EMERGENCE OF ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS FOR EFFECTIVE BUSINESS CONTINUITY MANAGEMENT

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Abstract. Communication is one of the key success factors which contributes to the effective Business Continuity Management. Failure to manage the communication during disaster may hinder the recovery process and prolong the downtime. The traditional communication channels used by BCM practitioners such as telephone, text message and email are commonly in practice. With the emergence of the new communication channels such as social media and mobile messaging application, it opens up a new paradigm to the way the communication being managed during disaster situation. The take up by the users is expected to be high as the new channels are widely being used by almost all levels of people. However, there are concerns on the integrity of the information disseminate via these channels as they are seen not meant for business purpose. To overcome the concern, there must be a balance between acting on information shared through these alternative channels and ensuring what is transpired is correct and accurate.

Keywords: Business Continuity Management, social media, mobile messaging application.

Introduction

Continuous availability of critical and essential services is a necessity for any organizations to promote customer confidence, ensure regulatory compliance and safeguard its reputation. Thus, it is crucial for the organization to continuously enhance its capabilities to respond swiftly and to ensure the continuity of critical business processes in the event of a disruption. A Business Continuity Management (BCM) entails enterprise-wide planning and arrangement of key resources and processes that enable the organization to resume its critical business functions and services across a broad spectrum of interruptions to the business triggered by internal or external untoward events.

The BCM is defined as a holistic management process that identifies potential threats to an organization and the impacts to business operations those threats, if realized, might cause, and which provides a framework for building organizational resilience with the capability of an effective response that safeguards the interests of its key stakeholders, reputation, brand and value-creating activities [1].

Disaster incidents may disrupt the operations and services that might cause severe impact to the business. Thus, many organisations recognise information system continuity as a major information management issue [2]. The past experiences of natural or man-made disasters had reformed the worldwide perspective in dealing with enterprise wide risk which had further intensified the adoption of BCM.

On the other side, the continuous evolution of information and communication technology (ICT) has an overwhelming influence to the way people communicate around the globe [3]. The new communication channels provide people with anytime, anywhere, voice communications and
the exciting multimedia features. Thus, it is logical for BCM professionals to tap on the latest communication technology which will enhance the effectiveness of BCM.

Evolution of BCM

BCM framework has its roots from Disaster Recovery (DR) practices that emerged during the 1950s and 1960s where companies began to store backup media copies of their critical information, paper or electronic at alternate sites [4]. DR originated from the desire of banks in United States to better protect their corporate data centres from disastrous events. During that time, the goal of DR was to protect the computer systems rather than providing organizational wide or business side protection. Resulted from the DR scenario planning approach, the strategy of having external backup storage or recovery sites arose.

In the early days, the basic DR strategy focused mainly on the recovery of information technology infrastructure from technical failures [5]. Next, in 1990s, there was a major paradigm shift from traditional DR to Business Continuity Planning (BCP) [6]. The BCP scope was much broader than DR and it was prepared for incidents that might affect critical business services in an organization. BCP was developed to identify and recognize the often complex causes of business disruption. There was also recognition that an enterprise-wide strategy is required to support the business requirement and should take precedence over IT centric disaster recovery approach.

Since then, the scope of BCP was expanded to enhance the value to the organization as a whole and broaden out its focus to include the stakeholders [7]. This expansion of focus shaped the BCM approach which includes enterprise wide and external factors. This approach will provide better anticipation and protection from incidents that may affect the organization.

Component of BCM

There are five main components of a BCM model which are organizational, process, people, technology and facility management [8]. Among the components, information technology has contributed significantly as one of the BCM key enablers. Ever since the introduction of e-commerce and internet based services as an alternative channel to extend the reach of business to the mass public, both the scholars and industry players have the common believe that the usage of technology will increase the level of resiliency of a business continuity framework. From the business view point, a proper adoption of IT could provide a better platform to minimize system downtime (maximize the availability) and consequently contribute to the company’s profitability, as each second of downtime has a direct impact to the bottom line [9].

Challenges in BCM

There are many challenges faced by BCM practitioners in relation to communication and dissemination of information to all the stakeholders in a timely manner during disaster situation. Chow and Ha [10] have recognized communication as one of the critical success factors for effective BCM implementation. In the absence of robust communication between organization and its stakeholders during times of crisis, stakeholders are left to speculate and construct their own sense of reality concerning the crisis and the “reality” that they constructed may not be accurate [11].

Hence, it is vital that all organizations to treat communication as major component of BCM and putting extra effort and coordination to keep the stakeholders such as the management, operational staff, customers and suppliers informed and continuously being updated on the situation while the recovery effort is taking place to resume to normalcy [12].
New Communication Channels To Facilitate BCM

The new communication channels such as social media and mobile messaging applications, and their integration into the existing documented BCM plans, varies greatly from organization to organization [13]. Business continuity practitioners managing BCM programs should consider these tools as part of their enhancement plans. As to date, there are many new communication channel platforms available to assist and perhaps hinder crisis communication merely create the spaces where dialogic communication may occur between the organization and its stakeholders. Yang, Kang, and Johnson [14] observed that openness to dialogic communication is significant in initiating and increasing stakeholder engagement in crisis communication, and it has certain direct effect on positive post-crisis perceptions.

In addition, the traditional mode of crisis communication featured dissemination of critical information from one spokesperson to many stakeholders, with opportunities for the many stakeholders to interact with the one appointed spokesperson, but with the introduction of the new communication technologies, adds the potential capability of a many-to-many mode of communication beyond the one-way one-to-many channel [15]. However, a communication guideline has to be established, understood and adhered by all participants in order to manage the self-regulated open interaction.

