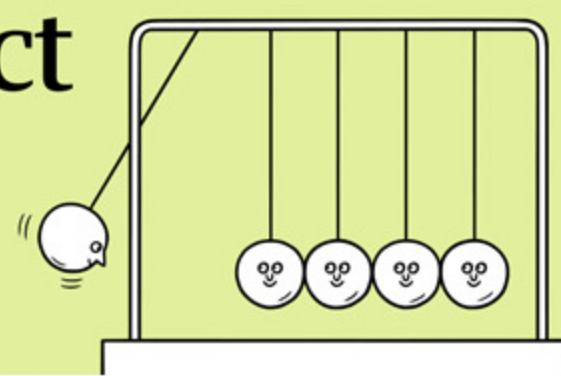


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In case of emergency: how to get a Plan B as an SME

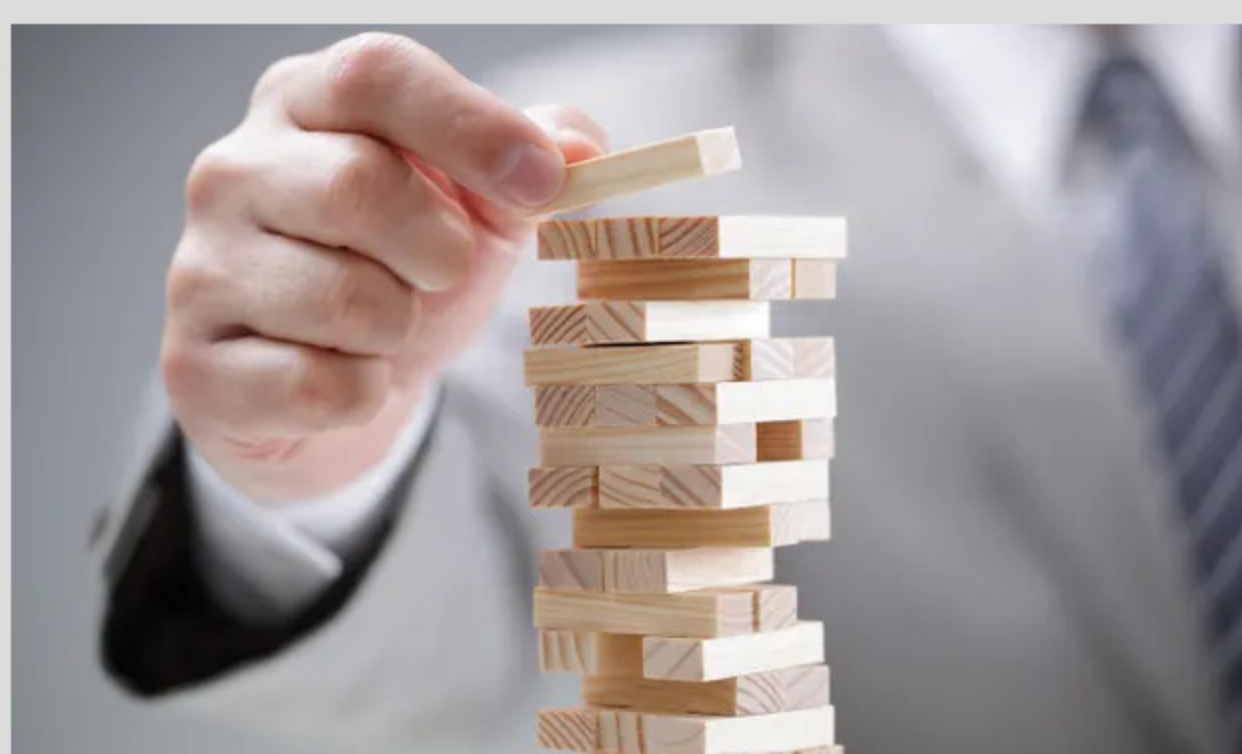
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Mark Smith



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▲ Planning ahead is vital to alleviate damage to your business if it's hit by unexpected emergencies. Photograph: Alamy

When it comes to formulating business plans, figuring out how to deal with a bomb scare or a flood probably isn't high on the agenda.

