Pandemic Preparedness: 10 Key Pandemic Readiness Components

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Pandemics: Why should we worry?

Pandemics can impact all types of organizations. Failing to prepare for a potential event could result in severe interruptions to essential business operations. Even if there is no immediate threat, organizations need to be ready to prevent unnecessary losses.

**The Pandemic Effect**

For any organization, the potential consequences of a pandemic could be numerous. They could include:

**Extreme staffing shortages**

Staffing is an immediate concern, as shortages between 30 and 40 percent should be expected from a major event. For this reason, organizations need to be prepared to cope with increased levels of absenteeism. Even if absenteeism isn’t an issue, employees at work could be less productive.

**Overwhelming demand for services**

In addition to potential loss of staff, an overwhelming demand for services in industries such as public service and healthcare may arise. In an attempt to keep as many employees working as possible, organizations might consider bringing in doctors or nurses as full-time staff during a pandemic event.

**Limited supplies/Disrupted transportation**

Limited supplies, and other vital services, could become an issue as well, as businesses that provide them are impacted by the aforementioned staffing shortages. Transportation disruption may also be an issue.

Absenteism is not the only issue, as this type of event could also cause workers in the office to be less productive.
Reduced reliability in communications, power, water, fuel availability, transportation service

In the midst of a pandemic event, resources could be scarce. For example, access to power, water, fuel, and transportation can be limited. It may also be difficult to communicate, so organizations need to plan accordingly.

Reduced reliability on contractor services (maintenance and repair)

If an organization is in need of maintenance or repair services they might have trouble finding a contractor, as the same staffing shortages impacting other organizations are also going to be an issue at maintenance and repair businesses.
**Organizational Challenges and Responsibilities**

Government, healthcare organizations, businesses, and individuals will all be impacted by a pandemic event in some way. It is important to understand the key challenges and responsibilities faced by each impacted group to improve preparedness and response.

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<th>Actor</th>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Responsibility and Expectations</th>
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| Federal Government          | • Coordinating varying levels of government and international partners for response activities. | • Develop a national pandemic strategy and conduct preparedness, surveillance, and response/containment activities.  
• Facilitate state and local planning through funding and guidance. |
| State/Local Governments     | • Increased demand on public services.  
• Demand for risk communication to public. | • Integrate non-health entities in planning (law enforcement, utilities, and city services).  
• Develop medical surge capacity plans. |
| Critical Infrastructure Entities | • Loss of workforce as employees stay home out of fear or to take care of families. | • Establish a plan to maintain essential services and operations.  
• Establish contingency systems to maintain delivery of goods/services during worker absenteeism. |
| Medical Community            | • A surge in demand for medical services.  
• Healthcare workers will be exposed to the disease and may become sick.  
• Care for nonacute health problems will decrease. | • Provide intervention.  
• Conduct surveillance activities. |
| Individuals and their Families | • Fear of infection and lack of information regarding services and treatment. | • Learn how to prevent and reduce spread of infection.  
• Be prepared at home with supplies to support the household. |
| International Partners      | • Integrating multiple and widespread efforts to mitigate the outbreak.  
• Providing timely data and information across the world. | • Report and share data/information across partners.  
• Coordinate and support expanded operations across multilateral organizations. |
| Employers                   | • Reduced workforce.  
• Limited ability to provide goods and services.  
• Interoperability between various industries. | • Establish flexible workplace policies and procedures.  
• Establish alternative methods to maintain operations. |

A pandemic will also impact an organization’s ability to mobilize its workforce, provide products, and serve its customers. All three of these aspects of planning and preparedness, product continuity, human capital continuity, and customer continuity, must be addressed.
BETH3 – BCM Strategy Development Model

In the event of a pandemic, organizations need to put a strong focus on getting critical processes back up and running to sufficiently support operations. BETH3 methodology is a planning strategy that helps organizations determine an appropriate set of circumstances for which business continuity management strategies should be developed. The model eliminates the single worst-case scenario, while avoiding the need for a high number of event-specific plans. The key is to focus on five specific asset classes all organizations must protect and recover in a pandemic event:

1. **Building** (Facilities and utilities)
2. **Equipment**
3. **Technology** (Applications, data, and infrastructure)
4. **Human Resources**
5. **3rd Parties** (Vendors, customers, and service providers)

Human resources is often the major focus of an organization during a pandemic. However, if it is the only focus, organizations could be ill-prepared for pandemic-related challenges. The other four asset classes also require attention to ensure full preparedness for a pandemic event.

To implement a BETH3 planning strategy it is recommended to go through three phases. The first is the analyzing phase, where organizations want to understand and define processes, complete a risk assessment, and conduct business impact analysis. This phase allows organizations to fully understand the challenges that could be faced in a pandemic.

The next phase is to develop strategies focused on the five asset classes in the BETH3 model. For example, human resources can come up with a plan to enable employees to work from home. If such a policy is implemented, it is important to find out if an organization is capable of handling a high volume of telecommuters, which is why validation is necessary, as strategies created for each critical process need to make logical sense before implementation. People from IT, HR, facilities, securities, etc. should be informed about potential strategies to determine the plausibility for each facet of an organization.

