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Article

Title: Being resilient: business continuity principles for veterinary practice

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DOI: 10.1136/inp.i5710


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Version: Accepted version

http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/8409/
Making the Veterinary Practice Resilient: Business Continuity Principles for Instant Impact

Introduction

This short article will summarise the key principles of business continuity (BC) and demonstrate how a lean and practical version of these can help enhance any veterinary practice to be prepared for and resilient to disruption. The causes of disruption (and the kinds of additional or alternative resource and specialist support needed) are many and unpredictable – so agility, adaptation and simple scenario exercises as part of the normal business planning of a practice are needed. No matter what the cause – fire, flood, reputational issue, animal pandemic disease, staff shortage – the business needs to thrive despite turbulence. By thinking ahead, working through consequences and embedding flexibility in the business – interruptions can be minimised, brands protected, liabilities limited and continuity assured.

Keywords: business continuity, risk management, crisis management, competitive advantage

What is Business Continuity and Why Does it Matter?

Business Continuity can best be understood as the ability of an enterprise to maintain delivery of service under challenging circumstances, whilst also preserving profitability, reputation and market share. Business continuity planning should also enhance risk management to avoid or degrade the severity of crises through effective crisis management. Both of these functions can be a source of competitive advantage and reassurance to the practice owner or operator.
Whilst there are many guides to, and frameworks for, business continuity planning and a myriad of consultancies to deliver them – often with software that offers glitzy technical solutions - for the majority of the time, individual businesses will know and care about their operational context far more than an external provider implementing a ‘one size fits all’ process. Outsourcing the thinking about and developing of a plan for business continuity is likely to lead to the practice being in receipt of electronic or paper plans and processes which are generic in nature and impractical in time of need. Software tools or binders of paper template flowcharts and meeting agendas are not useful in the event of an emergency.

Robust and reliable business continuity capability arises from a sober and frank analysis and assessment of the fragility of the enterprise’s exposure to known risks and a gaming of ‘what if’ some credible scenario were to occur. Business continuity planning should be a proactive and systematic activity that is not to be dreaded or postponed – but instead seen as a regular value-adding, cost-reducing and confidence-boosting endeavour. The unprepared business will suffer unnecessary costs and disruptions in a crisis – and may even fail thereafter should, for example, debt have ben accrued or opportunities, trust and confidence lost.

Note, though, that effectiveness of planning has to be measured in something other than having files and folders. Planning (the working through of how the business would wish to operate in turbulent conditions) is vital, and yet when an incident does occur it is unlikely to proceed in the manner anticipated. As President Dwight D Eisenhower noted in entertaining remarks in 1957: in a crisis, “the first thing you do is to take all the plans off the top shelf and throw them out the window and start once more. But if you haven’t been planning you can’t start to work, intelligently at least. That is the reason it is so important to plan, to keep yourselves steeped in the character of the problem that you may one day be called upon to solve--or to help to solve” (Eisenhower 1957).

Hence the need to have adaptive, agile, creative and competent individuals able to calmly and swiftly manage to re-plan for a situation and considering both the short and longer-term interest of
the business. Such capability, though, cannot be generated in the moment of the crisis – but you could start building it today.

**What Could Go Wrong?**

Many organisations overlook the need for investing time and effort into business continuity as it is assumed that it only has benefits for those exposed to massive risks – the multinational company operating in dangerous parts of the world; the government department in the centre of London. In reality, every business contains and can be affected by risks that could compromise survival.

An important element of making a single or multi-site veterinary practice resilient is considering ‘what if’ a range of scenarios occurred. A credible scenario provides “strategic foresight” of how things would unfold if the incident occurred today and the changes need to enhance that response. Research has found that such “efforts add value through (1) an enhanced capacity to perceive change, (2) an enhanced capacity to interpret and respond to change, (3) influence on other actors, and (4) an enhanced capacity for organizational learning” (Rohrbeck & Schwarz cited in Wilkinson & Kupers 2013: 120).

Practices might find it helpful to consider the following potential scenarios (which would complement a hard-hitting analysis of known or knowable embedded risk in the business or nearby). Note that the need is to focus on the consequences rather than the causes: preparing for specific events is inefficient. How would the business handle the logistical, reputational, media and other dimensions? As a result, the shape of business continuity documentation would evolve to enable effective responses – rather than a template driving what the business wants. The business must make decisions about how the following would be approached – itself a useful means of stimulating debate between partners, practice and business managers: what is our agreed position on these scenarios?

