



Business Continuity Management at the Confederation

Cross-section audit of practices in nine administrative units

Key facts

BCM: Necessity or waste of time?

Business Continuity Management is a process whereby all necessary measures are taken to ensure that the Federal Administration and Federal Council can accomplish their core tasks on time even in extraordinary situations. During this cross-section audit, the Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) found that various bodies have been addressing the issue for several years already.

The Federal Office for National Economic Supply has carried out risk analyses together with the private sector in areas such as energy, transport and logistics, as well as information technology. The risks, ramifications and probabilities of occurrence are set out in detail in the final reports published. BCM is cited as a key measure for guarding against the recognised risks. The Federal Chancellery is also active in this area. As the body in charge of crisis management training within the Confederation, it is responsible for the strategic leadership exercise that takes place every four years. Such an exercise on the topic of power supply took place in 2009. Based on the decisions of the General Secretaries Conference, the Federal Chancellery will also work longer term on a national project regarding the introduction of comprehensive BCM.

The spotlight has been on the Federal Office of Public Health, together with the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, because of the general pandemic precautionary measures. These concern not only the Federal Administration, but also the private sector and the entire Swiss population. In this case, BCM refers to the fact that sufficient quantities of vital supplies such as medicine, food and financial means can be ensured even with drastically reduced resources.

The SFAO thus checked the extent to which measures for coping with extraordinary situations are implemented in nine administrative units with large flows of funds or with supervisory functions. Also in the Federal Administration, it is necessary to guarantee the most important core tasks. BCM expenditure cannot be seen as a waste of time. On the contrary, valuable time can be saved in the case of an unforeseen event by having prepared and practised scenarios.

Risk analyses and the associated response plans for when a risk occurs are decisive for crisis management

The business processes of an administrative unit must be entered, and the necessary resources determined. Without this basic data, neither the risks nor their impact on processes can be assessed. It was found that the most important business processes have been defined in all the administrative units audited. The risk analyses, however, differ in terms of scope and methodology. Because of the pandemic precautionary measures, they focus largely on absenteeism. In contrast, scenarios regarding other areas of risk (e.g. natural hazards, IT resource outages) are scarce or incomplete. Accordingly, reflections on the consequences or necessary resources are lacking in these areas, which is subsequently reflected also in planning.

Business Continuity Planning (BCP) should define concrete courses of action for the individual risk scenarios that have been entered and assessed. The focus is undoubtedly on information technology in many administrative units. However, it was found that there were somewhat

insufficient agreements with the service providers in the case of high demands being made on availability. The usual standard contracts applied by the Federal Office of Information Technology, Systems and Telecommunication do not contain any disaster recovery options; these must be agreed separately. Also regarding alternative work areas, the Federal Office for Buildings and Logistics, which is responsible for real estate management, can provide only limited assistance. Any work areas that may be available are not at a single location and there is no guarantee that they are equipped with the necessary infrastructure. Therefore, the administrative units must give due consideration to this matter and clarify the alternative options before an event makes this a necessity.

The pandemic precautionary measures have resulted in all audited administrative units having defined their key processes and the necessary numbers of employees in recent months. These determinations constitute an important part of BCP and can also be used for other crisis scenarios (e.g. loss of a building). On the whole, however, there is too much reliance on the assumption that it will be possible to react and take decisions based on the situation at hand in the case of an extraordinary event. In some incidents, there are no plans at all, and in others important elements are missing and responsibilities are not clearly defined.

A separate organization outside of normal day-to-day business, i.e. a crisis management team, is needed in order to be able to ultimately handle a crisis or catastrophe in an effective and timely manner. Each member of the crisis management team must know his or her area of activity and responsibility, and must also have the necessary expertise. The requisite resources (e.g. alarm checklists, notebooks, meeting rooms, etc.) must be available at the right place within a reasonable time in the event of an extraordinary situation. Crisis management means that the important business processes defined are continued with no, or minimal, interruptions and gradually return to normal. Action of this nature must be practised regularly within the relevant body. Some work remains to be done as regards crisis management.

There are some positive signs in the Federal Administration, but the SFAO still sees a need for action

Based on the results, it can be established that some almost complete analyses and plans, as well as functioning crisis management teams already exist. BCM awareness has certainly increased at management level with the pandemic precautionary measures. Nevertheless, the SFAO has reached the conclusion that, at the current time, not all critical business processes could be maintained correctly within the Federal Administration in an extraordinary situation. The General Secretaries Conference has decided not to implement the SFAO's recommendations, as BCM is the responsibility of the offices and departments. According to the General Secretaries Conference, the departments will check which are the strategically important areas and whether there is a need for action.

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