ARE YOU PREPARED FOR YOUR NEXT CRISIS?
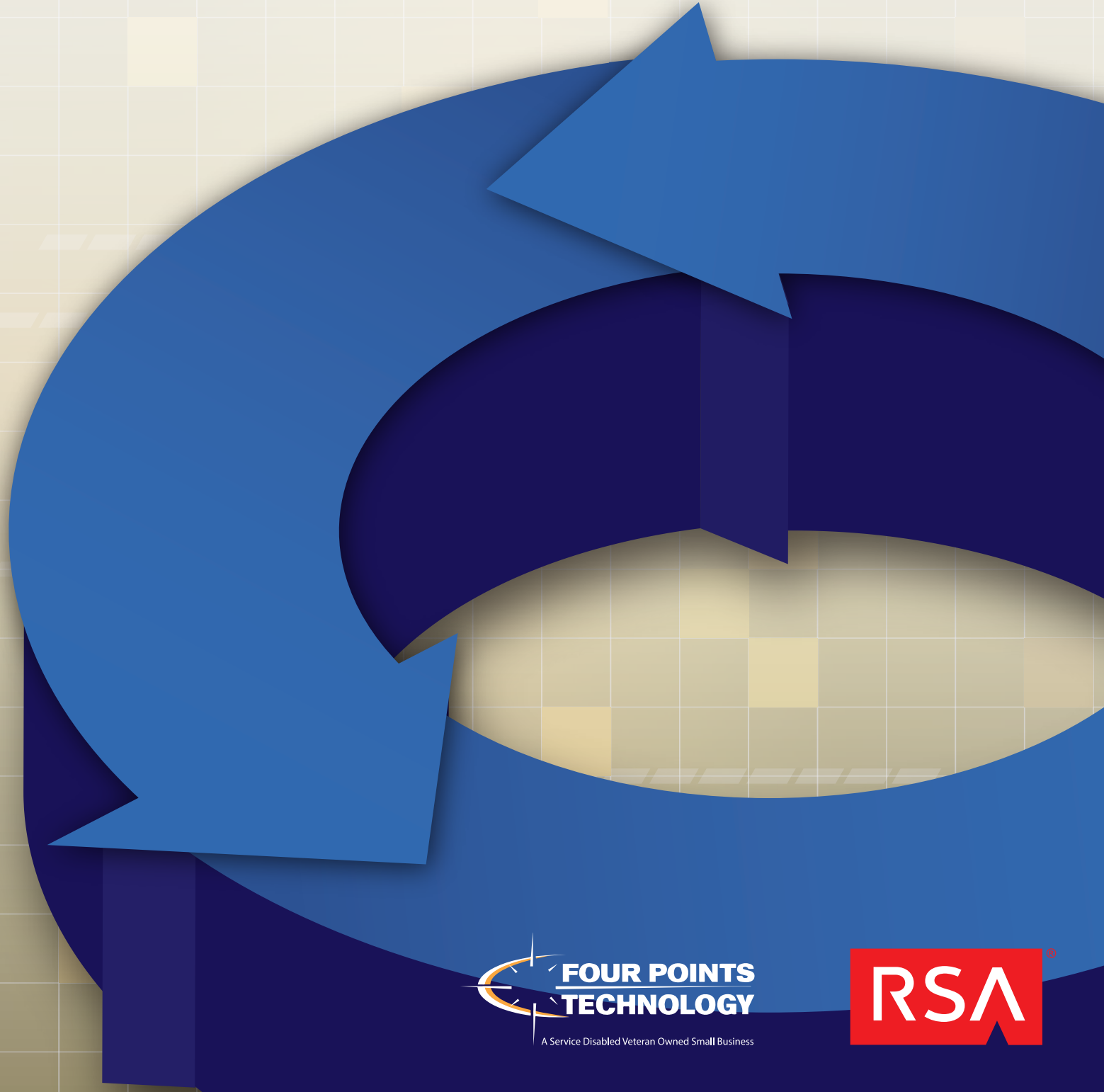
Improving Continuity of Operations at Your Agency

EXECUTIVE RESEARCH BRIEF

FOUR POINTS TECHNOLOGY

A Service Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business

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Improving Continuity of Operations at Your Agency

EXECUTIVE RESEARCH BRIEF

What is Continuity of Operations?

