Disruption Happens. You Need a Business Continuity Plan.



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When a nonprofit colleague asks me what risk management step would benefit their organization most in times of uncertainty and frequent disruption, I often ask them, “Do you have a business continuity plan (BCP)?”

Often, the first response is a furrowed brow. Then I frequently hear a statement like, “We know we need to do that, but it sounds like a ton of work, and we have more pressing issues.”

We get it! It’s hard to imagine planning for something that hasn’t happened yet when what’s happening in front of you feels so all-consuming. Whether you want to believe it or not, some form of disruption to normal operations will happen—and it could happen soon. When it does happen, things will be intense enough that starting your planning from scratch will be painful.

The good news is that business continuity planning doesn’t mean creating a 100-page plan with detailed procedures to respond to every type of disruption imaginable. That’s not possible, necessary, or even helpful.

Focus on anticipating and planning for “impacts.” How would a period of disruption affect your ability to staff your programs? Deliver services? Access and operate facilities?

A simple BCP of 10 pages or less can help your nonprofit navigate:

- Cyberbreaches
- Natural disasters
- Major facility issues
- Public health emergencies
- And much more!

Here’s how to get started.

Identify Goals Related to Continuity and Potential Impacts

Identify a few simple goals for business continuity. Examples might be to keep essential operations running for

clients, maintain staff safety, and minimize data loss during a data breach. Select the members of your planning team. Include any departments that would face a major impact during a business disruption and team members who have expressed an interest—or worries—about disruptions. Brainstorm what the biggest impact to your organization during a business disruption might be.

Establish General Principles

It's good practice to start your BCP with any guidelines your team will want to consider in an emergency. This is a great place to outline or remind staff of daily policies that come into play in an emergency, like policies that all staff must provide a cell phone number that can receive text alerts during an emergency. Include your organization's emergency notification phone chain, where emergency messages will be posted for staff, and any instructions for posting those messages.

Function and Contact Information

NRMC's Business Impact Analysis form, available at nonprofitrisk.org, is a fillable PDF that prompts you to identify your organization's key functions and the maximum acceptable downtime for each. Next, identify the recovery timeframe and strategies for each function. What will you need to do to bring each function back online in the designated timeframe? Who will be involved?

Congratulations! You've just completed a major part of the legwork of your BCP. The remaining steps will help you fully build it out.

Crisis Communication/Disaster Recovery Plans

Add any existing crisis communication or tech-related disaster recovery plans here. Even if you don't have those plans, list all external vendors you might need to contact in an emergency, from payroll to external PR counsel to IT providers.

Practice, Train and Test

Plan a simple tabletop exercise with a couple of business interruption scenarios to allow your staff to practice how they'd carry out the plan. After any training exercise, hold a brief after-action review. What went well? What could your team improve on for the future and how?

Need More Support?

Sometimes, it's helpful to have an outside perspective or external support to get a BCP to the finish line. For a more self-service option, consider our easy-to-use, collaborative *My Business Continuity Plan* web app at mybusinesscontinuityplan.org, available for $149 or $29 for NRMC Affiliate Members.

If your team needs more support, NRMC is debuting a new consulting offering that gives nonprofits train-the-trainer guidance on identifying essential functions and developing recovery strategies. We'll also provide feedback on your draft BCP worksheets and pull all the information together to create your business continuity plan. Learn more here.

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