Business Continuity

and the New Imperative for Digital Government

As governments look to reboot their local economies in response to the COVID-19 crisis, there is a resurgence of interest in modernizing business continuity infrastructure, policies and practices. Here's how state and local governments are rising to the challenge.

Over the last year, the term 'business continuity' has taken on new meaning. Once a periodic exercise to help organizations prepare for an unforeseen or temporary event, such as a snowstorm or natural disaster, the phrase is now at the forefront amid a persistent and global pandemic. Today, as state and local agencies have gained a new appreciation for operational resiliency, many are revamping their business continuity strategies.

Addressing the Business Continuity Challenges of COVID-19

How can organizations prepare for a crisis when they don't know what to expect?

"In the past, when we would talk about an event that would invoke a continuity of operation plan, it was almost always something weather-related," says Ray Elwell, government planning and analytics lead at Workday. "You would have these one-time events where you have an opportunity to anticipate it, plan for it, endure it and then recover from it. Now, we're seeing things like a cyber attack or a pandemic, where you have no opportunity to prepare. You also don't know how long it's going to last, nor what the recovery period is going to be."

Elwell is particularly empathetic to the business continuity challenges his colleagues in the public sector face, because he used to be one of them. Before joining Workday in 2015, Elwell spent 26 years in local government, first as a budget officer for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, and later as the deputy CFO for the City of Orlando, Florida. He knows firsthand how challenging continuity planning can be on a normal day — let alone during a global health crisis.

While every business has had to adjust to the current climate, agencies are tasked with providing critical government programs, such as unemployment and healthcare, which means they have little room for error. When government operations stop running, citizen services also come to a halt.

"You can't just shut down a government, you can't just say 'we're closed,'" Elwell says. "When you're in the business of serving the public, you don't have a choice."

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> Government Planning and Analytics Lead, Workday

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Embracing a Modern Approach to Business Continuity

The key to this paradigm shift in business continuity planning is digital transformation. Agencies were already starting to digitize their operations and services before COVID-19 hit, but the pandemic put pressure on many organizations to move faster than they otherwise would have.

Workday's Senior Principal Managing Partner for Government Strategy Rowan Miranda meets with public sector finance and administrative leaders on a regular basis. One common sentiment he encounters is that those agencies that were early movers to cloud-based enterprise software solutions feel fortunate to have done so because it significantly eased the shift to telework in the early days of the pandemic.

"Those governments with a patchwork of legacy systems barely pulled off being able to work remotely and deliver critical citizen services simply because they didn't have the infrastructure," Miranda says. "Now, agencies have become more serious about moving these processes to digital modes of delivery — the public sector workforce also needs these digital tools to be productive."

Promoting Operational Resiliency Beyond the Physical Office

Now that organizations have been working remotely for several months, some may never go back to full in-office staff.

A long term move to remote work could have many positive impacts for an organization. For example, fewer employees working from the office would mean lower real estate and transportation costs. From a personnel perspective, organizations can also broaden the talent pool and attract a more diverse workforce by recruiting employees to work remotely. However, this new age of hybrid work will require organizations to adopt a virtual operating model that ensures employees can conduct their work and access all the information they need in the cloud.

Workday is one platform offering future-proofed solutions to help agencies and their employees navigate this mix of virtual and on-site operations.

"All of our clients are on the same version of the software," Miranda explains. "So when there are improvements and technological innovations, we deploy them without disruption to daily operations. Clients don't have to worry about the extensive staff and consulting effort typically required for upgrading and maintaining the software."

Workday was also built in the cloud, meaning it can be accessed from anywhere, on any device.

"When people aren't on site because of the pandemic and people have to work remotely, they can still do their work without skipping a beat," Miranda said.

In fact, when the Las Vegas Valley Water District transitioned to a remote workforce to keep employees safe during the pandemic, the agency leveraged Workday's human capital management solution to assist employees in the transition.

Further east, the Memphis-Shelby County Airport Authority looked to the platform's cloud-based financial planning tools to forecast the business impacts of COVID-19 as airport traffic saw a significant decline. The airport's finance team tapped the Workday platform to conduct predictive modeling programs to better understand future performance. This approach allowed them to make data-driven business and operational decisions with confidence — especially at a time when there were still so many unknowns.

Cloud-based software tools that provide government executives and front-line employees with actionable insights will become even more important as they look to rebuild their communities and economies in the years to come.

"Going forward, the ability to conduct planning, modeling and forecasting is going to be a critical component to operational continuity at the state and local level," Elwell said. "Who knows when we're going to come out of this, how we're going to come out of it and what we're going to look like coming out of it. Having these tools in your toolbox is now imperative."