



# Business as usual

Sonia Cassidy asks why there are so many barriers to promoting business continuity to SMEs, and looks at ways of enticing smaller companies to adopt BCM practices

“So do you work in the City?” The question, though not unexpected, filled me with frustration and bemusement. The time was 2006, the place the Business Continuity Expo and I was, in the words of one vendor, “the only SME around”. Three years on, I find myself in an altogether different quandary. Having once felt as if I alone was banging on about the importance of small business BCM, I now find that others are attempting and failing in their efforts to reach out to SMEs.

Full-scale BCM solutions for SMEs simply do not seem viable until a critical organisational mass has been reached. In their current state, the systems that were set up to serve corporate, government and contingency clients cannot support SMEs whose needs, requirements and culture are

inherently different. As Andrew Hiles and Mel Gosling pointed out in their article “SMEs – Stop the preaching” (Jan/Feb 2009 edition of *Continuity*), the evangelical approach does not work, and nor do the 80/20 scare tactics.

Though we are some way off yet from unearthing workable solutions, the process of eliminating what does not work is valuable in itself. There are multiple barriers to business continuity in small, medium, and indeed micro enterprises, not all which have been explored and so might benefit from unbundling further (see box on page 28).

## Building BCM bridges

To all wishing to promote SME BCM in their respective environments/groups of interest,

a customer-focused, i.e. SME-focused, approach is likely to work best. It is customer needs that must come first (even if these may not yet be fully realised, as is the case on the BCM front). Those seeking to promote SME engagement should therefore ask the following question: Who will the average SME owner or manager listen to? Whose opinions are most likely to influence theirs? Who are the people in their immediate sphere of interest?

A local council? Not really, unless it is to enquire about parking or the small business rates relief. The BCI? They are not likely to join any time soon. Customers, on the other hand, are a different story, as is their bank manager, Companies House and the Inland Revenue. Suppliers count and, for the good ones, so do their staff. They are all

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potential sources of BCM knowledge, and could be employed for the purpose, though perhaps not always in an obvious fashion.

If an SME is lucky enough to supply an accredited, or simply BCM-aware enterprise, some of their supply chain resilience may be passed on or trickle down. What if the more BC-advanced partner was supported to deliver the BCM message through their supply chain and in a real business environment, rather than subject an SME to a separate and isolated awareness campaign? The relationship is already in place, as is mutual trust and buy-in, so this form of BCM education might fair better than flyers or a publicity onslaught.

Although attempts have been made, and have not proven successful, to provide deals, insurance savings etc. to SMEs with sound BCPs, it would be interesting to know the outcome if both the scope and depth of such endeavours was to be expanded. Let us look in more detail at three major forces for SME engagement, and what could be done to further facilitate it.

#### Business Continuity Institute

The role of the BCI cannot be overstated. In addition to the top-level work of liaising with the government and other BCM and risk management institutions, more could be done to promote the SME cause within the Institute itself.

The BCI could also question why BS25999 is excluded from British Standards Institute's "Small Business" packs of discounted bundles of standards aimed at the SME market. Opportunities for engagement should also be fully explored and those volunteering their time in the SME cause could perhaps be taken up on it to help move things along.

Lastly, while the BCI is to be commended for its mentorship scheme, it could do with a review. The depth and quality of individual mentoring relationships vary significantly and it is reassuring to know that the Institute is currently looking into it. It would also be helpful to consider if there is a way the scheme could be expanded, or a separate one launched, to specifically engage BCM practitioners working with SMEs. There are many benefits in encouraging exchanges between the corporate and small business worlds, though time, cost, security and confidentiality would all need to be resolved.



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## Barriers to BCM

- 1) The costs of BCM solutions and consultancy are an obvious issue, and one most discussed. Though this does appear to be a common denominator, not all SMEs are created equal, and other factors may also be at play.
- 2) While shortage of time or skills is hardly an original complaint, nowhere is this more acute than among SMEs. Their world is a dynamic one of fire-fighting, of movement, of adaptability, of unrelenting pursuit of dreams, concepts and ideas – or, conversely, of stagnancy, of burn-outs, of personal and business failure.  
The way in is through cooperation and lending a helping hand, through understanding the circumstances of a typical SME and the headspace of those running them. All are fire-fighters, and every day brings a new emergency. While the situation is not always quite so dramatic, there are also a good few riding on luck alone. Before attempting to interest any small business client in BCM, and getting frustrated at the lack of response, it is worth asking if they are ignoring the risks or issues, or are simply incapable of proceeding at this moment in time.
- 3) The Ostrich response. Although organisations of all sizes suffer from this particular affliction, it affects them for different reasons. SME owners/managers, unlike their counterparts in bigger organisations, do not hide their heads in the sand out of a misplaced sense of security. By its very nature, while essential and even reassuring to its practitioners, BCM flies in the face of entrepreneurial spirit, which is adventurous, daring and risk-taking.  
Riding high on adrenaline for prolonged periods of time makes acknowledging the possibility of failure, essential to start a business continuity debate, not only difficult but possibly also undesirable for it might undermine the war spirit needed to succeed at this moment in time, in this particular situation. To engage in BCM, and even less commonly, to incorporate it across an organisation, is to admit fallibility, something an SME owner, manager or entrepreneur may be reluctant to do.
- 4) Confusion over what exactly BCM is. BCM practitioners continue to debate the boundaries of risk management, crisis management and business continuity. While such discussions are typical of a relatively new industry charting its path, if we are only just becoming clear on this, how can anybody else be?
- 5) Confusion over why BCM is important in its own right. Surely, with all and any activities single-mindedly focused on survival, all SMEs ever do is business continuity?
- 6) Lack of true partnerships. Much of the cooperation in place, commendable though it is, is also superficial. Much of the corporate BCM world has little interest in SMEs. A great many SME owners (those who do recognise the importance of BCM at least) and indeed BCM practitioners working in the SME sector, are frustrated by the signs sent to them directly and indirectly announcing they are not worthy of corporate time, attention and partnership.  
Conversely, those on the corporate/training/the BCI end truly committed to the cause are coming up against what may seem to be an impenetrable wall of resistance and/or sheer ignorance on the part of SMEs. While there is pretence of partnerships, there are also genuine attempts to make them a reality. Tales of true cooperation and

