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HOW PREPARED WERE YOU?

A Business Continuity Retrospective of the Covid-19 Pandemic

May 2021

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INTRODUCTION

We ran a survey a few months into the pandemic to see what external employees thought about their company's response to the rapid shift to work-from-home life. Now, one year later, we've asked those same respondents among some new ones, to reflect on how their opinions have changed, and how business continuity planning either helped or hindered productivity at their company.

This time, we focused on 4 main job functions: Human Resources, IT, Business Continuity Management, and Risk Management. We did this so we can show results for these specific groups, as well as the group as a whole. Our goal is to provide insight into the opinions of these employees, one year after the start of the pandemic.

As you read through this report you will view our respondents' thoughts on things like preparedness, communication, and the future of business continuity management. You'll also see what was done well by companies and what needs improvement. Plus, you'll receive our feedback along the way to help you pull important takeaways out of these results.

We hope you gain some great insights from this report, and if there's anything else we can do to help please reach out.

All the Best,

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SURVEY RESPONDENTS

We surveyed **331 respondents**, who worked in either Business Continuity Management (BCM), Human Resources (HR), IT, or Risk Management. They all reported being closely involved with business continuity planning and response and came from several different industries.

Breakdown by Department

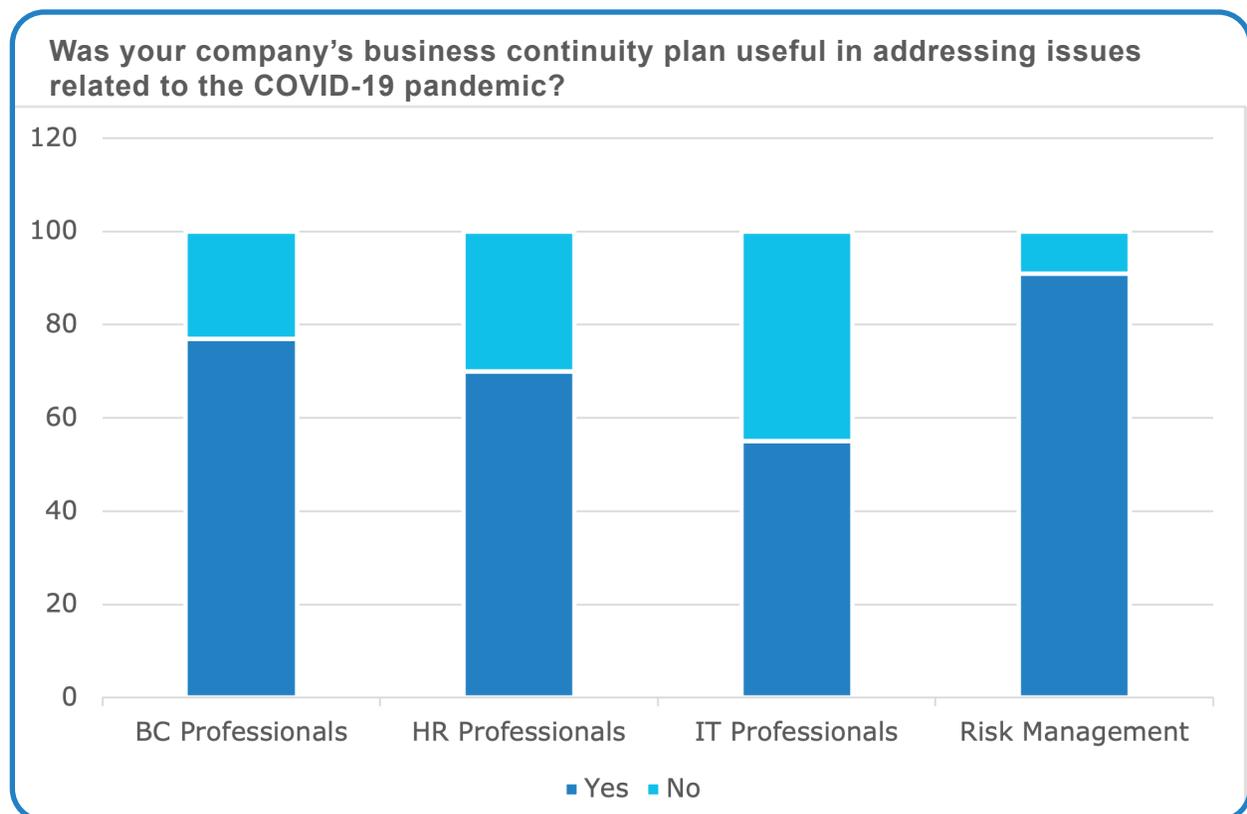## Breakdown by Industry

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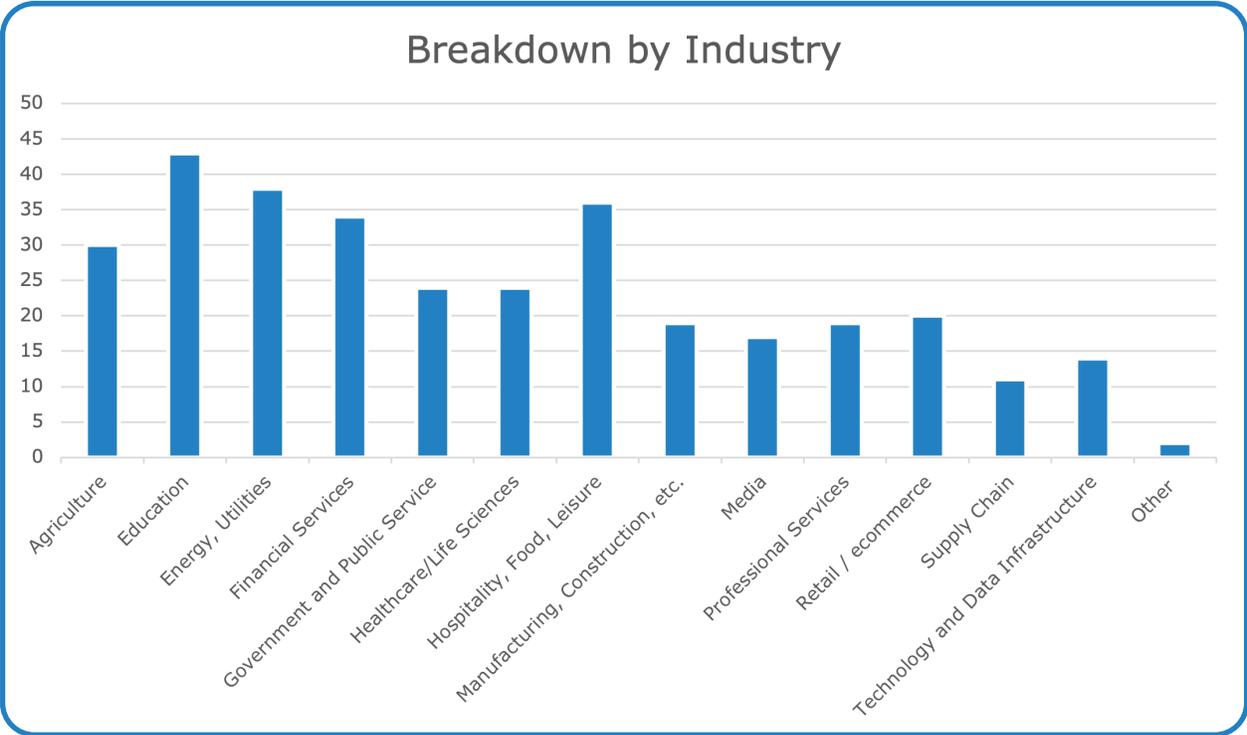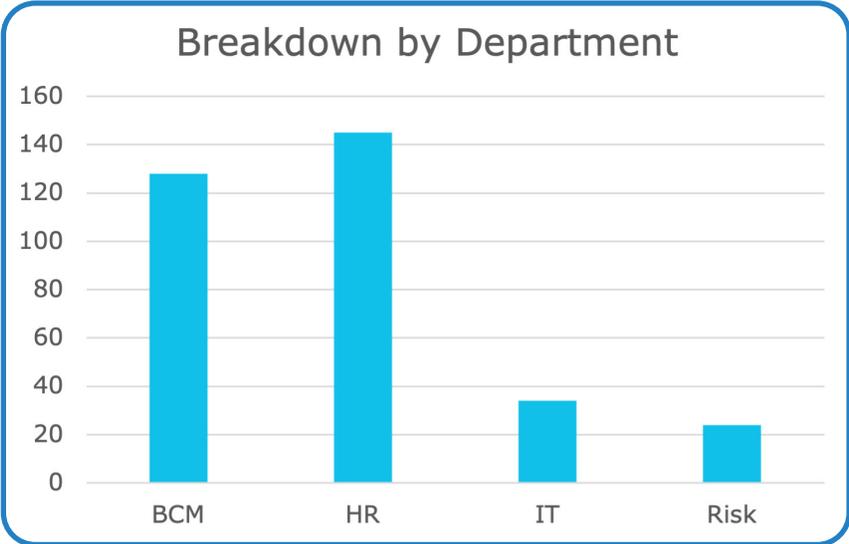
PREPAREDNESS

