

WHEN THE LIGHTS ARE ON, BUT NOBODY'S HOME

STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING WORKFORCE CONTINUITY

Promoting Workforce Continuity and Organizational Resilience Through a Blend of Inbound and Outbound Communications Strategies

WHEN THE LIGHTS ARE ON, BUT NOBODY'S HOME – WORKFORCE CONTINUITY IN BC PLANNING

PROTECTING, CONNECTING AND ACCOUNTING FOR HUMAN CAPITAL

Downtime is expensive. A Meta Group study indicates that the cost per hour for downtime across a broad range of industries ranges in the millions of dollars. After a series of major events over the past few years and a growing understanding of their associated costs, organizations in all industries have become aware of the need to implement resilient capabilities within their communications and IT systems. During an emergency, organizational resilience enables businesses to bend without breaking, adapting as quickly as possible to fluid situations.

Today's business continuity plans frequently incorporate redundant data centers, redundant telecommunications capabilities, and redundant IT resources. While maintaining data and communications integrity is integral to a viable emergency plan, business must also consider how to protect the most critical component of business – the workforce itself.

During any major event, communications networks may perform flawlessly, and systems may be humming with up-to-date information at a remote data center. Data systems, IT infrastructure and communications are covered. From a technology and IT standpoint, you're in business.

Or, are you? During a major event, it's possible for the lights to be on with nobody at home. Before businesses can resume normal or near-normal functionality, or make critical decisions during a fluid period of rapidly changing events, the workforce – the employees – must be connected, protected, accounted for and back on line. Engaging employees is critical, not just in terms of protecting and keeping them up to date about emerging situations, but also in terms of the quantifiable losses that occur when employees are not included as a key factor in a BC planning effort.

Certainly, managing data and communications systems outages is critical – it's extremely expensive when systems are down, as the table illustrates. But failure to effectively plan for management of human capital can be even more expensive. Consider that while data centers and core technology infrastructure may be up and running, your workforce may be unable to communicate or connect. Issues then arise, such as:

- Absenteeism or inability to reach the office may cause lost worker productivity
- Critical decision-making hierarchies may fail, causing breaks in continuity that prevent rapid, flexible response to the changing nature of an event.
- Key staff may be out of touch jeopardizing supply chain and customer relationships.

Planning that takes these issues into account is frequently called Workforce Continuity planning. In a recent study, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that barely one

Industry	Avg Cost Per Hour
Energy	\$2.8 Million
Telecommunications	\$2.0 Million
Manufacturing	\$1.6 Million
Financial Institutions	\$1.4 Million
Information Technology	\$1.3 Million
Insurance	\$1.2 Million

Table 1 - Average Cost Per Hour of Downtime¹

¹ SHRM Study, 2005, Disaster Preparedness Survey Report

third of organizations indicated human resources were a significant component of their business continuity planning² – this is clearly an under-planned area.

Improvements in this area can yield significant benefits, not only to staff morale and even safety, but to organizational resilience during an emergency.

RESILIENCE IS MORE THAN DATA AND INFRASTRUCTURE – IT'S COMMUNICATIONS

Despite the need for effective workforce management during an event, a recent Forrester study³ of NA and European BC planners and decision makers showed that while almost 70% of their organizations have plans in place to recover data centers and communications, less than 25% of them feel that they have planned to support, connect and recover their workforces.

The Forrester report also stresses that “workforce continuity” must be integrated into any successful Business Continuity plan. Workforce continuity is defined as:

A strategy that provides for connecting a disbursed workforce to the applications, data and communications they need in instances where pandemic, transit strike, natural disaster, or other event prevent the workforce from reaching a corporate facility.⁴

Organizations must take this concept one step further, and provide the means to communicate effectively with their workforce, using a blend of both inbound and outbound communications. Doing so will provide greater connectivity with others in the organization, while enabling communication about the more macro-level events that may be happening in the world.

This blended communications methodology provides your workforce with a basic understanding of the nature, scope and details of the event, and enables communication within the organization, as well as external communications with customers, supply chain partners, and local emergency management personnel. Given the importance of workforce continuity, integrating outbound *and* inbound communications must be considered a cornerstone of successful business continuity planning.

INTEGRATING INBOUND WITH OUTBOUND COMMUNICATIONS PROMOTES RESILIENCE

As outlined in the Forrester study, a comprehensive workforce continuity plan must include an emergency communication and notification system. This system links the organization to workers and enable the delivery of critical corporate communication and the tracking of worker status and well being. But there's more to an effective emergency communication and notification system than a set of recorded outbound messages, however well timed and carefully crafted they may be.

Communication systems associated with workforce continuity planning must blend both inbound and outbound communications capabilities. Outbound communications are critical for notifying workers of an unplanned event, providing accurate, tension-defusing information, and delivering critical status updates. But, outbound communications has significant limitations in an emergency situation. Outbound communications can inform, but cannot receive information from the field.

² Forrester Research, Dec. 2006, Workforce Continuity – a Critical Strategy in your Business Continuity Plan

Integrating inbound communications enables workers to report on status and well being from the field, let others know of urgent needs, and provide on the spot updates of work-readiness.

In short, inbound communications offer organizations a real-time view of employee status, field readiness and more. This provides a further safety net for workers, both from an organizational and psychological standpoint, as they are not simply receiving information, but are communicating back inwards, providing information from the field, making requests for assistance, and more.

Business continuity planners and executives have experienced first hand the limitations of outbound only communications while attempting to manage and mitigate the natural and manmade disasters of the past few years. These limitations include:

- Employees may be widely dispersed and unreachable due to lack of access to email or phones.
- Physical meeting points may be inaccessible.
- Facilities from which outbound communications are to originate may be damaged, destroyed or inaccessible.
- Outbound notifications have a limited period of usefulness. To remain current, they must be updated based on conditions and status reports inbound from the field.