The **NIST Special Publication 800-34 Rev. 1 Contingency Planning Guide for Federal Information Systems** defines COOP as, "...focuses on restoring an organization's mission essential functions (MEF) at an alternate site and performing those functions for up to 30 days before returning to normal operations." The report also provides standard elements of a COOP plan:

- **PROGRAM PLANS AND PROCEDURES**

- **CONTINUITY COMMUNICATIONS**

- **RISK MANAGEMENT**

- **VITAL RECORDS MANAGEMENT**

- **BUDGETING AND ACQUISITION OF RESOURCES**

- **HUMAN CAPITAL**

- **ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS**

- **TEST, TRAINING, AND EXERCISE**

- **ORDER OF SUCCESSION**

- **DEVOLUTION**

- **DELEGATION OF AUTHORITY**

- **RECONSTITUTION**

- **CONTINUITY FACILITIES**

Maintaining operations during a service disruption is vital to helping you achieve mission need. Because your agency relies on a safe, secure and resilient operational infrastructure, it is essential to understand how to maintain operations without interruption. In the event of a disruption, your agency needs to have a plan to be able to connect people and process. In doing so, you can assure that your agency will continue to operate, even in the event of a disruption.

That's why GovLoop, in partnership with RSA and Four Points, conducted a survey of 204 public sector professionals exploring how to create effective Continuity of Operations (COOP) procedures. This executive research brief provides an overview of COOP in the public sector. Specifically, this report highlights:
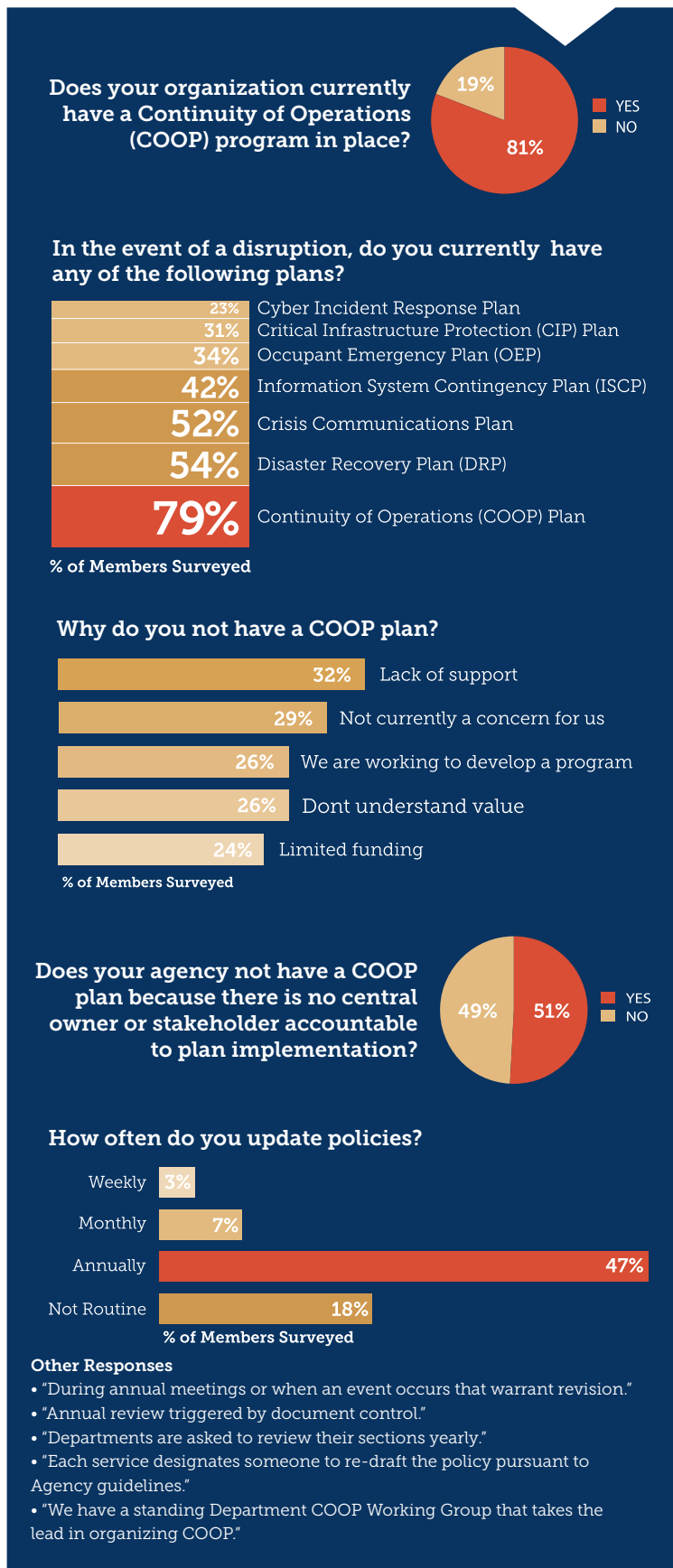
- Four common public sector COOP challenges

