



# Is Your Organization Pandemic-Ready?

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# Introduction

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Harvard's School of Public Health recently released survey data showing how deeply concerned U.S. businesses are about the possibility of widespread employee absenteeism that might follow a mass flu outbreak or pandemic.

Researchers from the school questioned more than 1,000 businesses across the country. Two-thirds of companies said they couldn't operate normally if more than half of their workers were out for two weeks. And four out of five organizations predicted severe operating problems if half of their workers missed a month of work.

These survey results should encourage all organizations to prepare for the worst by developing a crisis management plan. In addition to ample warning, senior management has ample *reason* to prepare – and no excuse not to. An organization's executives won't be blamed for the outbreak, but they do risk censure if they fail to prepare, respond, and communicate with internal and external stakeholders.

This white paper tells how.

To help organizations and their leaders prepare for a possible flu pandemic, certain key issues must be addressed to keep operations running as smoothly as possible:

- HR issues that drive pandemic planning
- Planning for steps necessary to keep an organization operating during the pandemic period
- Implementing steps needed to create an enterprise-wide crisis management plan
- Internal and external issues that crisis communications must address.

Why bother planning for a flu pandemic? To put it simply, companies and organizations that plan for any type of crisis demonstrate the behavior of responsible citizens. Formulating a detailed crisis management plan specifically for flu achieves four things:

1. Protects employees' health and safety
2. Lessens the chance of a major interruption of your daily business
3. Protects your company's or your brand's reputation
4. Allows daily business activity to continue with minimal disruption if you are affected.

Companies must establish open lines of communication with all audiences while dealing with the effects of the pandemic or other significant events. Should one occur, these stakeholders will want to know what you are doing to manage the situation and minimize their risks. If you communicate with these stakeholders openly and promptly, you send four valuable messages:

- You are taking charge of the situation.
- You take it seriously.
- You have the best interests of your staff and customers at heart.
- You run a responsible company with nothing to hide.

# Pandemic planning begins with Human Resources

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Pandemics have a disastrous effect on a company's optimal functioning because they prevent large numbers of critical employees from showing up for work. The resulting interruption to normal operations can have a disastrous cascading effect, affecting nearly every corner of the organization at considerable cost.

Employees unable to work or prevented from working become anxious and insecure. When they start asking management questions that aren't answered sufficiently or quickly, it exposes the fact that management hasn't developed contingency plans or that management failed to consider what employees need to know. Part of the cost of failing to prepare can be measured by the resultant loss of trust in management's capability, judgment and credibility.

We know from experience there are certain predictable questions that employees will ask and HR departments must be prepared to answer. For example:

1. Will flu close our business down?
2. If yes, what will happen to my paycheck?
3. How long could we be closed?
4. How long could the company be closed and still survive?
5. What are we doing to make sure we can stay in business?
6. Will I still have a job if the flu forces us to shut down?
7. Will I still get paid if I get the flu and have to stay home?
8. Will I get paid if schools close and I have to stay home with my children?
9. What will happen to my health insurance coverage?
10. What will happen if I run out of sick days?
11. How will I find out what is happening around the company and how it might affect me?
12. If the flu hits us, how will my job change? Exactly what will I have to do?
13. Will it be possible for me to work from home, using the Internet and phone?

14. I do not want to be forced to work next to someone who's sick. What is our policy regarding people who insist on coming to work when they have the flu?
15. What should I tell our customers/vendors/partners, etc., when they ask what's going on?

HR departments should, as a matter of urgency, review attendance and sick-day policies to ensure they have made allowances for managing the larger-than-normal issues a pandemic creates. Some of the policies that will need to be considered for implementing or addressing include:

1. How/when to start monitoring/screening employees at the workplace to determine if they are sick or pose a risk
2. How/when sick employees should be sent home to protect colleagues at work or be stopped/prevented from coming to work where they could infect colleagues
3. How/when the company should be temporarily closed due to the number of sick employees
4. How/when to implement steps to minimize face-to-face contact at work
5. How/when to allow certain employees, including senior management, to work remotely from home or another branch/office
6. How/when employees should be allowed to stay at home to look after sick family members
7. How/when the company's travel policies should be changed/suspended
8. How/when to stop employees from coming into contact with suppliers and customers.
9. How/when to implement and enforce a 'wash your hands' and 'cover your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing' policy; this must include making face masks and the use of hand sanitizers mandatory across the company
10. How/when to change the company payroll policy so that all employees receive electronic payments into their accounts; consider establishing an emergency "employee help" fund
11. Any and all extensions/additions to your existing payroll and work hours policies

At the core of your pandemic crisis plan, your HR department must be fully prepared to explain and communicate any new policies or changes to employees on an ongoing basis in all offices. This includes offices and employees that may not be affected by the pandemic at all. International and regional offices must also be briefed as they, too, could be directly impacted if there is a flu outbreak.

Employees should also be asked for input and ideas. This may help to highlight potential management or operating aspects that have not been considered. It will also make employees feel part of the pandemic planning process and thus, more accepting of and cooperative with the final plan.

