
An Ounce of Prevention - Preparing for the Pandemic

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Within the past year or two, many of us have no doubt been involved at some level in an exercise commonly referred to as “Business Continuity Planning”. More than ever, organizations throughout both the public and private sectors are engaging in this type of planning and emergency preparedness activity.

Why the increased need for, and emphasis on, emergency preparedness planning?

The sky might not actually be falling (to paraphrase Chicken Little), but according to an ever growing chorus of credible sources, the risk of a possible pandemic influenza outbreak in the near future is but one of a number of known perils that threaten to cause severe disruption to our organizations, our public institutions and our society.

Specifically, an influenza pandemic occurs when a new variation of the influenza virus emerges, against which the human population has little to no established immunity. Although the frequency and severity of pandemic outbreaks is still unpredictable, most experts agree that another pandemic is likely to occur within the next 5-10 years.

Forecasts, such as this, are based on the historical patterns associated with previous pandemic outbreaks - the average time elapsed between each of the last four (4) global influenza pandemics is 25 years. To date, it has been over 30 years since the last pandemic influenza outbreak occurred.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), in the event of an influenza pandemic, nations can expect widespread illness that may result in sudden and potentially significant staff shortages, impairing the ability of government agencies and others to continue operating and providing essential services.

Shortages of critical supplies may also occur during a pandemic caused by sudden

increases in demand, disruptions in transportation systems, or the inability of suppliers to meet demands caused by their own internal staff or materials shortages.

Considering the probable likelihood of these consequences, governments, corporations and other institutions around the world are following the WHO’s lead in pandemic preparedness.

The Government of Canada provides public information on our nation’s preparedness and response to a potential influenza pandemic (www.influenza.gc.ca), outlining various government departments’ and agencies’ methods and plans for minimizing public service disruption. Across the public sector, similar preparedness activities and plans are also in place or underway at the provincial level, as well as within municipalities, hospitals and school boards.

Business Continuity Planning (BCP) can be an extensive endeavour to pursue in any organization, be it large or small, public or private. However, no matter the crisis, once BCP has been initiated, completed and maintained an organization is well on its way to mitigating risks of disruption to the services and/or goods it has identified as essential to the continuation of its operations.

At its core, BCP is about much more than ensuring the critical supply of goods and services (this is only one element) – it is a process designed to identify all mission critical business functions across the organization, and to enact the policies, plans and procedures required to ensure the continuation of all essential functions in the event of an unforeseen disruption.

In the face of limited resources and more immediate or urgent daily matters, it can be at times difficult to convince senior officials of the merits inherent in contingency planning and pandemic preparedness. After all, this is a time consuming and resource intensive initiative, the benefits of which



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are not immediately obvious, nor potentially ever needed (hopefully).

Sounds a lot like taking out a very expensive insurance policy – never an easy sell.

However, implementing a business continuity plan not only prepares an agency for the possibility of an influenza pandemic outbreak, at the same time it can also strengthen the organization’s capacity to respond to other potential crises or disruptive events - anyone remember the 2003 Ontario power outage? Added to this, a sound and effective BCP process typically involves less investment than is commonly believed.

Wouldn’t you know it, but our mothers were right about this all along – an ounce of prevention is actually worth a pound of cure (if not more).

So, what are some of the measures that government agencies can take to mitigate the risks of disruption to their essential supplies and services?

No doubt, the Chicken Littles among us are likely to include such measures as bunker-building, 3-year stock-piling and other similarly excessive (not to mention, expensive) measures on their lists. Notwithstanding the dubious effectiveness of these types of measures in the face of a true pandemic outbreak (after all, one can never truly know if the measures will work until they are put to the test), are there not more

reasonable, practical and cost-effective steps which can be taken?

The simple answer is, yes, and knowledgeable officials from a host of organizations have come up with and are currently implementing a series of more measured, practical and (hopefully) effective measures, each aimed at minimizing the risk of disruption to essential supplies and services in the event of a pandemic outbreak or other similar peril.

Such measures include, but are in no way limited to, the following:

- Enlist as many players as possible, from the key business or functional areas within the organization (program managers, human resources, corporate administration, procurement and contracting, finance, IT, security...).
- Review lessons learned and/or disaster recovery plans developed prior to or following previous crises (i.e. SARS, Y2K, Ice Storm, 2003 Power Outage).
- Working together, collaboratively determine the essential services, materials, and supplies required by the organization to maintain critical service delivery.
- Develop meaningful and realistic criteria to determine what is actually essential, versus what is “nice to have”.
- Consider scenarios developed by WHO, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada (PSEPC) and other credible sources, with regard to the forecasted impact and duration of a pandemic outbreak.
- Determine the current procedures and plans in place with various suppliers to assess their capacity to maintain current volumes, lead-times and supplier capacity in the event of a pandemic. In many cases, leading vendors have begun to recognize the implications associated with an influenza pandemic, and have also developed their own supply programs in response.
- For the items on the list identified as “essential”, establish the supply characteristics of the good or service in the marketplace (e.g. price, availability, sources of supply, order lead time, delivery methods, shelf-life cycle, storage and handling requirements, etc.).
- With this information in hand, identify possible BCP method of supply contingency measures, such as:
 - Assigning lead and back-up personnel responsible for ensuring the delivery of those goods and services deemed essential.
 - Stockpiling 3-6 week supplies of low-cost, long shelf-life items pre-distributed to branch locations across the country.
 - Including suppliers within the planning process and amending existing contracts to ensure guaranteed availability, or vendor-held inventory.
 - Enabling staff to procure what is needed during a crisis, via the establishment, distribution and utilization of emergency acquisition cards.
- Most importantly, ensuring the safety of

all staff through the adequate supply and provision of necessary (although relatively low cost) personal safety items, such as anti-viral tissues, hand hygiene products, cleaning supplies and masks.

Undoubtedly, not everyone in your organization will see the merits of participating in BCP exercises or pandemic preparation activities - after all, how did you respond when your mother gave you your cod liver oil?

Nevertheless, know that when key members throughout the organization are included in and actively contribute to the process of BCP, the work load becomes more manageable for each individual, the organization positions itself to effectively and efficiently respond to such events, and the ability to maintain disaster recovery plans in the future becomes far easier than having to create them from scratch.

To learn more about BCP, as well as the probability and impacts of an influenza pandemic outbreak, the following websites provide a wealth of thorough and credible information:

- World Health Organization – www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/pandemic
- Government of Canada – www.influenza.gc.ca
- Government of the United States of America – www.pandemicflu.gov
- Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters Association – www.cme-mec.ca/pdf/CME_Pandemic_Guide.pdf ■