



An analysis from the viewpoint of communication management
BUSINESS CONTINUITY MANAGEMENT IN THE EVENT OF A POSSIBLE FLU PANDEMIC

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Introduction

Both private and public organisations must be prepared in the event of natural disasters, attacks, serious system and infrastructure failure, human error and pandemics. Now, with the advent of „swine flu“, we are facing a worldwide pandemic. The main goal for any organisation during this pandemic would be the safety and health of company staff and to ensure the continuation of all essential business activities

It is an extremely rare occurrence that companies can prepare so far in advance for the event of a crisis and have the opportunity to take remedial action.

In recent years almost every key sector, from energy, finance, healthcare and industry to public institutions, has developed emergency plans for possible crises. Given the fact that, up to now, pandemics have been of relatively minor importance, the current situation may prompt organisations to better prepare for the future. All sectors must plan for staff absenteeism and organise suitable cover. To ensure the successful implementation of emergency plans, appropriate and flexible communication procedures must be in place.

In the energy sector, for example, detailed communication plans are necessary to ensure that even highly qualified specialists can be replaced if necessary. Hospitals and clinics are currently engaged in developing information plans for over capacity accident and emergency intakes and for communication at inter-departmental and other levels.

The flu pandemic can also prompt changes in the business environment. For example, while it represents a threat to an organisations infrastructure and functioning, many analysts regard it also as a unique business opportunity. Customers will increasingly turn to online services such as online banking, internet shopping and so on. This can be both a risk and an opportunity for companies; the same applies to online retailers, the pharmaceutical industry and the providers of telecommunications services, which can anticipate higher demand for data bandwidth as employees turn to teleworking and their volume of telephone calls increases as a result.

Business Continuity Management Plan

In recent years, and particularly in recent weeks and months, it has become increasingly clear that business continuity management plans and comprehensive communication plans must be developed to prevent a breakdown of business activities. This aspect is particularly vital with any business-critical or high-profit activity. For this reason, it is important to draw up a list of staff members who play central roles in the provision of key products and/or services. This list should also include major suppliers and customers. Given that absenteeism rates of 30–40 % are anticipated, all critical members of the company’s business must be identified.

One of the most frequently heard recommendations advises the establishment of flexible processes in supply and sales chains that can be aligned to the current situation, in addition to implementing changes in working hours, teleworking etc. While all these adjustments are challenging in their own way, a new type of challenge is faced as teleworkers must be incorporated into a communication scheme for emergency plans.

For this reason, it is not enough to have a perfect business continuity management plan and its implementation if the plan itself does not contain instructions about successfully managing communication in an emergency situation. A government guideline sheet for the flu



pandemic advises:

„Development and regular updating of emergency communication plan. The plan must include the names of the persons to be contacted (and their deputies) and show a communication network (including suppliers and customers).“

Communication Plan

Taking a realistic view, we must not assume that in a pandemic enough staff will be available to disseminate information. Organisations which choose to use call trees, for example, can expect individual links in the chain to be missing. The communication plan can only be implemented successfully if the human factor can be excluded from its implementation. This means that the plan must be designed to include as many automated processes as possible.

Feedback from staff is also important. Communication of information is ineffective if there is no system to receive feedback that the message has been delivered and the employee will carry out his appointed task. The recipient must therefore have a way to confirm that he can perform the required task. A suitable communication structure thus not only features an automated information process, but also contains a system to request a response from the contacted recipient and reports the response to the emergency service manager to enable him to design an appropriate follow-up. Ideally, the communication structure is based on the transmission of information using multiple channels (telephone, mobile phone, fax, e-mail, SMS etc.) for contacting staff, thus improving the chances of reaching them.

A further aspect which is often mentioned in connection with Best Practices is the appointment of deputies for key members of a company. The definition of suitable deputies can compensate for the absence of a primary contact in the communication chain and is another important task in drawing up a communication plan.

A government document also recommends establishing a team structure with staff responsible for planning and coordinating emergency measures. Swine flu presents a major stumbling-block to one of the team's central tasks when it is no longer possible to meet up in an assembly room to discuss coordination of actions. The members of the team may be at different locations, so that classic solutions such as on-the-spot multimedia and video conferences are no longer relevant. Instead solutions must be found that do not require the physical presence of the teams, such as services which automatically set up multimedia conferences via telephone or Internet.

Internal and external Communication

An aspect frequently mentioned at present is the necessity for providing communication and information to employees. The staff must have access to ways to be informed quickly, simply and straightforwardly. One possibility is to establish dedicated areas in the corporate intranet, employee newsletters, emails, etc. However, if access to one of these areas is unavailable, employees cannot access the information they need. One alternative method is an information hotline that contains up-to-date information and is accessed by telephone.

The same requirements apply to communication with customers. If a functioning communication channel cannot be provided, such as an available information hotline, service failure may involve long-term negative consequences for business.



Verification of the plan

The ultimate aim of any communication planning is ability to test and exercise the plan with the help of drills and training. A government report stresses,

„Practical testing of plan in the form of drills, and regular updates.“

Unfortunately, tests often have little connection with reality, as they are generally based on processes which depend on manual work, have a low level of automation and are rarely implemented. Every step towards „mechanisation“, and thus towards automation of processes, represents a significant step towards optimisation and enables improvements to be made to the effective communication of the plan that increase the probability of its successful implementation.

Summary

Proactive or reactive plans have little chance of success unless they are backed up by an up-to-date, reliable communication plan to ensure that employees are contacted and tasks are carried out correctly and successfully.

Internal and external communication of information can assure that business operations can continue normally and that the impact on staff health and financial consequences are minimised. Intranets and hotlines are useful communication channels for the distribution of up-to-date information.

The effectiveness of communication plans can be improved further by drawing up a list defining key members of staff and their deputies and by developing processes that serve to maintain functioning lines of communication with these individuals.

Thanks to methods such as virtual conferences, the Pandemic Coordination Committee can also conduct decentralized meetings. In addition, all employees can be informed of important measures without the need to meet up and thus risk exposure.

By introducing automated processes which reduce dependence on individuals and call trees, companies can provide for efficient implementation of emergency plans. Exercise and training ensure repeatability of events and serve to further refine the processes involved and to further increase the chances of their successful implementation.



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