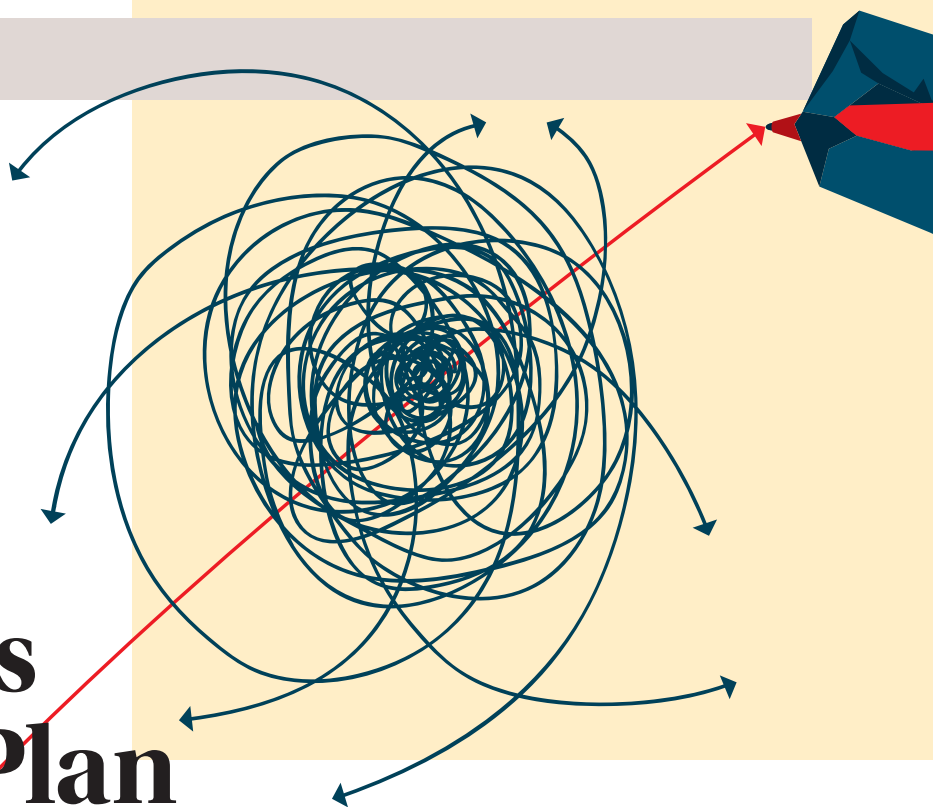# How Your Company Can Create a Solid Business Continuity Plan

By **Kari L. Roetman**

Having an organized response to unexpected events gives your company a good chance of surviving and possibly even thriving.

Many companies have a disaster recovery plan for IT operations and infrastructure should a network fail or hardware or software malfunction (and if you don't, you should). Protecting data is crucial during a crisis. However, having no disaster plan for your business as a whole can leave staff scrambling to figure out a course of action and hinder your company's ability to recover quickly—if at all.

Why a Business Continuity Plan (BCP) Is Important

It's rarely possible to predict when a threat to business operations will occur. But, the recent COVID-19 pandemic serves as a powerful reminder that unexpected events do happen. Business operations can be threatened or halted in a multitude of ways:

- Environmental events, such as extreme weather, flood, or fire

- Utility failures or outages

- Communication equipment failures or security breaches

- Cyberattacks, terrorism, or other human-related threats
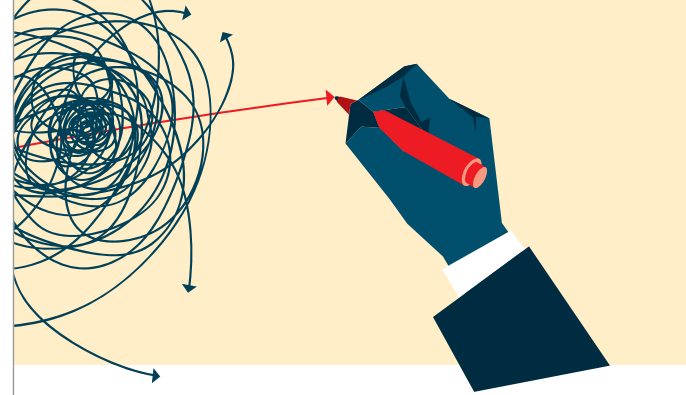
- Accidents/injuries or pandemics

Downtime doesn't just result in lost revenue. A business disruption can impact expenses, employee safety and productivity, and client relationships. When a company has a plan in place to respond effectively to a crisis and minimize the disruption, its assets, revenue, and reputation are more secure. The best time to develop a plan is before you need one.

