Preparing for, and Working Through, a Pandemic:
Things your Business Continuity Plan Should Consider

By Jack Riley

Much has changed since the time of my original writing of this article. As of now, due to the Covid-19 spread, most governments have made the decision to close all non-essential services and that has resulted, in many cases, in a further slowing of activity even for companies deemed essential.

Up to now, the world has not seen such drastic and swift response measures taken on a global scale, and with this consideration, we need to take note of how severe the impacts can become. This is obviously notable and therefore should be added to your future plan.

I have chosen to leave the article intact as originally written to serve as a reminder that we cannot fully predict and prepare for every outcome. Readers can inject their personal thoughts and circumstances while following along. The information written here provides what most may have anticipated, and I believe this three-paragraph addendum should serve to complete the intent of the article in the face of the recent changes….. JR

Most business continuity plans focus on what will happen if a building, equipment, products or services are lost or damaged in some way. They are also structured using the assumption that people will be able to return to begin recovery efforts almost immediately after the event. However, there are events that occur where the situation is prolonged indefinitely and/or recovery may not be able to start immediately. It is this kind of interruption that can make or break your business.

Let's address the current serious COVID-19 pandemic. If you haven't yet experienced a considerable impact on employee availability, you must start planning for it now. We are seeing many businesses, public and private service providers, and schools taking unprecedented measures to help slow the spread of the illness including being closed by order of public health officials. Other orders may include limiting or canceling social and public gatherings, stopping public transportation, requiring quarantines, etc. Some of which we are already seeing take place. All of these will add pressure on your employees and your business. It is important to be sure that your core business activities can be maintained for several weeks or months with limited resources and workers.

People will be off work for many reasons during pandemic crisis:

- Being sick, quarantined, self-isolating, or in recovery
- Volunteering in their communities, including assisting emergency workers
- Caring for their school aged children or other family members
- Preferring to remain at home, or under mandatory order by public health
- Avoiding public spaces and public transit
- In worst-case scenarios, they may have died or be on long-term disability

It is impossible to determine how many people will be unavailable to work. Estimates vary based on degree of sickness, speed of spread, or implementation of mandated preventative measures. Employers should plan for employee absenteeism rates of at least 20% and 50% during the peak periods of pandemic, with lower rates in the subsequent weeks. Normal absenteeism averages for a typical flu season are 8%.

Historically, pandemic flus have produced a higher than average number of illnesses and deaths over seasonal flus, and each strain seems to be very different than its predecessors. Current models suggest COVID-19 estimates are from 4.5 to 10.6 million Canadians becoming clinically ill and potentially unable to work.

Here are some other effects you can expect a pandemic to have on your business:

- Customer orders cancelled
- Difficulty getting parts and other supplies (especially if imported by air or land from across borders)
- Change in demands (increased internet use, travel limitations, road access points)
- Reduction or restrictions on public meetings or gatherings that may affect your facilities
- Reduced availability of health care or home care services where employees are concerned

- Forced full and partial closure of facilities by order of health officials
- In more extreme situations, possible disruptions in other services such as telecommunications, financial/banking, water, electricity, fuels, medicine, and food supplies

What steps are needed for a business continuity plan to prepare for a pandemic?

Once you have decided on the critical elements of your business, there are some organized steps to take:

- Decide on your strategy
    - Set short and long-term goals for your business' recovery
    - Determine how you will overcome obstacles
    - It is a good idea to consider a broad range of solutions to cover off the varying and unknowable impacts a pandemic will have
    - Be prepared for a multi-wave cycle. Pandemic spread usually comes in waves. You will need to plan for both smaller and larger worker absenteeism rates
- Develop clearly defined rules and activities for limiting exposure and impact
    - Establish a Pandemic Team. It is important to know ahead of time who will take the lead and who is responsible for each portion of the plan
    - There should also be a Prevention Coordinator assigned to keep track of staff and scheduling. This person may also be the person who is trained to determine the health status of employees
    - Prepare for, and have training, in crisis communications and/or media relations
    - Establish your needs for contracts and the level of service agreements, etc
    - Cross train employees to help ensure essential functions can continue.
- Develop a response plan
    - Write down what needs to be done and the resources that are required to implement the plan
- Implement your plan
    - Circulate the plan, gather feedback, and make sure that all employees know about and understand their roles and responsibilities
    - Conduct necessary training and cross training
- Test/Maintain/Audit
    - Commit to performing practice exercises
    - Review your plans annually or more often if your business changes

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Make sure to identify and set priorities.

It is important to set priorities that focus on the critical elements of your business. You must look at how the loss of any critical element will affect your business. The item that is critical can be anything or anyone: workers, systems, facilities, access to systems or the site, etc.

1. Identify critical processes, operations, and functions

2. Identify key internal and external dependencies

3. Identify what else can affect your business

Implementing a **Risk Assessment** process will be helpful.

How detailed your plan should be will depend on the type of business, its complexity, and its size. You need to take a look at what items are critical, determine how a pandemic will impact your business, and be sure to consider all aspects, even if they seem extreme.

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Please note that DFS is making consulting services available on a pro bono basis to help companies impacted by the Coronavirus. If you'd like to discuss how we can assist you and your business, get in touch with Jack Riley, the author of this article, at jriley@dfs-solutions.com

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