

A low-angle photograph of several modern glass skyscrapers reaching towards a clear sky. The buildings are reflected in each other, creating a complex geometric pattern of blue and white.

# Seven Critical Mistakes to Avoid in Continuity of Operations Planning (COOP)

[boldplanning.com](http://boldplanning.com)

White Paper

## The world isn't getting less risky.

Catastrophic weather. Devastating cyber threats. Unthinkable man-made disasters. Now more than ever, it's imperative organizations know how to respond to critical events and ensure essential functions are maintained.

But is your organization fully prepared in the event of a crisis? Many agencies and organizations still do not have a formalized Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP). Or, if they do, it's incomplete or gathering dust in binders on a shelf.

Whether your organization is adept at contingency planning, or is just beginning to formalize the process, avoiding the following seven critical mistakes will help ensure your planning is more effective and your organization is more resilient.





## MISTAKE 1

# Overlooking essential business functions and failing to identify their associated risks.

To prepare for disruptive events, managers must recognize the functions most essential to the survival of the organization, and then identify the potential hazards that could impact these functions. This is no small feat, but rather a process that deserves significant time and attention. A few key tips to consider for ensuring essential business functions are properly identified include:

Get buy-in from the top.

A thorough risk assessment is a serious exercise. It will require input and resources from multiple levels. Make sure senior management is fully supportive and willing to provide its stamp of approval on the process.

Incorporate feedback from a variety of different sources.

Do not rely solely on a handful of senior managers to develop a comprehensive list of potential hazards. While their perspectives will be invaluable and insightful in a variety of ways, they will invariably miss lower level risks that can cascade into much larger problems.

Associate details with the identified risks.

For each threat, outline the potential impact along with other key elements, including:

- Probability the hazard will occur
- Magnitude/Severity of the event
- Warning time associated with the risk
- Typical duration of the hazard
- Recovery time objectives

Make the risk assessment actionable.

Identifying the risks and their associated characteristics is one thing. Outlining the proper actions to take when facing the threat is another. For each hazard, managers should define and document the appropriate actions to take to minimize disruptions and losses.

A common mistake here is to focus solely on actions taken *during* the event. While this is essential, planners should also consider actions related to pre-event preparedness, post-event recovery and mitigation. These actions should be documented and be easily accessible by a wide range of authorized individuals.



## MISTAKE 2

### Failing to implement a process for ensuring contact information is accurate and reliable.

Proper preparedness and response begins and ends with people. As such, the organization must maintain an accurate accounting of its personnel, their responsibilities and the myriad of methods in which people can be contacted.

Sounds simple enough. However, it's surprising how often organizations falsely assume their contact information is current. Employees come and go. Responsibilities change. Contact devices are dropped or adopted. In a crisis, this can cause substantial problems.

The organization should develop a consistent, repeatable process for ensuring workers can verify their information. Outreach campaigns to employees should be conducted at least biannually. Quarterly campaigns are even better. In addition to verifying basic contact information such as phone and email, ensure secondary contact information such as title, division, location, etc. is correct.

In addition, remember to capture information from outside of the organization's walls. In most cases, external stakeholders play key roles in business resilience. These contacts should be maintained with diligence as well.





### MISTAKE 3

## Failing to clearly define key teams and communicate assigned roles/duties.

For effective response and recovery, it is wise to create teams centered on specific threats, responsibilities or decision-making capabilities (e.g., Executive, Pandemic, Relocation, etc.). With team development, managers should:

Clearly specify the team's mission.

Each team should have a written "mini-charter" that outlines the role parameters of the team. In a real critical event, lines can be blurred as to which teams own what responsibility. A well-defined list of team mission roles can help bring clarity to the situation.

Make sure team rosters are kept up to date.

Like contact information, team data should also be reviewed and updated regularly. It can

be frustrating or potentially damaging to assemble a team, only to learn a portion of its members are no longer employed, or key members have changed positions and are no longer "plugged in" to the area in which they supposedly offered expertise.

Ensure team members are fully prepared.

As COOP team responsibilities are likely not something average employees think about daily, it's imperative resilience managers ensure members are reminded of their duties. Teams should be encouraged to meet with regularity throughout the year to review team roles, members, individual responsibilities, etc. Regular tests and exercises should also be conducted.



## MISTAKE 4

# Creating insufficiently “deep” orders of succession and failing to outline clear delegations of authority.

A familiar managerial structure can provide some degree of comfort even during a stressful critical event. However, what happens if that decision-making hierarchy is impacted? What do you do when a key senior manager is incapacitated or unreachable?

Define and document orders of succession.

If a key decision-maker becomes unable to fulfill his or her duties on a long-term basis, it's imperative the organization knows where to turn for leadership. As such, a clear order of succession plan should be developed. It is recommended the succession plan go at least three levels deep (defining additional levels is advisable if possible). It is also recommended the successor's title be the defining element in the plan instead of only referring to a specific individual's name.

Document delegations of authority.

Immediate decisions or routine approvals may be needed during the short-term absence of a key decision-maker. Situations like leave authorizations, purchase requisitions, payroll, etc. can become bogged down, disrupting the flow of business. In cases where there is a temporary lapse in leadership, clearly documented delegations of authority are valuable. The plan should list 1) the position holder(s) who have typical day-to-day authority over the decision/process and 2) the position holder(s) who have delegated authority. These should be identified in the preferred order of delegation.



