The 10 most common mistakes people make when writing business continuity plans.

The following are the most the 10 most common mistakes I find in plans I am asked to review:

1. Compliance with BS25999

Many of you may not be going for the standard or even aligning with it but, if you are writing a plan you should at least comply with the items the Standard says should be in a plan. On Part 2 of the Standard you only have to comply with just over a page of items. If the Standard says in the plan there should be 'a method by which each plan is invoked' make sure that there is a section on this in your plan. I have see lots of plans where large chunks of what should be in a plan are left out.

Action – make sure all the items in Section 4.3 of Part 2 of BS25999 are covered in your plan.

2. Connect to the BIA

Business continuity managers spend ages on their BIA gathering lots of detail and perfecting it. Then when you look at their plan there appears no relationship between the two. All of the conclusions reached in the evolution of the BIA and development of their strategy, get lost before it gets into the plan. The plan should be the tip of the iceberg; it contains 10% of the information. The other 90% of the information is developed and produced as part of the BC lifecycle which informs the development of a plan.

Action – make sure the BIA information is reflected in the plan.

3. Samey

This often happens to organisations that go for a standard plan template and occurs when someone has produced a reasonable plan template, people have copied it or occasionally from lazy consultants. The issue is that it is almost impossible to distinguish between the different plans in the organisation. They are almost all identical apart from minor detail such as recovery numbers and the name on the front. It is fine to use a standard template and even some standard paragraphs but ensure that some thought has gone into the plan bespoking it to the organisation.

Action – ensure that your plans are written for the organisation and tailored to its requirements.

4. Telephone numbers

Almost all plans will contain names and telephone numbers. Often these are to be found at the heart of the plan or in an appendix at the back. Usually they are out of date because of a turnover of people or people have not updated their plan. Numbers should never be in the middle of the plan as they are difficult to update without printing a whole new plan. This either uses up vast amounts of paper or people just don't bother to do it. If the number have to be in the plan put them as the final appendix and then it is easy replace. Better still, many organisation already have telephone lists, updated by admin people, for operational reasons. Find out if these lists exist and then cross reference then in the plan and let someone else keep them up to date.

Action – review the best way to hold your telephone numbers.

5. Names in plans

As with telephone numbers the second most likely thing to be out of date in your plan are people's names. Plans, I believe, should never contain actual names because as soon as the plan is published someone will move or leave and the plan is out of date. Use job titles as they change less often than the personnel who fill them.

Action – change all the names in your plans for job titles.

6. Thickness

There is nothing wrong with a plan 2 inches thick if it is dealing with a highly complex and technical recovery. A plan for a 10 person department is unlikely to need to be 2 inches think. A plan's bulk should be commensurate with the complexity of the recovery and the organisation being recovered.

Action – if your plan is too fat slim it down.

7. Quality Assurance

QA is essential to making sure that you have the up to date version of the plan. Too many plans make a half hearted attempt at quality assurance. Good practice is to give details of the following

- *Amendments (Version, Date, Author, Description, Status)*
- *Assigned personnel (Authoriser, Reviewer, Author)*
- *Review / Approval (Version, Date, Approved by, Comment)*
- *Date of next review (Date, Responsible person)*
- *Distribution list (Copy number, Job title, Method of distribution)*

Action – review your QA details, are they adequate?

8. Flow

If your plan is going to be used on the day of an incident then ensure that there is a flow to the plan. Too many plans have information in no logical sequence. Keep all the background information together at the back or the front, if it needs to be in the plan at all. Have invocation at the front and long term recovery at the back and ensure that all the information is in a logical sequence.

Action – work through each section of your plan to ensure it is in sequence.

9. How to do it

Too many plans lack essential detail which on the day could thwart or delay the recovery. If your plan requires the invocation of a recovery centre then put in the essential detail such as the telephone number to call, your reference number, what information is required and who is on the list to invoke the plan. Only by getting to this detail can you ensure that something as critical as invoking a recovery centre can be carried out.

Action – get someone who doesn't know your plan, to read through it and point out any detail or information they would need to implement the plan.

10. It's the planning stupid

The plan is a useful document for reminding you of what is meant to happen in responding to an incident. A lot more important is the thought that has gone into developing the plan. This planning work is often short-circuited by people 'just wanting a plan'. Plans can look beautiful but if they are planning for recovering the wrong things or they wouldn't work on the day, the plan is a waste of time, effort and paper.

Action – review to see if you are really satisfied with your plans and that sufficient thought gone into it?

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