



**Whitepaper:
Health Emergency Business
Continuity Considerations**

866.333.2133
www.solutionary.com

Health Emergency Business Continuity Considerations

The threat that swine flu or any other health emergency poses to an organization is obvious – the loss or interruption of operations. The news that the virus is spreading worldwide is indeed a threat, but it is far from being a pandemic. Until that time we should consider it an opportunity, one that provide us with a sort of “wake up call” to dust off our business continuity plan (BCP) and ensure that we are prepared for this type of business interruption.

A good BCP should be designed to react to any emergency that threatens the daily operations of key business functions. However, a regional health epidemic or a pandemic could create unique circumstances that our BCPs may not be designed to address.

Cross-training – Most plans or operational procedures address this critical need, especially for key functions. Day-to-day responsibilities can be performed by more than one employee in the event that the primary employee is absent. The backup role is typically performed by an employee who is a close associate of the primary employee. In the event of a pandemic, or other contagious infections, it is possible that due to their close association that both employees could be infected, leaving one or more key functions unmanned. Providing training to an employee with little to no routine contact with the primary employee could minimize the impact of an infection.

Documentation – In the event that an entire department becomes infected the key functions of that department must be performed by employees with minimal knowledge of the tasks or procedures. Sustaining these key functions will require that all processes and procedures are completely documented, providing a step-by-step guide for someone to step in and fill each role. Equally important is the ability to access the required material, if the team has dispersed the paper documentation may not be accessible.

Telecommuting – Many organizations provide for part- or full-time work from home arrangements for some number of employees, the challenge is that when large numbers of employees use telecommuting options these systems can become overwhelmed. During a health emergency organizations should have a plan to maximize telecommuting to every employee whose job can be performed remotely in order to:

- Reduce the exposure or spread of contagions
- Minimize the impact that publicly-mandated closures, e.g., schools, would have on the employees’ ability to travel to work.
- Provide some level of continued operations if the organization was ordered to close the doors of any facilities.

An increased number of employees telecommuting can present additional challenges. Be sure the BCP includes:

- Provisions for adequate telecommunication support, e.g., bandwidth, security tokens
- Remote access for employee to everything they will need to do their job, e.g., internal systems, tools, utilities, and applications
- Maintaining the appropriate level of security by ensuring that anyone telecommuting is using company-owned or approved equipment and

- applications.
- Maintaining complete contact information for these employees, i.e., cell phone, home phone, alternate, personal email address.
 - Procedures for the forwarding of corporate phone calls to the employee's remote number, providing direct access to every telecommuter

Prevention – The BCP should have defined guidance to provide to employees to help them minimize the chance of infection. This text will need to be reviewed and modified to reflect the appropriate measures currently being recommended by the notional and international health organizations. Standard measures that will apply universally during a health emergency are being communicated daily, e.g., washing hands frequently, avoiding close contact, staying at home when ill. Others to consider adding to this guidance or to the BCP include:

- Publishing the phone number of the corporate healthcare provider, ideally one that has been established as a hotline for the pandemic
- Temporary modification of the current sick leave plan to accommodate the impact of a pandemic, which will reinforce the message to employees to “stay at home if you are feeling ill”.
- Procedures for routinely disinfecting any item that multiple employees must touch or use, e.g., door handles, elevator buttons, rest room facilities, cafeteria and break room facilities and appliances, locker rooms.
- Suspension of the use of a shared refrigerator and other practices where food can be shared, e.g., bringing in donuts or pastries to the office.

Containment – Should an employee become infected the BCP, or possibly operational procedures, should address:

- Immediately locking or restricting access to the employee’s office, cubicle, or work area. In some cases this may not be possible, e.g., an assembly line or publicly-accessible retail space.
- Testing, monitoring, or possibly quarantining all employees in close proximity to or those that have routine contact with the employee.
- Disinfecting the employee’s office, cubicle, work area, locker, and any other area where the employee has routine contact.

Consult the Center for Disease Control <http://www.cdc.gov> for guidance in this area.

Business – The primary function of a BCP is to maintain the business during an emergency. As stated earlier it is highly likely that most business considerations are covered in a comprehensive BCP. Some BCP provisions to emphasize during a health emergency are:

- Customers being assured that the organization has taken all steps to maintain operations and that there will be little to no disruption in service.
- Multiple contact names and phone numbers are obtained from all customers to be used in the event that the primary point of contact is unavailable due to the effects of the pandemic.
- Maintaining adequate cash reserves or ready credit in the event receivables lag due to a slow down in customer payments.

Worst Case – The development of a BCP should at some point focus on the worst possible scenario, i.e., the complete loss of operations or a facility. In the case of a

pandemic this could take many forms such as a federal or local agency forcing an organization to close its doors and suspend operation. The unique circumstances surrounding a health emergency most likely will not permit the resumption of operations at an alternate facility so the BCP should include provisions for:

- A planned, systematic shutdown of all functions and operations
- Employee communication
- Notification of customers, suppliers, and media
- On-going physical security of the facilities
- Sustained vital services, e.g., payroll

Depending on the type of business there are numerous other considerations, and all should be rolled into a comprehensive BCP plan.

Ramping up business continuity activity is typically more reactive, to some major, headline-making disaster that has either affected our organization or under the right circumstances certainly could have. It is a rarity that we have an opportunity to use the headlines to take proactive measures to shore up our BCP. It would be very wise to take every advantage of this while we can, or before we need to execute the continuity and recovery aspects of the plan.