

What works when the building is gone?

Work-from-home vs. alternate sites

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An interesting article crossed my screen the other day.

With the overly long title "*Global consulting firm [Watson Wyatt](#) is revising its business continuity plan based on lessons learned from using the original plan last year*" the article, which can be found on the WWW at <http://www.computerweekly.com/Articles/Article.aspx?liArticleID=229837&PrinterFriendly=true>, tells how an organization discovered that its business continuity plan was flawed.

Several points caught my attention.

One, immediately obvious to any long-time planner, was that the plan never was fully exercised. Operative word: "fully."

Had the plan been truly and fully exercised, the problem encountered when the plan was invoked would have been discovered and, hopefully, remedied before the invocation.

The second point was the "got-cha" uncovered when the plan was invoked; it's potentially a "got-cha" for many organizations and one which I had given little thought for several years.

The "got-cha"

The organization's London offices were evacuated in June 2007 after the partial collapse of a nearby building, according to the Computer Weekly article by [Warwick Ashford](#).

The plan called for some personnel to relocate to a "workplace recovery center" while others were expected to work from their homes.

The problem Watson Wyatt discovered was that the "work-from-home" staffers lacked the ability to easily collaborate with their fellow workers.

The situation was so bad, according to Vijay Bains, the company's risk manager in the UK, that people were asking to relocate to the recovery center provided by a disaster recovery vendor.

The organization where I currently hang my hat is committed to work-at-home and "hotelling," where employees go to temporary office space in a company-owned or leased facility. About 90 percent of all the people in my division have notebook (nee' laptop) computers and key fob security devices to access the company's network and IT resources. This scrivener is one of the 90 percent.

While not all of the division's personnel who are provided portable computing gear have Blackberrys, many do; those who don't have a Blackberry usually have a cell phone, either personal or company provided. For some who refuse to lug a notebook computer home, the Blackberry's functionality suffices. (Our contact requirements include at least two telephone numbers - office and cell or home.)



Cross-country conference calls are commonplace; these often are supplemented by NetMeeting, an application (being phased out for a newer program) which lets people "share" their screens with selected participants via the corporate network. It's a wonderful world, sitting here with a headset and monitor and participating in a meeting with people all over the place.

However, while this works for most of the people in my division, I have been places where the efficiency of the option drops to near zero.

Call centers

I once worked for an "export/import" company - it's category was international shipping, but the "bottom line" business was export and import. The company had two call centers: one for export and one for import.

Unlike its competition, it lacked a decent Internet presence, so for the most part, shipments had to be handled by real people sitting at desks with special telephones (which, by the by, required a special power supply to function - when the power was off, the phones were silent - but that's another matter).

While each call handler had a computer with access to relevant databases, few of the call handlers had the knowledge or expertise to

field all the questions a customer could throw at them. Bottom line: they constantly were asking each other for help.

Which is fine as long as everyone is within shouting distance.

Work-from-home for these people was **not** an option.

My plan

I fancy myself as an "off-the-wall" planner; at the same time, I understand that planning in a vacuum is stupid - not just foolish, it's downright stupid.

When I was creating a plan for this organization - the plan was ignored and when a storm hit, the company was out of business for a week - I understood the necessity to have work areas sufficiently large to allow the call center staffs to interact with one another.

Managers and personnel from other departments could work from home, Starbucks, or any place else with Internet access, providing they had equipment and access to the company's servers - and, of course, assuming the servers were serving.

But the call center people - they had to be clustered.

My plan was to relocate all call center personnel to a nearby hotel or convention center. There the company could easily lay down phone and IT infrastructure (read "wires and cables") and maintenance could rent and install tables and chairs for the call center personnel. Desktop gear - telephones, computers, etc. - also could be rented locally.



What about the data center, you ask.

I had that covered, too.

The backup plan was to bring in 24*60 mobile units - otherwise known as "doublewide trailers." (Try and pull a 12*60 half unit behind the flivver and you'll quickly understand why "trailer" no longer is an apt attribute.)

Bottom line

The bottom line to all this, as the folks at Watson Wyatt discovered, is that some job functions require face-to-face communications. These functions must be identified and appropriate "in the event of" accommodations prepared.

Even the folks who are able to work in semi-isolation - depending on business and social interaction via the 'Net and a telephone for their interaction with "the world" - occasionally may have a need for face-to-face communications.

Call centers are similar to production lines - for maximum efficiency, everyone needs to be in the same place.



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