

Business Continuity Planning for Influenza A (Swine Flu) Pandemic



Release 2.6 – 17:00 GMT, June 11th 2009

Key issues

- ⊙ H1N1 (Swine flu) is gradually spreading – more countries, more cases
- ⊙ It has achieved human to human transmission, which avian flu did not
- ⊙ On 11th June 2009 the World Health Organisation raised the threat level to six, a full pandemic
- ⊙ At that date it had affected 74 countries and caused 27,737 reported cases and 171 deaths.
- ⊙ So far it is a mild variety – but so were the first iterations in other devastating pandemics
- ⊙ Like all influenza attacks, it might die down during the summer but return in winter in strengthened form

Therefore:

- ⊙ If you don't have a plan, you need one – if not now then by next winter
- ⊙ Delaying till there is evidence of the second wave will be like installing smoke alarms in a burning building
- ⊙ Plan for the loss of the things that are crucial to your business - e.g., working environment, IT, telecommunications, people, key suppliers and partners

Reducing the risk of your employees & others being infected by the virus

- ⊙ Use guidance from organisations such as the World Health Organisation and the government and health services of those countries where your employees are based. Such advice is being regularly revised to reflect the course that the pandemic is taking and the latest thinking. Key topics are restrictions on overseas travel, domestic and workplace hygiene, vaccination, home working, public gatherings and the use of public transport.
- ⊙ Consider carefully before sending employees to high risk countries. The list of such countries will change, but initially Mexico and to a far lesser degree the United States must rank highly for such consideration.
- ⊙ Monitor the situation closely and have a mechanism for reacting to any change in the status of the crisis.
- ⊙ Set up a disaster and pandemic management group. If you have a Business Continuity or Crisis Management plan, it should already have triggered the formation of such a group. Have them on stand-by and make sure that they are all accessible and contactable.

Reducing the risk of your critical business functions being interrupted

In a pandemic, both you and your suppliers you will have significantly more employees absent, and for longer periods. Employees with children may have to stay at home to look after them if they are sick or their schools are closed. Public transport may be curtailed.

Contingency planning could reduce the impact of all of this on your critical activities, ensuring your survival.

If you do not have a business continuity plan:

You need one! However, you are where you are, and the following steps should give you much more resilience than you have now:

- ⊙ Establish your critical functions and the people and suppliers that they depend upon. Identify pinch points – you could well have one or two critical people or suppliers whose loss would have a disproportionate impact. Work out, now, what your options might be.
- ⊙ If you do not have this information already, use a simple questionnaire to establish what skills your employees have that go beyond the requirements of their current job. Establishing this now, and possibly encouraging your employees to update some of their vital skills, could considerably increase your flexibility if key employees are affected. Where relevant, use the same process to gather data on your employee's broadband connections, home computers and family commitments.
- ⊙ Based on the information gathered on the various areas discussed here, develop some ideas around possible strategies. Given the unpredictability of the way in which the pandemic might develop a precise strategy is inadvisable but you can do a great deal to think through some of the key options.
- ⊙ It is more important that you develop the ability to think and act quickly and decisively – that will depend upon creating effective Business Continuity and Crisis Management teams that have the ability and authority to take rapid yet considered decisions. Such teams should include senior, preferably board-level, people who encompass all of the critical functions – for example, Finance, IT, HR, Sales, Marketing, Operations.

If you have an existing Business Continuity Plan:

Ideally your existing Business Continuity plan should cater for pandemic. The following sections are relevant:

Loss of people – Employees are a time-critical asset just as much as are computers, telecommunications or a working environment. Your plan should cater for the sudden loss of a sufficient number, and type, of critical employees to impact adversely on your business.

Failure of critical suppliers – External organisations have a similar vulnerability to your own. Loss of people could affect public utilities, transport, computer and internet services, work that you sub-contract out and the critical goods and services that you buy in. Having identified your critical suppliers and partners you should have, or should now, make enquiries of them to ascertain their state of preparedness as well as brainstorming alternatives in the event of their inability to deliver. In the UK and many other countries the planning that has been undertaken by key public utilities for an avian flu pandemic should hold good (but cannot perform miracles).

Even if you have not made a provision for either or both of these scenarios in your plan, the ground work that you should already have undertaken to create your plan should enable you to bring your plan up to scratch relatively quickly. In particular:

Critical needs analysis – this should identify which of your critical functions have to be resumed in the event of a major disaster and the time tolerance for each of those functions.

Business impact analysis – this should identify the impact of a range of possible scenarios on your critical operations, and will draw heavily on the Critical Needs Analysis to draw its conclusions. If you have not undertaken an analysis for the loss of critical people and suppliers, you may still be able to extract some wisdom by drawing on your past deliberations surrounding the loss of individual buildings or IT systems.

Home working strategy – It is possible that in planning for the loss of specific locations or computer systems, the viability of strategies such as a fall-back to complete or partial home working, with network access, was planned for; such a strategy can be readjusted to cater for a scenario in which you may need to minimise the risk of your employees

contracting the virus, or respond to a severe restriction on public transport and public gatherings.

Communications – Your crisis communications plan will be invaluable to deal with a range of stakeholders

Getting your Business Continuity plan fit for purpose

If your business continuity plan includes, as one of the threat scenarios, the unexpected unavailability of employees, do not assume that it is fit for purpose. Things could have changed since it was prepared. Review it and make sure that it is up to date.

Depending on your plan, we list below the sort of things that will need to be done. Which you do at this stage and which you delay until a pandemic seems more certain depends upon your judgement on the likelihood of the threat posed by the pandemic to your business judged against how quickly you feel that you could complete them if things deteriorate.

- ⊙ Quickly review the plan – has anything changed externally or internally to call for adjustments to the plan's strategy or the critical data contained within it? Have any of the key assumptions on which the plan is based changed?
- ⊙ Consult those employees who will play a critical role in your strategy and confirm that your understanding of their situation is still valid. (For example, relative to their family commitments, broadband/personal computer availability and commuting arrangements)
- ⊙ Review the plan against what we know of the current pandemic threat – are any changes needed to make the plan more appropriate or effective?
- ⊙ Review each department's log of key stakeholders and their contact details
- ⊙ Your plan should identify your critical suppliers and what resilience you have – the quality of their plans and/or your alternatives in the event of their inability to meet your needs. Review this information and talk to your suppliers as necessary.
- ⊙ Undertake the changes/updates triggered by all of the above
- ⊙ If your plan calls for IT or telecommunications infrastructure changes, for example by rolling out additional laptops for home working, acquire and set these up and make the necessary access changes
- ⊙ Convene a meeting of your business continuity/crisis management team(s) to fine-tune their roles and agree on the logistics for future meetings.
- ⊙ Many people are worried by the situation. If you feel it appropriate, announce the plan to your employees and explain how it will affect them.
- ⊙ Implement your crisis communications plan to communicate both reactively and proactively with employees, customers, the media, suppliers and partners and other key stakeholders

For further help

Contact us – It is easy to overlook critical factors or make false assumptions because you are simply too close to things. By providing help remotely (phone/email/internet) or directly we can help you to review or extend an existing plan, or create a new one where one does not yet exist.

In addition, our Dynamic Crisis Management system is a powerful tool that can be used by your crisis management groups to assist you in speedily making the optimum decisions and recording vital information.

Please [click here](#) to contact David Davies or Andrew West at idRisk or call 0845 22 55 606.