

How to Make Business Resilience Practical for the Mid-Tier

A conversation with Grace Burley and Devin Sirmenis, Managing Directors, Corporate Resilience

Mid-tier companies recognize the importance of corporate resilience as high-impact, negative events and disruptions continue to affect companies of all sizes. Disruptions that impact employee security, interfere with critical businesses processes and potentially damage an organization's reputation have become more frequent. For the Fortune 500 solutions are attainable, albeit expensive. For the mid-tier, the solutions can be complicated due to resource restriction and consultant solutions designed for only the largest of companies. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored a new reality – crises can impact any business, of any size in any industry. Today, no company can really be under the radar or afford to ignore or try to “ride out” negative events.

Giving mid-tier business leaders an affordable way to prepare for and manage disruptive events was the genesis of Witt O'Brien's [CO:RE](#) outsourced resilience service. Recently we spoke with the two principal CO:RE architects: [Grace Burley](#) and [Devin Sirmenis](#), about how their distinct backgrounds in business continuity (BC) and crisis management (CM) helped design the service to help mid-tiers develop successful CM and BC planning and clear, effective communications to minimize disruption, recover more quickly and build strength.

Tell us a bit about your background and how you came to envision CO:RE.

Grace: I owned a small CM and BC firm that worked with large global brands with extremely high profiles. The contrast of being a boutique firm owner focused on supporting large international companies put me in a unique position of understanding both extremely large and small companies. I also have had the opportunity to see how the absolute top tier, elite companies lead and respond to adversity. I am constantly taking note. My personal mission with CO:RE is to take the best components of our lessons learned and make them attainable and affordable to the mid-tier companies that I know need them.

Devin: I come from 'big consultancy' where you are constantly filtering down the tremendous depth of expertise and abundant on-demand resources that can be applied to a client's needs. For years I have been exploring how to apply this same approach to the resilience disciplines, to scale solutions to the culture, size, and maturity of mid-market firms. Making things 'simple' is often harder than providing complex solutions.

What ideas and capabilities ladder up from the boutique world and trickle down from the corporate world to form the foundation for CO:RE?

Grace: Irrespective of client size, we have brought a small business mentality that emphasizes practicality. Small businesses do not have the luxury of being impractical with the way time and resources are allocated and how you prioritize – really knowing where the rubber meets the road. The ability to tune out the noise and focus on the essential and doable translates directly to the BC function in mid-tier businesses. Typically, it is a single person or small team responsible for both crisis management and business continuity for the whole company. They have a large, important responsibility and are always juggling priorities.

Another advantage of the practical mindset is that with both BC and CM, there is a tendency to try to boil the ocean. There are myriad different opinions on what BC and CM mean, and people come to the table with their own agendas and priorities. Trying to encapsulate all those competing ideas and interests, the effort gets too complex and ends up going nowhere. So, we can help keep the strategy and planning focused by being astute enough to understand what the client truly needs and be discerning as to how to apply resources to the most challenging problems or critical areas of the business.

Devin: One advantage of large consultancies is that you have access to unlimited resources and unlimited expertise. You can literally pick up a phone and request an expert on any sector or subject matter and have someone ready to work in five minutes who understands your business and can talk your talk. The complementary big firm skillset to practicality is the ability to understand the broad nature, scope of the client's risk, and determine what specific expertise is needed to address those issues. It is also the ability to scale expert resources – to bring in experts when and while they are needed, and then cycle them out when the task is done.

How does the boutique mindset help mid-tier businesses focus on what matters most?

Grace: Business leaders know their businesses. They know what is important and what is fragile. Our emphasis on practical, doable action taps into the company's trust in that knowledge to bring into focus the most important, critical and fragile operations. Because we know, and they know, they simply cannot give every process equal attention. So instead of identifying every single business process to get to the most critical ones, we work with leadership to identify the most critical process then go right to plan development.

Also, unlike large companies where departmental leadership is so deep that different people can make critical decisions, with most mid-tiers, the same decision maker covers multiple processes, so we work to make their life easier. We give them a list of the top processes they need to focus on and the business continuity centric data points they need to make those decisions.

How does the big firm experience translate into the practical, focused approach for mid-tier businesses?

Devin: It would be extremely hard, if not impossible, for a small crisis advisory to deliver a service like CO:RE. To be of real value, it needs to have larger infrastructure, like the one we have at Witt O'Brien's – where the bandwidth to be truly 24-7 and the expertise to pull together the right response capability for the client's unique needs exists. Working with clients to tailor and implement CO:RE and having the ability to discern what is applicable to the client's business, our team can offer mid-tiers all the intellectual capital they could ever want to run a global world class resilience program, but in a scalable, tailored and practical manner. Clients do not sacrifice intelligence and capability, they just avoid any unnecessary, undifferentiated heavy lifting, and getting tied up in in dense, complex structures and processes.

What other ways does the blending of small firm practicality and big firm scale benefit CO:RE clients?

Grace: Two other important benefits of our approach are efficiency and relevance. Devin and I have each spent most of our careers - building risk and resilience capacity for all types of companies. We know the common BC and CM elements that work everywhere. We have been able to take those learnings and translate them into field-tested frameworks and templates to streamline creating plans, so they are useable, while still following the intent of standards and blending in best practices from across industries. We start with the basic, common elements that need to be in place – the ones we know are important to all businesses. This helps make CO:RE practical, doable and affordable.

Devin: That said, CO:RE is a tailored, balanced and useable solution. There is a bespoke quality to CO:RE, and the finished product will always reflect the client's business, their priorities, and the industry landscape.

Another crucial point is that we do not talk about risk abstractedly or conceptually, but rather in terms of impact and probability. We work with client teams to understand their top vulnerabilities and risk exposures and build the CO:RE program to ensure continuity against those risks. We also take an inclusive approach that involves different client teams that help bring out both the known and unknown interdependencies and uncover critical risk impacts in one area of the business that otherwise may have been overlooked. Being inclusive also helps build

understanding, trust and alignment in the approach and the plan. This helps avoid independent, misaligned decisions that can work against resilience goals.

Any concluding thoughts about what mid-tier businesses should know about CO:RE?

Grace and Devin: While Witt O'Brien's has expertise across emergency management, disaster response, natural disaster recovery, compliance, business continuity, crisis management and crisis communications – with various teams supporting diverse clients, our common thread that unites our efforts is resilience. We work as a federation of experts that come together seamlessly – as needed – to attack a specific client challenge. And we are not theoretical resilience practitioners. We build the programs and then we roll up our sleeves and will dive in to help clients manage real events, providing both preparation and response support through CO:RE.

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