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Workforce Continuity

Emerging as a
Separate, Urgent Issue
... and it's not an IT Problem

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& **RUSSELL LINDBURG**

Business interruptions such as road closures, transit strikes, pandemics, and severe weather can displace employees from their workplace – without affecting your data center. And even if an event does affect the data center, many companies already have back-up sites hundreds or thousands of miles away. Is your company ready for smaller disruptions such as workforce relocation, plumbing failures, heating and air conditioning problems, or perhaps a workplace violence incident?

According to Gartner, “Having a workforce continuity plan is critical to ensuring the organization can recover from a local or regional disaster. Without your workforce, there is no business.” You need to be able to account for your workers, know that they are safe, and keep them connected to your company’s e-mail, enterprise resource planning, and customer relationship management systems.

Where are the People?

According to a March 2008 business continuity management survey conducted by the UK Chartered Management Institute, only 29 percent of organizations with business continuity plans in place made allowances for workforce disruption. Further, over the past year more than one in three companies (35 percent) experienced a workforce disruption. The survey also found staff training relating to business continuity remained limited, with only 35 percent including such training in induction courses for new staff, up from 30 percent in 2007. What is interesting is that most published statistics still concentrate on system outages rather than missing personnel.

While loss of IT is the most commonly experienced disruption, staff shortages also continue to be a major cause of disruption. Reporting for 2008 indicates a relatively high level of disruption due to extreme weather incidents, such as flood or high winds, with 29 percent of companies having been disrupted, up from 9 percent in 2006. Severe weather could leave your infrastructure unscathed but prevent your employees from getting to it.

Comparison with the disruptions that were actually experienced highlights potential gaps in planning. For instance, large numbers of plans address the threats of fire or terrorism, despite the fact that small numbers of organizations were affected by these threats. Only 29 percent of organizations have a BC plan addressing staff shortages as a concern, yet 35 percent experienced disruption as a result of this during the past year.

It's Not Just an IT Problem When Buildings Become Corporate Ghost Towns

As you can see, recovering your computing infrastructure is not enough. Recovering your workforce is a human problem. Your IT department cannot help you when your employees are thinking about their families or grieving for lost co-workers. A survey of Disaster Recovery Journal readers indicated that it takes up to five days for the workforce to return to normalcy after an event.

Does your company have HR policies as part of your overall disaster recovery plan? Do you provide for the families of workers who need to be sent to your

backup site? Can you provide financial security for your employees if banks and ATMs are out of commission? Can you support your employees who need to work from home or wherever they feel safe if they need to care for their families?

Virtualizing the Office for Workforce Continuity

Once you have provided for basic human needs for your employees and their families, you need to think about how to get them productive again while giving them the latitude to care for their families. This might include allowing them to work from their home, a hotel, or even a shelter if necessary. You reconnect them with their co-workers and allow them to collaborate – both for work and personal issues. Even with a minor event, employees can provide support for each other including venting about what happened, locating supplies, and offering their own services to other employees.

The basic building block for virtualizing the office to your employees is secure connectivity. Fortunately, widespread broadband Internet connectivity is available in most major metropolitan areas, and wireless broadband coverage is getting better. In fact, even when voice communications is limited or unavailable, data still gets through.

However, enterprises must ensure that security policies are strictly enforced, particularly for employees using non-company devices. The infrastructure should allow rapid provisioning of users who might not be set up to access corporate systems remotely with the correct levels of access to information and applications.

Employees might not have access to corporate devices and might have to use home PCs, or other temporary devices and enterprises must ensure that security policies are strictly enforced. Allowing access through personal devices, while safeguarding corporate data is an important capability. Further, during these disruptions, employees could be moving among temporary locations, using multiple devices, and therefore the underlying system must be able to manage this flexibility.

Communications among members of the emergency response team (ERT) and with employees is essential to keep the workforce informed of current condi-

tions, follow emergency procedures, and establish contact with fellow employees. Further, the system should enable on-demand assistance to the ERT and help-desk staff to resolve issues quickly.

A Business That Can Keep Running

Application and desktop virtualization are vital components of an application delivery infrastructure that provides device- and location-independence. These technologies allow employees to access their corporate information simply by clicking on Web page links from any PC. IT staff do not have to provision these “bring-your-own” PCs and yet employees have secure access and can be productive.

Real-time collaboration, including voice, instant messaging, and bulletin boards allows employees to work in teams, even when widely dispersed. Add in the ability to remotely access the company PBX system, participate in ad-hoc meetings, and use Web conferencing tools to share applications and data and you have a virtual workplace.

Finally, infrastructure services must be reliable and yet simple to use. People don't think straight when an out-of-the-ordinary event affects them. For example, the company might issue a special USB flash drive that walks the employee through all of the steps needed to connect to the company when inserted into a PC. Once connected, the employee should be provided with a document library that holds ERT procedures to follow, message boards where employees can ask questions and share helpful tips, and easily accessible emergency contact information so that employees can get immediate help.

Workforce recovery is not an IT problem, but an issue that will pull resources from multiple departments to ensure that your company survives when workers are displaced for any reason.



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CAUTION: Your employees cannot make it to the office. How will you keep them productive?

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Source: Hype Cycle for Business Continuity Management, 2008 dated 7/3/2008



When your business is disrupted by events such as severe weather, natural disasters, transit strikes, or even an avian flu lockdown, **Virtual Workplace Continuity** from IBM helps keep your employees connected and working — and isn't that what business continuity is all about?



For more information or to arrange a demonstration of Virtual Workplace Continuity, please visit www.ibm.com/services/continuity/virtualworkplace