But there are a myriad of ways an SME's operations can be disrupted - from fires to cyber attacks. Indeed, a survey of more than 700 firms for the Business Continuity Institute's Horizon Scan report 2017 found that the main causes of disruption were unplanned IT and telecommunications outages, adverse weather, interruption to utility supply, cyber attacks and security incidents. And if the right contingency plans are not in place, they can cause significant damage and delays to the organisation.

No plan B?

Hen party organisers Henheaven know the importance of having a back-up plan. In 2014 a bomb scare at a neighbouring army recruitment centre meant their building had to be evacuated, and their operations were temporarily put on hold. To get things back up and running, they built a skeleton operation - all the necessary equipment was gathered and taken to a rented office, and some staff were asked to work from home. It caused significant difficulties: "We couldn't maximise business based on small office space," says director Nick Shuff. "The IT team had to work hard to facilitate usage of 30 computers when the area was only really made up to handle a fifth of that amount."

Since this experience, Henheaven now has emergency procedures in place for any future incident. "We have clear processes mapped out for each department, remote systems access at our fingertips and a designated back-up space where we would regroup and get the business back up and running in the shortest possible timeframe," says operations director Steph Hague.

"Over the last two years we have had a leak in the building, plus multiple power-downs in the area, all of which have meant that the contingency plan has been called into action."

Preparing for emergencies

Celloglas, a print finishers, has also been hit by an unexpected emergency in the past. When the River Aire burst its banks in Leeds in 2015, Celloglas was swamped under 1.3 metres of water causing £2.1m-worth of damage.

The area had not seen flooding for 75 years and the disruption caused to local businesses was immense.

"It was a scary time for us," says director Richard Pinkney. "It's not being dramatic to say that this flood could have been the end of this site, a site we've been growing for the last 10 years."

Fortunately, the firm already had an emergency plan in place to mobilise those involved with that site and put pre-arranged disaster recovery methods in place. This included a tiered system of contact so everyone could be quickly informed about the flood. Local staff were brought in to help out, while others were sent to work from other sites.

There was also an established communications route to customers, with the firm using its Salesforce database to inform all clients about the flood with one single email.

"If we didn't have our data organised like this, this job in itself could have taken weeks as we have thousands of customers," says Pinkney.

"We hadn't actually planned for large-scale flooding, so this was a real challenge to see how our plan stacked up," he adds.

"On the whole it did the job, but it has certainly be made more robust now for future."

How to plan ahead

Tom Moor, managing director of Corporate Security Consultants, which provides a range of advice for businesses, says having a business continuity plan is vital in preparing for a threat - no matter how basic. Here he offers tips on how to create a solid contingency plan:

Protect your critical functions

"The company may not need all departments in the first 24-48 hours, but what does it need to stay competitive? Then, where will these people work - do they have laptops, for example? If not, what other ways can they operate and does the company need to procure equipment?"

Ensure data is backed up

"This can be done at data warehouses with companies such as KAO. Hot desks may not be needed as this is costly and if people are scattered then you lose command and control; it would be more cost effective to allow the key functions to work from home."

Test communications

"How do you continue to communicate with your teams? Via email or text message? You need to test how you inform them that the office is down, and then keep them updated with progress, as they will want and need to know."

Consider a backup site

"If the company can afford it, having a disaster recovery site is always a good option."

Test your plan

"I cannot reiterate this enough; you could have a 500-page plan or something on a fag packet - and if the fag packet option is tested and people know what they are doing then this will win over the 500 pages.

"Allow the departments that will have to work remotely if an incident happens, to actually do this and see how it works. Get all the issues ironed out before it has to be done for real."

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