

# Situational Awareness: New Buzz Word for Contingency Planners?

By Karie Wohlgemuth, NC4

With all of the negative news about the economy and words like “downsizing” and “furlough days” becoming the new buzz words, companies are looking for ways to cut costs but still protect their business from unexpected events. More and more that effort means utilizing technology to supplement a smaller work force, while still managing corporate risk. The first and most important part of significant event management is in knowing what happened and where. Set in this context, it might be a good idea to consider what the level of Situational Awareness is in your organization. Have you checked lately?

## It Starts With Knowing What’s Going On

**BOOM!** What was THAT?

Any disaster response must start with knowing *to a certainty* precisely what is going on. It is only through effective collection and dissemination of accurate information that an effective disaster response can be mounted. In the past, NaSPA has discussed the “dissemination” part of the equation in some fine articles about outbound notification systems. But what about the “what happened?” or more specifically, “what’s happening?” part of the equation? If a disaster strikes, how will you know *exactly* what has happened, when half facts and misinformation may abound? How does one afford to even propose such a capability these days? The answer is that as in most of the other aspects of our

business, technology is being employed. Today’s technology not only warns and alerts organizations to disasters, a fire alarm can do that on an elemental level. Today technology can “filter out the noise” by sifting through thousands of alerts and only telling you about the important ones. The net result is the ability to deliver *actionable* information to your organization based on the situations and scenarios that are most meaningful to it.

## Are Companies Really Doing This Today?

Absolutely, and the bigger they are the more they do it. After 9/11, it became obvious that companies needed better ways to see the events unfolding around them, and to communicate with employees, stakeholders and partners. Yet, it is virtually impossible to monitor all of the information sources that are available on a 24/7/365 basis. Even if a company could monitor all of these sources, it would waste resources sifting through the volumes of data only to mine the small nuggets of information that may actually be applicable. A car alarm in the parking lot may not be important. An explosion in the basement probably is. A train derailment might not be important, unless it’s next to your place of business and spills a load of ammonia.

Consider the incident on April 9, 2009 when someone sabotaged an AT&T fiber optic cable and blacked out a big chunk of California. The



deliberately severed fiber optic cable caused millions in Silicon Valley and San Francisco to go without broadband, phone, and wireless service for most of that day.

In this case, *Twitter* was actually used by communications giant AT&T to “reached out and update” its customers about the sabotage! AT&T began “tweeting” about the fiber sabotage in California around 7 a.m. PDT on April 9, 2009 with the first message saying:

*“CA customers: We are aware of a cable cut situation impacting services in Santa Clara and San Jose areas.”*

AT&T went on later to add:

*“AT&T offering \$100,000 reward for info leading to arrest/conviction of those responsible for CA vandalism. Call 408-947-STOP.”*

When you think about it, however, wouldn’t one assume there were better ways to organize information and communicate in a time like this than with a social networking tool? As it turns out, there is and some companies have been developing the tools for some time.

### **The Industry’s Response to Situational Awareness**

In a research expedition, members of the Candle Corporation (now part of IBM) went out to the marketplace to see if technology could answer the call for being the intelligence and reporting arm for incidents happening externally to an organization, that might impact its people and operations. There was not only a need for such a technology, but a gap in the marketplace in fulfilling this need. As a result, NC4, the National Center for Crisis and Continuity Coordination, was formed in 2002. The focus of NC4 was not only on creating awareness in the marketplace, but also on readiness for the things happening around you. NC4 created the phrase, “Situational Readiness” to apply to its offering.

To be effective, NC4 would have to monitor thousands of the media sources, emergency service scanners, dispatch systems and social media sites around the world while filtering the information to determine relevance to a customer. The vision was to be the primary information source for relevant events that had a direct impact on customers. This vision translated into the External Situational Awareness service, known as ESA. NC4 identified the types of information that corporations and government organizations would be interested in which now include: advisories, aviation, fire, geospatial, hazmat, health, infrastructure, meteorological, security, structural, terrorism and transportation.

