



**DISASTER
RECOVERY**

PUSH

LEARNING FROM DISASTER

ContinuitySA helped this large services organisation recover from disastrous strike action. This was a long-lasting invocation with many unexpected twists and turns, clearly demonstrating the need for a current updated BCM plan to ensure business resilience.

The client is a large services organisation, wholly reliant on its 24/7 call centre to receive and schedule client service requests. The majority of the service requests are urgent and relate to a range of emergency services.

ContinuitySA had been supplying the large services organisation with replication, backup and recovery services for its servers, as well as work area recovery (call centre seats and back-office seats) for 11 years. In addition, ContinuitySA provided a communications link between the production site and the disaster recovery data centre.

Early in the contract, ContinuitySA's Advisory team helped the client develop its business continuity management (BCM) plan, but since then the plan had never been updated owing

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CASE STUDY

to budgetary constraints. Budgetary and operational constraints had also caused the client to skimp on testing. Both these factors were to cost dearly when the BCM plan was put to the test.

Disaster came in the guise of a protracted strike by the client's field service. Once granted a court order to strike, the union took matters a stage further and barricaded the entrance to the client's head office. The first the client knew of the problem was when call centre agents reporting for the 06h00 shift change could not access the production site.

The client invoked a disaster almost immediately, and by mid-morning its IT team and 40 call centre agents had relocated to the ContinuitySA recovery site in Midrand. By the time they arrived, the ContinuitySA team had deployed the computer images to the agent desktops and opened the links to the client's communications service provider.

Over the course of the two-month-long strike, ContinuitySA had to accommodate three daily shift rotations of 40 call centre agents, with a floating population of back-office staff. As many of the latter as possible were set up to work from home.

Things start to get worse

Although the initial on-boarding of the first set of agents went smoothly, it soon became clear that the client's 4MB line for connecting to the internet was not robust enough. The ability to break out to the internet is vital, because its field agents rely on GPS data.

"Because the client had chosen to use only a small staff complement for testing, the fact that the line would not cope with a full complement of agents did not become apparent until a real disaster occurred," explains Vernon Lee, Senior Client Manager, ContinuitySA. "It took us 24 hours to come up with an alternative solution for the client. That meant that the call centre was effectively offline for a period of 24 hours, thus depriving several clients of the emergency service they needed a grave reputational loss for the client."

Unfortunately, the new link was slow, so agents could not keep up with the workload, necessitating the employment of up to 50 temporary staff a significant extra cost for the client, which was already reeling from a host of other unexpected costs.

For ContinuitySA, hosting a 24/7 operation with shift changes meant running its own reception and cleaning facilities to the same timetable. Additional security was put in place, and technical support staff placed on permanent standby.

Things took an unexpected turn when the striking workers

and their union began picketing the recovery site. During the many weeks of the strike, the union and strikers acted both illegally and in an extreme fashion, harassing and assaulting employees coming to work and, ultimately, petrol bombing the homes of three employees as well as a vehicle belonging to one of the client's regional branches.

It became apparent that the police would intervene only in the event of violence or vandalism. At the same time, the riot unit provided by the client's own security company proved to be ineffectual in protecting employees or ending the standoff.

After two months, the extreme actions of the strikers, and the fact that they were without pay, provided the catalyst for a resumption of negotiations and the ultimate resolution of the industrial action.

Learning the lessons

"The risk landscape is constantly changing, and so the BCM plan and strategy has to be a living document," Mr Lee remarked. "While the exact scenario was unlikely to have been predicted, an updated BCM plan combined with proper testing would have made the organisation more resilient in itself."

The importance of taking tests seriously in order to strengthen the BCM plan was the second major lesson. If proper testing had been done, the inadequacy of the Internet breakout would have been identified and corrected before the disaster happened. As it was, it proved to be a crippling problem, one that caused lasting reputational damage to the client.

Another important lesson affects all organisations with large staffs that rely on public transport. These employees typically use season tickets, and do not have the financial flexibility to pay for additional transport. Such organisations must have a mass transport plan in place in the event they have to relocate to a work-area recovery site.

While no plan can prepare one for every situation, a properly executed BCM programme will create an organisation that is resilient enough to cope better with the unexpected.

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