THE GPAA PROVES RESILIENT IN THE FACE OF DISASTER

The Government Pensions Administrations Agency of South Africa (GPAA) was able to mount an effective response to the worst disaster in its history because it had a well-thought-out business continuity strategy centred on resilience. ContinuitySA was proud to play a role.

The GPAA administers pension funds and schemes on behalf of the Government Employees’ Pension Fund (GEPF), Africa’s largest fund. It administers the pension affairs of approximately 1.7 million government employees and pensioners, as well as those of their spouses and dependants.

On 14 July 2016, a burst sewerage pipe flooded the Pretoria building housing the GPAA’s call centre and regional walk-in centre. The severity of the rupture meant the building could not be used at all.

This constituted a major disaster because the call centre is a key communication platform for members and pensioners. The walk-in centre is also a critical regional communication node, as it is visited daily by around 200 people who prefer to talk to agents in person, or need to collect or drop off documents.

“The unavailability of these two communication channels would inconvenience our clients greatly and cause great damage to our reputation, as well as the reputations of the funds in whose name we provide services,” says Dr Clifford Ferguson, Acting CIO of the GPAA. “We needed to get both up and running with the least possible delay, a true test of our resilience as an organisation.”

By 10h00, the GPAA Business Continuity Committee had declared an official disaster. As part of that process, Dr Ferguson invoked the highest level of disaster with ContinuitySA, his service provider for work-area recovery (WAR). The GPAA has 120 seats at the Midrand-based WAR facility, of which 40 are allocated to the call centre.
CASE STUDY

An immediate priority was to get the call centre functioning. 20 of the agents were dispatched to the WAR immediately; a further 20 followed the next day. The remaining call centre agents and back-office workers were relocated to the ground floor and reception area of the GPAA’s head office, approximately four kilometres away.

Dr Ferguson and his team also recognised the need to provide a solution for those members who wanted to visit the walk-in centre that day. They rapidly improvised a temporary walk-in centre on the pavement outside the affected building, using a mobile communications van to provide connectivity via satellite to the back-end systems. This kind of inventiveness in response to the actual demands of an emergency demonstrates how adaptable a truly resilient organisation can be.

The Business Continuity Committee looked on the role of coordinating activities across all of these sites, using a range of channels: teleconference, SMS and WhatsApp. The Committee also performed the vital role of liaising with the local media.

As the crisis unfolded, new dynamics came into play. The unions representing the call centre staff were unhappy that some members had greater distances to travel, and the call centre manager found that it was impossible to work effectively across two sites. Accordingly, the decision was taken to relocate the whole call centre to another GPAA building at the head office site, and to move one of the teams using it (the Modernisation team) to the WAR site, along with part of the ICT team. Later, the ICT team was consolidated at a new site at the Trenvonna Campus.

In all, the invocation lasted 58 days. During that period, the all-important call centre suffered only minimal disruption. The effectiveness of the GPAA’s disaster-response strategy was recognised at the 2016 Business Continuity Institute (BCI) Africa Awards, when the team was awarded the “Most Effective Recovery” award. It was shortlisted in the “Best Invocation” category at the recent BCI Global Awards in London.

Key success factors in building resilience
Looking back on the invocation and its aftermath, Dr Ferguson says that there were several factors that contributed to the GPAA’s ability to continue operating in the wake of a disaster.

The first of these is to have a multi-faceted, integrated business continuity strategy. The GPAA is a large organisation with many branches across the country, and is the custodian of large amounts of sensitive personal and financial data. To ensure maximum resilience, the network has a great deal of redundancy built into it, and data is replicated between the data centre in Pretoria and the disaster recovery site in Sandton. Virtually every part of the network and infrastructure is designed to fail over to others. Thus, for example, if the call centre becomes inoperative, calls could be diverted to regional offices, which would act as temporary call centres for a limited period.

This way of thinking is central to building resilience, in Dr Ferguson’s opinion. He is of the view that having many components to the plan makes it more flexible, able to be adapted to shifting circumstances by definition, a crisis does not unfold in a predictable way. Multiple options make it possible to improvise within the guiding framework of the overall plan.

One of the important components in the GPAA’s resilience strategy is the WAR facility at ContinuitySA. Because WAR is essentially provided as a managed service by ContinuitySA, the capability is fully tested regularly with the client so that it does work when a disaster occurs. In addition, ContinuitySA holds an updated desktop image, which enabled it to have all the desktops already loaded with all the correct programmes for the agents. Thus, in this case, the WAR was ready for the GPAA’s call centre agents within one-and-a-half hours.

“We literally just had to make a few configuration changes to allow the agents to take calls in a live environment that was linked to the mainframe in the head office data centre, and the Oracle Supercluster replication site in Sandton,” says Dr Ferguson. “What we really valued was walking into a place that was already set up for us, with everything taken care of, down to the transport—all as part of the deal. As a state entity we have very defined procurement processes, so to acquire any of this kind of capacity at short notice would be impossible.”

An added success factor was that the GPAA’s data is replicated to the ContinuitySA data centre.

Another key success factor was strong executive sponsorship, from both parties. ContinuitySA CEO Michael Davies was personally involved in the invocation, while the GPAA’s CEO, Krishen Sukdev, also paid a site visit. Perhaps most important of all, the parties had previously tested the WAR, which meant that many problems had already been ironed out.

“Regular, thorough testing is the only way to ensure that any element of a business continuity plan will work on the day,” says Luyoilo Hela, Head: Public Sector, ContinuitySA. “In fact, coincidentally, we had a test scheduled to take place later in July, which was pre-empted by the disaster invocation.”

Dr Ferguson concludes by advising that both parties should undertake a joint debriefing as soon as possible after a disaster to ensure that everything that has been learned can be incorporated into the plan.

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