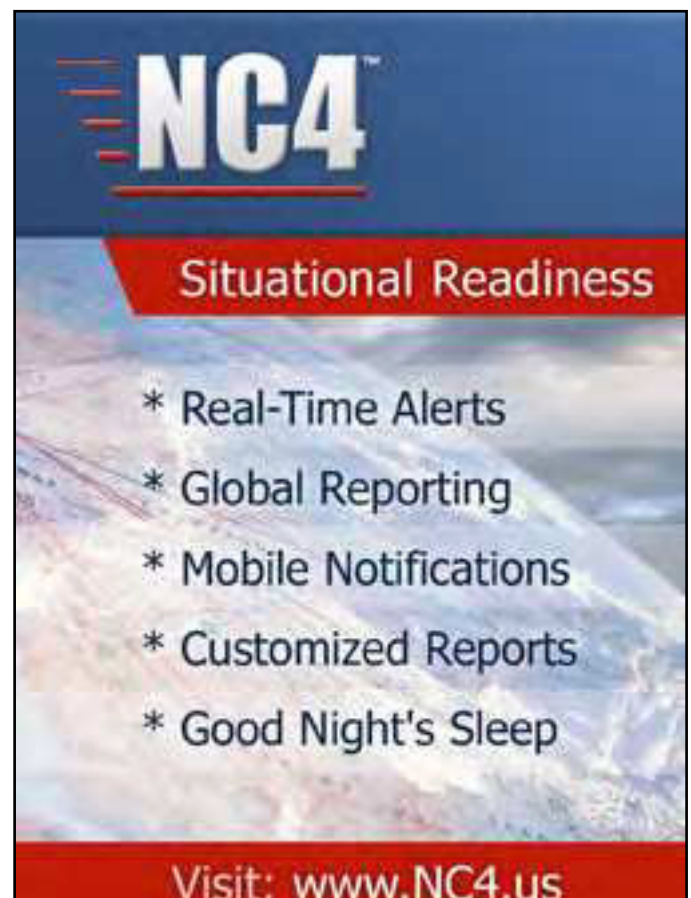
It is just as critical to understand an event’s proximity to a specific location as it is to understand the severity of the incident. I may not be interested in a traffic accident 50 miles away, but I will be interested if it’s outside my building and affecting my employee’s ability to leave work or my distributor’s ability to deliver supplies to my store. Similarly I would want to know if severe weather is headed in my direction or if a terrorist activity affects the hotel where my employees are staying. NC4 customers therefore pinpoint locations on a map and then decide the incident type, proximity and severity that are applicable to their specific organization. This allows them to then profile what they want to know about, as well as the devices that they want used for notification when a given event triggers that profile. The key here is that relevant alert information is filtered and distributed based on the

criteria they define. The information can be received over e-mail or any SMS device which means customers can see the incident summary on a cell phone, pager or blackberry.

Does it work? According to Ray Ferrara of Ferguson Enterprises, “Everyone asks about return on investment (ROI) after installing a technology solution. It is very difficult to quantify the dollars saved from preventing a terrible event, making decisions five minutes faster or knowing that your employees are safe. The peace of mind ESA provides is priceless.” Similar stories can be heard from organizations that use this technology to provide them with critical information to help them maintain business continuity. NC4 customers include major financial firms, aerospace and defense contractors, Government agencies, software and technology vendors and pharmaceutical companies.

Yet, the basic service that NC4 set out to create 7 years ago is a much different product than what ESA is today. NC4 still maintains the top-notch incident monitoring and alert notification that made it an almost instant success. NC4 has partnered with local police, corporate security and emergency services to receive direct information feeds as well as incident confirmations from these sources. This growing list of direct sources, in addition to the extensive technology developed specifically for ESA, gives NC4 advantages that traditional alarm or monitoring services do not have. NC4’s technology adds automated sources as well as parses the data into bytes that are monitored by one of the analysts in the NC4 Incident Monitoring Centers (NIMC.) The service has both a domestic and global offering.

In following their mission of using technology as a force multiplier, NC4 has partnered with TranSecur to expand the offering to include



The graphic features the NC4 logo at the top, followed by the text 'Situational Readiness' in a red banner. Below this is a list of five bullet points: '\* Real-Time Alerts', '\* Global Reporting', '\* Mobile Notifications', '\* Customized Reports', and '\* Good Night's Sleep'. At the bottom, a red banner contains the text 'Visit: www.NC4.us'. The background of the graphic is a blurred image of a city street.

## Want to Know More?

Other recent events, news articles and press releases can be found at: [www.nc4.us/newsevents.php](http://www.nc4.us/newsevents.php). Information on ESA including Case Studies: [www.nc4.us/ESA.php](http://www.nc4.us/ESA.php) Incident Highlighter: [www.nc4.us/flashmap.php](http://www.nc4.us/flashmap.php) (Shows a preview of the live incidents being monitored by NC4 Incident Monitoring Centers) Also see the NC4 ad in this section. We thank Karie and NC4 for their thoughtful contribution to Technical Support Magazine, just in time for National Preparedness Week.

country risk analysis and will introduce its travel tracking component later this year. Also, NC4 has recently completed its integration with Everbridge to allow incident data to be broadcast to tens or thousands through Everbridge's extensive notification distribution technology. The ESA service now has a sister component, ISA which is the Internal Situational Awareness feature that allows companies to report, track and distribute information regarding their own internal incidents in addition to the external incidents reported by NC4. All of these features can also be served up through a mobile device.

NC4 has added to its technology suite the E Team emergency response platform, which allows emergency services to prepare, respond and recover from natural or man-made disasters. In addition to its domestic use by most major U.S. cities, E Team has also expanded into several other countries. Further, NC4 provides a secure collaboration portal product through its ESP Software as a Service package.

This SaaS product is in use by many Federal agencies for secure collaboration and communication. NC4 is also presently evaluating other sources of useful data, such as the [Pacific Disaster Center](#) and others.

## Summary

In closing, the use of technology can indeed make a significant impact on a business in time of distress if it is timely, relevant, filtered and well-utilized.

As is virtually always the case, technology should be employed where possible to do the heavy lifting. Besides, it's cheaper than just using people power.

Now is the perfect time to look at technologies with multiple uses that can bring in the benefits of risk mitigation and safety for employees and operations while leaving your resources to focus on other aspects of the business.

**Karie Wohlgemuth** is the Director of Marketing for El Segundo CA based NC4, which specializes in all facets of situational awareness for major corporations, and proud NaSPA sponsor. The company's web site can be found at [www.nc4.us](http://www.nc4.us).



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