

# A People-Focused Approach

**T**he list of natural and man-made disasters that businesses have had to contend with has increased dramatically in the last few years. Disruptions resulting from these disasters have rippled across just-in-time supply chains, shaken entire industries, and taken their toll on employee, customer, and partner relations.

Increasing complexity in global organizations leads to more extensive disruption of business operations. Not surprisingly, organizations of all types and sizes are making workplace recovery a key focus of their business continuity planning.

While organizations have planned for the recovery of their IT systems, many are not sure where to start with the human side of business continuity planning. According to a recent survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), only 34 percent of companies indicated that human resource issues formed a significant part of their organizations' business continuity or disaster plans. Thirty-six percent indicated that these issues were only somewhat part of their plans.

When a disaster strikes, numerous factors impact the ability of employees to continue working and can significantly impact employees' ability to get to work. Employee shock and grief also can lead to increased absenteeism, as well as to higher turnover and reduced productivity. Proactive counseling may be required to help employees confront emergent issues — and enable them to address the crisis more rapidly, so they can focus on their work and tackle disaster recovery activities.

In addition, damaged power or communication infrastructures can prevent businesses from sharing critical information with employees. Mobile phone, landline, and other communications networks can be destroyed or become dysfunctional in a disaster, making it difficult to locate employees and share critical information with them. Further, if offices or other facilities are unsafe to use or inaccessible to some individuals, employees who are used to working in close proximity will find it more difficult to collaborate and tap into their existing social networks.

When business continuity plans don't include contingencies for human capital, businesses may be insufficiently prepared for a disruptive event. During an emergency, businesses need to be able to issue status reports to the workforce, communicate operational plans, and enable key members of staff to continue working. Doing so can have a

profound positive effect on an organizations productivity, revenue and reputation.

An organization's ability to respond in a timely, relevant manner to a crisis depends, in part, on how well it has identified and documented — ahead of time — the policies and activities that will be most important to employees. Organizations should consider how policies overseeing sick leave, travel and flex time can be adapted to apply specifically to times of disaster. It is important to have clearly defined immediate response capabilities, roles and responsibilities, and a crisis communication strategy. When a disaster hits, policy and situation updates need to be clear and concise, leveraging as many different avenues of communication as possible, including voicemail, intranet sites, conference calls, and television and radio.

Organizations also can leverage virtual workplace continuity solutions to help plan for a significant workforce disruption. This will ensure that even a displaced workforce can access critical applications and collaborate effectively during outages. These solutions enable large numbers of employees to work remotely for an extended period of time, maintaining communication with coworkers, suppliers, partners, and customers.

To weather a disruption with minimal impact to business, organizations must take the time beforehand to identify pivotal business processes and key employees—and make provisions for these critical elements to continue uninterrupted. Virtual workplace continuity can help determine which human capital elements are most important to business operations, and then prioritize the actions in a written plan to enable them to work through a disruptive event.

Organizations that can build resiliency into their human capital are more able to protect their most valuable resources and maintain continuous operations in the event of a disruption. Many forward-thinking companies are already considering the impact of short-term interruptions in normal business activities and identifying appropriate actions to sustain vital business processes in the event of a crisis. **CI**

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