Best Practices for Outage Communications

Streamline Incident Communication with Intelligent Alerting

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Introduction

When incidents occur, you need a streamlined method for the rapid dissemination of information to relevant teams. What may seem to be an easy communication workflow solution, is in fact, just the tip of the iceberg of a major communication challenge.

Think about all the channels you can communicate on. Think about the various teams that need to be looped into the conversation and the different pieces of information that they may need. Think about how you would keep an audit of every action being taken or each recipient's response time. Consider how you would keep your internal stakeholders informed and how you would send out only relevant information to vendors or customers.

To enable organizations to build a robust outage communication workflow, OnPage highly suggests that firms deploy a comprehensive incident alerting solution, covering all sides of their communication needs.

To set the stage, there are three parties you need to communicate with...the incident response team, employees, and stakeholders, such as customers and vendors.

Incident Response Team

The first step to incident resolution begins with preparation and assigning the **incident response team** to manage the issue. It is important that your front-line team and subject-matter experts are empowered with technology that enables them to have an **orchestrated response approach** to critical incidents. Incident resolution, when done correctly, will prevent an organization from massive revenue losses.

To ensure successful remediate, you'll need to follow a three-pronged approach, **1)** involve the right people, **2)** choose your communication channel, and **3)** create post-mortem reports.

Involve the right people:
The first step of incident resolution is assigning an incident commander, who takes ownership of the incident and makes final decisions. They are involved in defining incident teams, roles, procedures, escalations, and failover policies. They take ownership of the situations from start to finish and are the point of contact for all teams involved.

OnPage's incident alert management platform enhances an incident commander's operations. The platform can be used to create on-call schedules for team members, assign escalation rules and policies, store team members' preferred contact methods, and enable redundancies to ensure no messages are missed.

OnPage makes it easy for the incident commander to bring teams of people together on one single platform to start resolving the issue at hand.

To take the guesswork out of the equation, the incident response team is notified as soon as there is an outage. Teams will also have rotations or "turns" if the first on-call member is not available. IT outage alerting can take place on multiple channels such as SMS, email, phone calls, and the OnPage mobile application. The underlying goal is to have a primary and secondary form of alerting to ensure that responders get out of their beds...even at 3 a.m. if need be.

Choose your communication channels:
Once the IT team is alerted of the situation, they need an incident response tool, that allows them to exchange vital information and contextual data. In a high-stakes situation, emails and SMS are not effective. They are indistinguishable from other notifications and are often missed. More importantly, these tools do not encourage collaboration, which is exactly what the team needs for successful outcomes.

Teams need a solution that enables real-time chat for effective collaboration and speedy recovery. Indeed, the success of incident resolution rests on speed and accuracy, and chat plays a crucial role in rapid incident resolution.

OnPage also bidirectionally integrates with chat collaboration apps like Slack, ensuring seamless team collaboration, without the hassle of switching between applications mid-conversation.

Create post-mortem reports:
For incident commanders to ensure further success, the actions taken by their response teams need to be documented and measured. This type of visibility can only occur when there are robust reporting capabilities attached to your critical alerting platform.

The reporting tool should provide summaries and insights through data. This information should highlight a team's effectiveness across multiple shifts and time zones. Thus, team leaders can see trends, performance, productivity, and understand how well their team is doing.

Internal Stakeholders

An incident commander often takes sole ownership of an outage situation. When they're in the process of resolving an incident, the last thing they need is people persistently asking for situational updates. That being said, one can't emphasize enough how outages directly affect internal stakeholders. Leaving internal stakeholders in the dark is not recommended, since they are answerable to your clients.

As a firm, you need to equip the incident commander with a tool that lets them send important information about the incident to your team. Internal stakeholders are not interested in every minuscule detail. Information should be limited to the **severity of the situation**, estimated **resolution time**, and any follow-up procedure to mitigate risks.

In gist, be proactive and send situational reports every time there is an update. You can also have an internal, real-time dashboard, displaying information including, the total number of open incidents, their severity, total resolved incidents, and the on-call tech support availability.

An effective way to send these updates is through OnPage's incident alerting platform. You can create various groups using the platform's internal directory and send out updates that may be the most relevant to that group. For instance, the group tagged as "senior management," may be interested in only getting a high-level view of the situation, while the folks in the customer support department need more insight into the situation that will help them get the message out to anxious customers.

The second method, and a highly recommended solution, is to use a mass notification solution to get the word out. Like a two-way dispatcher, one has the option to pre-configure groups based on departments, seniority or any other criteria to send out notifications.

In either case, you will receive a time-stamped audit report of message statuses.

Customers

Finally, IT outage communication does not stop with internal stakeholders; it is also an ideal practice to keep customers and vendors in the loop, especially if their operations are directly impacted by the outage.

Outages can be chaotic, and the last thing you want is to be forced into making logistical decisions about communicating with clients on the spot. Leading organizations are increasingly becoming more and more transparent and keeping their customers aware during outages. They proactively post updates about an outage on their website as well as on their social media pages.

Another recent trend that we've been seeing is that some of our clients are interested in solutions, that enable them to proactively mass notify their customers during IT outages.

A good practice, when it comes to sending out mass notifications, is to have the right amount of information that is relevant to the customer. This may include a sanitized summary of the outage, the severity and impact of the situation, and possibly, a temporary work-around if there is one. You may also choose to link a live status page with updates.

By openly discussing failures, your team can improve transparency with its clients, highlighting your organization's accountability and responsibility. It is also often seen as a signal of strength and ownership to prospective customers. Ultimately, providing frequent outage updates solidifies trust with your clients making it a great business move that puts them at ease.

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Plan ahead of time for outages to avoid further complications.
- ✓ An incident commander should be appointed as the single point-of-contact.
- ✓ Automate the communication process to avoid manual errors and for speedy resolution. Have a mechanism in place to automatically alert the right person at the right time.
- ✓ Proactively communicate with your customers and keep them updated.
- ✓ Inform your internal stakeholders on a timely basis.
- ✓ To learn from an event, maintain documented summaries and data insights.

About OnPage

OnPage's award-winning incident alert management system for IT, MSP, and healthcare professionals provides the industry's only ALERT-UNTIL-READ notification capabilities, ensuring that critical messages are never missed. OnPage enables organizations to get the most out of their digital investments, so that sensors, monitoring systems, and people have a reliable way to escalate urgent notifications to the right person immediately.

OnPage's escalation, redundancy, and scheduling features make the system infinitely more reliable and secure than emails, text messages, and phone calls. OnPage shrinks resolution time by automating the notification process, reducing human errors, and prioritizing critical messages to ensure fast response times.

Whether to minimize IT infrastructure downtime or to reduce response times of healthcare providers, organizations trust OnPage for all their secure, HIPAA-compliant, critical notification needs.

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