WORKPLACE RECOVERY

# Insurer Markel finds simplicity and flexibility are its best policy

**MARKEL INTERNATIONAL**
A Markel Company

**In these days of red tape and bureaucracy, insurer Markel International's unregimented approach to business continuity is highly unorthodox. But it is a policy that has proved successful for over three decades.**

Markel Corporation has grown from a small family business, founded in the 1920s, into a multi-billion dollar international insurance provider. Markel International is the international arm and it underwrites a diverse portfolio of property, casualty, marine and reinsurance business on a worldwide basis.

**Business continuity (BC) is an integral part of Markel International's 'business as usual' operations** rather than an 'add on' handled by a central department in isolation from the rest of the business. Company values of spontaneity and adaptability are reflected in the simplicity and flexibility of its business continuity management (BCM) programme in which responsibility for **BC is devolved to the business, creating a true BC culture.**

Markel relies upon one of Sungard Availability Services' highly resilient Technology Centres to house the systems it would need **in the event of a disaster** striking its production environment. In the event that its offices were also affected it would relocate to one of Sungard AS's many London-based Workplace Recovery suites **to help ensure business could continue uninterrupted.**

IT Director Steve Fountain sums up the firm's approach, "What we do for clients is manage their risk. Managing our own risk is simply an extension of this. Taking steps to remain active in the marketplace is something that we've been doing since 1982 with our first disaster recovery (DR) contracts – long before DR and BC became mainstream practice."

Markel International successfully combines grass roots involvement with top level support. **Such is the interest in protecting its business and IT operations, BC has commanded Board level attention from the outset.** Over the years IT-centric DR for key mainframe and mid-range systems has evolved into people-centric BCM.

Unusually in these days of bureaucracy and red tape, Markel International is not prescriptive when it comes to BCM procedures.

"As soon as you have a dedicated department BC becomes 'someone else's job' and people see it as divorced from their day-to-day activities," explains Business Continuity Manager Nigel Poll. "We want the process to be empowering, not imposing."

## Business problem

Given that Markel's role is to manage client risk, its own risk management must be exemplary to maintain market confidence.
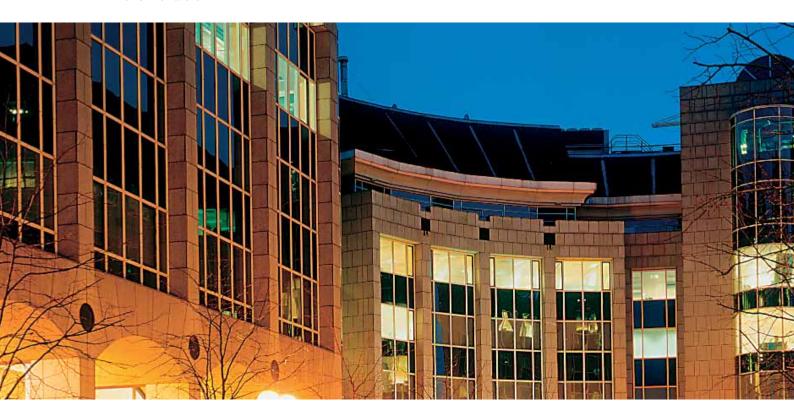
## Solution

- Workplace Recovery
- Technology Recovery.

**"What we do for our clients is manage their risk. Managing our own risk is an extension of this."**

**Steve Fountain,**
IT Director
Markel International

2010 CIR SHORTLISTED

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**"We believe our people are a competitive advantage and when truly empowered the results are impressive."**

**Nigel Poll,**
Business Continuity Manager,
Markel International

**Business benefits**
- Reduced risk of downtime
- Avoids financial loss
- Safeguards reputation
- Engenders customer confidence.

To this end, the BCP manager provides templates for documentation but each department maintains its own BCP manual, as do regional and international offices, thus ensuring a broadly standardised approach that is only bespoke where needed. Staff keep a copy of brief guidelines with them at all times and almost all employees have secure remote access to company systems and data through an internet-based Virtual Private Network (VPN).

Markel International's 20 business divisions each nominate a primary and secondary BC Planning Officer, creating a 40-strong virtual BC team. Steve Fountain and Nigel Poll co-ordinate activities and the testing programme.

This simple, flexible approach extends to the composition of Markel International's Emergency Management Team. Roles are listed but not allocated to named individuals in advance. "Everyone takes collective responsibility, which flies in the face of conventional wisdom," notes Nigel Poll. "But because we've tested our response so thoroughly it's become second nature."

**Sungard AS hosts redundant recovery hardware for Markel International to use in the event a disaster affects its production systems.** This is dynamically updated and can accommodate all Markel International's systems, services and data. **Should disaster strike its premises, key staff would relocate to one of Sungard AS's fully equipped workplace recovery centres, which provide all the technology and telephony the company needs to keep running.**

The success of Markel International's unorthodox approach can be attributed to its efforts to embed BCM into the cultural mindset. Within three months of joining, new starters have a familiarisation visit to the recovery centre so they can hit the ground running in the event of an invocation. Then **on an annual basis every employee** – from the post room to members of the senior management team – **takes part in a thorough, company-wide two-day test split between alternative 'front office' locations, users' homes and the Sungard AS recovery facility.**

This annual test is supplemented by monthly IT tests and ad hoc tabletop exercises involving any individuals who might be called upon in a real crisis. **All lessons learned from testing are fed back into the BC plans so there is a process of continuous improvement.**

Nigel Poll explains, "It's all about people, giving them 'muscle memory' of their individual role in BC so that the business can have confidence in its ability to survive disruption."

Markel's strategic approach to BC was recognised by peers in the 2010 Business Continuity Awards. The company became a finalist in the Business Continuity Strategy and Excellence in Business Continuity in the Insurance Industry categories.

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**About Sungard Availability Services**

Sungard Availability Services provides managed IT services, information availability consulting services, business continuity management software, and disaster recovery services. To learn more, visit www.sungardas.co.uk or call 0800 143 413

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