WHAT'S THE POINT OF PLANNING?

By John Matthews, Resilience Solutions

Recently, after conducting yet another exercise where the participants were clearly finding the business continuity plans hard-going, I started to wonder why it is that, so often, people seem disinclined to actually use their plans? You would think that, in an unfamiliar scenario, people would be grateful for any useful guidance, so maybe it's the way the information is presented to them.

To see why plans can end up being hard to use, I thought I'd start by looking at why we create them. I would suggest that a plan has four main uses:

1. To maintain a record of our Business Continuity (BC) processes;
2. As a repository for recovery objectives, requirements, time frames etc, collected during the BIA phase of our programme;
3. To ensure consistency of approach to business continuity;
4. To assist in co-ordinating our response to an incident.

Interestingly, that is often the order in which people put them, which may explain why so many BC plans start with several pages detailing company BC policies, BC organisation, glossaries, distribution lists, version control etc. All necessary stuff, of course, but if I'm standing outside watching my offices burn down, I'm likely to be more interested in what I should do, where I should go, who I should talk to and what I should say. Frequently also, plans contain detailed actions or objectives for all the different groups involved in each phase of recovery, and again, this can be distracting. If I'm co-ordinating the recovery of my business area, I only want to know what they're doing in as much as it affects me. Plans frequently contain contact details for every person or organization that any plan holder may need to contact, whether in the short term or during the entire recovery period. Again, it's hard to believe that this is necessary and I think this profusion of redundant or unnecessary information is often a major reason why people are reluctant to turn to the BC plan.

In my opinion, it's pretty clear that a BC plan isn't a homogenous whole, rather it's a collection of elements, many of which have entirely different purposes and are, therefore, likely to be entirely different in format and approach. The trouble is, I think, that all the good practice guidelines tell you that you must have a policy, version control, organisation charts, incident management processes etc. and so; many people think that each individual plan module must have all of these elements. However, as discussed above, if I'm a operational recovery (Bronze) team leader, do I care about this stuff when I'm trying to manage the immediate response of my business function to a major incident?

Obviously, somewhere in our body of BC documentation, we need all the things I've mentioned above, I'm just not sure we're not making the mistake of trying to be all things to all men / women in every individual document. Throw into the mix the fact that, in many organizations, the plans are created and maintained by the central BC function whose principal interest is, naturally, in the administrative detail and it's hardly surprising that the person responsible for recovering a critical business function often has to search for the information he or she needs immediately following an incident, at which point, he/she is likely to give up on the plan.

If this is true, what can we do to make plans easier to use? It seems clear to me that all of the elements of the Business Continuity Plan must be linked by version control and document reference, so that we can ensure they're all current, but this information could easily be contained in the header or footer of each document, rather than having the change history detailed every time.

The BC policy, glossaries, change history, distribution list etc. only need to be held once, possibly in an appendix or separate section, not in each module. Duplicating the information also increases the overhead involved in maintaining it.

For me, what should drive the content of any particular part of a plan is; who's the audience for this and what do they need to do with it? Obviously, the requirements of the plan administrator and those of the recovery team leader are not alike and are unlikely to lend themselves to the same style or format and there's no reason why they should. The Incident Management Team doesn't need the detailed actions for all the business teams or vice versa, they simply need to understand how and where their actions fit together. We practitioners all emphasise in scenario exercises and training programmes that, following an incident, people are likely to be stressed, disorientated, confused and operating at a level far below their norm, so surely at that point we should only be presenting them with information that is strictly relevant in a simple, easy to understand format.

So what are my top tips for making a BC plan useable? You probably have your own, but here's my starter for ten:

<u>Structure</u>

- Have a separate Incident Management Plan which takes you from the incident point through the escalation process to invocation of the BC plans and briefing team leaders;
- Include an overview section showing how the response / recovery process works and how all the elements fit together;
- Create individual modules for each recovery team, including the management / co-ordinating team, containing team-specific recovery information, team objectives, resources, contacts etc;

- Maintain a Plan Control Appendix containing the BC policy, glossaries, change history, distribution list, consolidated resource requirements and any other common or centrally-maintained information.

Content

- The Incident Management Plan should contain simple escalation principles and scenario interpretation guidelines;
- Plan modules should not contain paragraphs of text – only checklists, bullet points, flowcharts etc.;
- Team sections should only contain team-specific information and should only deal with the first few days after an incident.

Maintenance

- The Incident Management Plan should be maintained by the BC Team through regular reviews with the Incident Management Team;
- The Overview and the Plan Control Appendix can again be centrally maintained, with processes and resource requirements updated to reflect business impact assessment (BIA) reviews;
- The information in individual team modules can be maintained by the teams as needed, using dates to manage versions, subject to the requirement to notify the BC Team if processes or resource requirements change;
- The BC Team would require and co-ordinate regular fixed reviews and would issue document references and new version numbers on completion.

The sharp-eyed amongst you will have noted that there's nothing new in any of this. That's true, what I've tried to do is to summarise what I see in plans that exist to be used, rather than the ones that just exist to satisfy an audit / corporate governance / regulatory requirement.

I can't guarantee that if you follow these tips, people will become enthusiastic about their BC plans, but I would bet that next time you run an exercise, they'll at least refer to them and that is really the point of a plan – isn't it?