- Manual verse automated COOP functions

- Six best practices for COOP adoption

- Desired functionality for COOP solutions

The survey data highlighted in shows 81 percent of respondents currently have a COOP program. Yet, the specific kinds of programs and initiatives vary widely from agency to agency. As for the 19 percent who do not currently have a COOP program in place, respondents cited "lack of support" as a barrier to adoption.

Our next section explores the unique challenges for COOP and then provides agencies six best practices to begin to create their COOP programs.

Figure 2.

The State of COOP in Government

Does your organization currently have a Continuity of Operations (COOP) program in place?

- YES 81%
- NO 19%

In the event of a disruption, do you currently have any of the following plans?

- 23% Cyber Incident Response Plan
- 31% Critical Infrastructure Protection (CIP) Plan
- 34% Occupant Emergency Plan (OEP)
- 42% Information System Contingency Plan (ISCP)
- 52% Crisis Communications Plan
- 54% Disaster Recovery Plan (DRP)
- 79% Continuity of Operations (COOP) Plan

% of Members Surveyed

Why do you not have a COOP plan?

- 32% Lack of support
- 29% Not currently a concern for us
- 26% We are working to develop a program
- 26% Dont understand value
- 24% Limited funding

% of Members Surveyed

Does your agency not have a COOP plan because there is no central owner or stakeholder accountable to plan implementation?

- YES 51%
- NO 49%

How often do you update policies?

- Weekly 3%
- Monthly 7%
- Annually 47%
- Not Routine 18%

% of Members Surveyed

Other Responses
- "During annual meetings or when an event occurs that warrant revision."
- "Annual review triggered by document control."
- "Departments are asked to review their sections yearly."
- "Each service designates someone to re-draft the policy pursuant to Agency guidelines."
- "We have a standing Department COOP Working Group that takes the lead in organizing COOP."

Challenges for COOP

Although the survey yielded bright spots of COOP in government, adopting COOP comes with a set of unique challenges. Our findings show that the leading challenge for COOP adoption is to stay relevant in a dynamic world. There are more threats facing the enterprise than ever before, and citizens rely on government services for their health and safety. Survey participants noted many challenges, as highlighted in **figure 3**.

The survey yielded interesting insights into the challenges facing public sector professionals tasked with administering COOP programs. Four key themes emerged: the need for increased education; clarity on how to receive COOP funding; testing COOP procedures; and coordination across departments.

Increased Education of COOP

One of the barriers to adoption is a lack of education about COOP's role in government. Our survey found there is a knowledge gap within government on what kind of tools are currently available to government for COOP programs, and how they can improve the reliability of systems. For instance, a survey participant noted the following challenge: "Having knowledge of and being actively included in the COOP plan."

How to Receive COOP Funding

As most of the responses revolved around lack of executive support, the survey also explored where funding came from. According to our data, the funding process for COOP is ambiguous. Forty-nine percent cited funding came from the agency level; 28 percent said funding came from the department and/or project level. Additionally, responses include uncertainty on how to obtain or support COOP initiatives. "At the agency level, but each office (department) has a small piece that is part of the system life cycle," said one survey participant.