If appropriate to your workplace and organizational culture, additional steps can be taken to protect employees by putting up educational posters, using training materials, and even arranging for annual flu shots (under doctor's supervision) to be provided in the workplace for convenience. Employees should also be encouraged to learn and do more on their own and away from work.

All of these actions send a message to employees that you are looking out for them, their jobs, and the company's well-being. In return, employees are much more likely to "go the extra mile" in order to lessen the business impact of widespread absences.

Communicating during a crisis is important, but what businesses do is always more important than what they say. Making good decisions and providing straightforward, honest and factual information to all employees with frequent updates is one of the most critical actions management can take.

# Crisis planning specifically for a flu outbreak

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Ideally, all companies and organizations would have enterprise-wide crisis plans in place before a crisis breaks. But realistically, we know from multiple surveys that at least half don't. Too many companies assume an "it can't happen to me" mentality or, in tough business or competitive conditions, they decide not to invest in "insurance" activities. Unfortunately, some find out the hard way that you cannot choose your crisis; it chooses you – and almost always at the most inconvenient time.

If yours is an organization that hasn't taken the steps necessary to implement crisis preparedness, here are some **interim steps that you can take quickly** to address the flu. Remember, the most effective and least costly way to manage a crisis is to prevent it from happening in the first place. You cannot stop flu, but you can take steps to keep it from damaging your operations, your reputation, and your bottom line.

Here's a quick checklist of things an organization can do, even at this late date:

1. **Appoint a pandemic coordinator or team.** This individual or team will lead the organization through various steps to become pandemic-ready.
2. Have them first **conduct vulnerability and risk assessment.** That means identifying areas in which you are at heightened risk of infection or in which your responses or ability to compensate will probably be weak. Armed with this knowledge, you should be able to prepare for **worst-case scenarios** and begin planning accordingly.
3. Get your **Crisis Management Team** up to speed. A crisis management team consists of senior employees who will deal full time with a crisis while the rest of the organization runs as normally as possible. The most effective crisis teams typically consist of no more than five members who serve as its decision-making leadership. Crises are not situations for committees or consensus-building. They demand swift and certain

decisions and actions be made under “battlefield conditions.” We strongly recommend that you have a “five-star general” heading up your team.

4. A Crisis Management Team must possess sufficient inherent or delegated power to **command unrestricted access to a full cross-section of corporate disciplines**, including HR, sales, customer service, IT, security, operations, facilities management, communications, department/business unit heads – from every corner of your organization. The Crisis Managers must know who from these disciplines are to be brought on to support the Crisis Management Team on an as-needed “on-demand” basis. Note that these disciplines are for advice and support – not crisis decision-making.
5. Management should assign each person on the Crisis Management Team and the designated support providers to **specific roles and functions ahead of time** – and give them full authority to carry them out.
6. The team should also include someone who will be **company spokesperson** throughout the crisis. Ideally, the spokesperson should be a senior company executive. He or she should have received formal media training, and should have the stamina, self-discipline and inner strength to be able to convey trust and believability when speaking during a time when bad news may need to be delivered to various audiences.
7. Think about including **external experts** on your team. These could include public health consultants, doctors, HR consultants and business continuity experts.

No organization can hope to be crisis-ready unless it is prepared with **messaging** ready to be disseminated to audiences on short notice and under pressure. Crisis messaging typically consists of fully or partially (fill-in-the-blanks type) prepared statements addressing a range of potential situations **anticipated in advance**. Prepared organizations keep them in a template format. Then, as a crisis develops and the actual facts of the situation become known, the relevant template can be rapidly updated with all pertinent information.

In a crisis, you simply do not have time to agonize for long over “What are we supposed to say?” Remember, it is only during the first 60 minutes of a crisis that you have your one chance to **take control of the situation via proactive communication**. In that time, messages must be disseminated internally to staff and externally to the relevant audiences, such as customers, stockholders, suppliers and partners, and possibly the media.

Businesses that conduct vulnerability and risk assessments will have a better idea of the templates and draft messaging they will need for a flu outbreak. These situations range from temporarily closing a site to announcing an interruption of service. The tone of all messaging must demonstrate that management is taking the situation seriously.

Employees are your first priority and must receive crisis-related messaging before anyone else. The media and relevant external stakeholders can then receive the same or similar messaging soon after. Department heads in your company can be used to communicate directly with employees. Employees should also be provided with messaging that they can share with others outside the organization. In today’s “always-on” instantaneous online world, whatever employees are told invariably becomes public knowledge within minutes.

From time to time, someone will ask a question that cannot be answered using prepared messaging. The crisis team must be prepared to reply “I don’t know,” and then either explain why, honestly and plainly, or commit to providing the answer at a given time in the future. Nothing destroys trust and creates anger more than speculating or guessing at answers that may be proven wrong at a later stage. While you must *respond* quickly to all questions, you may not be able to *answer* them all. The crisis team must understand the difference.

Stakeholders want reassurance you are doing everything possible to manage the situation and communicating without a hidden agenda. If you intend to keep your business open and running during a significant event, say so. For credibility, communicate the steps that you are taking to ensure it is kept open. If you are asked questions and are uncertain about

what will take place, acknowledge this honestly. Make every effort to find the answer quickly and, when you have it, follow up as soon as possible.

