

Are you covered? Five questions to ask about your business continuity plan

In today's business continuity planning, the focus is often on disaster recovery – having procedures in place for IT systems to be restored and data recovered should they be compromised for any reason. But a business continuity plan encompasses far more than that.

While disaster recovery is about getting back to business as usual in the immediate aftermath of an unforeseen incident, good business continuity planning should not be thought of as first aid, but as an integral part of your organisation's culture.

It should encompass not just IT and data, but all the mission critical functions of your business, such as your key channels of communication.

It's central to your ability to weather any storm survive and thrive in the face of long term or chronic challenges, maintaining trust and confidence in your business whatever happens.

With this in mind, these five questions should be at the top of your checklist.

1 Have you considered what would happen if your telephone lines fail?

Your ability to answer telephone calls is often an overlooked element in business continuity planning. But missing calls can directly impact an organisation's bottom line – a report by BT Business estimates that a single missed call to a business results in an average loss of £1,200 in sales revenue for SMEs, with the loss rising to £9,000 if businesses remain unavailable for a full 24-hour period. The ability to contact you first time could mean the difference between making a sale and losing a customer.

It's important to conduct a thorough business impact analysis of the potential effects of any disruption, considering the following 'what if' questions:

- What if our telephone lines went down for a few hours, a day or a week?
- What would happen if customers/partners couldn't reach us?

If your telephone lines are critical to your business operations, it's vital to plan ahead.

2 Are you prepared for all eventualities?

Events such as storms, power cuts, vandalism and technical faults in the local exchange or other parts of the telecoms system could directly affect your telephone lines.

It's easy to assume that the standard protections your phone provider has in place are sufficiently robust, but often they are not.

The cables leaving the telephone exchange are not buried very deeply, making them vulnerable to being dug up during roadworks, liable to flooding during heavy storm or general wear and tear.

When a phone line goes down, your local exchange will have a backup generator that ensures the service will continue should power be lost. But should this generator also fail, for instance as a result of a flood or fire, engineers will not be able to restore your phone lines straight away.

Therefore, it's important to have a failover in place that will automatically divert your calls to an alternative land line or mobile in the event of an unforeseen outage.

3 Could you continue to operate should your site become unavailable?

There are many scenarios that could affect your ability to gain access to your premises, such as flooding, fire, snow, gas leaks, asbestos or structural issues, traffic problems, police cordons or terrorist alerts.

Have you thought about what would happen should you suddenly be physically unable to get to your phones? If your business could not operate from its present site, will your staff be able to work remotely or from an alternative location, or to answer calls while on the move to an alternative site? You may need to be able to pick up inbound calls to your published number from an alternative phone, whether a landline or a mobile.

Carefully consider your options: not all call diversion services give you the agility to be able to divert calls on the fly while continuing to present your public-facing geographic numbers to callers.

4 Have you tested the plans?

It's not enough to have a plan in place – you need to proactively review and test your strategies for business resilience on a regular basis to ensure they're effective and that they continue to meet your needs.

Plans are often not rehearsed in realistic scenarios. Can you actually still answer calls when business continuity plans are invoked? If you have a basic call diversion system in place, it may not work in practise and will need to be thoroughly tested. It's best to discover any issues in the planning stages rather than when faced with adversity.

Ultimately, you need to know that your service works instantaneously so you don't miss any calls. Some diversion services redirect all calls in a number range to just one number – will you be able to manage the increase in calls that this will entail?

5 Is your business continuity plan easy to implement in an emergency?

You can have the most thorough business continuity plan ever devised, but it's no good if key members of staff can't actually implement it when the worst happens.

Should your IT manager get a 2AM call about a problem with your organisation's servers or telephone system, they will not want to have to leaf through an enormous manual to put the right processes in place.

Wherever possible, keep your plan simple and quick to implement. A business continuity plan should not be considered a bolt-on. It should involve the same tools that staff use every day and are already familiar with. That way it's easy to deploy in an emergency and will get you back to business as usual as quickly as possible.

Why organisations trust BT smartnumbers to deliver business continuity

BT smartnumbers is trusted by a wide variety of private and public sector organisations to maintain 'business as usual' and ensure their telephone calls always reach the right person.

The cloud-based service automatically detects any failure in the local exchange or telephone system, kicking in instantly to divert calls to any alternative landline or mobile.

Customers can manually invoke their own call routing plans at any time, and have complete control of where calls to each number in their range is delivered should the unthinkable happen.

Because it works via a web portal or phone call, it is simple to implement and stays in place at all times should staff wish to take calls away from their desk.

Wherever you choose to divert your calls to, you can continue to present the geographic numbers your customers know and love.