

Is Business Continuity Certification Right for Your Organization?



This updated white paper analyzes the business case for pursuing organizational business continuity certification, including what it takes to complete the certification process and how best to begin preparing.

As the business continuity management discipline matured over the past twenty years, governmental and standards development organizations created and introduced numerous regulatory requirements and standards – some with optional certification offerings. Private sector organizations develop business continuity programs based on these regulatory requirements and standards to gain business advantages ranging from compliance and competitive positioning to satisfying aggressive customer demands.

Whether responding to a customer inquiry or request from internal management, most business continuity professionals struggle to clearly demonstrate their organization’s program competency. A potential solution to this problem is an organizational certification based on a comprehensive and generally-accepted standard.

This white paper analyzes the business case for pursuing organizational business continuity certification, including what it takes to complete the certification process and how best to begin preparing.

Key Terms Defined

While business continuity certification is relatively new, many organizations are familiar with other forms of value-adding certification that commonly focus on quality, security and safety (i.e. ISO 9001 and ISO 27001). No matter the focus, certification is centered on a consensus-based standard that almost always leverages management system concepts. So what do all these terms really mean?

A **standard** is a collection of best practices and guidelines developed collaboratively in a consensus-driven process, which is overseen by an accredited standards development organization. Standards are evolutionary, meaning they are created based on a formal process and revisited and revised at regular intervals. Although standards are voluntary, meaning organizations can choose to model programs based on the content, some are written for certification and are known as “technical specifications”. By adopting recognized standards, like those outlined in this white paper, organizations demonstrate that they are committed to operational excellence that can help stimulate industry competition and market leadership.

Numerous business continuity standards and regulations exist, including those authored by the following organizations:

- British Standards Institute (BSI)
- International Organization for Standardization (ISO)
- ASIS International
- National Fire Protection Association (NFPA)
- Federal Financial Institutions Examination Council (FFIEC)

[Learn More About Business Continuity Standards & Requirements](#)

Unlike standards that organizations may voluntarily choose to adopt, **regulations** (a.k.a rules) exist in nearly all industries in order to ensure consistency in product/service delivery and protect stakeholders. Typically created and enforced by a government or trade association, regulations specify mandatory requirements that must be met under specific laws in order to legally operate and engage in business activity.

Numerous organizations, including BSI, ASIS International and ISO, embrace **management systems**, which is a concept relatively new to the business continuity profession. A management system is the framework of processes and procedures used to ensure that an organization can fulfill all tasks required to achieve a set of related business objectives. Management system standards provide a model for setting up and operating a management system that focuses on several characteristics specifically applicable to business continuity: accountability, repeatable processes, competencies, resources, performance management and review and cultural change.

What is the Value of Certification?

Business continuity remains a fragmented discipline, with programs implemented based on diverse business requirements and numerous standards. Certification to an accepted standard provides an objective measure of an organization's approach to preparedness and removes doubt concerning the quality of business continuity planning efforts. Certification may add value to your organization in the following four ways:

1. Certification provides organizations with a strong competitive differentiator and potential customers with the means to make a solid, straightforward comparison between organizations. For existing customers, certification can provide a degree of assurance, which is critically important if the organization is operating as a single or sole source provider of a critical product or service and customers have expressed concern and are evaluating secondary sources.
2. Related to competitive differentiation, certification provides a convenient and efficient response process to frequent business continuity program surveys and inquiries from customers, as well as regulators, investors and insurance carriers. With the existence of a third-party registered certification, there is less of a need to share proprietary planning information to satisfy continuity inquires and concerns. Certification may soon begin to offer direct cost-savings opportunities on a recurring basis. Industry associations are in the process of debating the direct benefits of "viable" business continuity programs on credit ratings and business interruption insurance premiums.
3. The organizational certification process also introduces discipline, holding the organization accountable to consistent focus and participation in a life-cycle oriented business continuity planning effort. With employee turnover always a concern, organizational certification (and the inherent requirements that mandate management system documentation, accountability, repeatability, continual improvement and evidence) will enable an effective knowledge transfer process.
4. Also from an internal perspective, developing business continuity processes and capabilities in accordance with a standard provides the program owner with the ability to easily and confidently answer management questions regarding the state of the preparedness effort. Questions such as "What's everyone else doing?" or "Are we doing everything we should be?" can be clearly quantified and answered through reference to the standard. Program weaknesses and non-conformities will be highlighted during initial and continuing certification audits, which can then be built upon to show progress. Additionally, for organizations with decentralized business continuity planning processes, audits will encourage compliance, ensure conformity across the organization and act as a catalyst for continuous improvement.

