Guide to Pandemic Planning

Table of Contents

Introduction

As the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to increase, with the economic future uncertain, and with people everywhere dealing with a new reality, business continuity capability is under intense scrutiny. In response, many organizations are developing their first pandemic plans or reviewing existing plans. To assist these efforts, the following article, although not exhaustive, provides a structure for carrying out these activities.

A common view in the business continuity profession is that business continuity capability should be focused on impact following disruption rather than cause, and while this is often the case, the specific circumstances of a pandemic are an exception. Specific pandemic plans are a requirement because the organizational and societal issues under pandemic conditions are so very different from traditional threats, as the latest COVID-19 outbreak is showing; and while pandemic plans will not necessarily ensure business-as-usual during the pandemic period; they will help the organization to keep impacts to the lowest possible level.

Figure 1. The continuum of pandemic phases[a]

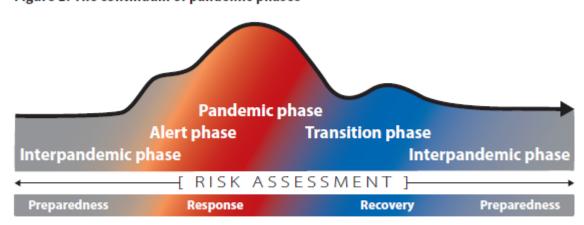[a] This continuum is according to a "global average" of cases, over time, based on continued risk assessment and consistent with the broader emergency risk management continuum.

U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention see:
https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/planning-preparedness/global-planning-508.html.

Traditional Business Continuity vs. Pandemic Planning

The Federal Financial Institutions Examination Council's (FFIEC) recent Interagency Statement on Pandemic Planning[1] explains the difference between traditional business continuity planning and pandemic planning very clearly, stating:

"There are distinct differences between pandemic planning and traditional business continuity planning. When developing business continuity plans … management typically considers the effect of various natural or man-made disasters that may differ in their severity. These disasters may or may not be predictable, but they are usually short in duration or limited in scope. In most cases, malicious activity, technical disruptions, and natural/man-made disasters typically will only affect a specific geographic area, facility, or system. These threats can usually be mitigated by focusing on resiliency and recovery considerations. Pandemic planning presents unique challenges … Unlike natural disasters, technical disasters, malicious acts, or terrorist events, the impact of a pandemic is much more difficult to determine because of the anticipated difference in scale and duration. The nature of the global economy virtually ensures that the effects of a pandemic event will be widespread and threaten not just a limited geographical region or area, but potentially every continent. In addition, while traditional disasters and disruptions normally have limited time durations, pandemics generally occur in multiple waves, each lasting two to three months."

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Background Information on COVID-19

While it is not necessary to have an in-depth understanding of virology, it is important to be informed about what COVID-19 is, what the symptoms of infection are, and how the outbreak is developing.

Accurate information informs good decision making, so it is necessary to do some background research, communicate this where appropriate, and monitor both the World Health Organization (WHO) situation reports[2] as well as governmental and health authorities in regions where your organization is exposed.

COVID-19 risk increases with age, and those who have existing medical conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and lung disease are at higher risk than the wider population[3]. Pregnant women have also recently been identified as a possible high risk group.

Business as Unusual

Pandemic planning requires strategic input from the organization's executive leadership. Depending on your exposure, your organization could be operating at significantly reduced capacity for an extended period. Therefore, wider business strategies, rather than your usual business continuity strategies, will be required to make the operational changes necessary to manage this situation. Your usual business continuity strategies are unlikely to be sufficient.

With organizations being forced to choose difficult but necessary survival strategies which have a huge impact on staff, governments taking draconian actions that impact daily lives, family and care issues becoming more relevant, and of course heightened anxiety resulting from uncertainty, strong and empathic leadership will be required.

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The Pandemic Capability

When developing your pandemic plan, the following areas should all be considered, identifying gaps which need working on if you are reviewing your current plans rather than building a plan from scratch. They don't need to be worked through as a step by step process as many can be carried out concurrently:

Understanding the Risk Landscape

It is important to consider the specific risks and threats to your organization posed by COVID-19 and how these are likely to develop over time.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

→ *The nature of your business activities;*

→ *The geographical locations of your facilities, customers and suppliers;*

→ *National and business culture that will affect how people respond and behave;*

→ *The percentage of your workforce who may be at higher risk from COVID-19;*

→ *The expected peak absenteeism rate and how this is likely to develop and subside;*

→ *Government actions, such as travel restrictions, quarantines, restrictions on mass-gatherings, and guidelines on social distancing.*

Understanding the Impacts

If your organization already has business continuity plans in place, a business impact analysis (BIA) will normally have been carried out to inform this planning. Reviewing the BIA with the information gained from the 'Understanding the Risk Landscape' activities outlined above will enable you to identify impacts on your organization which might occur or may be amplified as a result of COVID-19.

This will also give you a view of strategies that can be employed in support of the scenario and inform you on the minimum staffing levels needed to maintain core services.