Respondents were asked about the planning their company had done pre-pandemic, and how that planning factored into the strategies that were actually implemented over the last year.

93% felt that their organization was prepared to respond when COVID happened.

Diving even further into that, **89%** of respondents reported that they had a BC plan in place that specifically addressed pandemic response. However, when asked how complete their plan was in addressing the reality of the COVID pandemic, **27% said that when they reviewed that plan, they found it "not very useful" or "not good."**

IT professionals were the most vocal about this, with 45% responding that the plans in place were not actually helpful or did not function in the way they were meant to, during the pandemic.

Was your company's business continuity plan useful in addressing issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Overall, **81%** of respondents reported that they continuously expanded and enhanced their pandemic plan as previously overlooked dependencies revealed themselves, and **86%** noted that their pandemic response significantly improved over time.

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These responses confirm what we've been hearing over the last year. Even those companies that felt they were extremely prepared, realized that they had not thought of certain aspects of working from home that would need to be addressed. For example, I've worked with a few companies that did not think through the possible issues relating to cyber security that could happen with every employee laptop located in a different location. I also heard from some IT professionals that tech support was extremely difficult in situations where an employee needed their equipment fixed or replaced.

What we can learn from this is that plans need to address the challenges of moving the primary workspace away from the office and should identify the potential points of failure in this new environment.
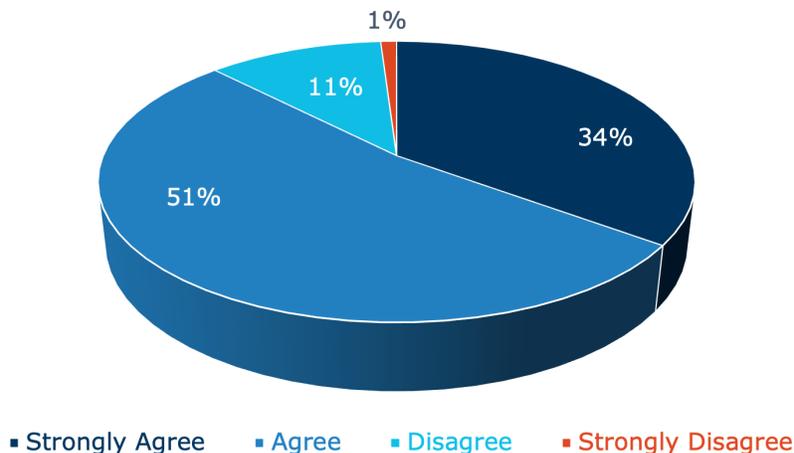
COMMUNICATION

Respondents were asked about the overall communication to employees, partners, vendors, suppliers, customers, and prospects.

