



HUMAN RESILIENCE AND BUSINESS CONTINUITY

Emerald-jane Turner and Siobhán McGee discuss human factors in the context of organisational resilience and highlight the importance of developing adaptability in a changing business environment.

In its early years, business continuity was primarily focused on meeting the challenges of crises, some manmade; such as fires, terrorist attacks and hostage situations, and some natural; such as flooding, tsunami and pandemics.

It has evolved from an IT, buildings and document-oriented discipline into one which encompasses other areas and now includes the people aspect as part of the strategic planning for its main assets. This development reveals the value now placed on the human factor in the context of business continuity and the importance of managing people skilfully during challenging periods.

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Other developments are also impacting on the evolution of the discipline in less traditional ways. Global factors such as climate change, the credit crunch and declining resources and energy sources are all having a knock-on effect on the

continuity of business. This combination of events is enforcing upon businesses the need to adapt, to be forward thinking and, it is our belief, to develop resilient strategies and communities to rise to these challenges.

Community resilience

“A resilient ecosystem can withstand shocks and rebuild itself when necessary. Resilience in social systems has the added capacity of humans to anticipate and plan for the future.”¹

In response to the need for greater levels of resilience in the face of a changing environment, a number of towns in the UK have taken on board the need to

anticipate and plan for the future. They have established what are referred to as ‘Transition Towns’ as a means of preparing for the changes in lifestyle and community that are forecast as a result of climate change and growing energy demands from

dwindling sources.

These towns, which can now be found across the British Isles, are focused on tackling a simple but significant question: “For all those aspects of life that this community needs in order to sustain itself and thrive, how do we significantly increase resilience (to mitigate the effects of Peak Oil) and drastically reduce carbon emissions (to mitigate the effects of Climate Change)?”²

In order to answer this question, the communities have set up skills and information courses and established working parties to examine aspects of community life such as transport and food. All are ways of improving resilience but, more importantly, show how people are communicating and anticipating together, using skills and creativity to build resilient communities for the future.

What is resilience?

“The concept of resilience is a profound shift in traditional perspectives, which attempts to control changes in systems that are assumed to be stable, to a more realistic viewpoint

aimed at sustaining and enhancing the capacity of social-ecological systems to adapt to uncertainty and surprise.”³

We meet and work with many resilient individuals and organisations. Previously our work has focused on the more reactive or ‘crisis management’ phases of post-incident support for staff and managers, to help them manage the psychological impact of critical incidents. Whilst we still believe this is a vital part of an organisation’s response procedure, it is our opinion, based on our more recent practice, that this should be incorporated into an overall strategic approach to building resilience across the organisation in preparation for the kinds of BCM issues that we have outlined above.

Resilience is an elastic-like ability to spring back into shape no matter what the event. As an organisation’s resilience is dependent on many inter-relating factors, we consider it from a systems point of view.

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“The systems view looks at the world in terms of relationships and integration. Systems are integrated wholes whose properties cannot be reduced to those of smaller units. Every organism – from the smallest bacterium through the wide range of plants and animals to humans – is an integrated whole and thus a living system... But systems are not confined to individual organisms and their parts... What is preserved in a wilderness area is not individual trees or organisms but a complex web of relationships between them.”⁴

In our hands-on work with people and organisations, we have come to specialise in recognising, assessing and training people in ‘resilience behaviours’.

Some people are naturally resilient and display these behaviours during incidents with acts of courage and strength through adversity. It is our experience that community or ‘social resilience’ is a fundamental aspect of recovery and adaptation as well as maintenance of resilience. In organisations a resilient community strengthens the recovery environment, enabling people to adapt to inevitable changes and take ownership of them.

The World Bank has conducted extensive research into ‘social capital’ and has this to say about it:

“Social capital refers to the norms and networks that enable collective action. It encompasses institutions, relationships, and customs that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions. Increasing evidence shows that social

capital is critical for societies to prosper economically and for development to be sustainable. Social capital, when enhanced in a positive manner, can improve project effectiveness and sustainability by building the community’s capacity to work together to address their common needs, fostering greater inclusion and cohesion, and increasing transparency and accountability.”⁵

Developing resilience behaviours in individuals and teams is essentially a ‘pro-active’ activity, which involves educating people about the nature of trauma, helping them to identify their own resiliencies and providing training in resilience behaviours, so they can draw on them when they face adversity.

