

HOW THE BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL COPEd IN THE WAKE OF THE 7/7 BOMBINGS

A BMJ case study

On 7 July last year, the British Medical Journal (BMJ), based at the British Medical Association's headquarters in Tavistock Square, London, found itself at the centre of the terrorist attacks on the city. The London bus bomb exploded directly outside the offices of the BMJ, resulting in denial of access to the premises in the wake of the bombing. In the hours, days and weeks that followed the bombings, the BMJ worked with SunGard Availability Services to ensure that the business was able to continue to function and to keep up its proud 160-year tradition of never failing to produce the weekly journal, despite having endured two world wars and various other difficulties associated with being located in central London.

Introduction

The British Medical Journal (BMJ) is one of the foremost scientific publications in the world, with a weekly circulation of 120,000. It is at the forefront of the international debate on health and publishes original scientific studies, review and educational articles, and papers commenting on the clinical, scientific, social, political, and economic factors affecting human health.

In 160 years of publication, the BMJ Publishing Group (BMJPG) has never failed to produce the weekly issue of the journal, despite being based in London and enduring the difficulties of the Second World War. This enviable record was challenged on the morning of Thursday 7th July 2005, when at 9.47am a suicide bomber on the now infamous no.30 bus exploded his device in Tavistock Square, outside BMA House, where the Publishing Group is based.

Background

When the bomb exploded outside the BMJ's offices on the morning of 7/7, many of the journal's production team were in a meeting, unaware that there had been three other explosions around London in the previous hour. Having heard the explosion in the Square outside and seen the damage caused, the team took the decision to evacuate themselves from the rear of the building, away from the scene of the explosion.

Once outside, and having realised the scale and nature of the explosions, the challenge was then to ensure the safety of the staff and to go about ensuring the continuity of the business itself.

Challenges

Despite having disaster recovery and electronic data vaulting solutions in place with SunGard Availability Services, what the BMJ did not yet have was a formal business continuity management process defined. Its contingency plan was to convene a crisis management team and decide upon actions.

However, on 7 July, when Colin Davis, the BMJ's Group Production Manager and business continuity coordinator, tried to convene the rest of the crisis management team, he discovered that he was unable to contact any of them. Mobile phone networks were out of action and, because of the informal nature of the evacuation, it was impossible to physically locate the team members. Having spent twenty minutes searching for Neil Poppmacher (Operations Director and business continuity programme manager), Colin took the decision to place SunGard on standby.

The Recovery

The BMJ had subscribed to SunGard's Workplace Recovery service, and had 27 seats allocated at the company's City Recovery Campus. This provision was specifically to provide resilience for the weekly British Medical Journal and BMJ Careers, its classified advertising supplement. Various tests had been carried out and a battle box, containing a variety of equipment selected to assist with the management and control of a disaster, prepared. In addition, SunGard's VytalVault electronic data vaulting service was being used to take a daily off-site backup copy of critical data – a more robust solution than tape-based alternatives.

By midday, Colin had located Neil Poppmacher and a decision was taken to invoke SunGard's recovery service. All of the BMJ staff was then sent home for the day and preparations were made at SunGard's recovery centre for resumption of business on the morning of the next day.

The first challenge on the morning after the bomb was to obtain the battlebox which was still within the BMJ offices. These were now firmly behind a police cordon. After some negotiations, Colin and Neil were allowed to enter the building to extract the battlebox.

By Friday morning recovery was well underway, with six members of the core BMJ team on site at SunGard's City Recovery Campus. With an unalterable print deadline of Tuesday 12 July and with editorial staff reluctant to reduce the pagination of the publication, it was decided to extend the recovery team and to work throughout the coming weekend.

At this stage a new challenge arose for the SunGard/ BMJ team, in the form of a scripting problem in a third party software package. The recovery point was being set too far back and as a result a whole day's data was not being extracted from the data vault. After some head-scratching technicians were able to resolve the issue, but valuable time had been lost.

Monday came, and the journal production teams were now fully up to speed. No further glitches occurred and the journal was ready for press *only 20 minutes later* than the usual deadline. A tremendous achievement given the difficulties and pressures faced.

Within a few days, police allowed restricted access to the rear wing of BMA House and Neil coordinated the BMJPG activity within the building. A number of key staff were given access to the building and used the BMA/BMJ systems (which remained fully operational) to continue key business operations.

BMJ Careers decided to migrate back to BMA House in order to gain access to the invoicing systems (non-critical business systems which are not supported through the SunGard facility). The migration back to BMA House was carefully planned and a whole working day was given over to the move. This consisted of couriering large amounts of paper documents back to the main workplace as well as ensuring that all data was effectively synchronized. The migration went very smoothly with no unexpected difficulties.

The bulk of the BMJ team remained on site at the City Recovery Campus for a total of 12 days, with a second issue of the journal being published from the recovery centre. Again, the migration back to BMA House was well planned and executed with no problems.

Lessons Learned

- Although the BMJ Publishing Group has a well-tested disaster recovery plan and a designated crisis team, it had not issued a formal business continuity management process. This meant, amongst other things, that quickly contacting critical staff after the bomb attack was not possible and, in general, employees found it difficult to get information on what was expected from them. BMJ has now started work on producing a formalised business continuity plan and has developed a Business Continuity Card which contains a central crisis contact number; a map showing the location of appropriate SunGard recovery centres; and some simple instructions telling card holders what do to in the event of an incident
- The Executive team was very active in formalising communications after the event so that staff were kept well informed; this allowed Colin and Neil to concentrate on managing the business related effort
- Some staff did not wish to travel by public transport in the days which followed the terrorist attacks. It had previously been assumed that this would be how staff would reach the City Recovery Campus. Staff were told to use taxis instead of public transport and that BMJ would reimburse the fares
- A fully operational mobile phone network cannot be assumed; walkie talkies have now been issued to selected staff to improve communications in the event of an evacuation
- After six days, a contingent of staff left the recovery centre and returned to the main BMA offices. This duplicated some effort in terms of migration. It would have been easier for all work to continue from the recovery centre and to migrate back all at once, although the move back to BMA House did allow for invoice generation
- BMJ decided that the 27 seat recovery centre contract was not quite enough space and has since extended the contract with SunGard to 40 seats, and has also added several more of the Group's products to the contract
- Finally, the incident served to highlight the high importance of 'people issues'. Information Availability is much more than simply protecting data. BMJ staff were provided with access to a trauma unit for post-disaster counselling, but there are still

members of staff who have yet to return to work. It is important to plan for the long term mental health needs of staff; no assumptions can be made in this area

One Year On – Reflections

Whilst lessons were learned from the events of 7 July last year and the days that followed, the overall recovery was a remarkable success. Such was the effectiveness of the BMJ's recovery with SunGard, that it was still able to publish its weekly publication, *The British Medical Journal (BMJ)*, on time, and to distribute it to over 120,000 people within the medical profession, both in the UK and abroad. This maintained the BMJ's proud tradition of having never missed an issue of the *BMJ* since its inception in the 1840's – not even during the bombs sustained in 1941 during World War II.

As Fiona Godlee, the editor of The BMJ, wrote in her editorial column in the issue following the bombing, "The fact that you are reading this is a small but significant victory. When the bomb exploded last Thursday morning, ripping apart the number 30 bus outside BMA House, killing 13 people and injuring many more, we were two days into work on this week's journal..... The fact that the journal has come out on time is trivial in the face of what happened on 7 July. But it is our best answer to those who would tear our world apart."

For more information:

0800 143 413, infoavail@sungard.com or www.sungard.co.uk

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