

# Homeward bound



**Recent events in Iceland have proven that business disruptions came from all manner of diverse sources, so having a back-up plan that allows employees to continue working without needing to travel to a central location can be very beneficial**

The cloud of volcanic ash that covered the UK recently might have been an exceptional circumstance, but it does also raise more general questions about business continuity. At the height of the crisis an estimated 150,000 Britons were stranded abroad, with RBS economists estimating that EU businesses collectively lost over £400m per day through reduced productivity.

Business continuity aims to minimise the ill-effects of unforeseen events by ensuring that the operation of the firm can go on as normal. So what are the best ways of ensuring this, and how can productivity be maximised when staff have to work from home?

Risk UK spoke to Daljit Paul, head of service delivery at Networks First about making sure you have the right infrastructure in place for allowing staff to work from home in the event of a crisis.

### Network and email access

Communication is one obvious problem. Without access to email and company phones, employees can be left in the dark. Email accounts now hold all sorts of business critical information, such as contact details or important documents from suppliers and clients. If your staff were forced to work from home, how would they manage without access to these resources, not to mention other

documents on the company network?

According to Daljit Paul: "To ensure business continuity, it is clear that enabling remote access to emails and the network is a must. Employees should be able to access the network from their home computer, and emails via an online portal or company smartphone. The IT department or an external networking company will be able to implement these systems, but they will be no use unless everyone knows how to use them, so make sure employees are given instructions on how to log onto the network and access email from home."

Network access should mean that even teams which traditionally have been tied to the office should be able to work from home. During the snow in January, our sales, engineering, contracts and purchasing teams could all work remotely, making payments and providing quotes and technical advice as normal.

### Phones

"Telephone policy too should be examined: what happens when none of your staff are at their desks to answer calls?" asks Daljit. "Phones should be programmed to divert to company mobile phones or even employees' landlines, ensuring that both current and prospective clients can still get a response."

### Customer service

It is crucial that service levels don't drop when staff work from home, and this in itself is a good test of policy.

"At Networks First for example, we have worked very hard to ensure that even if there is a serious disruption at our headquarters, not one of our customers would see a drop in service levels: this is the sign of an effective policy," explains Daljit. "Remember that in the event of a national event such as the volcanic ash cloud or heavy winter snow, your customers too will be under stress and facing their own problems, so your service will be more important than ever."

### Planning and evaluation

Business continuity means trying to plan for every eventuality, which takes plenty of time and careful planning. The irony is that despite all the effort that goes into business continuity plans, most firms would be very happy if their plans were never actually used. However, the potential cost of ignoring business continuity planning is too great, and by the time a crisis starts it is usually too late to swing rough plans into place.

"A firm designing a plan from scratch should concentrate on business critical areas first, running through hypothetical scenarios which could affect the company," concludes Daljit Paul. "Robust plans to combat 'what if?' questions should concentrate on practical considerations, and answering who, what, when, where and how questions. Once drafted, policies should be tested to ensure that they are fit for purpose. If the worst happens and your business continuity strategy is tested for real, evaluation of your strategy can be a valuable learning experience. What went well? What aspects could be improved, and how could this be done?"

Planning for business continuity can seem overwhelming, but the benefits of an effective strategy will easily outweigh the costs if the worst happens and the policy is severely tested. Planning can become an organic process, and one which can develop over time once a solid policy base has been established.

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