If your organization has not carried out a BIA now is the time to do so. Consider the impact of COVID-19 on your people, processes, technology, facilities, supply chain, and stakeholders. Detailed information on how to carry out a BIA is beyond the scope of this article, but the Assurance and ClearView team of business continuity consultants would be happy to assist.

> *Business impact analysis (BIA) is a systematic process to determine and evaluate the potential effects of an interruption to critical business operations as a result of a disaster, accident or emergency.*

Prevention

Prevention of COVID-19 infections amongst your employees is a key priority and actions to take in this area include:

→ **Handwashing:** there can be very few people who have not yet heard health authority and governmental advice on handwashing; but repeated reminders are important to maintain appropriate handwashing by employees. However, since staff are probably experiencing COVID-19 information overload due to wall-to-wall media coverage, the challenge is how to use creative messaging and social nudges to enhance this behavior.

One key is to ensure that janitorial supplies are always available and toilet facilities kept hygienically clean. This might require more frequent and thorough cleaning than is usual. If possible, make high alcohol (60 percent minimum) hand gels available around company premises. Providing employees with pocket sized hand gels would also be a wise move, again presuming that these can actually be sourced. Advice varies on face masks and other PPE but there seems to be little consensus on effectiveness in non-clinical settings.

→ **Information cycle:** COVID-19 is likely to have a negative psychological impact on employees, with anxiety levels and mental health difficulties increasing as the societal impacts become more extreme. One area of anxiety will be about how COVID-19 will impact employment and wages and receiving regular clear and concise information about the state of play in the organization can help address this.

Lack of information creates uncertainty, which can feed anxiety. Developing a communications plan is therefore an important activity: make sure that communications is a cycle; requesting feedback, ideas and contact from employees. This is especially important where staff are socially isolated from other employees when working from home. Once in place, the communications plan should be reviewed regularly to check effectiveness and whether the frequency needs to be increased or reduced.

→ **Advice to staff on travel and social distancing:** social distancing advice will need to follow governmental actions, but organizations will need to interpret these for staff and put them into context. Having clear and well communicated policies on organizational operations, employee travel, on office and home working, on work-based social activities, and other activities which involve potential close contact between people, is important.

Roles & Responsibilities

Another important consideration is the establishment of a Pandemic Working Group – the team that will manage your organization through this crisis. Think about who should take part in this and what their role will be. Make sure that each member of the group is clear about their role and remit; and how this will change as the pandemic moves through different stages.

Ensure that each member of the Pandemic Working Group has at least one deputy who can stand in for her / him should any of the Group members become ill and unavailable. Emphasize the importance of Group members keeping their deputies fully up to speed so that they can step into the role with little or no learning curve.

Think about policies which the Pandemic Working Group should adhere to:

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

→ *How often will it meet and when? What are the escalation steps, should this be required?*

→ *How will it meet? What technologies will be required to enable remote meetings?*

→ *How will it record and log decisions made and subsequent actions?*

→ *What and how will it communicate to the wider organization, suppliers, customers and other stakeholders?*

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Pandemic Planning Checklist

Strategies & Actions

Work through the following checklist to sense-check your plan and use this as a standing agenda for your Pandemic Working Group.

ESTABLISH MONITORING PROCESSES

Establish how you will monitor, who will monitor, and what will be monitored. Advice should be distilled from formal trusted sources only. These include Government and its departments; business bodies and regulatory authorities; trusted industry experts; health authorities and the World Health Organization. Analyze the guidance and apply to your organizational situation.

In addition, monitor your workforce, business and the immediate external landscape.

GOVERNANCE

- ✔ *Establish a regular cadence for meetings*
- ✔ *Agree standing membership, keeping a balance of participants that is workable, has the authority to make decisions and have a part to play*
- ✔ *Establish a process for escalating information to the group*
- ✔ *Set up subgroups to focus on specific issues if required*
- ✔ *Scan the horizon, in addition to the immediate actions now, think strategically ahead to look for different scenarios, think about the company, liquidity, sales, etc. How will these be impacted, how will these affect your response?*
- ✔ *Keep a record of all meetings, actions and allocate support resource if required*
- ✔ *Be prepared to change direction as the situation evolves.*

HEALTH & SAFETY

✓ *Identify high risk staff (either as vulnerable groups, family vulnerability or location, travel)*

✓ *Procure pandemic consumables where possible (e.g. hand gel / wipes, general cleaning wipes, face masks, tissues, contaminated / sealed bins, specific cleaning materials, etc)*

✓ *Produce any hygiene measures and advisory material*

✓ *Consider appointing a medical advisor to support the above*

✓ *Review and establish enhanced cleaning / decontamination processes for key areas and general office cleaning*

HUMAN RESOURCES

✓ *Ensure contact details for staff are as up to date as possible*

✓ *Establish support process for staff concerns or those directly impacted*

✓ *Review and agree employee communications, striking the right balance of factual information, clear communication of actions required, whilst trying to avoid noise.*

