Issues management

Case study: Australian Bureau of Statistics

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) established a comprehensive issues management framework to categorize, manage, coordinate and respond to issues arising from program operations. This included appointing a designated Issues Manager and a small team comprising at any time between 4 to 6 staff members.

The issues management team established strong working relationships across all work program and developed issue management plans for each work stream. These plans were in place early in the process to enable the efficient handling of issues as they arose.

Two companies were contracted to provide external expertise in business continuity and issues management and to assist with developing issue recovery plans. These plans complemented the issues management framework and provided independent assurance over processes.

The Issues Manager worked closely with the Risk Manager to monitor emerging issues that potentially required a risk management strategy to resolve. Equally there was a strong working relationship with the Fraud Manager in the event that issues involved suspected fraud.

The issues management framework ensured a common understanding of terminology amongst all work streams and a clear understanding of the escalation path.
The Operations Management Team included all work stream leads and was responsible for reporting issues at the daily operations meeting. This ensured that all work streams were aware of the issue and any possible impact on other work streams.

The Issues Management team was responsible for:

- overseeing the execution of issues management plans and determining actions required to delegate and respond as appropriate
- monitoring the resolution of issues
- identifying crises for escalation to the Crisis Management Team

The Crisis Management Team was responsible for ensuring business continuity in the event of an issue impacting on the organization’s reputation.

The issues management framework adopted agile processes to work through issues and used a Kanban board to facilitate conversations with the Issues Management Team and work through the priority areas; people, security, integrity of data, communication and reputation, processing, customer experience and business as usual. This process was useful in identifying key priority areas requiring action and quick resolution of issues.

Issues Management Kanban

To effectively and efficiently manage issues that occurred outside business hours, a secured virtual conference number was established, with a supporting ‘virtual’ Kanban board to guide the discussion.

An Issues Response Room was established and equipped with video conferencing; communications media monitoring; workstations; whiteboard to allow the Issues Management team to work through issues in a secure location. Utilization of tools such as Skype Chat Rooms; SMS group contacts; and external conferencing enabled communication to flow effectively and efficiently.

A total of 8 issues arose during the operations of the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey (AMLPS) with the majority of issues occurring in the early stages of the program, in particular the period where survey forms were being mailed out (between 12 September 2017 and 25 September 2017). All issues were resolved well before the close of the survey, with the majority closed within a day of the issue occurring.

Throughout the AMLPS there were no issues elevated to a crisis situation.

Issue management case study: 1

Attempts to sell survey forms online
On 30 August 2017 the media reported the sale of survey forms online via sites such as eBay and Gumtree. This action raised serious security concerns.

The ABS engaged quickly with online marketplaces such as eBay, Facebook, Gumtree, Amazon, Alibaba and Digital Industry Group seeking their assistance to remove any listing and an assurance that future listings would be blocked and promptly removed.

The sale and/or purchase of survey materials or responses may be an offence under the Census and Statistics Act 1905 or the Commonwealth Criminal Code. Penalties for these offences range from fines to imprisonment.

All allegations of fraud or criminal actions were investigated by the ABS and where appropriate referred to the relevant authorities for investigation. A total of 18 matters were referred to police for investigation.

**Issue management case study: 2**

**Bogus Australia Post worker using torch to identify No responses**

On 13 September 2017 an individual claiming to be an Australian Postal worker tweeted that they were using a torch light held against the reply paid envelope to see the response on the survey form and throwing out No response surveys. This raised issues around tampering with survey responses, privacy concerns and the integrity of Australian Postal workers.

Australia Post investigated and confirmed that the person was not an Australia Post employee and noted that tampering with mail is a Commonwealth offence and carries serious penalties. Examining the contents of a person’s mail that is not approved to do so is punishable and could face imprisonment of up to two years. The criminal consequences were highlighted in responses to media questions and in media appearances by the Taskforce lead.

There was no visible identifying information on any response form such as a name or an address to identify an individual and therefore there was no breach of privacy.

This fake claim about Australia Post’s handling of forms was an isolated report and there were no such incidents at any point in the process.

**Crisis management simulation**

The ABS engaged a public relations agency to facilitate an issues workshop to test the Issues Management team readiness to prevent, prepare, respond and recover in a crisis situation. A set of scenarios were used that focused on the management of likely crises and the efficiency and effectiveness of the public and internal communication channels.

The scenarios ranged in complexity and covered threats to physical security, data integrity, sabotage, staff safety and theft. This approach proved highly useful and was able to inform the ABS’s approach to risk management, issues management and fraud control.

**Complaints**

Members of the public were able to lodge feedback with the ABS through the marriage survey website. The ABS received 800 complaints from the public through this form. The complaints related to:

- the fact that the survey was being conducted
- concerns about personal privacy
- a broadcast SMS message sent by a campaign
- skywriting by a campaign

Where appropriate the ABS referred complaints to relevant areas within the ABS and to relevant government departments and agencies.