NotesOn: Risk Management - Disaster Recovery versus Business Continuity

Introduction (V1.6):

During a recent discussion the question came up: “What is the difference between Business Continuity Planning and Disaster Recovery Planning?” A number of the folks I was speaking to had the idea that the two subjects were pretty much one and the same. But. Of course. They are not. Let’s find out why not.

Background:

Disaster Recovery (DR) is one of those subjects of acquired expertise that I started picking up long ago, out of necessity, before DR was known as DR, and DRP (Disaster Recovery Planning) was thought to be a miss spelling of the word DRIP. In other words, I was doing it as an integral part of “IT systems-design best practices” which eventually evolved into a specialized discipline. So I believe I can contribute to the DR conversation in general and the answering of the above question specifically.

As most everyone in or connected in any way to the field of DR is well aware, the events of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina raised everyone’s awareness as to the critical importance of the subject. Suddenly CIO’s and IT Execs, many of whom had barely given DR a passing thought, or more than an honorable mention during IT budget negotiations, were “hot under the collar” to ensure that if their IT systems went down (for whatever reason) they did not stay down.

Realization that there is a problem does not, however, necessarily equate to the full understanding of the problem ... at any level of IT or the business community. Hence this post.

The Difference:

So, what IS the difference between Disaster Recovery Planning (DRP) and Business Continuity Planning (BCP)? Is DRP senior to BCP? Is BCP senior to DRP? Should they be managed by the same IT group? Do they belong in IT at all? Or one does and one doesn’t? Do ...

As a foundation for answering these questions, let’s first start with a simple graphic – simple in appearance now, but it took a while for the light bulb to go on, i.e. it took some time and thought, looking at the subjects this way and that, before the bright idea on how to visually represent the answer finally occurred to me:
Take a few moments and study the above diagram. The entire essence of both BCP and DRP is contained therein. And that is not an over- or under- statement. If you fully appreciate the fundamentals that the diagram is representing you will be a long ways towards attaining full comprehension of both what the subjects are about and how they interact.

With the above graphic in mind, here are the answers to the most common DR/BC questions:

**Q:** Is DRP the same as BCP?

**A:** No.

**BCP:** In a post disaster scenario, the BCP team focuses solely on the people; and on the physical locations and/or building(s) where the affected company personnel are going to have to work for a while; and on the building’s or work space’s usable contents -- basic supplies such as toilet paper, towels, refrigerators, lights, water, power and so forth; and on basic communication methods such as phone lines; and on places for folks to work at including offices, desks, chairs, and tables; and on items to work with such as pens, pencils, copy machines, desk tops and laptops (with or without external connections); and so forth ... plus ... and this is critical ... any and all manual processes needed by the business unit to keep the business moving forward until IT comes through to save the day with the automated processes.
DRP: In a post disaster scenario, the DRP focuses on virtually NONE of that. The DRP team is completely focused on IT infrastructure and systems: data centers, racks, computer hardware, software installs, database and application and file and web servers, hooking up and getting everything hooked back up to the network and the internet ... in other words all of that “icky techie stuff” no one cares about until it isn’t there. The goal of the DRP is to help the business folks, the ones being managed by the BCP team, get back to the point where they can re-start doing “it”, whatever “it” is that helps the business to run, using their normal computer automated methods.

In a disaster, and after a disaster, things are rarely “normal” so one starts where one is and works back up from there. As far as the BCP is concerned that usually means places to sit and manual processes and limited access and a lot of late nights and early mornings. As for DRPs, they address the restoring of and/or the re-building the business’s IT systems, sometimes from the ground up (and oh how you had better hope IT at least made regular backups that were then stored w-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-y off-site).

Q: Is BCP senior to DRP, or vice versa?
A: No. One is not senior to or junior to the other. They are and should always and only be partners. Any attempt to break up the natural symbiotic relationship by making one team “the boss” will do more harm than good to your BCP-DRP efforts. Though there are similarities between the teams and how they get their work done, factually they are two entirely different disciplines with two different skill sets, two different (though somewhat related) background requirements, and two distinctly different focus points.

Q: Should both the BCP and DRP teams be run out of IT?
A: DRP teams definitely yes, no question, yes, absolutely positively no question, yes. They must be part of IT and managed by IT. Any IT group that farms out its DRP management should have its collective head examined.

BCP teams can successfully live outside of IT. I’ve seen it done both ways. However, where the BCP team is “free of IT Management” it must ensure that it is solidly plugged into IT’s expertise.

Let’s put it another way. IT’s role in a post disaster environment is to make sure that all of the prior systems (or as many as possible) are recovered and up and running. Period. IT does not care if there is no place for their users to sit or a place for them to plug in their laptops, that is not their job. (Well, okay. They do care, but they have their hands full in a post disaster environment so the more accurate statement would be they don’t have time to care.) The BCP team’s responsibility is to put everyone in an environment where they can safely and securely connect to the systems ... once IT calls and says they are back up ... and until then, in the meantime, the BCP team’s responsibility is to hand out the previously stored pre-printed invoice and order forms and such, and the pens and pencils and pre-printed customer phone lists and the old style ledgers for accounting, etc. ... so that the business can continue to do business. It may be, probably will be, at a much slower rate, but any business is better than no business right after a disaster.
Q: But, in your recent post “NotesOn: IT HR – Part III – IT Organization Models” you show that both DR and BC Planning are under Risk Management in IT Services, doesn’t that violate your last answer?

A: No. DRP teams cannot be successfully run outside of IT. But the reverse is not true. BCP teams can quite successfully be managed from within IT. As long as it is understood by the managers and IT Management that the two are not “the same thing with two different names”.

**Summary:**

I have gotten so used to the “DRP versus BCP” question being asked that it never occurred to me to write an article about it for www.fromtheranks.com, so I am glad it came up again. It is rather important to IT and to the business community that the difference is understood by everyone who may be involved in a post disaster scenario, and everyone involved in the pre disaster planning that must take place before the post disaster scenario occurs. Without that planning your business’s chance of survival rests between very slim and none.

Hope this helps,

DP Harshman

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