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While certification can add value to an organization, it may not be the appropriate choice for your organization. Review *Table 1* to determine if your organization should consider business continuity certification.

Table 1 – Determining if Certification is Right for Your Organization

✓	Criteria Influencing The Certification Decision-Making Process
☐	<p>Customer Demand You are a single or sole source provider and wish to retain that status.</p>
☐	<p>Differentiation in the Marketplace Your business development team feels that business continuity capabilities may be a competitive differentiator in your marketplace, and your leadership team desires to increase market share.</p>
☐	<p>Cost Savings Opportunities A proven business continuity management capability may provide business interruption premium savings or influence more favorable credit ratings.</p>
☐	<p>Senior Leadership Inquiries Management displays a strong interest in business continuity readiness or requests benchmarking data or third party attestation to confirm the viability of the investment made to date. They may also want answers to the following questions, which alignment to a standard or certification may help answer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is everyone else doing? • Are we doing everything we should be doing? • What are our primary program weaknesses?

Certification can add value, but most importantly, adopting and leveraging standards can contribute to improved performance in most cases. By simply adopting standards, even without certification, organizations will realize value in three key areas:

- **Maintain Focus**
The business continuity planning team will achieve continuous commitment (and improvement) where the business participates in planning and plan maintenance efforts.
- **Manage Risk**
In a prioritized manner and consistent with organizational strategy, the business will proactively manage risk instead of simply reacting to it.
- **Integrate Processes**
The organization will benefit from a greater understanding of business continuity as it integrates preparedness into all critical business processes.

What Organizational Certifications are Available?

Several business continuity-related certification programs are currently available. Determining which certification is right for an organization depends on the organization’s industry and operational goals. *Table 2* highlights three standards that offer an optional path toward organizational certification. The table also provides guidance on which would be the most appropriate, depending on an organization’s characteristics and business objectives.

Table 2 – Current Organizational Certification Options

Title	Description	Status	Application	Reason
BS 25999	End-to-end business continuity management system standard focusing on risk treatment, response and recovery strategies – equally	Available as of November 2007	Applicable to all organizations (large, small, public and private) anywhere in the world	Organizations that are focusing on business continuity management concepts with aggressive domestic risk management demands or international business interests
Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP)	NEMA-originated certification process focused on assisting local governments with developing and measuring the effectiveness of emergency management strategies (based on NFPA 1600)	Available as of September 2007	U.S. state and local governments	Government leaders are interested in measuring progress toward an actionable response and recovery strategy
ISO 27001	Information security management system certification program which includes content that addresses business continuity and disaster recovery	Available as of April 2006	Organizations seeking certification of security processes, with a “minor” in business continuity	Primary business driver is an interest in security program enhancement and certification (BS 25999 was written to offer a more expansive look at business continuity as an extension of ISO 27001)

In addition to the certifications listed above, three additional and complementary efforts that are now available could lead to additional certification options: Voluntary Private Sector Preparedness Accreditation and Certification Program (PS-Prep), ISO 22301 and the ASIS (ANSI) Business Continuity Management Systems Standard.

Voluntary Private Sector Preparedness Accreditation and Certification Program (PS-Prep)

Title IX of Public Law 110-53 details the Voluntary Private Sector Preparedness Accreditation and Certification Program (PS-Prep). Title IX mandated that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) develop and implement a voluntary preparedness certification program that promotes private sector preparedness. On June 15, 2010, DHS published a notice in the Federal Register noting the selection of three standards for initial inclusion in the PS-Prep Program (PS-Prep does not include a provision to develop any new standards, but rather to adopt existing or newly-developed standards that meet certain criteria):

- ASIS International SPC.1-2009
- British Standard 25999-2:2007
- National Fire Protection Association 1600: 2007/2010

With these selections, the ANSI-ASQ National Accreditation Board (ANAB) worked to structure an organizational certification program. In order to launch the organizational certification effort, ANAB finalized the audit/certification approach (which included a public comment period) and identified qualified audit firms that will evaluate private sector organizational readiness for certification. PS-Prep certification is now available for each of the three selected standards.

