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Roundtable

Operational resilience in a post-pandemic world

➤ There has been much speculation about what the world will be like after the pandemic, but what effects have the last 18 months had on businesses' approaches to resilience?

Our recent roundtable with Sungard Availability Services discussed developments

It has become increasingly clear that the future for many businesses will involve a hybrid-working strategy, which has a knock-on effect not only for real-estate and finding more cost-effective and flexible ways of giving staff collaborative space, but also IT disaster recovery and ensuring effective communication in a crisis.

Managing dispersed workforces is therefore becoming the norm, adding another level of complexity to overall operational resilience and ensuring key customer services can still be delivered in a crisis. A recent rise in cyber attacks, particularly as a result of ransomware and increasingly phishing, adds yet another layer of risk. Forward thinking organisations are reviewing their crisis response strategies in this new environment.

A group of global heads of business continuity and resilience at a number of high profile financial services companies and insurers was convened to discuss how businesses are tackling all these new challenges, and even using the new dynamics to gain competitive advantage.

A new normal

With the hybrid working genie really out of the bottle, now is a good time to take stock and consider how the experiences of the past 18 months might influence

how we approach resilience going forward. There is no one-size-fits-all solution and no playbook – as different functions and sectors all have unique needs.

Planning around hybrid working requires structure and process. Employees of course need to be provided with the right tools and equipment to operate effectively and safely.

The importance of leadership support, clear communications, planning, horizon scanning, collaboration, internally and externally, and supporting employees throughout cannot be understated. Ultimately, it is about sharing information and collaborative working across functional silos with coordinated interaction between and across the technology, business operations and executive layers.

“A learning and resilient culture is required in order to bounce forward, rather than bouncing back to where you were pre-COVID. I would encourage practitioners to conduct lessons capture as part of a continuous improvement process – ask what responses were

effective, and what fell short of expectations. Whatever your experience, lesson capture is going to be critical in producing better processes and plans for the future, which is important when you consider further waves of the current pandemic, to say nothing of other potential disruptions,” Tom Holloway, principal resilience consultant, Sungard Availability Services, commented. “That planning and analysis should start now – and you might need to throw your old rulebook out.

“The experience of all organisations over the last year-and-a-half is akin to a searching stress test of business models. We're hearing that younger employees yearn for a return to the office environment as quickly as possible, to pick up their career development, mentoring, and in many cases, induction activity that's been on hold over this time,” Holloway added. “Also consider the reported increase in mental health related issues over this period.”

The good news as a result of the last 18 months, is that operational resilience, in its broader sense, and

“In my view, operational resilience is as much a product of an organisation's culture and approach, as it is of its procedures.” Tom Holloway, Principal Resilience Consultant, Sungard Availability Services



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“We’re highly involved in the return to work, with customers using our facilities as stepping stones to get back in.”
Pat Morley, UK Service Delivery Director, Sungard Availability Services

business continuity are now much better understood and taken more seriously at the C-Suite level.

“Executive engagement is an important enabler to any resilience programme, establishing the tone, setting cross-functional objectives, and directing resources,” Holloway explained. “My concern is that leaders of many businesses now consider themselves to be masters of resilience and ready for anything on the basis that they’ve survived the various lockdowns, with working from home the go-to solution for all disruptions – something we don’t concur with.”

Cyber risk

The growing cyber threat needs no introduction. And with cyber insurance premiums skyrocketing, and carriers demanding a much more robust approach to cyber security, there is an immense pressure to protect data, and put in place plans to recover from an attack if the worst does happen.

“We advocate a programme approach to cyber recovery, working out, as you do with your business, what’s vital – and tiering your data based on its confidentiality, integrity and availability. You need to be able to prioritise. That’s the whole purpose of a programme approach to complex cyber recovery,”

Chris Butler, principal consultant, Risk, Resilience & Security, Sungard Availability Services, said. “It also helps to differentiate IT disaster recovery from data recovery, as they are two different things.”

It should also be taken into account that there is an increasing unwillingness among boards to allow ransom payments to be made. In some companies it is already forbidden. It is also against the law in some countries, including the UK and the US, to pay prescribed terrorist organisations – which some hacker groups are now considered.”

“I think we are going to see more and more cracking down on the payment of ransoms, with insurance companies continuing to cover remediation in the aftermath of an attack.”

Real estate and workforce

Under the new hybrid model, businesses have less need for real estate. Pre-pandemic, most offices would not be full – roughly around 80 per cent of desks would be in use on a daily basis (due to staff off sick, on holiday, or working away from the office). Going forward, there is an expectation of closer to 60 per cent of desks in use.

“There’s a huge amount of work going on in this area,” said Pat Morley, UK service delivery director, Sungard Availability Services. “Our customers are now counting the dedicated spaces that they have with us as part of their real estate environment. The seats that used to be there in an emergency, have now become an extension of the day-to-day office environment. The procurement and real estate team want to get more value for money out of those seats. There is also a much greater emphasis on staff well-being and better utilisation of space.”

“We’re talking to a lot of customers

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Chris Butler, Principal Consultant, Risk, Resilience & Security, Sungard Availability Services

who still want a London office, but don’t need 1,000 seats. Rather, they want a small office in central London, based near a mainline station, and subsidiary offices outside of the capital with good parking that enables customers and staff to turn up, park and enter those sites safely,” he added.

“One of our biggest call centre customers is picking up lots of business because they moved to a split-site working model and have split their site between their normal office and a Sungard office, and they are hitting every SLA for calls, whereas their home-based competitors are failing badly in that respect.”

“Suite layout has also changed considerably, as high occupancy in a small space is no longer acceptable – not even for a day. Customers are also asking for more space per desk, plus their own shared areas, such as kitchens and meeting rooms.”

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