

Business Continuity Planning for Small & Medium-Sized Businesses





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Business continuity planning is when an organization prepares to continue running the business after a disruptive incident.

What is BCP?

If the last few years have taught us anything, it is that the unexpected can happen.

The lesson for any SMB should be that business continuity planning is not theoretical. Every business needs to prepare for when, not if, disaster strikes to survive the incident. Business continuity planning is when an organization prepares to continue running the business after a disruptive incident. A Business Continuity Plan, or BCP, is the plan that an organization uses to identify the incident, react to it, coordinate resources, and continue to operate the business at acceptable levels until the situation returns to normal.

How is it different from Disaster Recovery?

When most business people think of how their company will react to disruption, they think of disaster recovery - DR - if they think of it at all. But, there is a difference. DR is about restoring the most vital systems to a functioning state as quickly as possible. So, having a DR plan is critical. To minimize the impact of an incident, a lot more than just IT systems need to be considered. A business needs to know what level of service is acceptable in a disaster. It needs to be prepared to coordinate seamlessly in adverse conditions. It needs to know how to get all of its business operations to an acceptable level as quickly as possible.

What's involved in creating a BCP?

Planning for business continuity is a complicated and complex process. And, getting it wrong can have pretty severe consequences. That's why one study found that more than 50% of businesses rely on experts to help them build a business continuity plan. But, this guide will walk you through the high-level process so that you can start with a solid foundation.



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Create the **BCP**

Now that we've established the importance of having a business continuity plan, let's walk through creating one.

Identify the key business areas

First, identify the areas of the business that need to continue to operate. Some of these will be obvious. If your business is an accounting firm, your accountants need to manage the financial records of your clients. But, do you need sales, HR, etc.? All of these need to be considered, identified, and prioritized. A 2019 study of business continuity plans found that the highest priority objectives had the highest rate of success.

Model the threats

Once you have established the key business areas, consider all of the types of incidents. These don't need to be specific. A few years ago, it wasn't

uncommon for many BCPs to not account for a global pandemic. But, they should have considered a scenario where all employees were unable to go into the office for an extended period of time.

Assess the business impact

Next, determine the impact that each type of threat can have to each of the key business areas. Many threats will affect the entire business. For example, your email service going down will affect everyone in the company. It is worth evaluating the impact on different business areas because customer-facing roles are far more affected by an email outage than internal technical roles.



Establish acceptable service levels

After considering the different types of issues that can occur to the business's important areas, it is time to determine the level at which those areas can operate and for how long. It is easy to default to extremes during this exercise - areas need to be operating at 100% or can handle being down. But, there are many options in between. Can salespeople get away with using just their cell phones for a day? A week? Does access to a coworking space help the people that can't work from home while an office is unavailable? How quickly does everything need to be back up and running in some capacity? How much data can you afford to lose? How much are you willing to spend to reduce these impacts? There are a lot of factors to consider when setting acceptable service levels in a BCP.

Define the communication plan

One aspect of a BCP that is often overlooked is the communication plan. But, communication is key to surviving a crisis. This is key for several reasons. There needs to be a clear path for identifying a disruptive incident and allowing the right people to start to enact the plan. There

needs to be predefined methods and channels for communicating out to the rest of the team that the plan is being executed. There needs to be a way for your team to continue to communicate with customers, partners, and vendors to continue running the business.

Build the operations and recovery plans

The last step in creating the BCP is to build the operations and recovery plans. This is one of the areas where BC differs from DR the most. Business continuity needs to consider situations where recovery - getting back to normal - may not be possible for an extended period of time. If the incident is an internet outage, you can recover from it by having a backup Internet Service Provider. But, if your office building burns down and it will take your months to set up in a new one, how do you keep the business running in between? Once you have established the business's key areas, what incidents might affect them, and at what levels they need to operate, you can establish the plan for how they will operate in response to those incidents.

Training the team

Business continuity planning doesn't end when the plan is created.

Everyone involved needs to be trained on the plan. In some companies, this means training everyone in the company to at least be familiar with the plan and understand their role in it. In others, it means just training those team members who have a role in actualizing the plan, including those who communicate out to the rest of the company.

Testing the plan

No one gets their business continuity plan correct on the first try.

Therefore, no business continuity plan is complete until it has been tested. Initial testing should start with simple walk-throughs or “table-top” sessions where the appropriate team members role-play their responsibilities in different disaster scenarios. Ideally, testing should progress to live testing of simulated incidents. This might mean failing services over to a backup region or simulating an office closure for some businesses. Netflix takes this so far as to have automated software³ randomly terminate production servers. Fortunately, this is

only recommended for advanced levels of business continuity preparedness. And, not every business is going to be able to invest that much in preparation and testing. But, frequent plan simulation in some form is the validation method most likely to be correlated with a highly successful Business Continuity Program.

⁴There will be many types of incidents that need to be tested, and there will be mistakes. The only way to find them is to test the plan.



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Identifying and responding to incidents

Once you have gone through the process of creating your business continuity plan, you've trained your team on their roles and responsibilities within the plan, and you've tested the plan to work out as many issues as possible; you need to ensure that everyone knows how to identify incidents and respond to them appropriately. For some businesses, this can be addressed while training the team. But, for many, it is a distinct step in the planning process that needs to be considered.

Many members of your organization may not have a specific role in the business continuity plan, but may be in a position to identify an incident early. Those people need to know how to respond to ensure that your plan is put into place as efficiently as possible.



Communicating and coordinating

Communication is important enough that it needs to be considered both in the context of creating the plan and in the context of implementing the plan.

When an incident occurs, each member of the team needs to know their role. For many in the organization, their role is to get back to work as quickly as possible. That's the reason for the plan in the first place! But, in order to get back to work, they need to know that an incident has occurred. They need to know that the BCP is being put into action. And, they need to know the critical decisions

that are being made and how they are affected by those decisions. That is why it is so important to set up the appropriate communication channels and coordinate the necessary decision-makers right at the beginning of any plan that you put into place.



Operating under the plan

Even if everything goes according to plan, operating under a business continuity plan is chaotic and can raise stress levels.

In most cases, the same incident that triggered the response may be inducing stress on your team in other ways. So, it is important to minimize the overhead caused by the BCP as soon as possible. Some incidents only require a small portion of the business to operate under the BCP for a few hours. Other incidents require the entire business to operate differently for months straight. The longer the incident response, the more important it is to establish an interim standard. This allows the team

to settle back into a consistent routine and focus on delivering results. So, as early as possible in the plan, you should forecast out how long you will be operating in a degraded state. This will enable you to better plan for that state to be as stable as possible.

Getting back to normal

As with most other aspects of business continuity planning, when to get back to normal depends on the incident.

There are some scenarios where getting back to normal is as simple as switching back to a primary circuit. But, there are many scenarios where “normal” no longer exists. And, getting back to normal might mean setting up a new office or moving to a new cloud service provider. These sorts of scenarios can and should be considered when building your plan. But, an important part of any BCP is recognizing the new factors and accounting for them after the incident occurs.

As discussed in the section on modeling the threats, a business continuity plan will often deal with generic situations to not be too complex. But, once a disaster occurs, it is important to adjust based on the reality of the situation. Once your plan has been set in motion, you have coordinated the appropriate resources and established a stable interim state under which your team can operate; you need to assess the bottom line and decide on a new plan for operating your business for the long term.



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WHO WE ARE

OpsAssist, Inc. is a technology consulting firm that provides the expertise to help businesses manage and secure their technology, including business continuity preparedness, so that they can focus on their own business.

Thanks for reading!

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