

How many businesses have in place a strategy to cope with the sudden impact of a crisis? Terrorism, freaks of climate change, transport accident, pandemic, total infrastructure failure, fire and flood are just some of the threats that might strike, without warning.

Responsible managers know the importance of anticipating the various potential threats and thereby minimising the effect of a disaster on their business. While bombs and the risk of pandemics jump out from the headlines, almost 90 percent of crises are nowhere as dramatic. It's these quiet catastrophes that have the potential to damage an organisation's most valuable assets: its brand and its reputation.

"An incident may have an immediate impact on staff morale and share value," says Andrew Bale, who joined Teamphone in 2005. "An organisation's brand and reputation may be destroyed very quickly by a crisis unless it has strong defences.

"The speed and scale of events can overwhelm normal operational and management systems. However, with a well-managed and swiftly-executed crisis management plan a

company's reputation can remain strong or, in some cases, may actually be strengthened."

The voice of calm

"A crucial aspect of disaster management is communication. It is apparent that the way a company communicates with its stakeholders during and after the crisis can either make or break the company. Staff need to be informed in order to communicate with their own colleagues and, in turn, with the rest of the world. The most important point of contact, and yet often the first to fail in an emerging crisis, is voice infrastructure," Mr Bale added.

"All the different audiences will be calling for information: suppliers, the financial community, relatives, media; even 'interested public members,' and it is vital that they are reassured quickly and with calm efficiency. A familiar voice and an efficient business continuity plan (BCP) will reassure audiences that it is on top of the situation: that it is 'business as usual'."

This view is supported by Michael Wilson, Chairman, St James's Place Group. "Voice continuity is the 'must have' ingredient of any business continuity strategy," says Mr Wilson.

Crisis management: communication is strength

Andrew Bale, Chief Operating Officer of Teamphone, the next-generation voice service provider and BT partner, argues that you can plan for the unforeseen, and tells us why voice continuity is vital to any disaster response



Current methods

Dave Birch, BT Commsure Senior Manager, comments: "The very diversity of today's potential incidents means that no assumption can be made that a company's network or infrastructure will survive or be operable. Nor can we assume that a BCP that was put in place several years ago is adequate in light of the ever-changing nature and number of threats."

Mr Bale continues; "It would be easy to suggest that a mobile phone 'information cascade' might suffice but this cannot be assumed. In London, during the terrorist crisis on July 7, 2005, the authorities enacted the ACCOC (Access Overload Control) that disabled public access to mobiles."

"By using an On-Demand model instead, we've saved this cost and added true location-independence into our operations."

Mr Bale cites another example. In Italy in 2003, a fallen tree on the Swiss-Italian power inter-connection crashed a major part of the Italian power grid. The early morning blackout stranded more than 30,000 train passengers, forced airlines to cancel flights and left people sleeping on the streets.

The authorities fell back on their emergency plan; a well-rehearsed process but one that, unfortunately, relied on mobile phones. Without power the mobile phone network had failed and the process was delayed a full eight hours before power was restored.

"Some might suggest that a simple 'call divert' emergency plan would be sufficient. However, during a crisis there might not be time to apply it, and where would it divert? Perhaps to a shadow infrastructure; a 'mothballed' office somewhere? Such a premise is an expensive luxury, which might not be accessible quickly – if at all. Staff may be working from home during a pandemic – to avoid infection or because the trains have no drivers as they are ill or staying at home. In such a case the empty office will remain just that – empty," Mr Bale said.

Many companies have invested in VoIP as the possible answer in a crisis. Mr Bale points out that, unfortunately, staff may not be able to access the corporate network and, more importantly, the network may fail before they can get to the private network and configure calls to a new location. While dual parenting may reduce this problem it is a significant weak point since it does not enable calls to be routed seamlessly and cost-effectively from another long distance gateway to the corporate network.

A new dawn in voice continuity

Together, BT and Teamphone have developed BT SmartNumbers, the next generation of voice continuity solutions that answer the vast diversity of potential disasters.

"The telecoms infrastructures of major British companies are too reliant on systems and resources based around single office locations," says Mr Bale. "Should these offices be forced to close, or the surrounding telecoms infrastructure becomes inoperable, communications could become difficult, if not impossible.

"Much of the current debate about BCP is focused on data services and outbound voice," continues Mr Bale. "In the event of a catastrophic event, it is to the phone that most people turn first. Should an office closure occur unexpectedly, UK businesses must ensure that their employees can be contacted at all times, wherever they are, so that it's business as usual."

Mr Bale believes that unless UK businesses create more effective BCPs for phone services they run the risk of serious communications failure should an emergency situation occur.

BT SmartNumbers services enable staff who are denied access to the company offices through floods, fire, terrorism or pandemic, to dynamically pull calls to any temporary location

on any voice network – PSTN, mobile or VoIP – ensuring that customer calls can continue to flow as normal. In addition, a temporary voicemail and fax service is provided.


Staff can log on anywhere, on any network, with any phone device or through the web. Authorised personnel can log into the service from any location and direct call-flow to that location. If required, calls may then be delegated to other colleagues, branches or to a service-centre with no impact on the caller's experience.

Other important features include:

- delivered on-demand without requiring any new hardware, software or network infrastructure;
- ensures that all essential voice-services will endure during any emergency, in any location or for any duration;
- provides broadcast messaging to the entire company or to teams to ensure key messages can be distributed to employees, customers or suppliers;
- can be provisioned in a matter of days, and requires no capital expenditure;
- no reliance upon office or surrounding area infrastructure; and
- service immediacy – automatic detection from the network provides true voice continuity.

Luigi Galluzzo, who runs the business continuity practices at Mediaedge:cia, part of the WPP Group, has been using BT SmartNumbers since May 2006. "Not only does BT SmartNumbers On-Demand remove our dependency on our PBX, but it saved us money too," says Mr Galluzzo.

"Without On-Demand, we would have had to purchase secondary PBX's and all the housing and management costs associated with this. By using an On-Demand model instead, we've saved this cost and added true location-independence into our operations. In this way, if we're denied access to our buildings, or chose not to travel into our offices, our staff can work from any location yet all the company voice-services such as voicemail, fax-mail, hunt-groups and team-working will endure.

"In fact, the convenience of flexible working that the BT SmartNumbers service provides has been adopted by some of our users on a daily basis and not just for emergency situations," continued Mr Galluzzo. "While this was an unexpected benefit of the service, it supports best practices since it means that in the event of any emergency the staff don't have to learn a new set of tools or processes." 

Teamphone is the service provider for BT SmartNumbers. To learn more about BT SmartNumbers, call: +44 (0) 20 3162 3030 or visit www.btsmartnumbers.com