Interestingly, only **19%** of HR professionals strongly agreed that communication to employees was clear and timely, while **35%** of both BC and IT professionals strongly agreed to the same thing.

When asked about communication to partners, vendors, suppliers, regulators and others that keep their business running, feelings were mixed across all respondents.

"During the pandemic, our organization's communications to partners, vendors, suppliers, regulators and others that keep our business running, was clear and timely."

1%
11%
34%
51%

■ Strongly Agree   ■ Agree   ■ Disagree   ■ Strongly Disagree

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This is interesting, because in most organizations, HR is responsible for the communication to employees. What this shows us is that HR, the ones closest to this task, felt that they could have done a better job. When it comes to partners and vendors, it seems like most respondents felt their company did an adequate job in communicating with them.

What we can learn from this is that while communication across the board is important, it's easy to forget that employees are your most important resource and should be kept informed about what is happening whenever possible.

When asked about productivity during the pandemic, **22%** of overall respondents felt their company was not as productive as they were pre-pandemic, with those in IT feeling the most strongly about this. 27% of IT respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed, showing that they were feeling the pain of working remotely and having issues doing their jobs.

This goes hand in hand with the <u>survey we ran in May of 2020</u>. One of the consistent trends that we have noticed is front line and non-salaried workers report the lowest satisfaction in communications.

We found that this dissatisfaction was consistent throughout the survey and is clearly segmented to those that can work from home/remotely, and those whose roles do not allow for remote.

WHAT NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

It's important to get feedback on things that organizations could have done better, so that we can learn from these situations and improve in the future.

79% of respondents felt that some of the organization's departments, facilities and business units were better prepared than others to respond to the challenges of the pandemic.

IT titles reported seeing the least difference in preparedness levels between groups, with Business Continuity Management professionals feeling the most confident in the preparedness of all departments.

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What this tells me is that those closest to the plan and response of an incident, (those in Business Continuity Management), feel strongly that they have prepared and responded equally across departments. When other groups disagree with this, it shows that there needs to be more communication and hands-on involvement from BCM into other areas of the company.

This is an important learning for those in BCM, as they should often aim for over-communicating with employees, especially at the start of an incident like a pandemic.

"We have reports and analytics that allow us to understand how our response is working and where more effort/attention is needed."
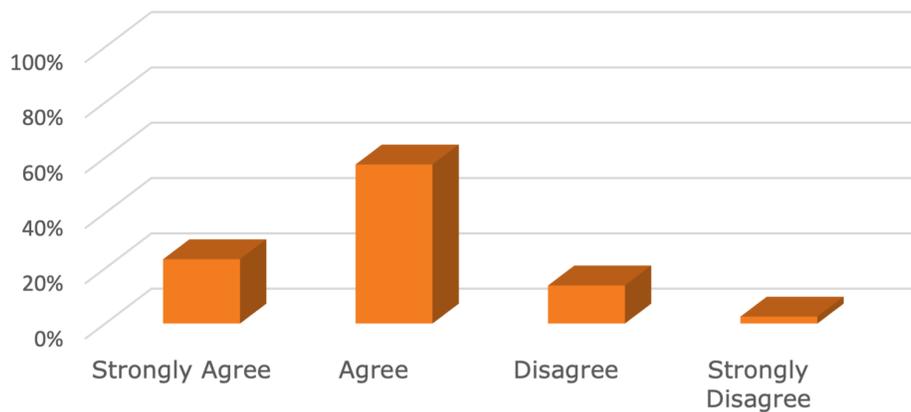
On average about **19%** of the BC, HR and IT respondents indicated that they do not have reports and analytics that help them understand how their response is working. Risk titles were the exception to this with only **8%** indicating they did not have these reports.

This shows that those in Risk have visibility into things that other departments would like to see.

