



Originally published in *Professional Association of Health Care Office Management* magazine

Are You Prepared?

Creating a Disaster Recovery/Business Continuity Plan for Your Practice

Theresa G. Stearns
Technology Director
Anders Minkler & Diehl LLP

Disaster Recovery, Business Continuity Planning – whatever title you want to give it – is a time-consuming and underappreciated task. But, as a blueprint for response and recovery, it is crucial to the sustainability of your practice.

While Disaster Recovery concerns the recovery of your practice after suffering a catastrophic event, Business Continuity refers to the processes or activities required to keep your organization operating during any business interruption. Both are equally important.

Why is a Plan Important to your Practice?

Think about the people who depend on your practice. Imagine how your patients and employees would be affected if your practice ceased operating tomorrow. How would you communicate with your employees and still provide care for your patients if you were the victims of a fire, power outage, major equipment failure or electronic system or data loss? What if you suffered a security breach? The results could be devastating. Think about the financial impact such an interruption could have on you and your family. While none of us want to think a catastrophic event could happen to us, it certainly could. Being prepared could help to minimize the effects to you and your practice.

Four Steps to Crafting a Plan

There are basically four steps in creating a business contingency plan:

1. Get Help
2. Perform Risk Analysis
3. Write the Plan
4. Test and Train Staff

Get Help

In a larger practice, develop a committee that is empowered to make decisions and hold others accountable. The committee should be comprised of members of senior management, including Accounting, Finance, Human Resources, Marketing, Technology and other key areas of your management team. The members of the committee will have the responsibility of developing and implementing the Plan when needed. You noticed I didn't say "if" needed. In a smaller practice, the team might be yourself and your office manager.

In either situation, you can seek assistance from outside vendors and consultants that specialize in this area. Working with them will provide you with research and the development of a Plan in a shorter timeframe, along with some ready solutions to address your needs. However, there are fees associated with this approach.

There are outside “free resources” available on the Web. Some of the most common sites for research and sample plans are www.ready.gov and www.drj.com.

Perform Risk Analysis

This is the time to discuss the mostly likely interruptions and determine recovery time and recovery point objectives. A word of caution; your plan can't have steps for every known (or unknown) disaster. If you try to include every scenario, your plan will never formalize. Instead, discuss in terms of generalities. For example: what happens if we lose building access for three hours versus three weeks? With this approach, it doesn't matter if the building access was caused by a fire or a hostage situation.

The recovery time objective (RTO) is the duration of time and a service level within which your practice must be restored after a disaster (or disruption) in order to avoid unacceptable consequences. More simply put -- how long can you afford to not be practicing medicine? It is important to determine this timeframe because you can then start to develop a budget for your business continuity planning efforts.

The recovery point objective (RPO) is the point in time you must recover data, as defined by your organization. This is generally a definition of what you determine is an "acceptable loss" in a disaster situation. For instance, is it acceptable to lose the patient records you entered today?

Write the Plan

The plan should include the following components:

- 1.) Executive Summary - a brief overview of the purpose; the practice's emergency management policy; authorities and responsibilities of key personnel; types of emergencies that could occur, and where response operations will be managed.
- 2.) Emergency Management Elements - briefly describes the practice's approach to the core elements of emergency management:
 - a. Direction and control
 - b. Communications
 - c. Life safety
 - d. Property protection
 - e. Community outreach
 - f. Recovery and restoration
 - g. Administration and logistics

- 3.) Emergency Response Procedures - spell out how the practice will respond to emergencies. Whenever possible, develop them as a series of checklists that can be quickly accessed by senior management, department heads, response personnel and employees. You will also include necessary action steps to properly assess the situation and guidelines to return the practice back to normal in the most efficient manner. This section may also include emergency response to typical interruptions such as fire, medical emergencies, etc.
- 4.) Support - documents that could be needed in emergency; include emergency call lists and building and site maps.
- 5.) Resource lists - lists of major resources, such as equipment supplies and services, which could be needed in an emergency.

The task of “writing the plan” can be accomplished by using a sample plan and making modifications or purchasing a software package to help during this process. The Plan is a forever changing document. Once it has been developed, it must be reviewed and updated whenever the practice adds new services, products, facilities, technology or undergoes major internal changes.

Testing/Training

Testing and training of your plan is a crucial aspect. Testing all aspects of the Plan will give you valuable insight to make it stronger, so that when an interruption occurs your practice will be able to execute the Plan as efficiently as possible. Testing of your Plan should be scheduled no less than annually.

Business Continuity Planning is a vital practice for your practice. By following these four steps, your practices chances of surviving a business interruption significantly increase. Remember “When you fail to plan, you plan to fail.”

About the Author

Theresa G. Stearns is the Technology Director at Anders Minkler & Diehl LLP (AMD). Experienced in network support and technical training, she is knowledgeable with the Microsoft operating systems and Microsoft Office products, specifically Microsoft® Office SharePoint and virtualization technologies. Theresa also works with AMD’s affiliate company, Inflexion LLC as a technology consultant. She assists clients with SharePoint, Documentation, Paperless Environments, Disaster Recovery and other special technology applications.