Where To Start

A good place to start the BCP process is by doing some research and gathering information. You can:

- Visit the Department of Homeland Security[1] for preparedness toolkits and information about continuity planning—their website also has software to help develop and test a plan

- Review BCP articles and free resources on the internet, like a template provided by Betterteam[2]

- Meet with your insurance provider to ensure your plan will cover major areas of risk; a BCP may qualify your firm for a discount on the premium

- Talk to other company leaders to get their insights— particularly those who have successfully navigated a crisis

Once you've taken the time to understand the basic elements of a BCP, you're ready to begin developing a plan.

How To Develop a BCP

Methods of developing a BCP vary, with plans ranging from simple and straightforward to formal and complex. Whether you begin with a template or start from scratch, tailor the BCP to fit your organizational needs.

As you start plan development, think through strategies to ensure employee safety, communicate with clients and stakeholders, and efficiently conduct business during a crisis. For example, if a sprinkler failure caused a flood in your corporate office:

- Do you know the location of the fire sprinkler shutoff valve?

- Who should alert the property manager or landlord and what is their role?

- Who will your flood restoration contractor be and how fast can they respond?

- How will you communicate with employees and meet client commitments during the disruption?

It's also useful to consider how the business will function once the disruption ends. For example,

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> " The best time to develop a plan is before you need one.

when COVID-19 is over, how might your business operations change?

- Will consumer behaviors and supply chains return to pre-pandemic levels, or will you need to reshape business and marketing strategies?

- Will employees return to the office, or will remote and flexible work options continue?

- Will there be new or changed operating or safety procedures? Will there need to be training?

The development of a BCP generally includes the following steps:

1. Determine essential business functions. The foundation of a BCP is a clear understanding of the actions required to preserve and maintain business operations during an emergency and who handles them. What supplies, equipment, and staff are critical? If something should fail or become unavailable, is there a backup option or procedure? Explore any vulnerabilities.

2. Determine BCP team members. To best understand how a disruption might affect each department in your organization, involve leaders from all functional areas in the continuity planning process. At a minimum:

- An executive should oversee the development of the plan. CEOs, owners, and partners understand their company and are effective advocates for getting buy-in from team members and creating company awareness.

- Along with the IT manager, include managers from finance, HR, marketing, and other critical functional groups. Collective input will help clarify interdependencies between departments.

- Appoint an administrator to develop the structure of the BCP document. The administrator will also maintain the BCP files, make updates, and distribute the plan to team members as needed.

3. Perform a risk assessment. A risk assessment helps your team first identify the company's potential emergency scenarios (cyberattack, flood, pandemic, etc.) and then assess how each of these scenarios could affect operations.

If desired, you can use a business impact analysis (BIA)[3] to assess possible risks. A BIA gathers information about business functions and resources through interviews or questionnaires. The resulting data helps determine the effects of a disruption on business functions, revenue, staff, and other critical resources.

4. Determine available resources. As the team develops recovery strategies, available resources will need to be determined. Internal resources might include extra computer supplies or a generator. External resources might include an offsite data storage facility. Additional resources might include arrangements with outside vendors for services, such as payroll processing or security.

If a recovery strategy requires resources not readily available, you'll need to create a plan to address the missing resources.

5. Determine and document recovery strategies. The last task in creating a BCP is to document the step-by-step instructions. The plan should detail the specific procedures, responsible staff, and available resources to mitigate or recover from each operational threat identified in the risk assessment. If a strategy requires third-party resources, document the procedures for obtaining them.

The detailed strategies to address operational threats become the framework of your continuity plan. The BCP may also include:

- The plan's purpose and scope
- Emergency contact information for critical staff and third-party vendors
- Communication protocols for employees and clients
- Relevant diagrams and maps

6. Review, test, and maintain your BCP. Continuity planning is not a "one and done," but a process to revisit on a regular basis. Walk through your plan to review and test it for weaknesses. Strive to make the plan fail and if it does, make improvements. Additionally:

- Include someone who wasn't involved in the development of the plan during review. This person can provide a fresh perspective and spot missed vulnerabilities.
- Pay attention to events that can adversely affect business, such as industry changes, politics, and environmental threats. Adjust the plan if needed.
- Set a recurring schedule for the BCP team to review the plan and update resources and recovery strategies. Make sure to update the plan if there are any changes in key staff.

What Will Normal Look Like After COVID-19?

Whether you have a BCP in place or need to develop one, it's valuable to think about how your organization and the A/E/C industries at large will operate in the aftermath of COVID-19. The global pandemic is a compelling reminder that the time to develop a plan is well before a disruption happens.

Planning for every possible threat or disaster that may affect your business is challenging, but don't underestimate the value of having a BCP. A solid continuity plan will help your company reduce confusion, miscommunication, downtime, and financial losses. ∎

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