

The Fact Gap

JOHN JACKSON

Welcome back to my column on trends and events in the continuity industry. In this article, I'd like to explore this question: "Do your executives really understand your business continuity program?"

To set the stage for this, let me tell you about something that happened to me about a year ago. I was sitting at a luncheon, with roughly eight to ten folks, discussing a potential new venture in the data storage area. The discussion came around to the issue of IT backup sites, specifically vendor-provided centers vs. dedicated centers.

At one point, the gentleman next to me said something like: "My previous organization had a contract with hot site vendor yyyyyyy, and we were guaranteed access to their zzzzzz recovery center if we had a disaster. We got all the equipment and space we need; so I don't understand why someone would build their own center. Our arrangement was much more cost effective." Now, this gentleman had been the chairman of the board for a major financial/securities firm and obviously thought he understood exactly what they had in place.

As the conversation moved on, I quietly leaned over to the executive and whispered: "The arrangement you had with your hot site vendor really wasn't a guaranteed access solution. Other firms also contracted for the equipment you used, and if one of them declared a disaster before your firm did, you would not get into the recovery center." He looked at me with a combination of disbelief and irritation and asked me how I could possibly know that, when he had heard from his IT chief that a contract was in place, they tested regularly, and if a disaster occurred, the plan was to move into the recovery center and resume operations. Who was I and how could I know what their program entailed? My answer: "At the time, I was the president and contract signatory for your vendor. So I know exactly what you

have. Unfortunately, you don't understand exactly what you are paying for." After the luncheon, we talked further and the executive was appreciative when I explained the nuances of the arrangement.

What is the Fact Gap?

But why was he confused in the first place? Had anyone been deceptive or misleading? I certainly don't think so. I believe this is simply one of hundreds of cases of senior executives not knowing all the questions to ask and the IT staff not quite accurately relaying all the facts. The problem is the "fact gap" that is created and leaves executives thinking they have one thing, when in reality they have another.

I also don't think it is very difficult to understand how this situation develops inside organizations. Management's view is that IT should be responsible for securing, protecting, and recovering the infrastructure, and making sure the recovery capability works. The "how" is left to IT to figure out.

IT's view is that they have put a prudent capability in place, make sure it works within the limitations of the vendor contract and the level of funding they receive, and communicate pertinent facts about the recovery capability to management. Management comes away understanding they

have a recovery capability, but possibly at a different level that what really exists. This fact gap, as I call it, can cause a number of problems.

If and when there is a disaster, and if problems occur, management will be hard pressed to understand why they didn't know the limitations or specifics ahead of time.

If IT wants to upgrade the recovery capability, they will have a hard time explaining why they need more money if shortcomings were not identified ahead of time.

The organization might be reporting inaccurately to regulatory or governance agencies as to what capabilities are really in place.

During a disaster is not the time to be educating management on potential shortcomings and explaining why your program doesn't live up to expectations.

Fixing the Fact Gap

So, how can we fix the fact gap and get management and IT on the same page?

First, there needs to be clear and open communication as to the limitations, risks, and constraints of any capabilities that are put in place, so both sides know what will — and more importantly, what might — happen

Second, management needs to make sure they understand the specifics of any capability that is put in place. Reflecting back on my luncheon, that executive might have asked why their contract was less expensive and found out about the potential risks of a shared option.

Third, in most cases, there is no

clear measurement and reporting system in place for evaluating business continuity and disaster recovery. Given that, there is no factual basis for discussion, debate, and understanding that could be used to eliminate or close the fact gap. That must be remedied.

In short, do whatever you can to make sure all constituencies understand the capabilities and limitations of your recovery program. Remember, during a disaster is *not* the time to be educating management on potential shortcomings and explaining why your program doesn't live up to expectations. **CI**

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