

BY LEO A. WROBEL

Common Mistakes in Business Resumption Planning: Part III – Avoiding Deadly Mistakes

To create a successful business resumption plan, it is first necessary to determine who in the organization does it, how, and with what tools. This knowledge can help your company avoid deadly mistakes.

SO, you have been tasked with developing a business resumption plan. Congratulations! I am both happy and sad for you! Seriously speaking, this will be a most visible project with ample opportunity to shine in the eyes of executive management. On the other hand, it could backfire miserably on you if you proceed carelessly.

It's impossible to list every way people go wrong in crafting their business resumption plan, even in a three-part series. Even so, we can hit some of the more common mistakes. Parts I and II of this series (*Technical Support*, October and November 1997) dealt with the preliminary work that is often short-sold in the interest of getting the plan done cheaper or faster, only to cause undesirable consequences later. This article discusses some common mistakes made in actually writing the plan, centering principally on who does it, how, and with what tools.

If you have been given the responsibility for writing a business resumption plan, chances are your boss raised your budget, lightened your work load, and perhaps even let you go out and hire one or two bodies to assist you in the project, correct? Yea, right! In actuality, the worst case is probably true. You will be expected to add contingency planning to your "to do" list and knock out a plan in your copious spare time.

MISTAKE #1: MAKE OPERATIONS PERSONNEL DO THE PLAN

This leads us to the first major mistake most corporations make in putting together their business resumption plans. More often than not, responsibility for developing a long-term recovery plan is placed squarely where it does not belong, in operations departments. This is not to say that operations

managers are not qualified to pursue this goal. But think about it: When was the last time you found an operations person in your organization with extra time on his hands? That means business resumption planning becomes "kitchen table" work that gets taken home at night as it certainly does not fit in the schedule of today's overwhelmed operations personnel. So what are the options available? There are several, each with its own advantages and drawbacks.

Of course, there are obvious advantages to allowing operations personnel to write the plan, but also some major drawbacks. The chief advantage is network operations personnel know the environment better than anyone from a technical standpoint. In fact, in most organizations with which I have been personally involved, the overriding sentiment is that if it ever came down to it, the operations department could, in fact, restore operations under most any circumstance. The problem is, however, in most of these organizations the "recovery plan" resides in the minds of seven or eight key employees, not on paper. Therefore, if for any reason one or more of these key players were not available, the plan, and probably the operation, would fail in a disaster. Upper management therefore insists on documented recovery plans not because they do not trust that the operations department knows how to do the job. Quite the contrary is true. The plan must be documented to assure continuity in the event key operations personnel are incapacitated or unavailable. Therefore, since they are so capable in operations, and so knowledgeable about the operation, why shouldn't operations personnel author the plan? There are a number of good reasons why not. The following represents the key disadvantages

to having network operations personnel develop the plan.

Time constraints: Disaster planning is thoughtful, time consuming work that is not easily accomplished in a busy operations environment. The position an operations manager was hired to fill will not go away because it's planning time. Thus, trying to accomplish any serious planning between phone calls and interruptions is virtually impossible, and the plan often becomes homework, accomplished after hours or not at all.

Skimping on or omitting business process training: Learning all the nuances and subtleties of business resumption planning requires time for your people to read, attend seminars or classes, and upgrade their individual knowledge level. Additionally, the project will undoubtedly take the time of those who report directly to the operations manager; these people are even less familiar with the objectives of the plan than the operations manager. It will be necessary for the manager to play the role of trainer, which takes up even more precious time. Again, a major constraint on time and budget.

Lack of knowledge of other departments' missions: Can operations personnel be expected to know with certainty just how much revenue is generated by a department utilizing a support system operations department provides? Sure, they may realize, for example, that the automated call distribution unit they provide supports a busy telemarketing center. They can also assume that the center produces revenue critical to the ongoing health of the company as a whole. But can they say with certainty exactly how much revenue that center generates? Or how critical it is to the profitability of the business? Or determine how long the users could really do without the support they provide them? Do operations personnel really know exactly what all those people do? It will require time to learn more about their department, to justify whether it merits effort on their part in developing a backup plan for that particular component of the business. This necessitates much foot work in surroundings unfamiliar to a technologist and once again, takes a great amount of time.