Societal Security (ISO/TC 223)

ISO/TC 223 is an international technical committee formed to develop international standards in the area of societal security, aimed at increasing preparedness. The standards developed under the direction of ISO/TC 223 provide (or will provide) protection from and response to risks of unintentionally, intentionally, and naturally-caused crises and disasters that disrupt and have consequences on societal functions. The committee is using an all-hazards approach, covering all necessary activities in the key phases of societal security in general, including business continuity, to focus on:

- Framework Standard on Societal Security Management
- Terminology
- Emergency Management
- Business Continuity
- Public/Private Partnerships
- Exercise and Testing
- Video Surveillance
- Mass Evacuation

“Societal Security” integrates a range of interconnected disciplines including:

- Asset protection (human, physical, environmental, financial, and intangible)
- Security
- Risk management
- Preparedness
- Crisis and emergency management
- Business continuity management
- Recovery and disaster management

More information on this set of standards is available on [ISO's website](#).

While ISO/TC 223 is just now beginning to produce approved societal security-related standards, business continuity professionals can now begin to use the first approved international standard specific to business continuity, ISO 22301. ISO 22301 is written in a way to support organizational certification if the organization deems certification to be of value.

ASIS/ANSI Business Continuity Management Systems (BCMS) – Requirements with Guidance for Use

The ASIS/BSI BCMS Standard is a joint standard developed by ASIS International and the British Standards Institute (and deemed an ANSI-endorsed American National Standard) for business continuity. The standard includes auditable criteria for preparedness, crisis management, business and operational continuity, and disaster management. It utilizes a management systems process approach using the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) model and includes many of the same processes used in BS 25999. Although not presently available for certification, it is written in a way to enable organizational certification at some point in the future if the market need exists.

What to Certify?

Generally speaking, most certification registrars offer specific guidelines as to the scope of the certification process. For example, an organization can achieve BS 25999 certification for any of the following:

- The organization as a whole;
- A location; or
- A business unit.

However, in this context, a specific product or service cannot be the scope of a certification effort. *Table 3* outlines the three certification scope options mentioned above and the suggested criteria to assist in decision making.

Table 3 – BS 25999 Certification Scope Options

✓	Scope	Criteria To Influence Scoping
<input type="checkbox"/>	Enterprise Wide	The organization is tightly integrated and it is nearly impossible to differentiate or remove less critical locations or lines of business from the certification process. Additionally, all aspects of the organization follow the spirit and intent of the standard consistently.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Location	Senior management (or a customer) is able to pinpoint specific locations deemed critical to product or service delivery and/or are material to the organization’s well-being. Select locations are chosen if a finite number of facilities offer competitive differentiation and align to a stakeholder’s specific expectation.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Line of Business	Senior management (or a customer) is able to pinpoint specific lines of business where competitive differentiation is possible or where certification should be pursued.

Overall, careful consideration should be given to not only the value of working toward organizational certification, but also to what the scope of the certification should be. This decision-making process impacts the value of the certification, as well as the cost associated with obtaining the certification. Starting with a smaller scope may be a way to begin exploring the value of certification with lower costs. However, it is important that differentiation between program elements across the organization is avoided.

View [Scoping an Organizational Certification Effort](#) for more information on this topic.

What’s Required to Complete the Certification Process?

For most standards, preparing for certification requires time, effort, focus and commitment – no matter how ready one may feel their organization is for disruptive events. Avalution identified five key success factors that can ease the preparation process. These success factors are:

- ✓ Management commitment to develop, operate and continuously improve the Business Continuity Management System (BCMS)
- ✓ Time and resource commitment necessary to meet the requirements noted in the standard
- ✓ Time commitment to participate in the audit process, providing documentation and answering examiner inquires
- ✓ Time and resource commitment necessary to address audit issues (non-conformities)
- ✓ Budget commitment for audit fees, which includes the first assessment, as well as recurring surveillance audits throughout the certification period

The success factor that most organizations underestimate is the time commitment to prepare documentation for the audit process. Although it is not typically the most time-consuming activity, it is rare that an organization developed this type of documentation thoroughly or in line with the requirements noted in a specific standard. In order to prove compliance, the certifying entity requires detailed, descriptive documentation. This documentation must show how the organization meets the spirit or intent of the standard, how the organization delivers repeatable outcomes when compared to its unique BCMS, and how management approves analyses, strategies and test results (to name a few).

How to Begin Preparing for Certification?

For some organizations, particularly those new to business continuity, preparation will take time and resources. However, whether your organization is new to business continuity or one that maintains a strong, mature program, consider each of the following ten points as you prepare for organizational certification.

