What do you do when the fire alarm goes off at work? If you’re like most people, you think to yourself, “Great, an interruption right in the middle of my (x, y, z) project. I hope this won’t take too long.” You reluctantly shuffle outside and mill around with everyone else until someone gives the all-clear signal to head back to work.

We’ve been conditioned by years of fire drills to assume that alarms are either tests or false alarms, and just mean a twenty-minute work break. But if a fire alarm is to serve its function, we need to assume—or at least pretend—that it’s the real thing. Most important, we need to assume that we will not be returning to work.

I learned about this first hand years ago when I was staying at a hotel in New York City. I was returning from a jog one morning, standing in the hall in my running clothes, when the fire alarm went off. I decided to go in to my room to get my wallet and then started heading down the stairs with everyone else. It turned out that a transformer in the building had caught fire.

Although that fire was minor, regulations required that the fire inspector go through the entire building to look for other potential damage before anyone was allowed back in. The building was closed for two days. We couldn’t even retrieve our clothes. I spent that day touring NYC in sweaty running clothes explaining my odd appearance to restaurant people and the like. Luckily, I had my wallet and so could buy meals, tour tickets, and eventually a set of new clothes. I would have been in real trouble without it.

What does this have to do with business continuity? Well, many people would say that I did the wrong thing by taking the time to retrieve my wallet instead of immediately heading for the nearest exit. Was it a reasonable risk?

A similar question came up recently in a discussion on a business-continuity bulletin board about whether it is OK to advise employees to take their laptops with them when they hear a fire alarm. Most commentators thought that employees should not be told to take their laptops because life is more valuable than business.

But I’m not so sure it’s as simple as that. Most companies advise employees to grab personal belongings, such as coats or purses, on the way out. A laptop can be undocked or unplugged in a couple of seconds—no one is saying that they should wait for the full shutdown sequence or even the undocking process. There isn’t any more time invested than grabbing a coat.
It might even be that requiring people to take their laptop actually improves response time by breaking them of the it’s-only-a-fire-drill mindset and getting them to take it seriously. Take a look at how employees react to fire alarms and you will see them finishing up phone conversations, adding a few sentences to a document, waiting for friends, etc. Taking your laptop reminds you that you might not be coming back because it might be the real thing.

As is often the case with ethical questions, the issue is not easily solved with absolutes like “life is more valuable than business.” If safety always trumped other considerations, then we would not allow car radios in cars – and certainly not text-message ads via RDS <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4156/is_/ai_n9627466>. Information assurance and business continuity practitioners face many ethical issues that have yet to be explored and I hope that we will engage in vigorous discussion about these issues.

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John Orlando, PhD, MSIA is Program Director of the Master of Science in Business Continuity. <http://www.graduate.norwich.edu/business-continuity/> He frequently teaches courses in ethics at Norwich University in the School of Humanities as well as lecturing on business continuity.

M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP is Program Director of the Master of Science in Information Assurance <http://www.graduate.norwich.edu/infoassurance/> and CTO of the School of Graduate Studies at Norwich University in Northfield, VT. Mich can be reached by e-mail at <mailto:mekabay@gmail.com>; Web site at <http://www.mekabay.com/index.htm>.

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