

Considerations for Workplace Recovery

9th September 2019

This article addresses the issues that business continuity professionals should consider when sourcing workplace recovery facilities as part of a business continuity plan.

It addresses the needs of a medium sized office (several hundred staff) and that there is one office in the city. We are also assuming that the organisation has removed their IT infrastructure from their office and are now housing their computer systems in a datacentre or in the cloud.



Incidents that will Cause an Evacuation

Please be mindful that there are many incidents that will make your offices unusable and often it is a boring, mundane incident. There are many stories of sprinklers on the top floor going off on a Friday night, water supply being interrupted, power failures – all incidents that will interrupt the ability of your staff to be productive and which may require an evacuation from your offices.

After having evacuated, the last thing you need is the stress of finding offices for your recovery team and critical staff to work from!

Types of Facilities

Depending on the required speed of recovery and the complexity of the IT infrastructure, your organisation may need a dedicated facility. Of the different type of facilities available, the dedicated workplace recovery facilities are the most preferable but also the most expensive! These are essentially your extended offices – away from your current locations. You would have the key to the facility and it will only be used by your organisation's staff.

Shared workplace recovery facilities are the most commonly used. Here, the cost of the recovery facilities are shared by a number of clients and the assumption is that they will not require access at exactly the same time. Provision needs to be made to ensure that if there are capacity limitations, two clients from the same building don't access the same recovery location.

.... And then, there's the potluck approach!

We come across many organisations that have a BC Plan where the assumption is that the recovery location will be a hotel in the city. And that this hotel will have spare capacity when you have a disaster. This assumption exposes your organisation to a number of risks. What if your disaster strikes during the Global Rotarians' Convention in your CBD? Or during the Tennis Open or a Salesforce convention? And if there is a more wide-spread crisis, competition for hotel space will be fierce (this happened during the 2011 Brisbane floods). You will also want technology to perform in a predictable and reliable manner. Unfortunately, most hotels do not provide these facilities on an ad-hoc basis. Importantly, in order to instill confidence in your recovery teams, it's important to run exercises in your recovery location. Usually, hotels don't cater for this requirement.

By having a reliable and predictable experience in the workplace recovery facilities, you can focus on making the exercising scenario more interesting and challenging and this will increase the maturity and confidence of the recovery staff.

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By regularly exercising, you validate to management, clients and your regulators that you can recover within the maximum acceptable outage time (MAO) set by the business.

And if you operate in a regulated industry, you may find that your regulator has something to say about using the potluck approach.

Location

It's important to carefully consider the location of your recovery centre. It cannot be too close to your current offices, as a general disaster could impact both locations. If it is very far, it may impact your recovery time and make exercising more challenging.

Technology

As we become more and more dependent on technology, it is critical that wherever you end up running recovery operations, you're able to connect quickly and with little trouble to your applications and data - with access to good bandwidth.

Estimating how many seats you'll need

You should assume that each member of your recovery team will need a seat and access to a computer at the recovery centre.

Seats reserved can be used 24x7, so you could run two or three shifts during the initial recovery period and double or treble the number of staff using the facilities.

During recovery operations, please don't forget that many meetings will need to be held, some of which will be confidential, sensitive or run with people under great stress – so having meeting rooms available is very useful.

After the initial day or so, will you still need the same number of seats?

And what about the “shared services” functions such as IT Help Desk, HR, Finance, Procurement, they are often located in the organisation's Head Office and may be missed in the tally. It is common that there is so much attention paid to disaster recovery, that the business continuity needs of IT staff are often overlooked! Also, be mindful of IT staff needing special software that is not part of your Standard Operating Environment.

We find that IT staff are particularly challenged! They will first need to get themselves operational at the recovery location, help the other staff from the impacted office get operational AND continue providing BAU support to offices that are not impacted by the incident! If Head Office suffers an incident, don't forget that staff in unaffected locations will still need support. What would be the minimum number of seats required by these business functions in order to operate at even a skeleton level? Do they need to work as a group? Or can some work from home? Do they rely on other groups in order to do their job?

If your staff use cloud based applications, make sure that the IP address of the recovery location is accepted by the application provider.

Technology

Even if your staff use laptops exclusively, there are many feasible scenarios where your staff will leave their laptops behind during a crisis or the incident occurs when they are out at lunch or it happens out of hours and a large percentage of your staff have not taken their laptops home.

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So it's a good idea to build your business continuity plan on the assumption that the bulk of impacted staff will not be able to access your IT infrastructure because they will not have their laptops.

Cloud based computing is definitely making it easier to gain access to applications and data. However, organisations still use a large number of applications that are bespoke, poorly documented, have no DR or have data that is not backed up!

If your organisation fits this profile, it is important that you identify your critical applications and create an image of your Standard Operating Environment. This image should be regularly updated and a copy kept at your workplace recovery provider and tested at least annually.

Another big leap forward is the reliable and easy availability of IP phones. Being able to make and receive calls from a location that is not your office has been a fabulous development and makes recovery staff productive very quickly.

The tough one is providing workplace recovery offices for call centre operations. If you are using older technology for your telephony or managing your call queues, it could be a real challenge to duplicate these PABX services. Some organisations have invested in soft phones telephony that provides call centre functionality and can be used from the workplace recovery site. Other options are using an outsourced call centre service or you may need to consider a dedicated workplace recovery facility?

Working from Home

Again, technology is moving quickly in the direction that makes our lives easier! It is now considerably easier to work from home than it was a few years ago. High speed connectivity, web based applications, cloud-based applications, mobile networks, Citrix all help. If you are using Citrix or some type of VPN application, make sure you have enough logins available so that all staff can connect during a crisis, not just the ones that regularly work from home.

It is becoming common for staff to work from home on a regular basis, providing a useful test of your infrastructure. Importantly, there is usually more than one way to access the internet – providing further resilience.

As mentioned earlier, you should assume that staff will not have their work computers when the crisis strikes. You may have to ask your staff to commandeer their children's school computer to get access!

If you do suffer a serious incident and end up having a large percentage of your staff working from home for an extended period – you need to be ready for all sorts of HR and OH&S issues! It will be very difficult to manage productivity and keep staff motivated and happy – if they have to work from home for an extended period. Isolation etc

Our view is that a business continuity plan not exercised is worthless. It is critical that the plan is run through its paces at least once per year. As part of your exercise, ensure the IT staff establish access to your critical applications and data.