

BUILDING ON THE BASICS

Helen Molyneux walks through the primary steps in planning and conducting an incident management desk-top exercise to ensure you get the most out of it

Exercising is a fundamental element of a successful business continuity and incident management programme. Both BS25999 and ISO 22301 require a comprehensive exercising programme that validates the business continuity system in its entirety.

In this article, I will provide a personal perspective on exercising and the steps to take to help ensure a successful exercise. I will not go into detail regarding the different types of exercise and the pros/cons of each, but rather focus on the practical considerations involved in running an incident management desk-top exercise.

Before the exercise

Aims and objectives: Before designing the exercise, the aims and objectives need to be fully understood. When dealing with a relatively new or inexperienced crisis management team, these objectives are normally relatively straightforward, including familiarisation with plans, practicing roles, and helping to identify gaps and errors in plans. Where there is a greater degree of crisis management maturity more challenging objectives are required. Equally, where certification is the goal exercise objectives must consider BC arrangements in their entirety. Exercises can also be used to develop the business continuity capability.

Exercise format: The objectives will dictate the format of the exercise to be adopted. The format will also be influenced by the maturity of the incident management team.

A relatively new team will benefit from a gentler pace and probably a desk-top exercise with a number of fairly generic injects. A more experienced team will be better served by a more realistic exercise, based on a real-time scenario and driven by remote injects. This requires a detailed understanding of the likely approach of the team to ensure the scenario develops effectively, and also needs a competent team feeding injects who are able to adapt when things go a little off-script.

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Choosing how to run an exercise must be decided early in the process. You must establish whether you will focus on a single team, or involve multiple teams working together as would be required in an incident. Having more than one team may produce different solutions which can produce quite a lively debate. Some of the best exercises I have run have involved silver teams from more than one site. You will also need to consider whether you wish to include deputies or have observers involved.

Scenario development: Scenario realism is a difficult goal to achieve, and there will always be at least one delegate who will find

fault with the scenario and how it unfolds. I have clear recollections of a previous exercise that I preceded with a presentation from a representative of TORRO, the Tomado and Storm Research Organisation, and photographs of a sister site not more than 12 miles away that had previously been hit by quite a severe tornado. Despite this, one delegate complained of an 'unrealistic scenario'. It is worth noting that they were hit by freak storm winds a couple of weeks later, and did have to close early and evacuate the site.

The development of a realistic scenario is further complicated by the desire to involve all the participants in the exercise. A purely IT-based scenario may have a large impact on the business but little on HR and facilities, whereas a denial of access may have little impact on the IT staff.

Often there is a call to include a death or series of deaths to heighten the impact of the scenario. However, whilst this adds pressure for the exercising group, it could lead to a failure to focus on the main objectives and can take incident control away from the exercising team. This is therefore a scenario component that I try to avoid, particularly when working with a relatively inexperienced incident management team.

It is often thought teams want a high-impact event. However, experience has shown me it is better to start with the basics and build up from a firm base. I was criticised once for running a flood-related exercise because participants did not think it was challenging enough. Their last exercise had involved a pile-up on the local dual carriage-way, an aeroplane

Exercising



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crash and a fuel leak all within the same small area within one hour of each other. However, what they subsequently realised at the end of my simple flooding exercise was that they had failed to safely evacuate two nurseries, a primary school and a residential home, despite plenty of warning of the impending flood waters.

When developing the scenario, a good business impact analysis is invaluable. This will identify the critical activities which can be targeted. The exercise will also provide a chance to confirm that the BIA is accurate and realistic. In my work with NHS Acute Trusts, invariably, during the BIA process, staff stated that A&E is a critical function and of the highest priority. However, on plan invocation, it was usually one of the first areas to be closed to the public and the critical activities were in fact more about the care of patients that were already being treated.

Scheduling: Scheduling an exercise is always difficult and must take into consideration factors such as year ends, peak work periods and holidays. Even something as simple as what time or which day to hold the exercise on can be difficult.

It is essential to give plenty of notice to those involved. It is however inevitable that staff will cancel or be unable to attend, and this should be accounted for in the planning. Equally, and particularly for professional organisations where the operational staff are charged hourly, it is often difficult to persuade relevant personnel to attend to represent the business requirements.

You should also be conscious of the seniority of the staff attending the exercise. If possible, keep the event relatively short – I normally aim to conclude the exercise within two and a half hours. This will hopefully encourage attendance and minimise the numbers that will leave early.

Exercise day

On the day of the event, get there early to conduct the final checks on the room set-up, the table formation and the necessary facilities. I usually open the exercise with a brief training session on crisis management to help introduce delegates to some of the tools that they may have to use during the session and to help establish a common mind-set amongst the participants. This is also useful for tackling the problem of late arrivals as it hopefully means by the time you start the actual exercise everyone has arrived!

Be aware that at the start of the exercise you may have to encourage delegates to actually look in the plans – surprisingly they can often be unwilling to do this. Not only will this help familiarise participants with the content and layout, but will also help confirm whether the steps laid out are actually fit for purpose.

Managing the flow of information during the exercise is critical to achieving objectives and maintaining momentum. During an incident, information will be limited and this should be the case during the exercise. I always brief participants that the information available at the time is only that on the slide I show them. However, this does not stop questions regarding the situation and assumptions being made.

During the exercise, flexibility is key. Decisions made may not have previously been considered and could alter the flow of the exercise. In one exercise I was involved in, given the scenario used, I had expected a fairly immediate invocation of the incident management team, and had framed the exercise around that assumption. However, it took over an hour and a half for the plan to be invoked, and a further hour for the team to hold their first meeting.

After the exercise

Before participants leave the room, you must conduct a hot debrief. Ask them for their initial feedback on the event and encourage them to highlight what they liked and also disliked about the session.

A comprehensive post-exercise report should always be compiled. As well as detailing whether the aims and objectives were met, listing participants, summarising the exercise and highlighting key findings, it should also list all the preventive and corrective actions that have been identified. Each of these should be allocated an ‘owner’ and given a completion date. All actions should be monitored through to completion.

I have used the development and delivery of a simple incident management desk-top exercise to demonstrate some of the practical considerations for the development and delivery of an effective exercise. Of course, there are numerous other forms of exercise which can be used to assess not only the capabilities of your response team but also the viability of your response plans. It should be your goal to ensure that all staff participate in at least one form of exercise each year, whether that involves participating in a call tree rehearsal or working from alternate premises.

Exercising can be great fun and provides an effective way to confirm the accuracy and usefulness of your plans. However, it requires careful planning, effective control and commitment from all parties to ensure that you gain the maximum benefit from your endeavours.

HELEN HOLYNEUX MSc

Helen Holyneux, BSc(Hons), MSc, director,
Cambridge Risk Solutions Ltd

helen@cambridge-risk.com
www.cambridge-risk.com