Testing COOP Procedures

Testing COOP programs is essential, but a respondent noted that this process is challenging to them. "We are so busy, no time and resources to fully test, but some small limited tests completed." Later in this report, we define that automation can help agencies work through the challenge of testing COOP.
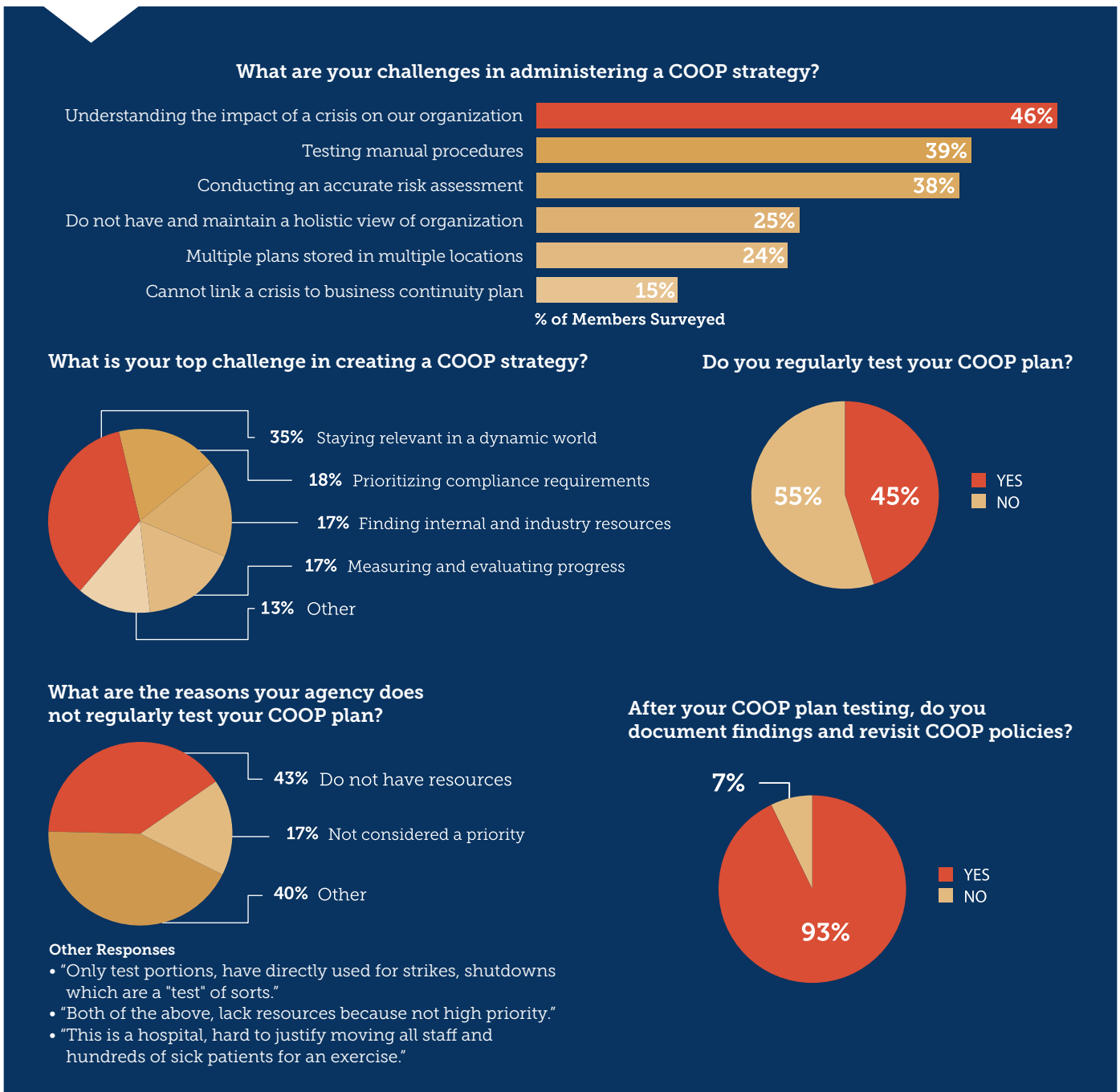
Coordination Across Departments

Collaboration across teams is essential for COOP to function in government. Yet, survey participants repeatedly highlighted coordination and collaboration across teams as a challenge. One other survey participant added, "Each of our eight offices has a different plan which is good but keeping them all updated and active is a challenge."

Finally, a respondent noted, "COOP plans not distributed beyond agency management."

Also, the report looked at where reports are typically stored. Sixty-three percent of respondents noted a shared drive as the main spot to store COOP plans. Other responses included cloud services, hard copies, and restricted access drives.

Figure 3.
Exploring COOP Challenges for Government

What are your challenges in administering a COOP strategy?

