Is Our Profession at a Crossroads?

By JAMES GREEN

As the world turned upside down this year, my new morning routine has become this: wake up, workout, meditate, stretch, shower, and catch up what's going on in the world while I drink a few cups of coffee, the last great vice.

In full disclosure that is my GOAL morning routine, and it is quite often derailed by late nights and stress. But one part of that routine remains constant: catching up on what happened overnight.

As I work through my traditional news sources and end up on social media, there is one type of troubling post on LinkedIn I am seeing with more and more frequency. It goes something like this:

> "Today will be my last day at GlobalCorp. I have enjoyed my time working in the business continuity department and am looking forward to my next chapter."

Have you seen something similar? I notice a few of these a week now, and have for months.

My heart goes out to all of our colleagues who have lost their job this year. This is an issue that hits close to home for me. One of my best friends and multiple members of my immediate family, including my wife, have all been laid off since March.

Amidst all of the carnage, there is an issue with which I have been struggling:

How can a company layoff business continuity staff during the biggest global business continuity event of my life time?

To me, there are two types of layoffs organizations perform. The first is when there has been a long-term change or disruption to the business or market. Blockbuster Video had to close stores and downsize staff as the consumer preference for watching and renting movies moved to online streaming. We will save how Blockbuster missed this market shift for another day. A more recent example is the commercial airline industry. According to Flightrader24, a website which tracks global flights, commercial airline travel in April and May was down 74% and 70% respectively compared to the same time last year. As COVID-19 continues to spread, particularly in the U.S., many airlines believe leisure and business travel will be impacted for months on end, if not longer. Airlines feel they need to adjust staffing levels in order to survive. This is an unfortunate byproduct of a global pandemic, but there is rational thought behind them.

There is another type of layoff which I call panic layoffs. Organizations trying to manage a quarterly financial target often engage in these types of layoffs. The long-term damage to a company from these types of downsizing often outweigh the immediate financial benefits. One of the negative effects is loss of institutional knowledge. Another is pushing secondary or tertiary responsibilities onto the employees who are left, employees who may not be qualified to do the job.

We are seeing both types of layoffs in today's market. But how is business continuity staff on the dreaded "list"?

One of the biggest challenges we as professionals often face is convincing management to plan ahead, to look past the here and now.

"I've been here 12 years and we've never had a bump in the night," one CFO told me last year. But that was last year. Everyone has had a bump in the night this year. I have yet to speak to a single company which hasn't been impacted by COVID-19 and hasn't had to change course.

During a Global Pandemic, Are We Not More Valuable Than Ever?

I don't want to turn this article into a rehash listicle of "26 things you should be doing to achieve perfect business continuity during COVID-19," but let's ask the questions at a high level: Are you happy with your company's response the last four months? Is your management?

Many organizations I have spoken with the last few months tell me the answer to both of these questions is an emphatic "no."

What happened? How did we get here? Is it a question of tougher standards and regulations?

I don't think it is because I always get asked, "Which standard should I follow?" or "What methodology should I use?" This is the answer I always give. …

What Are You Trying to Achieve?

That's the most important question. The last few years I have spent the bulk of my time on the road, embedded with companies all over the world helping them answer that question. Risk mitigation strategies with which one customer was delighted would get me fired at another company. Things which are common practice in one country are unheard of in others. I have said on more than one occasion, "This is unconventional, and I am not sure if this is going to work."

For the companies that feel their strategies during COVID-19 failed them, I usually find they can't answer that important question. When you put this strategy in place, what were you trying to achieve? They often don't have an answer.

If we can't answer this question for our organization, how can we stay relevant? How do we add value? When the demand for business continuity should be at its highest, how are we increasingly ending up on the outside looking in?

Are We Still Relevant?

Are we still relevant? Are we as relevant as we need to be? It seems many organizations are telling us "no" these days.

- **Checking the box**: I have seen some of the most beautiful business continuity documents. They check all the boxes. Risk assessment? Check. Threat assessment? Check. BIA? Check. Recovery plans? Check. Crisis management? Check. Answer to the Kobayashi Maru? Check and Check. When all we do is check the box and don't come up with meaningful options, there is usually one outcome. One company put it to me this way: "Everything went into the trash in March; none of our plans were actionable."

- **The business**: One of the questions I like to ask a business continuity team when I sit down with them is, "What do you do?" The answers are always insightful. Many people never tell me about what the organization does or how they help business units succeed. They only tell me about their annual exercises or document update schedule. I already know they are operating business continuity in a silo. I already know they are not connected to the business. How does your business continuity program support the mission and values of your organization? This should not just be a mental exercise.

- **Management**: I often hear people say, "Management is preventing us from building the business continuity program we want." Is that always their fault? Sometimes it is, but many times I have found we have not created a strong enough business case for what we do. Do you show the ROI of your program? Most other business units must show a metric like this. We should not assume we are exempt. Do you solve a problem for management? Do you even know management's problems? What really keeps them up at night? Are you reporting on things they find relevant? How does a chart with "Percentage of Departments That Have Updated Their BC Plans This Year" keep a CXO's attention? There is no substance. There is no value to day-to-day operations. What are we really trying to tell them? Our most basic goal is to allow the business to continue operating during the worst of times. We need to do a better job of quantifying this goal.

- **One-size-fits-all**: We often apply the same methodologies regardless of employer or industry. Working with organizations in different industries has really given me an appreciation of this. A hospital or healthcare provider is going to have no appetite for any type of business continuity incident. An outage to them can lead to loss of life. Our strategies need to be tailored not only to the business but the industry we are in.

- **Looking backward**: We are very good at preparing for the last known risk. I guarantee for the next 18 months we will have robust pandemic response plans. But look at what has happened in 2020 so far: wildfires in Australia, a global pandemic, Cyclone Amphan, and civil unrest across the U.S. That's just the first six months. By only looking backward, we are guaranteed to fail for the next unknown. And there is always the next unknown. We need to shift our gaze to the future.

Full disclosure: in my career I have been guilty of many of the issues discussed in this article myself. This is not meant to be an ivory tower view of the state of our profession. My heart breaks every time I see another one of those LinkedIn posts:

"Today will be my last day at GlobalCorp. I have enjoyed my time working in the business continuity department and am looking forward to my next chapter."

I am thankful to the Disaster Recovery Journal for allowing me to share my thoughts on how we can address this issue. What do you think? Are my ideas on the right path? Or should they put in the trash like the check-the-box documents? I look forward to continuing the conversation.

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James Green is director of risk advisory services at SAI Global. He is passionate about business continuity and helps C-Suites around the world make their organizations more resilient not just during an incident, but as a fundamental part of day-to-day operations. He has worked on risk events which have occurred all over the globe, whether it was civil unrest in Egypt during the Arab Spring or typhoons in the Pacific Rim. You may contact Green by email at james.green@saiglobal.com.