The Evolution of Emergency Notification to Crisis Collaboration

By PAUL D'ARCY

In a crisis, companies need two things – a plan and a way to communicate. Over the last five years, emergency notification has evolved from a new technology to become the cornerstone of crisis management. At the heart of emergency notification is the assurance that companies can help keep employees safe or directly help their way if they need it. In countless incidents including Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the July 2005 bombings of London's public transit system, the 2004 Southeast Asia tsunami and the 2003 Northeast power outage, emergency notification has proven essential.

As companies migrate from manual call trees to automated notification, the market requirements for crisis communication have rapidly evolved. Today, organizations are looking for a new generation of solutions that goes beyond point notifications to enable ongoing collaboration and communication among the crisis team, employees, and other constituents. By using the Internet to facilitate collaboration, organizations can streamline recovery efforts and reduce the demands for ad-hoc status reports on busy crisis team members.

There are three essential steps in the evolution of emergency notification to crisis collaboration:

Step 1: Crisis Communication Starts with Emergency Notification

As mentioned, increasingly organizations are using emergency notification systems and moving away from outdated call trees and manual communications methods. Since it is impossible to plan what the crisis will be and its effect, there are several essential components for an emergency notification tool to ensure its effectiveness.

During a crisis, it is critical to have an automated and reliable solution to communicate with the entire organization. It must allow bi-directional communication to enable administrators to outreach and collect information in real-time using all available modes of communication (e.g. cell phone, e-mail, home phone, etc.). The emergency notification solution should also alert administrators when a response has been received or if anyone needs help. In addition, it should enable employees to be immediately connected to a conference call bridge to discuss next steps when they respond to a notification. Lastly, the solution must feature a call-in number for employees to proactively obtain up-to-date information.

Step 2: The Importance of No E-mail Downtime

Beyond emergency notification, organizations need multiple communication channels to coordinate recovery efforts. As the first step, organizations must protect their e-mail system from downtime. The use of e-mail as a communications channel is vitally important for recovery. Personal e-mail accounts do not provide the historical documents, bandwidth, or compliance of the corporate e-mail system. It is critical for all organizations to employ a reliable back-up e-mail solution that is independent of its location and primary environment to ensure e-mail continuity in a crisis.

Step 3: The Advent of Crisis Collaboration

Even with a comprehensive emergency notification system and no e-mail downtime, key communication challenges remain when moving into the recovery stage of any crisis. However, new technology offerings are making it possible to create an organization's own incident collaboration center to keep core business workflow functioning and provide regular information progress reports to constituents.

During recovery, the crisis team will likely need access to all key corporate documents (plans, task lists, contact lists). Even if several members of the crisis team have hard copies of some of the documents with them, they often need to share, change, and update all of the documents multiple times during the recovery. What the crisis team needs is one centralized, easily accessible collaboration center.

Another key concern in the recovery process is the reality that crisis management teams have complex and demanding communication needs. They need to know the ongoing status at any time, for any person, and on all tasks involved with recovery. Organizations have found that in managing a recovery there are multiple dependencies of tasks that require up-to-date communication for seamless coordination between the owners of those tasks. For example, the IT administrator may be able to put the server room back up, but if the air conditioning has not been repaired, and the IT manager knows this, he is unlikely to fire up the servers.

Further compounding recovery logistics, there are regular workflow needs that must occur to handle tasks such as signing a lease for a temporary location or ordering supplies to replace what was damaged in a flood.

Another challenge during a recovery is communicating status to employees, management, and the general public. In fact, the crisis team handling the recovery efforts is often bombarded with frequent requests for information and progress reports. Many times the crisis team is so busy providing updates that they are not able to focus on the job at hand – recovering the organization.

To help overcome these challenges, an incident collaboration center provides a place for secure document sharing via a password protected, intranet-like site. An incident collaboration center allows the crisis team to work interactively and share information securely by sending plans, task lists, and other key documents. It features collaborative incident logs to coordinate teams and individuals. Employees can enter dynamic task status and send immediate updates as they move through the recovery efforts.

As a result, everyone within the organization or even specific groups of employees can see the status of the recovery or instructions in real time. By providing up-to-date information, the crisis management team doesn't have to answer the same questions to multiple groups. Also, in times when the corporate site may be unavailable, an incident collaboration center can offer an external Web site for public communications.

Summary

In summary, there are five things every emergency communications and recovery plan should include:

1. Account for all constituents: Using a bi-directional, automated solution that will quickly, securely, and reliably distribute and collect information in real-time, using all available modes of communication will ensure you know the status of your employees.
2. Identify who needs assistance: By using a solution with a roll call capability, administrators can quickly determine which users need immediate assistance and send help their way.
3. Make sure e-mail doesn't go down in a crisis: Since e-mail is a core business application, it is extremely important that organizations can activate during any outage, regardless of the state of their internal network.
4. Drive recovery workflow of crisis teams: To enable the recovery process, it is important that the crisis management teams have a collaborative place not dependant on their local infrastructure, to store pertinent crisis information that can be updated by any or all employees. The collaboration center can also hold task lists that outline specific jobs and duties that must occur, that can be updated in real-time.
5. Keep all constituents up-to-date on the recovery process: In order to keep the crisis team focused on restoring the business, the solution must have the capability to inform inside and outside parties about the status of recovery.

Conclusion

When it comes to crisis communication, the options for more flexible and interactive communications are just beginning to emerge. With new communication solutions, organizations will be able to better handle immediate crisis management, as well as be prepared for smoother and faster recovery of business operations. It is time for crisis managers to look beyond just emergency notification to truly utilize the full power of crisis collaboration and communications.

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