Understanding the impact of a crisis on our organization	46%
Testing manual procedures	39%
Conducting an accurate risk assessment	38%
Do not have and maintain a holistic view of organization	25%
Multiple plans stored in multiple locations	24%
Cannot link a crisis to business continuity plan	15%

% of Members Surveyed

What is your top challenge in creating a COOP strategy?

- 35% Staying relevant in a dynamic world
- 18% Prioritizing compliance requirements
- 17% Finding internal and industry resources
- 17% Measuring and evaluating progress
- 13% Other

Do you regularly test your COOP plan?

- 55% NO
- 45% YES

What are the reasons your agency does not regularly test your COOP plan?

- 43% Do not have resources
- 17% Not considered a priority
- 40% Other

Other Responses
- "Only test portions, have directly used for strikes, shutdowns which are a "test" of sorts."
- "Both of the above, lack resources because not high priority."
- "This is a hospital, hard to justify moving all staff and hundreds of sick patients for an exercise."

After your COOP plan testing, do you document findings and revisit COOP policies?

- 7% NO
- 93% YES

Manual versus Automated

The distinction between automated COOP and manual COOP was an important component of the survey. Automation refers to automating plan maintenance and testing of COOP workflows, notifications and issue management. Automation also includes phased notifications, reporting and planned testing.

Figure 4 highlights the finding that survey respondents view COOP practices as a mix of both manual and automated processes. In addition, 66 percent of respondents believe they would benefit from an automated workflow and approval process. "An automated process will help keep the COOP plan tested and updated," said one participant. Another added, "An automated process would force us to evaluate what is really involved and what can go wrong." There were additional quotes that show the benefits of automation:

- "Automated workflows and approvals ensure a path to a system of record for transactional authorization."

- "Along with a manual process in case of power loss, automated is faster and can be retrieved even if at outlying locations."

The survey data also highlights the benefits of an automated COOP solution. The main benefit cited was "Rapid access to recovery strategies, procedures and tasks." Other responses include, "Enhance collaboration among all participants," and "As an update is identified, discussed and changes voted on, plans can be updated all at once."

Surprisingly, 34 percent of respondents did not believe automation was necessary. One participant noted, "Our process does not really change all that often at the business unit level. Should COOP need to be implemented, calls and notifications are done via phone or e-mail."

Figure 4.

Exploring Manual & Automated COOP Procedures

How much of your COOP process is automated?

- 76-99% automated — 5%
- 26-50% automated — 11%
- 51-75% automated — 16%
- 1-25% automated — 21%
- Completely automated — 47%

% of Members Surveyed

How much of your COOP process is manual?

- 1-25% manual — 5%
- 26-50% manual — 5%
- 51-75% manual — 9%
- 76-99% manual — 22%
- Completely manual — 60%

% of Members Surveyed

Is your COOP process manual or automated?

- 37% Manual
- 10% Automated
- 53% Mix

Is your COOP testing plan an automated or manual process?

- 45% Manual
- 8% Automated
- 47% Mix

Best Practices for Continuity of Operations in the Public Sector

Our report also investigated the best practices for COOP in the public sector. Our research indicates eight imperative best practices.

1. Automate Your COOP Program

Automation provides the opportunity for agencies to be more efficient and effective with their COOP policy. For example, this can mean phased notification plans for specific units, departments, or emergency response teams. If this process is automated, you will greatly reduce human error, have built-in checkpoints and witness the benefits of an automated COOP program, which are highlighted in **figure 5**.

2. Test Your COOP Program

Testing is imperative to COOP success. One respondent notes, "All staff are notified in advance for the plan testing, relevant personnel are trained on their responsibilities, plans and procedures are documented and available to those with a need to know." Testing is an essential process, and helps organizations understand and practice protocols in the event of a service disruption.

3. Update COOP Plans

You should always conduct periodic plans and reviews. Additionally, this process should be automated with and triggered by data driven notifications. One participant stated, "We conduct an annual review, and update as needed."

4. Centrally Manage COOP Operations and Disaster Recovery

Your solution must be consistent across your teams and departments. For COOP programs to be effective, collaboration across teams is essential. As one survey participant said, "All divisions and personnel provide active input in analysis and developing procedures," another respondent adds, "Matrix level management structure reduces misinformation, ensures employees receive information relevant to their work and reduces the need for repetition and redundancy."