- Local / regional inability to travel (e.g. extreme weather, perhaps prolonged)
Loss of access to premises (where a flood might prevent passage on a road; power or other utility failure to the premises)

Damage to premises necessitating full or partial relocation for a short or undetermined period (e.g. caused by fire, flood)

Loss of key practice personnel (e.g. ill health, inability to travel, etc.).

Loss of key practice infrastructure (e.g. IT systems, records, telephony, clinical equipment failure or recall).

Arrest or charge of practice staff for a matter (a) related to the business and (b) not related to the business.

Internally notified breach of law or good practice (e.g. about an employee to the partners / manager).

Externally reported breach of law or good practice, leading to regulator, law enforcement and other investigations (e.g. complaint or breach information passed to media, regulator – animal welfare, treatment, data protection, commercially confidential data).

Inability to operate due to statutory / other breach (or suspicion of).

Contamination of product supplied to the practice and used by it (e.g. product recall) and management of communications to customers (business and individuals)

Loss of a key client (fault or no fault)

Epidemic animal disease or statutory change producing opportunity for new business or causing increased workload.

Key Capabilities Needed for Business Continuity or ‘Resilience’

By working through a range of plausible scenarios, the veterinary practice can develop pragmatic and lean ways of anticipating the consequences of such eventualities. It will also be possible to establish just what the limits of agility and adaptability – or ‘coping’ – are at present. From this benchmark, discussion can take place around how it can be enhanced, over what time period and in
what manner assurance of reliable actions under stress could be achieved. It is likely that staff awareness, confidence and competence will need to be increased – as well as introducing a means of reporting potential sources of risk within the business and beyond (e.g. if working with a customer or stakeholder who could compromise the reputation and good standing of the practice).

The following activities should be regularly undertaken in the business and rehearsed through light and frequent ‘tabletop exercising’ (see Batchelor & Hills 2015 for a proven and easy approach):

✦ Risk surfacing – probe and test for embedded risks to reduce chance of uncontrolled risk ‘breaking through’ counter-measures.
✦ Update a ‘risk register’ of known issues and events judged more likely by the business
✦ Ensure all staff understand the business’ strategic objectives, key customers and stakeholders.
✦ Explore potential for ‘fallback’ modes of work (e.g. dispersed working from home or at another, known location). Practice (for real) how this would work. Induct new staff in this.
✦ Establish what ‘mission command’ the business is happy to delegate to employees in terms of authority to act and spend.
✦ Imagine novel challenges: media interest, law enforcement, technical experts
✦ Keep plans light, lean and portable. Key information (e.g. contact telephone numbers and emails updated; templates for recording vital information present)
✦ Knowledge of limits: capture the extent of what the business could effectively cope with.
✦ Trigger points for activation: how and by whom would a business continuity response be triggered?
✦ How would any response be sustained over hours and days?

Five Fundamental Processes
Whether responding in a relaxed manner to an identified risk and ensuring that the extent of its impact is curtailed, or operating in an emergency mode where decisions taken (or not taken) could threaten the survival of the business – the veterinary practice should develop business continuity capability guided by the key staff being supported by a process that enables timely and effective decision-making. One powerful approach is to ensure that five fundamental processes can be discharged and sustained through time.

These fundamental processes comprise Information Gathering; Assessment of the Situation; Decision-Making; Action & Monitoring and Communication. Information Gathering refers to the means by which information is acquired and processed in order that decision-makers are provided with a valid Assessment of the Situation. This Assessment is then drawn upon in the Decision-Making process. Here, a group collectively reflects on the Assessment - and other information - to make timely, proportionate and sustainable decisions (Hills & Mahrra 2007). These decisions are then executed and tracked through an Action and Monitoring activity. In turn, the Communication function delivers key information to internal and external stakeholders (staff, media, operational partners, etc.). This sequence should be seen as a continuous process whereby any change in information is reflected by a timely change in decision-making, or where negative effects of a decision or adverse media coverage causes an adjustment in decision-making.

Conclusion

Business continuity is often viewed as a distraction from the real work of an enterprise and a technical specialism that requires consultancy support. This article, by taking a business-focussed approach to the topic, has sought to convince the reader that this can be both a proactive and reactive activity that adds value. This value includes uncovering and addressing risk, benchmarking
current and desired response capability, better understanding the limits and potential of the practice and a means to begin useful conversations within the practice about how it would, could and should surface risk and weather crisis.

Reference List


