

Not just "empty building" effort

Planning for the pandemic

JOHN GLENN, MBCI
Certified Business Continuity Planner

Originally published in Disaster Recovery Journal (DRJ), Summer, 2007

I once was convinced The Pandemic, if it arrived at all, would be nothing more than a near-normal “empty facility” event.

In many respects, The Pandemic, if H5N1 Avian Influenza does morph into a human-to-human transmittable disease, is your basic, already-in-the-plan empty facility risk.

But The Pandemic comes with a twist – actually several.

First, the event is expected to linger in one location – while spreading to others – for 6 to 8 weeks. Most empty facility plans anticipate shorter durations.

Weather events usually last days, not weeks, with Andrew and Katrina being notable exceptions.

Work actions normally are in headline stage for a week, perhaps two, then management and non-union workers start to meet Service Level Agreements (SLAs).

The ripple effect is that the organization’s stock may take a hit – something that can be expected if the pandemic materializes here.

Second, those who should know expect three “waves” of the flu, each with a 6- to 8-week duration.

Change in Mentality

Pandemic planning for office staff should cause a change in the traditional “work in the cube” mentality.

Absentee rates for workers who normally are “chained to their desks” can be expected to rise sharply.

Some will stay away because they are sick.

Some will stay away because someone in their family or household is sick.

Some will stay away because they want to avoid getting sick. (The “no symptom” incubation time for “The Flu” is guesstimated from 3 to 10 days; in either case, this is plenty of time for an infected person to “share” the germs.)

Absentee estimates range as high as 50 percent across the board. That means that Company A’s absentee rate can be 50 percent, the corner grocery absentee rate may be 50 percent, the electric company technician absentee rate can hit 50 percent, and on and on. In a pandemic, no organization will be spared.

Expecting a high absentee rate, employers should be thinking about implementing “virtual office” environments.

This means learning to trust that personnel will work from home – perhaps not a standard 8-hour-plus-lunch-break day, but productive none-the-less. This also means providing personnel with the tools they need to work from some place other than the office.

The equipment list needs to include:

- Computer with remote access software/ permissions
- Modem
- Key fob, smart card, or other user ID if a secure network is to be accessed and remain secure
- Internet Service Provider (ISP) to connect the computer to the company network
- Telephone, Blackberry, or similar communications tool

A standard keyboard and external pointing device (e.g. mouse) can be considered to make the person more efficient.

If the organization uses Outlook or a similar tool with an address book, all contact information must be up to date – that includes home addresses and home or cell/Blackberry numbers and Blackberry Personal Identification Numbers (PINs). Failing that, personnel need a spread sheet – paper or electronic – with contact information for all personnel whether deemed critical or not.

On the Road

“On the road” includes service personnel coming to the organization’s facility – the telephone guy, the tape archive company’s courier, etc. – and the organization’s folks who travel for the business.

Those InfoTech folks who must show up to tweak a system or make backups and hand over media to the courier are “local travel” and are excepted – in this article, anyway – from the “business travel” category.

“Things” happen. Telephone lines and links fail, sometimes it is outside premises and sometimes within the facility.

Either way, someone has to clear the problem.

Since there is reason to believe that the commercial communications providers will be short-handed, expect a delayed response. Will the vendor be able to meet its SLAs to the organization? Has anyone asked for and performed a gap analysis (review) of the vendor’s business continuity plan. The vendor *does* have a business continuity plan, right? At least the

Disaster recovery segment of a business continuity plan?

If the answer is “don’t know,” check now. If the answer is “no,” consider an alternate vendor.

What vendors to consider?

- Alternate site providers (for InfoTech; most employees will be at home)
- Couriers
- Data (electronic and paper) archive services
- ISPs
- Telecom (copper and cellular)
- Utilities (electric, gas, oil, etc.)

The list is far from “all inclusive.” The other aspect of “on the road” is business travel.

Unless going away from home is absolutely necessary, stay home.

If travel must be undertaken, go to flu-free locations; put off visits to areas where the pandemic is prevalent.

Likewise, put off inviting personnel or clients – even potential clients – from areas where the pandemic has taken hold.

A wise travel manager will hold off on invitations even from areas which neighbor pandemic areas. Plan to check on all traveler's recent excursions. Have any been to areas where the pandemic has, or is, taking hold?

Track H5N1 in all its phases on the Internet. There are a number of URLs (Web sites). Visit multiple sites on a regular basis. Several good sites are US Agency for International Development (AID), Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Department of Health & Human Services (HHS), National Institutes of Health (NIH), and State Department; the UN's World Health Organization (WHO), and several UK and Australian, Canadian, and New Zealand government sites. An extensive list of URLs is posted on DRJ's forum (<http://www.drj.com/forums>).

Production Lines

"It's hard to hit a moving target." This old saying may be the only way an organization that makes a product will be able to meet its SLAs.

Single site organizations will be hardest hit. The "hit" can turn into multiple "hits" before the last of the anticipated pandemic waves moves on.

On the same lines, organizations which depend on single-source products also are in jeopardy.

Unlike office staff which can work at home, most products are created on a production line. Even the most automated lines still require people if only to feed the line raw materials and collect the finished product at the other end. Receiving (raw materials), warehousing (raw materials and finished product), and shipping (finished product) also require human intervention, both by in-house personnel and vendors of all types.

One-facility manufacturers are wise to study past sales and anticipate future sales with the pandemic in mind.

Translation:

- Can product be stock-piled?
- Will product be needed by the customers if the customer suffers the pandemic?

If the product can be stock-piled, how much is enough, remembering the three 6-to-8-week waves? How much can customers absorb if the customer workforce or client base is confined to quarters?

Even if the product can be stockpiled, is there any guarantee it can be moved to the customer site? Will transportation be available to haul the goods from factory to destination?

Manufacturers with multiple sites, particularly international sites, will be slightly better off. But even then, moving raw materials and finished product will be a risk.

Finally, there are both immediate and long-term financial concerns.

The immediate concern is loss of revenue. Bills don't stop even if income ceases or slows to a trickle. Does the organization have sufficient capital to survive any disruptions? Are the financial backers willing to be patient?

For the long term, public companies may see a substantial loss in value of stocks, and bond ratings may fall. This could be temporary, but it is nonetheless a financial "hit" that must be considered.

Policies and Procedures

One more area which demands attention well before the event – actually any event – is policy and procedures (P&P).

Some existing P&Ps can be tweaked by appending "business continuity" paragraphs. Other areas need complete P&Ps. All P&Ps need to be disseminated to all personnel.

P&Ps to consider include:

- **Insurance coverage:** Will insurance cover the flu? Is the insurer's financial base sufficiently sound to make all the payments it might be called upon to make? (On the insurance issue: does the organization have business interruption insurance and does it cover pandemics?)
- **Leaves and furloughs:** Will personnel be paid? If so, at what rate? If they stay away because they are sick, because they fear getting sick, because a family member is sick, or because they were told to "stay away?"
- **Travel:** What will happen if a person refuses to travel if he or she fears the destination is a flu area?

- **Vaccine/meds:** If a vaccine becomes available, will the organization fund inoculations? Where (at a clinic, at the facility)? Will staff be obliged to accept the medication? What about those who, for whatever reason, refuse it?

These are just a few of the topics which must be considered by the planner and organization management.

No, a pandemic is not just another “empty facility” event. While it may share some risks with weather and workrelated risks, it is unique and needs to be given special consideration.

John Glenn, MBCI
JohnGlennMBCI@gmail.com