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## BCM training providers

Very few BCM training providers give much consideration to the differences between SME and corporate budgets (stretched though they currently are). The ones which do provide SME discounts, or can be persuaded to do so behind closed doors, fear that publicising them might subject them to fierce price competition from their non-SME clients.

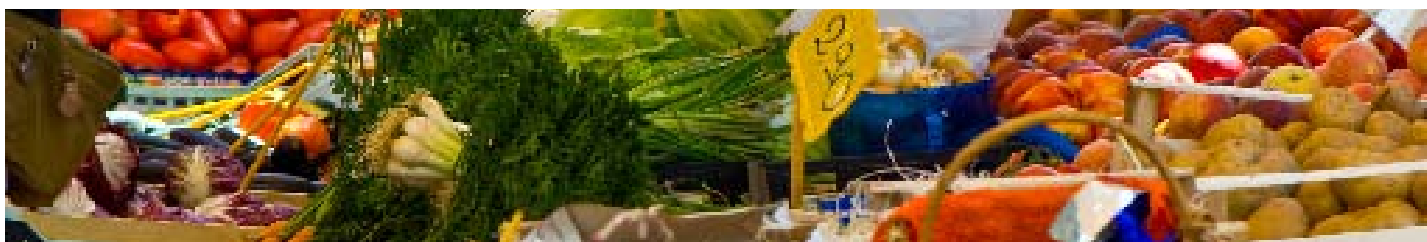
Anybody trying to leverage their corporate training budget should keep in mind that while a different price structure may apply, so do economies of scale, and that trained and aware suppliers are also a business benefit. Different types of return on investment can also be considered. One training provider I recently spoke to said that discounted (indeed, free in this case) SME training meant more delegates and better course feedback (however expensive the course, delegates enjoy bouncing ideas off each other and a half-empty room can be a show-stopper).

Right now, considerable government funds are being spent on SME training to help combat recession and equip the sector with much needed skills for the future. With so many opportunities, now is a good time for BCM training providers to consider getting involved.

## Local councils

Local councils may have been given the job of promoting BCM to local SMEs under the *Civil Contingencies Act 2004* but their ideas on how to best achieve this have in some cases so far fallen flat. While their recent investment in BCM materials, training and resources is commendable, and while some SMEs will listen, the overall take-up is somewhat disappointing. So here is a radical idea: perhaps they should forget about targeting SMEs directly and look at targeting SMEs' immediate sphere of interest instead, finding common matters and using them as an incentive? Making it real for SMEs is key. Encouraging emergency services to plan more exercises involving local businesses (as they will in real

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emergencies) will be a better BCM lesson than a council could ever hope to deliver. This needs to be done with sensitivity, as one cannot expect a small business owner to jeopardise their livelihood. Rather than funding yet more leaflets, though, could a local shop or cafe be paid to shut down for a couple of hours to take part in an exercise? It would be a diversion from business as usual and the word would spread that local businesses and councils are doing something together, something that, however serious, might even include an element of fun.

With their entrepreneurial spirit and raw ingenuity, local SMEs might cope surprisingly well with what such an exercise throws at them, even without much training or specific BCM skills. If chaos ensues,

let them fail truly. Let them get first-hand experience of what denial of access, lack of business continuity etc. actually means – as opposed to typical scaremongering statements such as “X businesses fail with Y after the incident”. Any subsequent review or educational/training efforts are likely to fall on much more fertile ground, and be much better appreciated.

#### The way forward

As Hiles and Gosling pointed out in their article, not everyone is well-placed to be a charity or play Santa, and there are costs to BCM which have to be met one way or another. However, a lot can be done to minimise them for the SME sector by simply keeping the SME issue in mind when going about our business as usual. Great value

can be added by relatively simple measures and altering the modus operandi of the BCM industry.

As we now start to recognise, although it may take a while for returns of whatever kind to materialise, SMEs are the engine of the economy and cannot possibly be ignored and left out of the BCM equation. One catches bees with honey, not vinegar. Whereas the direct offensive continues to fail, a softer, more inclusive and indirect approach might just be the recipe for success.

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