TRAVEL

✓ *Agree on any travel, suspected illness, absence, medical, and social distancing policies including for caring for other family members and review these constantly. Be clear on expectations, both of the employee and from the employer*

✓ *Implement screening (temperature checking, travel history) and isolation procedures for all visitors and staff at all sites (identify immediate isolation rooms (no air con), routes in and out of office minimizing contact, etc)*

BUSINESS FUNCTIONS & PROCESSES

- ✔ *Prioritize business functions that could be most affected by the absence of staff and other business impacts*

- ✔ *Identify critical staff to the business e.g. groups, individuals, business, IT, support staff, etc*

- ✔ *Consider minimal staffing levels or shutdown options and determine what will be the triggers for implementing these*

- ✔ *Review business continuity capability for staff absence*

- ✔ *Maximize opportunities for wider staff home working if possible*

- ✔ *Minimize face to face contact with suppliers, customers, etc for essential business support staff*

- ✔ *Assess key supplier capability*

- ✔ *Determine what additional technologies, processes, and actions may need to be implemented to facilitate high levels of working from home.*

STAKEHOLDERS

- ✔ *Monitor customers and key suppliers that may be affected and impacted*

- ✔ *Review alternate suppliers if required or necessary*

- ✔ *Identify key stakeholder groups for communication, communication channels, message tone and cadence for staff, customers, prospects, industry and make your messaging consistent*

- ✔ *Establish communication links with local bodies (government, medical, etc) if required.*

Employee Support

As well as communications, which was discussed earlier, there are measures that the organization can take to support staff through this crisis. ISO 22330, a business continuity management standard providing 'Guidelines for people aspects of business continuity', is a good starting point: it can be obtained as a PDF copy from the ISO Store.The standard focuses on the duty of care that organizations have to ensure staff wellbeing. It emphasizes that this duty extends to psychological, not just physical safety.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

ISO 22330 will help your organization work through questions such as:

→ *What do we need to consider?*

→ *Where are our blind spots – the things we don't know that we don't know?*

→ *What do we need to add to existing policies and processes?*

→ *What are we doing well?*

→ *Where do we need to bring in additional technical expertise?* [4]

As we move to greater use of remote working, think also about the social interactions that are lost and the isolation employees will experience over, possibly, long periods. Find ways of using video conferencing for teams to have short periods where they can 'hang out' together. Get the C-suite to drop into these sessions, keeping them informal and showing support. Listen to people's concerns and act on these where possible.

Get a PDF Copy of the ISO 22330 standard.

Access the ISO Store ›

Testing & Exercising the Plan

As is true for all business continuity plans, testing and exercising pandemic plans is essential to ensure that they will actually work and that there aren't gaps. As the COVID-19 pandemic evolves, it may seem too late to exercise whilst dealing with the reality of the situation. However, as we monitor, horizon scan, and manage we need to play out 'what if' scenarios and we can use our BAU (business as usual) exercising methods to help us test our assumptions.

When activity stabilizes, making sure that you replay pandemic scenarios as part of the usual exercise program will be key and at the forefront of people's minds.

Plan Lifecycle

Business continuity planning is not a project, it is a process; and pandemic planning is not an exception to this rule. Depending on how long the pandemic period lasts for and how societal impacts change, the pandemic plan may develop through several iterations.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

It is important to regularly monitor and review:

→ *The pandemic situation in the locations where your organization operates;*

→ *The direct impacts on your organization, including changing patterns of absenteeism and operational and economic impacts;*

→ *How effectively your pandemic plan is performing, considering how you can measure and substantiate this;*

→ *The results of tests and exercises;*

→ *Lessons from peer organizations;*

→ *New and updated official information.*

The pandemic plan should be regularly sense-checked with the above information in mind, with additional strategies added where necessary and existing strategies stepped-down where appropriate. When changes are made, testing and exercising should be carried out to verify the changes and to ensure that there are no unintended consequences. Updates to the plan should be communicated as appropriate.

Conclusion

At this stage of the COVID-19 pandemic things may feel over-whelming. Circumstances are changing on a daily basis and it seems like there may be a long journey ahead.

We are also in the middle of what the World Health Organization terms an 'infodemic' - *an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution.* Effective pandemic planning is the way through both the pandemic and infodemic, ensuring that your organization emerges on the other side, ready to continue with business-as-usual.

Ready to Build Your Pandemic Plan?

Download our Sample Pandemic Plan Template to get started >

REFERENCES

1. *FFIEC, Interagency Statement on Pandemic Planning:*
   https://www.ffiec.gov/press/PDF/FFIEC%20Statement%20on%20Pandemic%20Planning.pdf

2. *WHO, Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak:*
   https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019

3. *CDC, People at Risk for Serious Illness from COVID-19:*
   https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/high-risk-complications.html

4. *Continuity Central, ISO 22330 Guidelines for People Aspects of Business Continuity reviewed:*
   https://www.continuitycentral.com/index.php/news/business-continuity-news/3043-iso-22330-guidelines-for-people-aspects-of-business-continuity-reviewed

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