How prepared are you?…

…Business continuity is set to be high on the Agenda for 2006. Alex Chambers looks into the issues following the 7 / 7 terror attacks on London and discusses what lessons we could all learn.

In the last year the world has experienced foods, landslides, hurricanes and acts of terrorism. As Europe sees its first cases of Bird Flu, and in the wake of the 7/7 attacks, UK businesses will be meeting this month to talk business continuity planning at the Business Continuity Expo at ExCel.

For any manager tasked with the role of preparing the disaster recovery and business continuity plans, the last 12 months have provided a lot of lessons on what works and what does not.

A key criticism of plans put into practice during the July bombings had been that companies were too insular in their preparations. Ian Johnson, Group Managing Director of IJA, a security and risk management consultancy said "Whilst many companies had drawn up plans of what to do in an emergency, they tended to focus on the basics such as how to evacuate buildings, but had no clue on how to handle the situation when the police advice was to stay in their offices". Where evacuation plans were carried out there was often no consideration given to how employees would be able to get to and from work when the transport networks were down".

As the panic set in, managers were impulsively ordering coaches to ferry employees out of London, only to find police cordons blocking all routes into and out of the city. Some companies in Canary Wharf even chartered boats to transport staff to other areas of London, only to be refused docking space by police anxious to use the same jetties for police and anti-terrorism activities. Many hotels recorded huge demands for rooms for the night, whilst some workers were left stranded. News channels broadcast pictures of huge crowds of people walking out of the City, but this was not a new sight. Images such as these had been seen before, following the terrorist attacks on New York in September 2001.

"Many companies had emergency plans that tended to focus on the basics such as how to evacuate buildings, but had no clue on how to handle the situation when the police advice was to stay in their offices."

Yet simple planning could have alleviated many of these problems. Some companies have taken the proactive approach following 7 / 7 and given out advice to staff on how to be more prepared, as part of their overall contingency planning. In the event that transport networks are severely affected, advice should include reminding employees to ensure that mobiles are fully charged before leaving the office and women keep a spare pair of comfortable shoes to hand, should they need to walk some considerable distance.

In a statement on the July attacks, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) said…"despite years of investment in counter-terrorism measures, major vulnerabilities and shortages remain". The statement went on to say "British mobile phone operators' networks could not satisfy demand as the crisis hit the British capital".

Many people were unable to find out if their colleagues or partners were safe. Advice broadcast from the news channels, was to send text messages rather than try to call people's mobiles.

"If the attacks had been during a lunch hour or later in the day, it would have been easier to tell who was missing from the office."

"The communication networks were especially swamped on July 7th because of the timing of the attacks" says Ian Johnson. "If the attacks had been during a lunch hour or later in the day, it would have been easier to tell who missing from the office. But as they occurred during commuter time it was harder to determine who may have been genuinely caught up in the tragedy from those travelling to work, hence the increase in calls to ascertain people's whereabouts".

Much of the confusion could have been reduced if a clear communications system had been established directing calls to a specific task force set up to determine who was and who wasn't accounted for.

Whilst the data protection act has forced UK businesses to review how much private information they hold on file, post 7/7 the arguments have tended to favour more information not less. Additional information that might be useful in such situations includes; those who may require some form of assistance when evacuating from buildings or disaster zones. Establishing key information about who lives locally, and who doesn't need to rely on public transport or main routes into work, may help you get your business back up and running sooner.

"Finding places for people to stay overnight was a real concern" said Eddie Halling, Head of Corporate Security at the BBC "but we were able to get those employees in need of a bed for the night in contact with those employees who were willing and able to offer up a spare room or a couch".

One thing that became apparent is that many London based businesses, have their back up sites within the city. "We had a number of calls from companies that had based their whole plans on being able to move to a site only a few blocks away, within the city" said Mr Johnson "Had we seen the same sort of scale of disaster as in the sates, they may not have been able to get these sites up and running for a few weeks, which of course, could spell, the end for some businesses".

Whilst IT and back up systems are important, the problems that may arise due to location are starting to make businesses see the benefits of home-workers. Bob Piggot, head of Group Crisis Management at HSBC, announced back in January that they were developing plans on how to deal with avian flu that would allow them to continue operating if up to half of their staff were to fall ill from the virus. His plans include boosting home working, teleconferencing and increasing office cleaning to ensure the virus was not easily transmitted.

Whatever the crisis, it is clear that it is only through rigorous testing that weaknesses can be exposed. Ian Johnson believes as "companies are now realising the importance of conducting regular security reviews it is now equally important to ensure that business continuity is part of that review."

This article originally appeared in the February 2006 edition of Risk UK Magazine.

IJA - Linden Place - Seale - Farnham - Surrey - GU10 1HS.
Tel: (+44) (0)1252 782664 **Fax:** (+44) (0)1252 782818. **Email:** info@ija.co.uk **Web:** www.ija.co.uk