimizing revenue loss

A business continuity plan can minimize the revenue losses that occur as a result of a crisis that interrupts your business operations.

In short, a business continuity plan helps minimize the impact of the crisis on your client relations, your brand image and your revenue by equipping you with a plan to handle the situation better.

What are the essentials of a Business Continuity Plan?

A list of your key contacts

One of the most important elements in your business continuity plan is a list of all your important contacts who should be informed of the disaster. This can include all your C-level execs, HR managers, IT Manager, client facing managers, etc.,

A comprehensive list of your IT inventory

Your business continuity plan should contain a list of all the softwares, apps and hardware that you use in the daily operations of your business. This list should identify each of those as critical or non-critical and mention details pertaining to each of them such as

- The name of the app/software
- Version/model number (for software/hardware)
- Vendor name and contact information for each of them
- Warranty/support availability details
- Contact information for customer support for these hardware/apps
- Frequency of usage

Backup information

Data backups are critical to your disaster recovery and so your business continuity plan should include information about data backups. It should mention how often data is backed up, in what formats and where. It should also mention what data backups are available--ideally, you should be backing up ALL data already!

What's your Plan B?

Make sure your business continuity plan lists a backup operations plan that can be rolled out in the event of a disaster. Examples include alternative workflows such as options to work remotely or to allow employees to bring their own devices to work (BYOD) until the time regular business premises or systems are ready.

Floor plans and location

Your business continuity plan should also include floor plans of your offices with the exit and entry points clearly marked up, so they can be used in the event of any emergency. It should also mention the location of data centers, phones, key IT systems and related hardware.

Process definition

Make sure your business continuity plan defines the SOPs to be followed in the event of an emergency.

Audit of your business continuity plan

Having a business continuity plan alone is not enough. You need to audit it at regular intervals to ensure it is up-to-date and relevant. Often, business continuity plans aren't used for years, and may be obsolete or irrelevant by the time an actual emergency occurs.

Creating a team for business continuity

Constitute a team for your business continuity project. Decide who will take ownership of the business continuity plan in the event of an emergency. Break down the business continuity plan into smaller elements and decide who is responsible for each of them. Also, remember to designate a back up for each person in the team.

Mock Drills and Dry Runs

After your business continuity plan is ready you need to check if it really works. A dry run will tell you if it is really effective and also point out to loose ends, if any, that you can fix before the actual emergency.

Don't forget a debrief

In case you do end up using your business continuity plan, make sure you do a debrief. It will help you determine the effectiveness of your business continuity plan. The brief should focus on identifying the losses you incurred from the disaster, the time taken for implementation of the

business continuity plan, the key positives of implementation of your business continuity plan and also offer suggestions, if any for improvement.

Irrespective of the size of your business, business continuity planning is indispensable. Bigger companies often have their own staff (IT as well as non-IT) for business continuity planning, but for SMBs to have their own business continuity planning team can be a bit of a strain on their resources. Consider teaming up with a MSP who is experienced in disaster recovery planning, so you don't cut corners now to regret later.

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