Plan to work with third parties. Adopting a go-it-alone attitude in dealing with a pandemic is needlessly dangerous. Organizations are wise to be working with key third-party consultants to make crisis preparedness as robust as possible. Key third parties could include:

- Crisis PR consultants
- Doctors and pandemic specialists
- Public health departments
- Emergency medical responders
- HR consultants
- Lawyers
- Local hospitals
- Red Cross
- Security services

Don't overlook your supply chains. Companies providing each other with operations-critical products, goods or services become inextricably linked. A problem in another company may cascade to yours, affecting your ability to meet contractual obligations. Steps they take to stay in business may be beneficial or disruptive to you. Knowing ahead of time will help you make appropriate arrangements or establish alternatives. Cooperating with customers, partners, suppliers and local governments helps you become pandemic-resilient.

Expert legal opinion must be obtained on how to address contractual obligations should a full scale pandemic break out. If you're prevented from delivering products or services and thus break legally binding contracts, customers/partners could hold you liable for failing to plan adequately. Such legal action could expand or precipitate a second crisis, when the media reports the legal action and you are forced to deal with a reputational crisis.

# Crisis communications tools for pandemics

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During a pandemic, organizations must communicate effectively with all internal and external audiences. Being ready to communicate proactively and at a moment's notice requires advance preparations.

## **Internal communications**

In all cases, employees are the most important communications targets during a crisis. Friends and family will contact them along with many of their external business relationships (including the media) to ask “What’s really going on?” And we know from experience that poorly briefed employees tend to speculate in the absence of solid information. This could easily precipitate a secondary crisis, forcing you to deal with rumor-mongering by employees and potentially false reporting by the media. Either could cause serious damage.

Thus, you must **designate in advance your primary or “official” internal communication channels**, and let everyone in your organization know what they are. While face-to-face verbal communication is the best medium for internal audiences during a crisis, it may not be possible if the flu strikes. Depending on your specific situation, one of the following channels should be considered in order to communicate company-wide:

- Teleconference
- Webcast
- E-mail
- Public address system
- SMS (Texting)
- Company intranet
- Blast voicemail
- Call-in hotlines

Remember: What is written and given to employees can be passed on to the media and other parties.

### **External communications**

Communication with all external stakeholders must be **timely and accurate, with messages consistent with what is being communicated internally**. Messaging differences should be determined by relevance to the receiver. But be safe: when in doubt, over-communicate. In a crisis, everyone wants *more* information, not less.

If you had to **communicate with 100% of your customers within 60 minutes**, could you? Do you have up-to-date accurate contact information housed in databases that can support mass messaging such as blast e-mail or recorded voice messages with outbound auto-dialing? Blast-fax? Cell phone information for texting? Social media?

Nobody has time to build these contact databases once a crisis strikes. **Assemble them now.**

The best time to start communicating is when there is no crisis. A proactive information campaign could spearhead the opening of new channels of communication with your various external audiences prior to a crisis.

### **External communication channels**

The following external communication channels can be used proactively or reactively depending on the situation:

- Company website
- Teleconference
- Webcast
- E-mail
- SMS
- Voicemail

- Faxes
- News releases including wire services
- Call centers (inbound and outbound)
- Electronic signage
- Social media

While social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and blogs continue to play an important role in crisis communication, at this time we believe they must not become your primary or “official” communication channel to the outside world. Especially for business organizations, social media are not yet universally accessible and we therefore recommend an integrated strategy that uses both social media and traditional communication channels.

But more importantly, they are not within your complete control. You must be extremely careful about what you say via social media, as it is very difficult to change anything after it has been sent out. It’s the very nature of most crises that the situations and facts change, and change often. Social media messages containing old information can too easily recirculate, causing misunderstandings and conflicts precisely at a time when they can do the most damage.

# Business continuity management

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A major flu breakout could devastate supply-and-value chains and possibly close down entire industry sectors. This will prevent companies from providing or delivering much needed services. Customers, partners, suppliers and employees will feel a significant impact. There will also be financial repercussions.

In short, a business could be forced to close down if it is not ready for all eventualities.

To be truly resilient in a crisis, the organization must have an up-to-date business continuity plan detailing how it will restore its operating functions, either totally or partially, within a certain period of time.

To achieve this, key decision-makers must:

- Have an in-depth look at their company to **identify essential functions** needed to keep doors open. Non-essential ones can be temporarily discontinued without impacting day-to-day operations. People with **key skills** that are important to the business during the pandemic must be identified and protected whenever possible. Those with nonessential skills may be told not to report for work during the pandemic.
- Consider contingency plans to **switch operations to other sites**, if possible.
- **Identify alternative suppliers** that you can switch to at a moment's notice. Your primary suppliers of utilities, goods, products and services may suddenly shut down because of poor planning. You should ask current suppliers to disclose what contingency plans they have in place to ensure the provision of uninterrupted service to you. Put backup plans in place to switch to other/competing suppliers and contractors if you're the least bit unsure of their preparedness.
- Determine if their **IT systems are sufficiently robust** so critical technology dependent business processes would still function.

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