# Web-based Continuity Planning

*a report by*
**Chris Alvord**

*Founder, COOP Systems*

## Introduction

The Internet is becoming a central, pervasive direction in continuity planning, as it has for many other functional areas of organisations. This change enables new levels of capability, supplying collaborative environment to a wide group of planners and contributors. Everyone involved is empowered through all phases of their processes, using the Internet paradigm embraced by so many other parts of the organisation.

The end-point of Internet technologies is inevitable for our generation. Epochal changes like the mechanisation of agriculture, the steam engine, internal combustion engine, railroad, telegraph, telephone, electricity, microprocessor and relational database technology each caused significant change. Although the Internet has generated a different type of change to many of these, there is no basic difference in the order of magnitude for information management all becoming like the Internet. The best software now fully embraces the Internet. This change is typical of technology, periodically undergoing generational change affecting everything that comes later. Examples are the shifts from flat file to relational databases, mini to microprocessors, and client-server to n-tiered systems development. Entire industries and enormous companies rise (e.g. Microsoft, Intel) and fall (e.g. DEC, Worldcomm) when these types of changes occur.

## Current State of Continuity Planning Tools

Business users are currently employing two established classes of tools for their continuity teams.

### Legacy Enterprise Software

These are the proven, evolved software solutions with many years of history. Their roots are generally in relational database technology of the 1980s and early 1990s. For users able to make a substantial commitment over many years and accept standard planning processes for all their facilities, this direction has been the obvious solution. In these cases, there have been functional and organisational benefits for many institutions.

Despite these benefits, the drawbacks have become substantial over the years.

• Failure rates are high, with a recent survey indicating that 24.6% of organisations have tried and failed to implement a solution.

• Life-cycle costs are very high. License fees, implementation, tailoring, training and technical support are all considerable.

• Contributors with an intermittent but important role in the planning process often do not use the software, not having the time needed to learn it.

• Solutions are from non-strategic information technology (IT) software vendors, with some perceived risk as a result. The bankruptcy of Comdisco put an exclamation point on this issue.

• The basic design and user interface is antiquated in Internet terms.

• Changes to meet the shear variety inherent in different industries, organisations, processes and facilities have been difficult to accomplish.

There has been a general effort by legacy vendors to become compliant with some elements of Internet-related standards, especially in the effort to add a browser as an alternate graphical user interface (GUI) onto existing platforms. Some analysts would term this effort 'putting lipstick on the pig', a pretty harsh way of saying that many years of extensive and expensive efforts on older technology remains under the hood. It is rare to find a software company that throws away an older, successful core design in favour of a different information system paradigm; the past investment is too great.

### Personal Software

A recent survey indicates that 51.5% of large organisations do not use one of the legacy planning

tools. Instead, Microsoft Office software is used. They may buy some low-cost template libraries and other closely related add-ons to help increase efficiency and streamline workflows. Low costs and shallow learning curves are a major reason for this direction, as almost everyone already knows how to use these tools. Limitations exist here as well.

- It is difficult for the various facilities of the institution to adopt and use common standards, with everyone 'rolling their own' versions, limiting enterprise-wide views of the planning process.

- Plans get locked away on desktops, not available to executives, managers, auditors, process owners or other plan developers.

- Versions of the plan and updates can become muddled over time, especially if staff is transferred or lost.

- Lacking standards across facilities and organisational boundaries and with no easy access, reviews of plans can be cumbersome.

- The plan is ultimately based on paper, making changes and improvements difficult to administer.

- Many functions that should be automated (e.g. surveys, lists, contacts, etc.) can only be done with manual intervention.

- In the event of a disaster, institutional plans may not be readily accessible or up-to-date.

In any case, personal software will continue to be used by many planners. For a small facility with few team members and limited risk, this is perfectly appropriate.

### Large, Distributed Organisations

At large organisations with many facilities, complex functions and spread-out staff, this may still be the choice at first. Limited budgets, limited strategic direction, a need to start planning quickly, and a lack of good alternatives contribute heavily to this type of thinking. However, these substantial institutions should look to the Internet for a forward-looking, powerful direction.

### All User Types Need Help

Besides the core group of dedicated continuity planners who have the time to master sophisticated enterprise software or work through the limitations of personal software, there are others who do not get good support from either software approach.

- Organisational process owners, with overall responsibility for their part of the plan but without the time or resources to fully engage in the work.

- One-time or part-time contributors, where their information is only occasionally needed.

- Executives, who only need to review the plan from time to time.

- Survey respondents, who may only be contacted sporadically.

- Auditors, also connecting to the plan infrequently.

- New planners at other facilities, who may want to leverage parts of other plans as they build or augment their own.

- Anyone without a plan copy, who is affected and possibly helped by the plan with immediate needs after a disaster.

- Vendors, who could easily supply their readiness information through a Web-based questionnaire.

A planning tool is much more powerful and effective if it can automate support for all these types of users.

### The Internet-enabled Vision

Consider the following vision of an institution and continuity planning team that fully embraces the Internet for the planning team.

At a high level, whether the user is a dedicated team member or casual participant, all functions before and after events are available with simple, intuitive Web connections.

In the event of an incident, the software immediately supports the needs of the crisis management and emergency management teams, as well as recovery and restoration.

There is no need to worry about finding a current version of the plan. All relevant tasks are selectively pushed to team members via the Web, accessible instantly via interactive devices for more crucial immediate roles. Telephony becomes a supplement to more reliable methods.

At a more detailed level, consider the Web-enabled vision that can support the following functions for team members.

- Every part of the continuity planning process is consistent with the way team members handle

information for their other tasks in the organisation, with virtually no training required.

- For any new plan element, team members pull up a standard template or form fitting a standard planning process. They are filling in the blanks quickly and surely, not worrying about inventing a process.

- For a new facility, planners use a full set of standard templates, as well as viewing other plans in the system. A search engine allows *ad hoc* queries when searching through other plans.

- Other internal and external groups needing to interact with the planning team (e.g. electronic manufacturing services (EMS), public authorities, key vendors) can do so using the Web. For example, when questioning a vendor on the state of their continuity plan, it can be done through an automated survey.

- Tasks are assigned by the team and then monitored automatically by software.

- Contact information is automatically kept fresh by frequent updates from human resources files.

- News and events affecting the team are distributed automatically through an electronic subscription capability.

- Executives, managers or auditors can view the current state of any plan, at any location, from anywhere in the world, at any time of the day or night.

- Plan contributors can quickly fill out a survey, as easily as ordering a book from Amazon.com, when e-mailed a link to a questionnaire. The software automatically compiles and reports the results, as well as tracking who has not responded.

- Desktop exercises easily involve remote staff with Web teaching capabilities.

- When an event happens, everyone has access to a current version of their plan elements via wireless Web or desktop computer. Critical tasks are automatically pushed to team members for immediate action and response.

- As stated earlier, post-incident support is automated by pushing pre-established tasks and allowing other information access to users via wireless Web.

The productivity, quality and responsiveness of the continuity planning team takes a quantum leap because the group now has the best possible tools to do their work. ■

*COOP Systems is an industry innovator in the use of the Internet for continuity planning. Please visit the website at: www.coop-systems.com*