1. Identify the most appropriate standard and certification process. Obtain a copy of the standard and any material that provides assistance with the certification process, and review carefully for organizational alignment.
2. Develop the certification value proposition and begin “selling” individually to those who may benefit most from organization certification (sales, strategic planners, supply chain and executive management).
3. Determine the appropriate scope of certification.
4. Develop a project plan/program charter to prepare for certification. This activity will clarify the time investment and resources necessary to ensure a successful outcome. Gain approval and support from key management personnel.
5. Develop program documentation consistent with the standard, including a policy, standard operating procedures, scope statement and objectives listing.
6. Perform required activities resulting from new processes outlined in the program documentation. Some organizations may be able to move forward to the next step, a self-assessment, prior to beginning any new program activities.
7. Perform a self-assessment or identify a qualified firm to perform a certification readiness assessment, specific to the scope of the certification you’re planning to pursue.
8. Perform any or all aspects of your BCMS required to close the gaps from the assessment. For organizations with mature business continuity processes, this may include re-performing activities so they align with the standard’s requirements or so the proper documentation is completed to prove compliance.
9. Ensure all major gaps have been closed, and ensure the organization has a strong corrective actions/preventative actions handling process to address future improvement opportunities or compliance issues.
10. Develop an RFP and submit to a registrar, confirming scope and resource requirements. Schedule the certification process with the certifying body when management feels ready.

Note: Avalution Consulting and BSI Americas released a second edition of their joint white paper “[How to Deploy BS 25999](#)”. This white paper provides a more in depth look at this specific standard and the BSI certification process.

What are Alternatives to Certification?

It is important to note that standards exist first and foremost to improve performance, and second to enable certification where it makes business sense. Organizations that choose not to pursue certification can still achieve value by embracing the standards outlined in this white paper. Additionally, internal and external program assessments or “audits” can provide organizations with actionable feedback related to program improvement and organizational preparedness.

Internal program assessments may be completed by management or other internal, “disinterested” (independent) departments, including internal audit, compliance, risk, or even the business continuity

team. These assessments should ensure that the program is meeting identified organizational objectives based on one or more standards, including proper alignment, implementation and maintenance. In preparation for these assessments, organizations may obtain business continuity self-assessment templates from several industry websites including the [Business Continuity Institute](#) and the [British Standards Institution](#) (BSI).

External program assessments should be conducted by business continuity professionals who carry accreditation from a certifying organization such as the Business Continuity Institute or DRI International. In addition, some consulting firms have aligned themselves with particular standards and have received accreditation that certifies their knowledge of the standard and their ability to conduct external program assessments against that standard. One such example is the [Associate Consultant Program](#) (ACP) offered by BSI.

Conclusions

Organizational business continuity certification can offer the opportunity for market differentiation, cost savings and increased levels of program readiness for organizations of all sizes and in all industries. Upon certification, organizations may realize a competitive advantage within their industry by displaying this commitment to preparedness. Similarly, certified organizations should demand the same level of commitment from their supply chain partners and share preparedness standards, concepts and techniques in order to achieve higher levels of preparedness.

Outside of business continuity certification, organizations that embrace the standards outlined in this document will be able to improve their processes and performance while increasing the value they deliver to themselves and to external business partners.

Let's Connect

Avalution has been a longtime proponent of standards, and if there's a business case to proceed, organizational certification. We've been in your position and know this decision isn't an easy one. Please review the resources included in this document or reach out to us, as our team always welcomes a conversation about how certification or alignment to a standard can benefit your organization.

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About Avalution Consulting

Avalution Consulting – the Business Continuity Institute’s 2012 Business Continuity / Disaster Recovery Company of the Year – is a U.S. based firm that specializes in business continuity, continuity of operations planning (COOP) and IT disaster recovery consulting, outsourcing and software solutions for organizations in both the public and private sectors.

In May 2011 Avalution achieved certification to the BS 25999 business continuity management standard for their consulting services and software solution, The Planning Portal. Further, Avalution is recognized as a certified participant in the BSI Americas Associate Consultant Program (ACP). As a certified firm, Avalution demonstrates a strong competency in program and governance design, with a particular focus in applying management systems concepts. Avalution has deep experiences in implementing standards-based preparedness programs, and also assists in preparing organizations for BS 25999 certification, as well as assessing readiness for the certification process.

Avalution also offers a completely customizable business continuity software solution based on the simplicity of Microsoft SharePoint. The Planning Portal (TPP) is hosted, web-based business continuity software that delivers an easy-to-use set of tools and processes to assist any organization in managing and executing business continuity and IT disaster recovery programs. Solutions address analysis, planning, awareness generation, exercise planning, notification, live crisis management and continuous improvement.

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