



# Technology Currents...

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## The Need for Crisis Communications is not just in Crisis

It used to be that a Crisis Communications system was meant for the few organizations like governmental groups dealing with national emergencies, public safety issues or essential services. But the current pandemic highlighted that the requirement for crisis communications is much more widely needed than previously believed. Many organizations needed instant and robust communications with their staff as rapidly changing events unfolded, with no great way to get important messages to everyone at once from a single source dispersed over a number of methodologies (text, email, voice call). Without such capability, keeping employees safe while maintaining business operations is nearly impossible. And a lack of confirmation of messages received presents a failure to guarantee everyone is notified. A crisis communications system can provide a detailed log of all such communications.

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*“...nearly every company needs to have some form of optimized mass communications as part of its operations strategy, and not only used in times of crisis, but also as an active component of the corporate employee communications strategy. With the implementation of the cloud-based “as a service” model, the complexity of deployment/operations and the low cost of operations have made it attractive for nearly every organization in virtually any business.....”*

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Information sharing and timely communications are critical elements to making organizations functional and safe in times of crisis, and even in normal operations. Yet few enterprises have communications systems built for such purposes. Most organizations do not have a crisis communications plan in place, let alone the required technology to implement it. As a result, “mixed messages” from multiple sources delivered in a haphazard way can dramatically affect the operations and efficiencies of organizations. Further, communications that are improvised pose a significant security risk that wrong information will be communicated, potentially even from outside sources. Businesses would never allow their mission critical apps and IT infrastructure to run this way, and they shouldn’t do so for mission critical communications either.

The current Covid pandemic has shown that crisis communications must be part of an organization’s tool kit, and should be used, for example, for any shutdown orders or notifications needed in the aftermath of exposure, rapidly notifying affected people. But the current situation is not the only crisis that we can expect to occur, as storms, natural disasters, and similar events are likely to happen on a regular basis. There is a need for organizations to communicate rapidly, securely and uniformly with all workers affected. In future crisis situations, effective communications will be imperative.

Few companies have the wherewithal to create a true crisis communications system. Not only is the installation of appropriate technology that interfaces with a variety of company-operated communications methods required, but continuing IT support is also needed to make the systems effective. Costs could easily be \$.5M-\$1M or more per year. But with the rapid move of nearly all things offered in the cloud, we’re seeing the availability of “crisis communications as a service” emerge. This moves the cost of such a system from Capex to Opex with expenditures of a few dollars per employee per month, and with little or no IT hardware/integration needed.

Choosing a service should take into account the capabilities required for implementing and maintaining the communications necessary for your organization. These include:

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- 24/7 operations and access to expert personnel for monitoring alerts and initiating communications
- A proven crisis communications strategy that can be implemented for your organization along with training for staff members in crisis communications
- Ability to send alerts via multiple paths while being able to confirm messages received by the intended users and maintaining an audit trail of all communications
- Cloud deployment that can be implemented in a matter of days with minimal internal IT support and no on premises installations
- Secured communications and regulatory approvals like ISO and government certifications, and secured cloud hosting services to prevent security issues

An example of such a system is BlackBerry AtHoc. While this product was originally designed for governmental agencies and public sector needs, it is being used by a wide range of entities both during crisis and in ongoing operations. Recently, BlackBerry made it available in a cloud-based “as a service” model (AtHoc Managed Services), easing deployment for many. Examples of real world uses of the AtHoc system include:

A large healthcare system needed to implement a scheduling solution for its staff to maximize efficiency by communicating with each staff member as needed. The old system required manual intervention if someone was not able to be on a particular shift or personnel needed to be moved to another department. Replacement staff needs to be asked for their availability. In the new system, the hospital implemented a link directly with HR systems to determine which staff member was specialized in which required skill, was available at a particular time and location, and how best to communicate with them. The solution cut down the time required to send out notifications for an open shift or an emergency scenario. The result: It can take nearly an hour to fill a shift manually but that process was cut down to a matter of minutes by sending out targeted alerts to all appropriate staff.

The American Red Cross uses crisis communications to provide arrival instructions to responders deployed to disaster relief operations. Each worker receives an automated email and voice call providing them with details of what to do upon arrival. It conducts workforce care surveys with volunteers to ensure each has the best possible experience. The platform also sends safety messages to deployed workers experiencing additional impacting events; first using the system during Hurricane Harvey. The Red Cross does at least 20,000 deployments a year and has sent out an average of 2000+ alerts and 100,000+ unique messages annually to the 36K people it supports.

Other use for such a system include: truck drivers impacted by weather or other natural disasters need to alter their routes before they get to the blockage, saving valuable time, operations costs, and potentially eliminating product delivery delays that could cause spoiled cargos. Utility repair crews could “swarm” to needed areas by receiving situational updates. Schools could inform all students and faculty of an emergency situation in real time. It could even be extended to include “direct to the public” crisis communications if needed. More generically, mass communications could be of great value in any scheduling or personnel assignment/deployment situations.

**Bottom Line:** Crisis communications is not the old style specialized system it was once relegated to. Indeed, nearly every company needs to have some form of optimized mass communications as part of its operations strategy, and not only used in times of crisis, but also as an active component of the corporate employee communications strategy. With the implementation of the cloud-based “as a service” model, the complexity of deployment/operations and the low cost of operations have made it attractive for nearly every organization in virtually any business. We strongly recommend such a capability be made part of all business continuity and disaster response plans for nearly every size organization, while also evaluating the system for ongoing employee communications improvements and better worker efficiencies. Failure to do so will result in both an enhanced danger to workers in times of crisis, as well as a risk to continued operations of the organization.



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