

Managing change as a COO

Managing business continuity



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Insights created to navigate the operational challenges which COVID presents

In this article, I share my thoughts on some of the practical issues which may not have been covered in your Business Continuity (BC) planning but which may be important now that we find ourselves in the eye of the storm of an unprecedented, global event.

Communicate clearly:

Communications are without doubt one of the most important aspects of a BC event. External stakeholders need to know that you are responding to the situation adequately and that your business is operating without interruption. Internally, your colleagues will be looking for reassurance that the situation is under control and that their welfare remains the company's top priority.

The COO should be asking him or herself one question at all times: "who needs to know about this piece of information I've just been given?" and respond accordingly.

Another important step is to ensure that all internal communications are coordinated. You do not want to overwhelm and confuse colleagues with multiple messages originating from different areas of the business. This can be avoided by assigning a specific individual or team with responsibility for issuing all internal communications. These should be regular enough to keep everyone informed but not too frequent that you end up flooding colleagues' inboxes. A coordinated daily update could be considered 'best practice', unless there is a specific reason for sharing information on a more urgent basis. Messages should also be clear and unambiguous – again, to avoid confusion. Finally, the lines of communication should work both ways. As well as communicating out to the business you should provide colleagues with a means by which they can provide feedback or share concerns.

Keep your scenario analysis up-to-date:

When events are moving as rapidly as they are at the moment, anything you can do to stay ahead of potential changes in circumstances will benefit your people and your business.

One practical way of dealing with this is to bring your BC team together to consider the "what ifs". As far as possible, these should cover all scenarios that may reasonably materialise, with a particular focus on those which will have the biggest impact. By exploring the different scenarios in detail, you can agree ahead of time how you will respond.

Keep a record of your decisions:

Another important task, and one which can easily be forgotten in the heat of the moment, is to keep an accurate record of all key decisions and the rationale for each one. This responsibility should be assigned to a member of the BC team.

Maintaining your "decisions' register" is crucial for a number of reasons. First and foremost, during the BC event, it will serve as a useful tool to ensure consistency in your decision-making. After the event, you may need this record in order to prepare reports for your insurance company or regulatory body. Last but not least, you can incorporate any lessons learned into a future iteration of your BC plan so that you are better prepared for future events.

Share knowledge across customer-facing teams:

I will confess that this item may be specific to professional services firms – understandable given my role as a COO in a law firm.



However, a similar principle may apply in other industry sectors.

The problem is as follows: law firms typically have a well-formed 'house view' on the key legal issues, which ensures that any client advice is consistent, irrespective of which lawyer is providing the advice. However, during a major BC incident, it may be necessary to form this house view about a developing issue at short notice. If left uncoordinated, there is a risk that different practitioners form different opinions on the same issue, which could lead to clients receiving inconsistent advice.

One practical way to deal with this is to encourage colleagues to channel all such enquiries through the BC team, and assign a team member with the responsibility for tracking these and ensuring that all of the relevant client-facing teams are operating in a 'joined up' way.

Make use of the technology

Technology has vastly improved our ability to keep operations running during a BC event. In the professional services sector, in particular, many companies have implemented 'virtual desktop' technology so that employees can access everything that they would have in the office from any internet-enabled PC, laptop or tablet. Policies that may have been introduced for completely different reasons (e.g. working from home, paperless working, video conferencing, electronic signatures, etc.) come into their own during a BC event.

For smaller companies that perhaps don't have the infrastructure to support all of the above, there are still a number of simple, technology-related actions that can be taken to assist during a BC event. For example, setting up a WhatsApp group for your team and checking in with them regularly is a good way of staying in touch.

BC events are challenging, uncertain and often disruptive. With effective planning, collaboration and quick action, businesses can navigate periods of uncertainty. Once the current situation has passed – COOs and other business leaders may look back at those quieter days of 'theoretical' BC planning with feelings of nostalgia. But we should take comfort in the knowledge that we will learn important lessons from this experience and that the companies we serve will be better equipped to weather any future storms as a result.

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About the COO Network.

We believe in the vision of deriving business connections with a purpose, therefore we are pleased to introduce the COO Network, a platform which stimulates innovative thinking and collaborative connections amongst professionals across the Middle East region. The purpose of the network is to provide a platform which will drive professional development, address key issues and offer a hub of ideas for individuals to consider and grow further.

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The global pandemic has already had unprecedented affect, with uncertainty ahead for businesses and the citizens of the world. It is a stark shock which has left many leaders reflecting on their role and responsibilities to the society in which they live and work in, along with their responsibilities to its people and clients.

To continue supporting COOs and leaders to shape their thinking further, we will be sharing further insights in this series which focus on:

- ▶ **Avoiding a cash crunch**
- ▶ **Managing governance during a crisis**
- ▶ **Emotional Intelligence Leadership**
- ▶ **The evolving working model**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Earl is the Chief Operating Officer at Al Tamimi & Company, a leading law firm in the Middle East. In this role, Patrick works closely with the firm's leadership on strategy implementation and, in addition, is responsible for approximately 400 staff across the firm's Business Services functions. Since joining Al Tamimi & Co. in October 2014, Patrick has executed a variety of business-critical projects, including the launch of three new offices, the introduction of new service lines, a complete overhaul of the firm's IT infrastructure and numerous business process improvements.

Prior to joining Al Tamimi & Co., Patrick spent 11 years in management roles with Linklaters, a leading global law firm, based in Moscow and London. It was in his final role at Linklaters - COO for Emerging Europe, Middle East and Africa - that Patrick first became acquainted with the Middle East region and, as a regular business visitor, developed a strong affinity for the UAE.

Earlier in his career, Patrick spent 4 years in the London office of Ernst & Young, where he worked within the Audit Division, focusing on clients in the professional services and technology sectors. He is a qualified Chartered Accountant (ACA) and holds a first-class honours degree from the University of Edinburgh.

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