These are not the only disadvantages with regard to using operations personnel but they are a few of the most significant. It is because of the reasons previously mentioned that disaster recovery planning projects take years to complete. Operations

personnel are simply not suited to be objective without special assistance.

Even given these serious negatives, chances are that technical operations personnel will be the ones to complete the plan. If so, get them some help. There are again several options, and each has its own inherent strengths and weaknesses. These options include:

- ◆ hire a "Big Six" consultant
- ◆ hire an independent consultant
- ◆ use a computer hot site provider
- ◆ use a long distance carrier or a local telephone company

Each solution should be evaluated on its individual merits; however, none should be considered an exclusive solution. By using key components provided by all of these sources, it is possible to fashion an optimal solution with regard to time, money and scope of coverage.

Will an outside firm be able to transfuse the methodologies associated with contingency planning from their organization to yours? The alternative is to be forced to bring the outside firm back in a year or so when the plan becomes hopelessly out of date. It is much less expensive for you if the outside firm trains your staff in the *process* of keeping the plan up to date, so that these costly re-engagements can be avoided.

Even if you are successful in getting help, remember this important fact: No matter how many bodies the firm devotes, no matter how large the budget, no matter how firm the commitment, the project will still require some of the already limited time of operations personnel.

There is an old joke about consultants that says they borrow your watch to tell you what time it is. While humorous, it is not totally untrue. A network operations manager will probably be designated as "project manager" or at least be expected to direct the consultant's activities for which the company is paying so dearly. This could amount to 25 percent of the manager's time in some cases.

Aside from the problems involved with depending on operations to author the business plan, companies also fall victim to these other common mistakes:

MISTAKE #2: MAKING THE DOCUMENT WAY TOO COMPLEX!

Many outside experts feel "bigger is better" and take great strides to assure their final business resumption plan passes the

weight test. While very thorough in scope, these plans can often be too lengthy, voluminous and complex — the worst kind of reference to have on hand in a high pressure emergency. A plan that is too lengthy discourages users from really reading and understanding it thoroughly due to time constraints. Keep it simple; use pictures and diagrams and as few words as possible to get the job done. Rule of thumb: If you had 12 hours to rebuild a complex organization with which you were totally unfamiliar, what would you want to see?

MISTAKE #3: BLOWING OFF THE UPDATES

If the plan is produced for you, who will do the updates? Most business resumption plans should be updated often. This could prove to be expensive if it necessitates bringing in a Big 6 firm each time, for example. All components of the recovery plan should be updated at least quarterly, with critical components subjected to verification even more often.

MISTAKE #4: DEPENDING TOO HEAVILY ON A HOT SITE PROVIDER

Lots of companies depend solely on their computer hot site provider. And why not? Many computer hot site providers have invested much in the way of time, money and personnel to address the issues. These firms have done well in following the market by providing seasoned technical personnel, adept at configuring emergency networks and plans including major forays into recovery of distributed networks. Furthermore, in many cases, management has already signed off on the conceptual need for a computer disaster recovery center and already has a contract with one of these firms for the mainframe. This could be helpful in selling management a follow-on plan addressing the LAN or telecom network. All good advantages to be sure. There are, however, disadvantages as well. The issues of updates and complex plans apply to computer hot site companies just as they do with the Big 6 and other consultants. Additionally, the user must always be aware that a computer hot site will never recommend the services of a competitor, no matter how well suited they are to the application. "ABC Recovery Services" will always (coincidentally) find an "ABC Recovery Services" solution to your recovery needs. Lastly, since the experience of many of these firms may be primarily in support for mainframes as opposed to LANs and

telecommunications, careful screening of capabilities is a must.

MISTAKE #5: FORGET TELECOMMUNICATIONS?

Whether you are an airline, service company, retailer, or manufacturer, you probably have one thing in common with every other company in business: You depend on the phone, or more precisely, on telecommunications services in general. That means not only voice but data communications, as well as everything from telecommuting to LAN interconnection. Ever think about what happens when this service is disrupted? Not just a circuit outage — we all deal with those. I mean, what if the telephone company itself has a disaster? It's happened before.

Telephone, electric, fiber optic, gas, water, television and other facilities are most often installed in the same public right of ways, mainly along streets and thoroughfares. In many cities, particularly older ones such as New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, these right of ways date back quite a number of years. The result is that when a contractor digs to repair or install facilities, he is often never quite sure exactly what he will hit on the way down.