After strategies have been developed, implementation is the next step. This phase includes resource acquisition and implementation, training and awareness, as well as exercising and testing. Simply putting strategies in place isn’t enough to be prepared, as people in an organization need to be informed of what to do in the event of a pandemic, and strategies need to be tested to ensure they work.
10 Key Pandemic Readiness Components

An organization’s preparation strategy should leverage 10 key components – all of which are critical to sustaining operations during a pandemic event.

1) **Leadership/Decision Making** – A Pandemic Planning and Coordination Unit (PPCU) needs to be implemented as a part of the existing Business Continuity Planning (BCP) function. This helps ensure an organization has a well-defined structure in place for decisions to be made in a timely and effective manner. Without a PPCU in place, there could be long delays caused by indecision or a lack of clarity as to who’s authorized to do what in a pandemic event.

2) **Education** – Organizations need to educate employees as to what is expected from them in a pandemic event. For example, are people expected to stay home? Do operating procedures change with a 30 to 40 percent absentee rate? Employees should also be made aware of knowledge about prevention and treatment.

3) **Public/Private Partnerships** – Develop and maintain relationships with trading partners and critical stakeholders, such as unions and public health agencies. These relationships could prove beneficial in a pandemic event, as it can give an organization priority access to necessary supplies. It is also important to discover if it is worth the time and effort to build these relationships.

4) **Communication** – The response plan and approach needs to be communicated to employees and families, customers, suppliers, and partners. Organizations also need to figure out the means by which they will get the message out. It is recommended that organizations have pre-written messages for specific scenarios so they know what is going to be sent out should a pandemic event present itself.

5) **Telecommuting** – Depending on how a pandemic event is impacting an organization, allowing employees to work from home could be the best way to ensure continued operation with limited disruption. When allowing employees to work from home there are a number of factors that need to be considered, such as laptop configurations, networking concerns, and security of home computers. Tests should be run to make sure it is possible for a high percentage of the staff to telecommute without any issues.

6) **Risk and Legal** – Prior to a pandemic event, organizations need to identify likely threats to decrease the risk of a damaging situation. This can be done by developing risk mitigation policies and procedures. Legal considerations also need to be put into place when creating policies, such as telecommuting, to ensure requirements are fair and reasonable.

7) **HR Policies and Procedures** – In the event of a pandemic, organizations need clear and concise HR policies and procedures in place. For example, employees should know their rights if infected in terms of sick time and medical leave. It is also important to consider the legal aspect of these policies to ensure they’re fair and equitable.
8) **Trading Partners** – If the situation is serious enough it could be difficult to get supplies in the door. For this reason, it is important to review demand, distribution, and production plans, and link strategies with key trading partners to come up with a plan of attack for a pandemic event.

9) **Employee Wellness** – If a pandemic hits, organizations need to be concerned about the well-being of employees. This should include reviewing contracts with health plans and provider networks to determine coverage and provision of services such as vaccinations and access to medical facilities. All employees should know what is available to them if infected, and where they can seek treatment.

10) **Business Processes** – To avoid shutdown during a pandemic, organizations need to develop policies and processes that enable them to maintain operational effectiveness. For example, if employees are infected it is important to decide whether or not the organization will use temps.

**What Needs to be the Focus?**

When responding to a pandemic event, there are numerous areas that organizations need to focus on. The first is crisis management, which includes establishing an emergency operations center, activating business continuity and disaster recovery plans, and monitoring new developments. Organizations also need to be concerned with getting the word out to the appropriate stakeholders as to what is being done and what is planned to deal with the pandemic event. In addition to internal messaging, public relations should also be addressed at this point in time.

Another area that needs to be addressed is operational continuity. This includes focusing on how to get critical business activities completed during a pandemic event. For instance, organizations will need to make it possible for employees to work virtually. Also, supplies necessary for operational continuity should be acquired and stockpiled. Next, organizations will want to focus on facilities and equipment. This is when partial or complete facility shutdowns should be considered and equipment is stabilized. Also, local risk levels need to be evaluated to determine if any facilities will be impacted. This information can be obtained by the local civic authorities.

Technology is another area of focus. A few examples of issues that need to be addressed include increasing remote working infrastructure for expected telecommuting, as well as enabling and testing remote access to critical applications. Human resources is important as well, as organizations need to identify critical roles and name appropriate backups if those people are unable to work. Additional HR tasks that organizations need to focus on include identifying and supporting at-risk employees and providing transportation for those who rely on public transit.