One respondent reported, "Central repository on Sharepoint," and another, "We push updates onto staff laptop hard drives so we can operate if network is down," and finally, "The plans are stored a variety of ways, including those listed, by a small, diversified group of individuals."

5. Conduct Business Impact Analyses

A business impact analysis (BIA) simply is the process of analyzing activities within your agency, and the effect that a disruption might have upon them. This process is essential to allow you to prioritize the value of business processes, and what the impact may be on the mission of your agency. Also, this can help you develop real-time awareness. Your COOP plan should be able to track events in real-time, and provide decision makers with the information they need to know to track, monitor and assess a situation.

6. Develop Reporting Strategies for Continuous Improvement

As the survey data shows, there is a knowledge gap preventing leaders from seeing the impact of COOP across the entire agency. This does not have to be the case. Focus on improving your reporting strategies to gain an enterprise-wide view.

Committing to continuous updates and improvements is also essential to updating COOP. As one survey respondent notes, "Continuous updating to ensure inclusion of emerging threats and incidents." Another respondent adds, "Review monthly with key stockholders who can adjust in timely manner identified problems," and finally, "Keeping COOP plans and methodologies restricted to those with a need to know."

Figure 5.
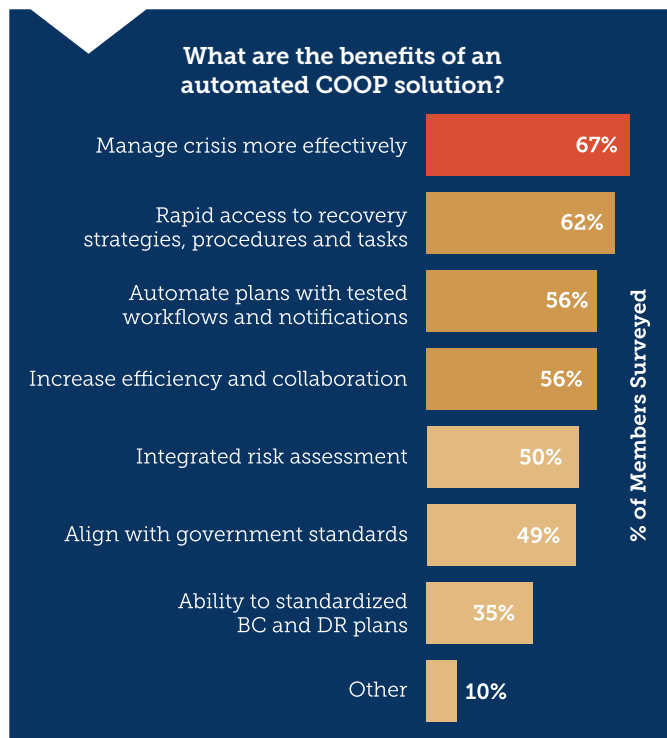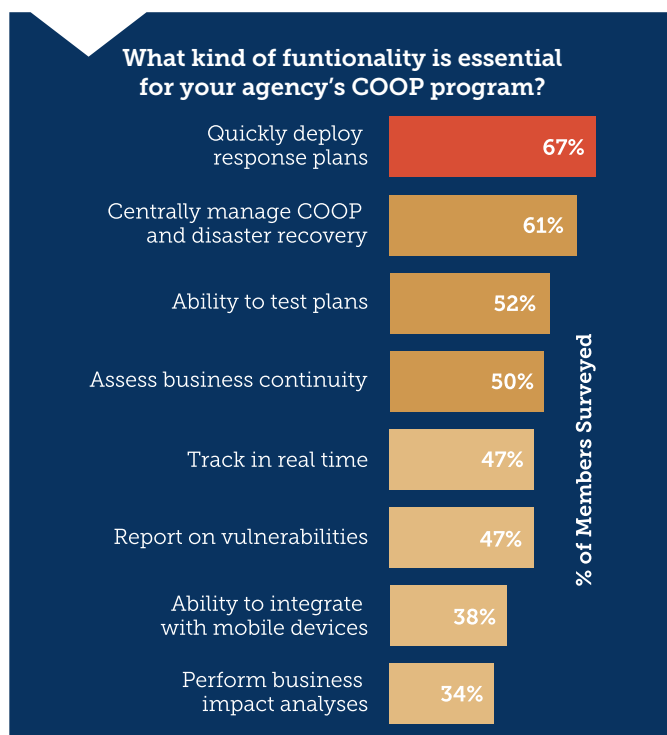
Benefits of an Automated COOP Solution

What are the benefits of an automated COOP solution?