While being invisible makes a telephone cable facility more secure, ironically, in another way, it makes it vulnerable. Record keeping can also be a problem when right of ways have been in continuous use for decades. Being off even a few inches with a back hoe can have devastating consequences to buried utilities of all types. A few years ago a major television shopping service sustained a two-day outage due to a fiber optic cable cut. That's serious business for a company that depends on constant turnover of merchandise on literally an hour-by-hour basis.

A good first step in mitigating this exposure is a meeting with your local telephone company account representative to assess your company's exposure in this area. Many times alternate or diverse routing is available in your company's service area for little or no cost, but other times rerouting can be totally cost prohibitive. Check with your telecommunications department, as they may be pursuing projects such as these right now. Also, don't forget to look at the entrance facilities — from the manhole or telephone pedestal in the street to your building. It undermines the purpose of spending a lot of money on diverse routing if these new facilities are simply brought into the building through the same conduit. Lastly, be alert for all construction activity in your

company's vicinity, as the back hoe is a cable's worst enemy. Oh, and by the way — many of us have more than one local phone company now! Don't forget the Competitive Local Exchange Carriers (CLECs) whose facilities are often totally diverse from the LECs and offer greater protection.

MISTAKE #6: WIMPING OUT ON THE TOOLS

A relatively minor investment in some planning tools can save hours of research and aggravation and shorten the planning cycle. Another common mistake, therefore, is for a company to be "penny wise and pound foolish" by expecting personnel to write a complex recovery plan without so much as a guide. PC- or LAN-based software planning tools are available from a variety of sources and range in price from \$500 to \$100,000. At the high-end of this range the packages generally include on-site consulting and training in use of the package. These software planning tools provide the user with an outline, or "template," of a recovery plan, oftentimes in a convenient fill-in-the-blank format. While this allows the planning process to get moving quickly, the biggest advantage to these plans is in the ability to keep them up to date. Since environments change so quickly, updates should be undertaken at least quarterly as mentioned earlier. These packages help with the update problem by providing a convenient electronic format that can be imported into other documents as required.


MISTAKE #7: OMITTING CLASSROOM TRAINING

Does your present staff know what is required to not only write a disaster recovery plan, but also to keep it up to date? As I mentioned earlier, operation personnel are in need of training both in disaster recovery concepts as well as the actual mechanics of the planning process. One approach is to host some type of on-site training class covering the topic in detail. Consider an outside seminar house like BCR, DataTech, MIS Institute, etc. An on-site seminar can usually be hosted in one week's time. The organization's staff is split in half, with each half attending alternating two-day sessions. The fifth day is reserved for wrap up, questions and discussion. During this time each staff member is afforded two days of uninterrupted instruction on the finer points and concepts of disaster recovery planning — something very rare in our busy operations environment! Other tips to follow before scheduling this training time include:

1. Host the seminar off-site at a hotel or other neutral location to avoid interruptions.
2. Leave the beepers and mobile phones at the office.
3. Do not interrupt the attendees at the seminar unless it is absolutely, positively unavoidable.

This may be the only time these busy operations personnel will ever be able to self actualize about disaster recovery outside the world of hung terminals, ringing phones, and ceaseless interruptions. Most importantly, by having everyone attend the same seminar, it not only increases the knowledge level of the staff, it also establishes a common frame of reference as to the task, and greatly aids the latter phases of the plan when you pull everything together.

MISTAKE #8: NEVER GETTING THE PLAN STARTED

Perhaps the most common mistake that many organizations make is talking the issue to death but never achieving closure on anything. Hopefully, the techniques presented in this series will help you add urgency to the project and get it the attention it deserves. Half the battle, however, is just the will to get it done. How about starting yours today? Good luck in your pursuits! 

Portions of this article were adapted from Leo A. Wrobel's two new books, *Business Resumption Planning, third update* © 1997 Auerbach Publishers, and *The Definitive Guide to Business Resumption Planning* © 1997 Artech House Books, Norwood, MA. Reprinted with permission. Wrobel has eight other titles in print and more than 20 years experience in all phases of information technology. For information on Wrobel's books, or the 11-year old management consultancy of which he is president and CEO, contact his web site at www.dallas.net/~premiere or call (972) 515-5000.

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