In the era of vast technological advancement, it becomes imperative for organizations to leverage technology to better manage risks, compliances, and incidents. Numerous governance, risk and compliance (GRC) platforms exist in the market, which enable the organizations to manage risk and compliance with increased scope for scalability. Everbridge has partnered with RSA, the security division of EMC, to enhance an already established, market leading GRC platform – Archer. The unparalleled competency of Everbridge in Unified Critical Communications combined with the industry leading
expertise of RSA forms a formidable crisis response tool. RSA have incorporated Everbridge’s Unified Critical Communication platform into the Archer Business Continuity Management solution. The integration enables customers to improve flow of communication via text, voice, and smartphone; improves compliance by helping recovery teams test and meet recovery time objectives; facilitates identification of resource needs, potential issues, and improves the success of employee roll calls. The merger definitely encompasses the focus areas regarding technology.

Lastly, relationships with third parties need to be addressed. Are key vendors, service providers, and suppliers prepared for a pandemic event? If not, it is important that organizations have alternative sources available if necessary.
Value of Pandemic Preparedness

Outbreak of pandemics is a realistic threat and there is immense value in being prepared. During the past decade we have witnessed a rise of new subtypes of influenza viruses and other widespread diseases. An outbreak of H7N9 bird flu occurred in 2013, caused by the transmission of the disease between birds and humans. Many experts believe that the outbreak led to more than $6.5 billion in losses to the economy. Hundreds of people died because of the disease.

Recently, several countries from the Middle East have reported multiple deaths after contracting an often-fatal Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) virus, and the number of new infections in the region continue to increase. Till now, thirteen nations (Egypt, Greece, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malaysia, Oman, Philippines, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, United States of America, and Yemen) have reported cases of MERS or evidence of infection since December 2013. This has potential to escalate to a pandemic outbreak and may lead to considerable manpower shortage.

Not being prepared for a pandemic event is a major mistake that needs to be avoided. Organizations receive a tremendous amount of value through preparedness, beginning with the ability to protect their most important asset—employees. Taking the necessary steps to be prepared for a pandemic has other benefits as well, including minimizing the impact to business operations, continuing to deliver products and services to customers, enhancing brand image for reliability, and minimizing financial loss.

Pandemic preparedness offers value for an organization beyond the actual event as well. For example, it could improve preparedness for other types of business interruptions. It can also help an organization better understand critical processes, resource requirements, and internal and external dependencies.

Critical Success Factors

When an organization is planning for a pandemic event, there are seven critical success factors that need to be considered:

1) The cost of doing nothing is too high. The belief that a pandemic will never hit could get an organization in trouble. If a pandemic event does occur—and an organization has no plan in place—the consequences will be costly and far reaching.

2) Most organizations will already have business continuity strategies in place. To be prepared for a pandemic event, these strategies need to be applied to the distinctively different circumstances.
3) In a pandemic event, the likelihood of loss of staff, including critical members, is high. That said, preparedness planning needs to be developed with this in mind.

4) Planning strategies need to consider different regulatory frameworks, cultural practices, and risk levels around the world.

5) Organizations need to analyze potential dependence on government organizations and third parties. The risks associated with this dependence should be mitigated.

6) Pandemic planning needs to be incorporated into the overall Business Continuity Management process.

7) Simply implementing a pandemic preparedness plan isn’t sufficient. Organizations need to complete regular maintenance, review and testing to ensure readiness for an event.
What Questions Should I Think About?

Whether an organization is looking to implement a pandemic preparedness strategy or improve one that’s already in place, there are some questions that should be asked to ensure everything is being addressed:

- If a pandemic plan has been developed, has it been adequately tested and can it be activated swiftly enough?
- Has the level of preparedness at key suppliers, vendors, and service providers been verified?
- Are there ways I can leverage the investment in Pandemic Readiness strategies such as enhanced remote access capabilities, including better information security, to provide cost savings in future, and normal operating capacities?
- Does the plan consider varying regulatory frameworks, cultural practices, and risk levels around the world?
- What has been communicated to the board, major customers, and other key stakeholders about the level of preparedness?

Conclusion

Pandemic preparedness is essential for all organizations, from state and local governments to large corporations. A strong plan can prevent a pandemic event from damaging certain aspects of an organization. For example, implementing a telecommuting policy in such a situation could prevent a high percentage of employees from getting sick. If completed correctly, preparedness planning should assist organizations in pandemic events and beyond.
About the Author

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About Everbridge

Everbridge provides a unified critical communication suite that helps clients be better prepared, make better decisions, and respond quickly and confidently during disruptive events. When an incident happens, whether it’s a natural disaster or an IT service outage, we automate communications to ensure that the right messages get to the right people at the right time.

Widely recognized by analysts as the market leader, Everbridge solutions are trusted by clients in all major industries and government sectors to connect with over 50 million people around the world.

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- **Planning**: Everbridge is easy to set up, maintain, and organize, meaning that you’re always ready for a quick, coordinated response. Everbridge ensures that the right messages get to the right people - with the most advanced opt-in portal on the market, streamlined integration with internal and external data sources, and simple group and contact management.

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- **Delivery**: Even during large-scale disruptions, Everbridge stays on. The most advanced platform in the industry ensures that you reach your contacts - every time. And with worldwide coverage and capabilities, including globally local calling infrastructure and data storage, we’re ready to support you wherever your people are in the world.

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