Benefit	%
Manage crisis more effectively	67%
Rapid access to recovery strategies, procedures and tasks	62%
Automate plans with tested workflows and notifications	56%
Increase efficiency and collaboration	56%
Integrated risk assessment	50%
Align with government standards	49%
Ability to standardized BC and DR plans	35%
Other	10%

% of Members Surveyed

Figure 6.

Key Functionality Needed for COOP Solutions

What kind of funtionality is essential for your agency's COOP program?

Functionality	%
Quickly deploy response plans	67%
Centrally manage COOP and disaster recovery	61%
Ability to test plans	52%
Assess business continuity	50%
Track in real time	47%
Report on vulnerabilities	47%
Ability to integrate with mobile devices	38%
Perform business impact analyses	34%

% of Members Surveyed

Understanding Your Solution Needs

Our respondents provided many insights as to what they look for from a COOP vendor, and the kinds of solution needs they require **(see figure 6)**.

Respondents noted that they desire a vendor to have:

Enterprise-wide Solution

One respondent noted the importance of having the COOP solution be enterprise-wide, noting, "Ability to work with/link to other enterprise systems (fiscal, HR., etc)." This is an important requirement for a vendor to have, as collaboration is key across government agencies.

Distinguished Record of Public Sector Experience

Another key element was having a distinguished record of public sector experience, so they know the needs of their government clients. "Skill and track record with other governmental organizations," said one survey participant. Another added, "It would be beneficial for our office to work with a vendor who has experience or knowledge of contracting, who will treat our office like a small business and help us match our needs to the regulations that currently exist."

Adaptable

A final requirement was the need to be adaptable in a quickly changing environment. "A vendor with experience, adaptable to each environment, tools that are easy to use and work well, personnel who are well trained and knowledgeable," said a survey respondent.

In a dynamic world with changing threats and emerging risks, organizations must pay attention to how they can quickly and efficiently keep their organizations running in the event of a disruption. This report is your first step to understanding how to improve your processes, and make smart decisions to improve the efficiency of your operations, no matter what the scenario.

ABOUT FOUR POINTS

ABOUT RSA

Four Points Technology, LLC is a CVE-verified Service Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business (SDVOSB) delivering technology solutions to our Government customers around the world. We partner with top manufacturers and software companies to provide our customers with leading edge information technology solutions. As a Federally-focused prime contractor, Four Points Technology offers a strong contract portfolio that includes Government-wide contracts such as GSA Schedule 70 and SEWP IV as well as multiple agency-specific IDIQs and BPAs. Our disciplined approach to the management of product delivery and ancillary services provides access to the latest technology in an environment that supports rapid implementation, clear productivity gains, and short ROIs.

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RSA, The Security Division of EMC, is the premier provider of security, risk and compliance management solutions. RSA helps government agencies solve their most complex and sensitive security challenges. These challenges include managing organizational risk, safeguarding mobile access and collaboration, proving compliance, and securing virtual and cloud environments. Combining critical controls in identity assurance, encryption & key management, data loss prevention, continuous network monitoring, and fraud protection with industry leading eGRC capabilities and robust consulting services, RSA brings visibility and trust to millions of user identities, the transactions that they perform and the data that is generated.

With RSA's Business Continuity Management and Operations solution, organizations can deploy a holistic management process to prepare for possible disruptions to business processes, manage crises and manage risks to business operations. Organizations can automate their approach to business continuity and disaster recovery planning, and enable rapid, effective crisis management in one solution.

www.rsa.com/grc

ABOUT GOVLOOP

GovLoop's mission is to "connect government to improve government." We aim to inspire public sector professionals by serving as the knowledge network for government. GovLoop connects more than 100,000 members, fostering cross-government collaboration, solving common problems and advancing government careers. GovLoop is headquartered in Washington D.C. with a team of dedicated professionals who share a commitment to connect and improve government.

For more information about this report, please reach out to Pat Fiorenza, Senior Research Analyst, GovLoop, at pat@govloop.com, or follow him on Twitter: @pjfiorenza

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