# 5

## MISTAKE 5

### Failing to maintain accurate and detailed facility information.

Facility details is a COOP item that is commonly overlooked or at least incompletely addressed. While it's true most employees have sufficient knowledge about an organization's main facilities, knowledge gaps regarding other locations and their associated characteristics can create resiliency problems. Questions to consider include:

- Do new employees know about a backup location and where it's located?
- What about remote employees? Are they adequately identified, aware and informed?
- Will relocated employees arrive at the colocation facility with the proper entry credentials?
- Are relocated employees aware of emergency procedures for their new location?

To address these knowledge gaps, organizations should maintain an accurate and accessible list of all primary and secondary facilities, including the physical address. Additionally, information should be documented for each location relating to ingress/egress locations, access control measures, communications infrastructure, etc. It is also wise to detail evacuation procedures including any "rally" points for evacuees.

Example Facilities Detail Record in the BOLDplanning COOP Solution

Facility	Security and Access Controls Information
<b>County Administration Building</b> 2104 Money Lane Springfield, TN 34589 USA	<p><b>Access Controls / Physical:</b> The Building Supplies Depot has 3 entrances total. One on the south side off the building between main and 3rd street, the second on the east side of the building off Tudor street, and the 3rd, (the maintenance and mail entrance) is located on the alley off 3rd street on the north side of the building. A detailed map of these entrances can be found in the File Archive section of BOLDplanning.com under the "Facilities" folder. Physical Access Controls include a key fob for opening parking garage for all employees, and an ID badge. Visitors must sign in with front desk attendant and be escorted out by an employee until door shuts behind them.</p> <p><b>Communications and Information Systems / Cyber :</b> Communications and Information Systems Security is administered in the Administrative Complex by the Fulton County IT Department. They manage user access through a Novell Network environment and manage all firewall services. All users must change passwords on a weekly basis and create "hard" passwords to access their sign in credentials.</p> <p><b>Evacuation Procedures:</b> The Fulton County Administrative Building is located near several major buildings. Should you have to evacuate, use the most convenient exit points (not including the elevator) and meet at one of two rally points. (Rally Point 1 = County Courthouse) (Rally Point 2 = Jefferson High school). Maps of specific evacuation routes per floor, and specific rally point locations can be found through the "File Archive" section in BOLDplanning.com.</p>

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## MISTAKE 6

### Failing to document vital records and critical systems.

Virtually every organization relies on a myriad of systems, spreadsheets, forms, etc. to maintain operations. Accounting systems, human resources records, client/stakeholder data, public records, etc. all may be relied upon daily to fulfill an organization's mission.

Though the information may reside in multiple systems and locations, there are two key things planners can do to help streamline vital records response and recovery.

Determine what is "vital."

For every vital data source there may be dozens of useful, but non-vital sources. Managers should determine which data sources are truly critical to the organization's resilience and itemize these.

Capture relevant details about the critical data source.

Once the most important data sources have been identified, managers should outline relevant source details. Depending on the resource type, details may include:

- Physical location for hard-copy documents
- Shared drive locations
- Local software applications
- Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) solutions and Administrator
- Network resources such as printers, fax machines, etc.



## MISTAKE 7

# Failing to make COOP data accessible, editable and secure.

The days of stacking shelves with COOP plan binders really should be behind us. In today's world of secure online software solutions, hard-copy approaches leave much to be desired. Consider how online planning solutions improve the COOP process:

### Better Collaboration

COOP planning requires deep collaboration between multiple people, departments and external agencies. Online solutions make collaboration easier and more efficient.

### Easier Editing and Maintenance

Online planning solutions make editing records, teams and plans fast and easy. Users simply login, make changes and save. Assignments, duties, teams, etc. will be updated automatically throughout the plan.

### Enhanced Security

Emergency response plans should be protected as they typically contain sensitive information about the organization and its employees. Binder shelves have virtually no access limitations and safeguards, and there is no audit trail of who has accessed the documents at what times.

Online planning software provides for permission-based access to plan details and contact information via assigned user names and passwords.

### Superior Mobility

A shelf full of binders is difficult, if not impossible, to move in the event of a disaster. Today's online planning software providers

offer mobile capabilities that place emergency response plans quite literally in the hands of the right people wherever they may be. In all, these mobile capabilities extend the practical application of crisis planning.

### Faster Response

A comprehensive emergency preparedness plan is really a conglomeration of many multiple mini-plans. It's the reason why most plans consume multiple binders on multiple shelves. As such, precious time can be wasted manually scouring printed Tables of Contents or Indexes looking for the right piece of information.

With well-designed online planning software, information is easily accessed and key elements can be searched electronically to uncover crucial data within seconds.



## COOP planning doesn't have to be painful.

The best practices outlined here are based on BOLDplanning's experience helping more than 9,300 organizations plan and prepare for critical events.

We offer a unique combination of expertise, facilitation, training and project management combined with industry-leading online planning software.

The combination will help make your next planning process easier, faster and better, ultimately improving the resilience of your organization.

Contact us today to find out more.

Be prepared. Be **BOLD**.

## About BOLDplanning Inc.

BOLDplanning is the leading developer of online software for Emergency Operations Planning (EOP), Continuity of Operations Planning (COOP), Business Continuity Planning (BCP) and Hazard Mitigation.

Its comprehensive online system built specifically around the CMS Ruling walks planners through each step of the continuity and emergency planning process, becoming the central resource for your organization's training, plan development and on-going maintenance. Its support team is unrivaled in its knowledge, experience and planning certifications.

The BOLDplanning approach provides an unparalleled platform for both the public and private sector, making this important process easy and efficient. Currently, BOLDplanning is the solution of choice for more than 9,300 organizations.

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