



A Testing Time

This article was written by Mel Gosling, and was originally published in the magazine "Association Journal".

Mary looked nervously around the faces of her colleagues as she picked up her notes. Clearing her throat, she began to explain why they had been called together in the spacious committee room on the ground floor of the association's headquarters in central London.

"I've brought the Business Continuity Team together as a precaution. We're missing someone from Sales, and we haven't been able to contact George yet, but I don't think that we should wait," Mary explained as she fiddled with the paper in her hands. "It appears that we've lost contact with Customer Services in Crawley, and there are reports that there has been a plane crash in the area. I suspect that the telephone lines are down and that we'll be able to make contact shortly, but thought that we'd better meet just in case."

So began another desk-based test of one of my client's contingency plans. Over the next three hours, as the situation unfolded, the Business Continuity Team worked through their response to the incident. Testing out their reaction, they used their plan to determine how they would provide continuity of service to their members and customers after the loss of their Customer Service Centre, the staff based at that Centre, and their main computer systems.

This scenario was deliberately designed to be a catastrophic event as I had identified that the client might be particularly vulnerable to the loss of their Customer Services Centre. The Team reacted well, and demonstrated that they could have an alternative operation up and running within the timescale required, although it would take some weeks to clear the backlog of work, and they had the usual emotional difficulties in trying to decide on their response to the potential loss of life of some their colleagues.

What is a desk-based test?

Desk-based tests enable an organisation to theoretically activate a contingency plan under a given scenario without physically deploying resources, and are much more than just a document review activity. They allow the group of people responsible for the plan to work through their plan, and understand how it relates to, and can be used for, a specific incident. They also test the ability of the group to work together as a team in responding to an unexpected event.

My company, Merrycon, frequently conducts such tests for its clients, and encourages all organisations for which it has helped to develop Business Continuity Plans to make such tests a regular feature of maintaining their plans and training their incident response teams. Merrycon arranges a date with the client for the test to take place, and after looking at their current contingency plans and assessing the risks to their operations, prepares a suitable scenario.

The scenario is often started by Merrycon playing the role of the emergency services and calling one of the organisation's key holders to see if the client actually manages to get to

the first step of calling out their incident response team. This is not as silly as it sounds. I have firsthand experience of a fire in a suite of offices where the onsite Facilities Manager took matters into his own hands, ignoring the fact that there was a Business Continuity team that was supposed to be called out, and started initiating recovery procedures on his own without reference to anyone else. It took nearly 24 hours before the team managed to get control of the situation again.

Once the client's team has been called out, Merrycon then plays the role of all third parties with which the team needs to interact, provides information to the team on the incident and its effects (some of it deliberately misleading), and keeps "scenario time". Depending on the nature of the scenario and the client's plans, Merrycon may run through just the first day or carry on testing the team's response for up to the first month after the incident. Once the test is over, Merrycon carries out a debrief with the team, and provides the client with a report on the test identifying areas where the plan and the team need strengthening.

The Benefits

It is unfortunate fact that many organisations prepare contingency plans just so that they can "tick the box" for compliance and good governance, and leave their plans on the shelf as a job done. The first, and only, time that such organisations ever look at their plans is when there is an incident that has the potential to cause serious disruption.

The main benefit in carrying out a desk-based test is knowing that you are not trying to use your plan for the first time in response to a real incident. You will know that your incident response team is familiar with the plan, has used it before, and that any obvious problems will have already been iron out. First time use in response to a real incident usually ends up with the plan being ignored because the team is unfamiliar with it. (I know this from the experience of running desk-based tests, where it is not unusual for the team to ignore their own plan in responding to a scenario when the plan is tested for first time, until someone suggests that perhaps they should try to use the plan that they're supposed to be testing!)

Other benefits of desk-based tests include:

- Providing an opportunity to determine if the scope of a plan actually meets everything that it should.
- Checking to see if the plan caters for certain scenarios.
- Providing a check to ensure the plan is workable.
- Ensuring the information required to respond to an incident is contained in the plan.
- Identifying weaknesses in plan.
- Familiarising people with plan.
- Providing an opportunity for people to suggest ways to improve the plan (thereby helping to instil a sense of plan ownership).
- Generating ideas for live tests of recovery plans.
- Raising the profile and understanding of business continuity plans.

Interestingly, many individuals who are told that they need to attend a desk-based test, and initially appear apathetic, usually get very involved in the event and end up by thoroughly enjoying the experience. This is actually another benefit, as it creates a link in people's minds between something that is important and enjoyable.

Who should be involved?

Being a consultant, you would expect me to say that you should employ a consultant to conduct your desk-based tests. You're partly right, but for the wrong reasons. I believe that you should use someone external to the organisation (although not necessarily a consultant) who has knowledge and experience of real incidents where plans have been activated. Such an external person would be able to view the organisation from an independent perspective, i.e. "thinking outside the box", whilst also feeling more inclined to challenge senior managers about their perceptions and actions.

Being able to challenge senior managers is vital. During one desk-based test that I conducted last year, the most senior manager present in the client's team stopped the test after about half an hour and said to me "Mel, I'm sorry, but I don't like this scenario, it's not really testing our plan." To which I replied, "Well I'm sorry that the incident doesn't meet with your expectation, and that your plan is doesn't provide the required response, but in real life you're not going to be able to choose the event that you'll need to respond to. We can continue with the test or I can abandon it now and provide your organisation with a report on how well the team has responded to an unexpected event and the adequacy of your plan."

Having said this though, it is important for the external person to understand the organisation for which they are conducting the test, and to be familiar with the organisation's contingency plan. Considerable value can also be added to the process if an internal person is available to provide advice and guidance in drawing up the scenario and conducting the test.

In terms of who else from your organisation should be involved, it is obvious that everyone on the incident response or business continuity team needs to be. However, each person on that team should have a deputy, and it is important that each deputy also has the opportunity to be involved in a desk-based test, because in the event of the plan being used for real, it would be highly unlikely that every member of your team would be available. Don't though, fall into the trap of allowing senior managers to send their deputies along to every test. This leads to senior managers becoming divorced from, and unfamiliar with, the plan, which can result in chaos in the event of a real incident when senior managers try to take control.

How good are your contingency plans?

Desk-based tests are a vital part of ensuring that contingency plans are effective and workable, as well as having the added benefit of ensuring that the team responsible for reacting to an incident that might cause serious disruption is familiar with the plan and how it can be used. Are you confident that your organisation's contingency plan would work? Are your people familiar with the plan, and do they know how to use it?