Not only will more visibility provide reassurance to the organization as a whole, but a clear picture of analytics based on a company's response can help those in Risk and Business Continuity get more executive buy-in for their program.

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WHAT WAS DONE WELL

Of course, we also need to look at the positive side, and acknowledge what was done well, so we know what needs to continue. When examining the answers to the survey, three major things stuck out.

EMPLOYEES FELT CONNECTED

89% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that employees working from home felt/feel connected to the organization.

We also saw that by-in-large, employees have "gone the extra mile" when needed to respond to the unprecedented situation, with **86%** agreeing or strongly agreeing to that.

EMPLOYEES FELT SUPPORTED

84% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the organization's systems, technology and IT met the challenges faced when responding to the pandemic

TABLETOP EXERCISES GAVE EMPLOYEES CONFIDENCE IN THE NEEDED RESPONSE

80% of those who weighed in on the subject felt the table-top exercises conducted as part of their organization's business continuity program better prepared them to respond to the pandemic.

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PERSPECTIVE ON FUTURE BC/DR PLANNING

When we look at our survey, it allows us to see trends in what worked and what didn't work when it comes to pandemic planning. But thinking about the BC/DR industry as a whole, the responses also give us insight into what needs to happen in the future.

27% of respondents said that when they reviewed their pandemic response plan specifically, they found it "not very useful" or "not good," with 45% of IT titles responding this way.

81% reported that they continuously expanded and enhanced their pandemic plan as previously overlooked dependencies revealed themselves.

80% of respondents agreed that the multi-faceted response they conducted during the pandemic made them question if business continuity planning can be comprehensive enough to predict/address all that must be managed during an extended disaster response. Following that response, **87%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that because of their experience responding to the COVID pandemic, their organization has developed a deeper commitment to comprehensive business continuity planning.

This aligns with what we've been seeing for some time now. Organizations need to shift from passive planning to active process and vendor risk management. The size, scope, and layered events that occurred in 2020 have caused many of us to examine the way we evaluate risks. We are familiar with the unprecedented "Black Swan" events (popularized by the book by Nassim Nicholas Taleb), but we had to deal with multiple unrelated and unprecedented events occurring at the same time in 2020. We also are somewhat failing to ignore the concept of "Gray Rhino" events (Coined by Michele Wucker) describing an obvious event that we're ignoring.

To make the shift to risk management, more focus needs to be put on the probability of these more likely risks up front, and the use of data and analytics can help with this.

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CONCLUSION

One of the major trends we saw in this survey was:

RESPONSIBLE FRONT-LINE TITLES WERE HARDEST ON THEMSELVES

In areas that a functional title would know best, specialists were more likely to find fault with their area of response. For example, IT was more critical than any other titles when it came to the systems of preparedness and worker productivity levels, while HR was most critical of communications to employees and how connected employees felt to the organization.

Executive titles were consistently more positive or optimistic across the board than any of the titles with direct responsibilities for BC/DR planning and response.

This may be the result of those on the front-line of a specific part of planning and response "seeing the sausage being made" and having a better understanding of what was working and what needs more attention. This is a huge takeaway for us all. There needs to be consistent visibility throughout an organization, and we need to listen to each department when it comes to their specific issues and concerns. Overall, we can see that those in charge are very critical about their specific responsibilities, but they might not have all the information needed to make decisions regarding other departments.

I highly recommend regular check-ins with the executive team, directors, and manager level employees to ensure that communication continues on post-pandemic. Issues need to be addressed as early as possible, and those leading the charge have the opportunity to foster collaboration and make changes happen.

There were plenty of new take-aways from this survey, but we also saw a lot of consistent themes continued from May of 2020. The front-line workers still do not feel they have the flexibility of remote workers and are not able to work from home as often or at all. The common message previously was that remote, salaried employees can easily adjust to family issues and pandemic related challenges without an impact to take-home pay and PTO, whereas hourly workers do not have the same options.

The feedback from Infinite Blue is to incorporate the ability to work remotely into job descriptions, regardless of pay structure, with specific home office requirements.

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