When this sort of activity is strategically and proactively focused across an organisation, it sends a ‘resilience and creative coping’ message rather than a ‘crisis’ orientated one. This is important because in psychology ‘problem or crisis

oriented’ language can hold people back rather than empowering them to rediscover what helped them get through the difficult and changing times.

Who’s responsible?

We have had several discussions with business continuity and human resources professionals and it seems that there exists a gap where the area of human factors in business continuity falls between two camps. We hear HR teams saying “that’s a BCM issue” or “we outsource to an Employee Advisory Provider (EAP)” and BCM teams saying “that should be in HR’s domain”. Whilst clarity about functional responsibility is vital, in reality, we often hear overwhelmed line managers say it’s all been devolved to them. The danger of these ‘silos’ is that it creates inconsistency of approach and can build cross-functional resentments, which often arise during or after a critical incident when traumatic anger is looking for someone else to blame. Ultimately it often gets outsourced to someone else to ‘sort out’ with the result that the organisation has missed a golden opportunity to think strategically and proactively place resilience firmly in the hands of its employees, managers, directors and the organisational community as a whole.

Organisational resilience, then, is where human resilience has been proactively developed through training in resilience behaviours, creative thinking, communication and planning which enables people to support each other to



recover and be less overwhelmed during a time of crisis. This then enables them to think more clearly, work as a coherent system to find solutions and ultimately get on with the task of running the business.

How does building resilience benefit business continuity?

- When the organisation employs both ‘incident’ strategies and ‘adaptation to global change’ strategies, based on the understanding of resilience behaviours both for individuals and community, it communicates that its people are a valuable asset and that their well being is an important part of its strategy.
- The organisation that establishes a culture of ‘social resilience’ encourages a proactive and resilient organisational community able to manage day-to-day incidents, prepare for major business continuity situations and creatively manage changing demands due to global circumstances.
- When the organisation has an appointed team of trained Incident Responders it enables managers to manage the business operations in times of crisis. These responders educate people to understand the very natural responses and symptoms during and after an incident.
- Teams can become aware of resilient behaviours and can actively engage these by employing tools such as questionnaires and working with ‘Resilience Coaches’. We encourage

BCM/HR teams to proactively work together to plan and prepare a robust strategy, thus enabling teams to work effectively under strenuous circumstances.

- Managers who understand their own resilience feel more equipped to understand and support staff.
- The organisational culture encourages a supportive recovery environment which trauma studies research shows is essential for individual and business resilience.
- These measures lead to an improvement in return to work statistics.
- Resilience training creates people who are more able to understand traumatic stress and the need for adaptability during changing times. They are trained to practice techniques for self-mastery,

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which improve their reactions and cortical functioning. This improves the clear thinking across BCM, HR and Crisis Management teams.

- Resilience means that there is a constant focus on helping people to stay well and buoyant rather than treating them separately from the business.
- Dr Deborah Pretty's research “Reputation and Value Recovery – a focus on the airline industry” measures the vital contribution to business value recovery of engaging specialist experts. Her research emphasises that, “the humanity with which management responds to a tragedy is an essential part of the recovery process.”⁶

Business continuity is a fast growing and diversifying area that is currently being challenged to encompass and meet global changes and their effect on organisational communities. There are models that are leading the field in this area such as the World Bank and Transition Towns which are currently anticipating change and engaging communities to become more robust as a result of this.

In effect the area of business continuity and the challenges that it presents provide an exciting opportunity in which expanding our understanding of human factors in organisations may lead eventually to creating a more sustainable and adaptable world.

Notes:

1. Source: wikipedia Resilience (Ecology)
2. www.transitiontownsWIKI:main/homepage
3. Graham Hobbs, Economic and Social Research Foundation, June 2000
4. Fritjof Capra, “The Turning Point”
5. <http://go.worldbank.org/COQTRW4QF0/SocialCapital>
6. Pretty, Deborah “Reputation and Value Recovery – a focus on the airline industry” Oxford Metrica (<http://www.oxfordmetrica.com/research.aspx>)

SIOBHÁN MCGEE AND EMERALD-JANE TURNER

Siobhán McGee and Emerald-jane Turner, share over 30 years of experience working with people and organisations. They have been instrumental in bringing the human factors practice of business continuity into many business sectors and organisational settings including working with financial institutions, fire services personnel and providing support and guidance following 7th July bombings in London. They set up Human Resilience.com to help organisations develop resilience behaviours and create in-house strategies to provide support and emotional first aid to their staff.

www.humanresilience.com.

Awareness and embedding are the least fulfilled aspects of BCM*

*data from the BCI Benchmark

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