From experience with natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, we have learned that effective emergency communications cannot be a one-way street. In addition to being able to reach out to constituents rapidly and effectively, through a variety of channels, organizations must also provide a reliable method for receiving critical updates and other information from staff.

Placing your people and their needs first is not just the right thing to do – it's a critical enabler of organizational resilience during an emergency.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING – BUILDING IN BEST PRACTICES

Effective communications management is a keystone to business continuity planning. When combined with experience-derived best practice information it can maximize communication effectiveness. These best practices are all based on a blending of inbound and outbound communications that enables not only resilient business communications, but also helps provide a “social” infrastructure that offers a soft landing in hard times.

It's important to keep in mind that every element of your crisis communications strategy must first consider issues of protecting, connecting and accounting for the workforce – not just broadcasting data, but providing a hub around which employees can rally to preserve the enterprise.

A VIRTUAL RALLY POINT COMBINING INFORMATION AND CONNECTION

One key capability gained by blending outbound and inbound communications is that of a “virtual rally point” – a message center – think of it as a virtual whiteboard accessible through a range of channels – that can manage inevitable spikes in traffic as

- Employees who have identified themselves by accessing message center can later be contacted and asked to help employees from their departments or staff who live close to them.
- Members of response teams can be directed to begin, refocus or suspend their efforts based on the data received from the field.
- Organizations can upload maps to a Web-based inbound service to provide evacuation plans or directions to new employee work sites.
- Employees can call in to update their contact information with their temporary or new phone number for more accurate outbound messaging.
- Organizations can contact authorities and mobilize appropriate resources for employees who have called the system and reported that they need help.
- Employees can call in and receive corporate network status information. If the network is down, when it's restored, the company can push this news out to employees so that they can begin to recover their work and resume their responsibilities.

Table 2-- Advantages of people-centric emergency communications programs

employees, customers, partners and others attempt to learn what's happening and understand what they need to do.

To deliver this type of virtual message center, organizations are turning to fully managed communications services that provide both the bandwidth and the communications expertise necessary for successful deployment – without the intensive upfront capital outlays. This model is sometimes called “Software as a Service” (SaaS).

Properly designed, the outbound component provides clear, useful information immediately as necessary. This information not only informs – it minimizes abrupt spikes in inbound calls, primarily from employees, vendors or customers calling for general information or status. In parallel, the inbound component offers customized information to callers, the ability to leave messages, or requests for assistance, all supported by a robust reporting capability that enables the organization to more effectively manage resources, more clearly understand where help is most required, and focus closely on the people and assets most in need of assistance.

Fully managed solutions, with their built-in redundant infrastructure, geographically redundant data centers and multiple communications providers, are explicitly designed to manage not only the delivery of outbound, “informational” communications, but to cope with bursts of inbound calls from worried, isolated staff.

And, by automating key communication tasks using existing data driven, interactive technologies, these “rally points” can be employed as a cost effective strategy that both complements and augments other elements of your business continuity plan.

WORKFORCE ACCOUNTABILITY – ORGANIZATIONAL DETAILS

Implementing an automated, blended communications solution for workforce continuity and employee accountability enables the organization to respond rapidly – often in real time -- as events unfold during evolving situations. But, like most technology solutions, the devil is in the details.

Simply implementing a solution as described above will not in itself deliver the protection, the psychological safety net that helps create a sense of control and understanding. More is needed. Process and practice must surround capabilities. Productively prepared organizations have found that they need to:

- Publicize their plans to employees and other stakeholders
- Test and evaluate their plans on a regular basis
- Adapt and evolve plans as new information becomes available
- Evolve communications that protect people and assets, and keep affected constituents closely informed of changes

An effective, well-publicized, regularly tested emergency communications plan forms the backbone of organizational business continuity planning. Successful plans evolve to provide employees (and other key stakeholders) with a sense of control and context, along with accurate, cleanly and consistently delivered information.

As this track of planning proceeds, it provides a workable context – a context that enables employees and other key stakeholders to devote additional attention to those tasks and needs more closely focused on business operations, supply chain relationships, and ongoing, day-to-day functionality.

Ultimately, an effective communications plan that supports the workforce side of business continuity will:

- Protect people more effectively
- Deliver rapid, effective, two-way communications that enable adaptive response to evolving or emerging crises.
- Help minimize potential loss of assets or data
- Enable organizational resiliency during major events

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLANS — WORKS IN PROGRESS

Crisis communication plans will always be works in progress. And – that's a good thing. By their very nature, emergency events are unpredictable and cannot reasonably be addressed by a cookie-cutter plan. Even the most thoughtfully designed plan will stall out when confronted by events outside its design parameters.

By placing additional focus on workforce continuity, businesses not only help employees during an event – they can enable and empower those employees to respond to situations as flexibly as possible. An informed, connected workforce, whose human needs and concerns are being met form an indispensable foundation of organizational resilience.

About Varolii Corporation

PAR3 Communications and EnvoyWorldWide are now Varolii Corporation.

Varolii helps organizations – and their customers – get the highest value out of every interaction, driving more effective lifetime relationships and improving both ROI and customer experience.

Derived from the *Pons Varolii*—the pathway in the brain that unites intelligence and learning with the ability to communicate—the name Varolii evokes the blending of innovative communications technologies with knowledge, learning, and best practices. Varolii redefines the way organizations and their customers communicate, helping build and maintain more valuable customer conversations – over any communication device – throughout the lifetime of their relationship.

Varolii is headquartered in Seattle, WA, with data centers and offices in Denver, CO; Chicago, IL; and Boston, MA. For more information visit www.varolii.com.

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