

The 20 Critical Questions Series

What directors should ask about pandemic planning

A pandemic is an unstable disease epidemic spread across a large geographic area and may be prevalent over a whole country or the world. The world has been impacted by pandemics including the Black Death plague, Spanish flu, HIV/AIDS, Ebola virus, swine flu, bird flu, equine influenza, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). Each of these pandemics has had significant impact on society, countries, governments, commerce and industries, and global, national and regional economies. With pandemics occurring periodically, every organisation should be prepared for them.

For the past 15–20 years there has been considerable commentary about the need to have a pandemic plan as part of an organisation's overall business continuity and crisis management planning.

Pandemic preparation

1. Does your organisation have a pandemic plan, was developed prior to 2020, and has it been refined as a consequence of the latest global pandemic COVID-19?
2. Is pandemic planning accessible and readily retrievable by the right people when needed and does it include:
 - › Definition of a pandemic?
 - › A governance structure for managing a pandemic situation?
 - › Key risks associated with a pandemic?
 - › Associated strategic, operational and telecommunications risks?
 - › Planning for loss of staff, suppliers, customers, markets, revenue and critical supply chains?
 - › Supporting policies and procedures and communication / messaging templates?
 - › Information on variations to emergency purchasing and procurement arrangements, together with associated delegations and financial controls?
 - › List of stakeholders and how they are to be communicated with and managed?
 - › Sources of support such as medical advice, legal and compliance advice, media advice, accounting advice, governance advice, insurance, business continuity expertise?
 - › Communication strategy including with government, the board, investors, suppliers, customers, staff, other stakeholders?
 - › Monitoring government requirements and other sources of sound information?
 - › Complying with government requirements?
 - › Business opportunities the situation may offer?
 - › Process to return to business-as-usual or a post-pandemic version of what that is?
3. Is pandemic planning integrated with your organisation's business continuity, crisis management and ICT disaster recovery planning? Does it include:
 - › Business continuity policy?
 - › Business impact assessment?

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- › Business continuity and crisis management planning?
 - › ICT disaster recovery planning?
 - › Links to the contract register?
 - › Capacity management?
 - › Training?
 - › Update and maintenance?
 - › Testing?
4. Does the pandemic plan provide guidance on what to do if a pandemic crisis situation occurs? Does the plan provide sufficient guidance and flexibility to manage the unknown, but not overly rigid so the organisation gets transfixed in managing the paper scenario and not the actual situation?
 5. Has a recent business impact assessment been undertaken to identify core business functions, operations, supply chains, resources and support services required, expanded telecommunications capacity, and when they would be required for example (a) first 4 hours (b) up to 24 hours (c) up to 3 days (d) up to 7 days (e) up to 30 days (f) over 30 days?
 6. Does the pandemic plan include templates and sample messages for internal and external communication to save time and effort when a pandemic crisis situation occurs?
 7. Does the pandemic plan include consideration of opportunities such as alternative products, niche markets, organisation redesign, process improvement?

Staff and Welfare

8. Does your organisation have the necessary set-up for staff to work from home or other locations such as:
 - › Work from home policy?
 - › Necessary equipment to work from home or other locations for example telephones and ICT?
 - › Sufficient software licences and internet bandwidth for staff to work from home or other locations?
 - › Work health safety requirements considered?
 - › Cyber-security and information security?
 - › Insurance requirements such as workers' compensation, public liability and standard insurer notifications?
9. Does your organisation have a plan if staff get sick or are isolated because of a pandemic including:
 - › Details of how staff can receive support and medical testing?
 - › Which staff are essential and whether there are back-ups in place for essential roles to be performed? Do back-ups understand what they are required to do? Do back-ups have the necessary tools, equipment and access to information to perform the roles?
 - › Is there a policy for staff to notify the organisation if they become sick or need to be isolated? Is there a requirement for staff to not attend work until they have a medical certificate stating they are not sick?
 - › Leave provisions for a pandemic such as whether staff may be required to take annual leave, long service leave or specific pandemic leave if available?
 - › Employee assistance program?

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10. If staff become sick, will it be sick leave? If staff become sick at work, will it be workers' compensation?
11. Does the pandemic plan include a process to manage staff such as redeployment to alternative duties, work from home, forced leave, lay-offs, redundancy, etc?
12. Does the pandemic plan include opportunity for staff to receive a health assessment to manage physical and mental health?

Facilities and Logistics

13. Is there a plan if your buildings and facilities get contaminated, including informing the building manager and insurer of the situation? What is the plan if buildings need to be evacuated? Who would decontaminate and provide special cleaning services? If you share a building, what happens if one of the other tenants has staff who become sick or the building becomes contaminated?
14. Do supplier contracts specify supplier contingency requirements? Does the pandemic plan include information about the supply chain for goods and services including (a) which goods and services are essential (b) supplier contingency arrangements (c) supplier contingency testing (d) alternative suppliers?
15. Does the pandemic plan include information about essential goods such as (a) personal protective equipment (PPE) for example is there a supply of protective clothing, masks, overalls, hand sanitiser, alcoholic wipes, cleaning equipment, bottled water, etc? (b) is there ability to source more when required?
16. Is your organisation a supplier of essential services such as health, water, power or communications? Does your organisation understand its obligations to continue to supply these services in line with government and customer requirements and contracts?
17. Does the pandemic plan include potential support to the community and other industry sectors if your organisation has niche or required capability?

Post-Pandemic Activities

18. Does the pandemic plan include a debrief and lessons learned process to assist improving the plan?

Testing and Review

19. Has the pandemic plan been tested to (a) provide assurance the plan will work if activated (b) assist staff training (c) identify improvements to the plan?
20. Are regular reviews and audits of business continuity and crisis management plans performed that include pandemics, and are these reported to senior management and the audit committee?

The big question

Does the organisation clearly know how its business continuity and crisis management activities fit together, how effective they are, whether they are likely to be successful if a need arises to stand them up, and whether they include pandemic planning?

Acknowledgement

This 20 Critical Questions on pandemic planning has been prepared with input from Chris Davies an internal audit manager in Sydney Australia.