

A man in a dark suit and a red and white striped tie is holding a small, realistic-looking globe of the Earth in his hands. The globe shows the Americas and parts of Europe and Africa. The background is dark, making the man and the globe stand out.

THE GOOD, BAD AND UGLY OF BUSINESS CONTINUITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By Dr James Canton

As a futurist managing a global think tank, it is my business to consider the risks leading to the demise of corporations and even societies. I forecast scenarios that shape the future. Not all of these are pretty. Sometimes, they are dark scenarios that spell disaster on the horizon. Along with this work, business continuity has emerged as a competency that I think requires more attention and investment than I see in business today.

The idea of future-readiness, to prepare for business continuity, is a large task that every leader must embrace now. Too few take it as seriously as they should. After 9/11, there was a malaise that developed in organizations, a type of organizational post-traumatic stress that immobilized companies to not do more in helping prevent the next attack. Denial set in. The “it will not affect me syndrome” became prevalent. Perhaps this was a uniquely human response to the shock of 9/11, but it left most organizations unprepared to deal with the next risk, the next attack – as is the case today.

We are not prepared to meet the challenges of business continuity today. Most companies do not have a solid, executable disaster or security plan, and are not ready for a pandemic or something more disruptive, as yet unnamed or unidentified. This is the state of affairs. Most organizations pay lip service to security and systems, be they simple or complex, which require them to prepare for the next disaster. This is not to say that all business continuity is disaster prone, or to say no organizations are ready for the next disaster that may halt business; but most organizations are not future-ready.

Business continuity is one of those immensely critical issues that every business leader agrees is important, yet few leaders fully understand. Business continuity is about the planning for those factors that might detract, hurt, limit or kill an organization’s capacity to function in the light of disaster, crisis or attack. The threats to business continuity might be as simple as a snowstorm that freezes communications, or as extreme as a terrorist attack. There are two types of risk factors that face organizations. There are normal, predictable risks, such as storms, loss of energy, system breakdowns, security breaches and even war. The asymmetric risks are those that are unpredictable, but represent just as serious a threat to the continuity of the business, if not more. Examples might be a biohazard exposure where essential staff are delayed, or a pandemic that wipes out personnel.

Business continuity is complex. It focuses on many interlocking domains: technology, systems, security, energy, supply chains and perhaps the most vital and least recognized – the human element, people. The business continuity challenges that involve human resources are paramount to the success and survival of the organization. Too few leaders conduct analysis of human resource risks and factor this into the business continuity plan. It is not all about technology, security or unforeseen threats.

The following scenarios convey the business continuity challenges that lie ahead:

- An airborne pathogen infects an office complex where sensitive documents are stored and needed by a company, halting business transactions indefinitely.
- Your entire team of software developers leaves to start a new company with better incentives and their original company cannot function effectively.
- An organization's plans for IT changes to meet customer's demands are stalled when key personnel cannot be found and hired to lead the program.
- The company's expansion into foreign markets stops when the recruitment of new talent does not keep pace with the growth plans.
- Business process changes are needed to keep the company profitable, yet the stakeholders in management refuse to change, hoping for a buy-out that doesn't come.

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In each scenario, the essential asset is people. People making the right decisions, at the right time, with the best information at their disposal, are the most valuable asset a company can have to deal with business continuity. In addition, people prepare organizations for disaster, not technology. Insightful leaders with the resources to prepare today can prevent a company from meeting disaster to-

morrow. The notion of future-readiness, of which only individuals can embrace, is the smartest investment any company can make for insuring business continuity. Business continuity is about having the right people available to make the right decisions – both in prevention, and preparation for keeping a business sound in the face of disaster.

As we step further into the 21st century, organizations will be stressed to survive and challenged to meet many new risks. We cannot predict all of these with accuracy. But we maintain that hiring and retaining the right personnel, who can build in future-readiness, may best prepare an organization to successfully meet the challenges of this extreme future wherein business continuity will be on the line every day. ■