Social Media

Kaplan and Haenlein [16] defined social media as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technical foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content”. Murugesan [17] added that social media comprised of collection of sources of online information that are originated, spread and utilized by the end users to create awareness on certain goods, services and brands available in the market. The fundamental of social media systems is leveraging on information technology to facilitate discussions, relationships and collaboration among team mates, partners, friends, family and third parties. Table 1 below shows some of the popular social media applications and the type of social media system [18].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social media system</th>
<th>Most popular application</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social networking</td>
<td>Facebook &amp; Linkedin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microblogging</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogging</td>
<td>Blogger &amp; WordPress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Video sharing</td>
<td>YouTube &amp; Vimeo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Photo sharing</td>
<td>Flickr &amp; Photobucket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location-based social networking</td>
<td>Foursquare</td>
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The wide acceptance of social media system has dramatically changed the way people communicate with each other and the number of users has grown exponentially. For instance, as of December 31, 2013, Facebook has recorded 757 million daily active users on average and a total of 1.23 billion monthly active users [19]. Likewise, in 2012, Twitter has reported over 140
million active users who generate 340 million tweets daily, an increase of 40 per cent from the previous six month.

Due to the above facts, social media can be utilized as one of the communication tools to facilitate effective and efficient dissemination of information during emergencies. Besides the wide acceptance by all level of users, significant advantage of the social media system is because they are inexpensive and more often than not, absolutely free to use. As the world is revolutionizing, it is time for BCM professionals to leverage on the capabilities of social media to provide situational awareness to all the relevant stakeholders when managing the communication during disaster period. By utilizing these tools, it may ultimately lead to more effective communications with the team members and as a result, it could also enhance the effectiveness of BCM. Based on the Global Business Continuity Management Program Benchmarking Study by KPMG (2011-2012), over 43 per cent of organizations use or plan to use social media as part of their BCM programs [13].

On the financial aspect, the adoption of social media is cost effective with almost zero setup cost. Since the reason of many organizations which fail to execute BCM is due to monetary cost, BCM professional must explore and select the most cost effective technologies and services to be adopted by the organization [12].

The other strong point of social media is the fact that they offer very high availability solution as they are built on robust networks and system infrastructure by almost all established social media providers which generates a high level of confidence to the public [20].

Mobile Messaging Applications

Presently, there are growing number of individuals who are leveraging on mobile devices for communication and information gathering [21]. Current trends shows that people activity has moved away from static browsing towards applications and mobile browsing. Morgan Stanley's analysts predicted that, based on the present rate of adoption, the number of mobile internet users will supersedes the desktop internet users by 2015 [22].

In addition to the normal text messaging, mobile messaging applications enable the users to exchange images, audio and video or even their location using integrated mapping features. Among the most popular mobile messaging applications in the market today are Whatsapp, Telegram, Viber, Line, KakaoTalk Messenger, Facebook Messenger, Skype, LiveProfile, GroupMe, Kik Messenger, ChatOn and WeChat.

Similar to the high take-up of social media, the mobile messaging applications have also recorded wide acceptance by the general public. For example, as of November 10, 2013, WhatsApp had over 190 million monthly active users, 400 million photos are shared each day, and the messaging system handles more than 10 billion messages each day. In December 2013 blog post, WhatsApp stated that 400 million active users use their service each month [23].

The biggest attraction of mobile messaging applications is that most of the services are totally free and therefore it is very much more cost effective as compared to the Short Messaging System (SMS) service provided by the telecommunication operators.

Considerations

A common challenge to the adoption of the new communication channels is to obtain ‘buy-in’ from the top management who may not very familiar with such applications [24]. A natural concern is that the information received via the new channel is unverified and may not be secured
enough for business usage. There is also a valid concern on the integrity of the information which potentially could be manipulated with intention of embedding disinformation [24]. To address the concern, there must be a balance between acting on information shared through these channel and ensuring what is transpired is correct and accurate.

In addition, the integration of the new communication channels to the current BCM framework may not always be effective as some organizations are reluctant to engage fully due to the fact that these new channels embrace openness and transparency of information. The main concern revolves around the information confidentiality, sensitivity and lack of control over the open communication [18].

Despite the challenges and concerns, it is obvious that organisations and BCM professionals can no longer ignore the power of the new channels. The overwhelming adoption of social technologies by the public is driving a paradigm shift on how emergency management team approaches their communication tasks to engage the support from relevant parties.

Even though the adoption of the social media and mobile messaging application is still at infancy stage at most organizations, the potential future benefits are almost boundless. The new communication channels should be embedded into existing BCM practices in conjunction with traditional channels to form a comprehensive and thorough instrument for dissemination of critical information in timely and effective manner [20].

As a comparison, emergency management which had spearheaded the collaboration of new communication channels into its current practises had effectively addressed significantly the communication issues faced by the emergency managers[20]. Emergency management, sometime called crisis management is referred to any unexpected incident that can cause death or severe injuries to employees, customers or the public, shutting down the business or disrupt its operation, cause physical or environmental damage, or threaten the financial standing or public image [25]. The communication includes pre-event preparedness and planning as well as responsive crisis communications necessary during the emergency or disaster.

**Conclusion**

BCM has emerged as one of the key disciplines that organizations can use to manage operational risk. The discipline continues to evolve from one that is focused on responding to an event or incident to one that adapts to changing market trends and threats. A holistic approach in managing the communication among the BCM stakeholder should be reviewed and enhanced in line with the emergence of new technologies which allows significant mobility and portability. All organizations, regardless of the nature of business and size, should capitalize on the potential benefits of the new communication channels by using these tools to build geographically borderless relationships with their various stakeholders across many platforms of social media and mobile messaging applications. As the result, this enrichment in the process may contribute to a higher BCM effectiveness.
References


