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Feature Article of the Month



The Influenza Saga – Is Your Organisation Prepared to Face a Pandemic Crisis?

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During the recent weeks, the world paid close attention to the progress of the Influenza A (H1N1) outbreak. For business continuity planners, the diseases outbreak provides an opportunity to revisit and improve their pandemic contingency plan. The actions and reactions from the health authorities, governments, private organizations and general public generated valuable information which the business continuity planner can use to verify the assumptions of the pandemic contingency plan. This article will discuss the lessons from the diseases outbreak.

Expect the Unexpected

The outbreak surprised us in many ways. First, the widely expected pandemic scenario was the emergence of H5N1 cases in Asia will then spread globally. Instead, we deal with different type of virus (H1N1) and it emerged in Mexico and US before it spread to other countries.

Second, the change of the pandemic phase as indicated by the pandemic alert level is more aggressive than what is expected and used in several of the market-wide exercises. What we experienced in the recent weeks was it was possible to progress from pandemic alert level 3 to 4 and then from 4 to 5 within a week.

Third, the fact that the virus was able to spread to many developed countries in relatively short time challenges the effectiveness of control measures to delay the spread of the virus. WHO in its communication stated: *"WHO is not recommending travel restrictions related to the outbreak of the Influenza A (H1N1) virus. Limiting travel and imposing travel restrictions would have very little effect on stopping the virus from spreading, but would be highly disruptive to the global community."*

The important lessons from these surprises for Business Continuity Management are:

- Verify the assumptions – Identify false assumptions and revisit your flu pandemic contingency plan
- Plan for the unexpected – Give attention to risks that are not expected to happen (i.e. low likelihood) but if occur will severely impact the organization capability to continue business
- Plan based on consequences – If plan is based on the threats source, the organisation will be caught off guard when a risk emerges from an unexpected threat, as none of the prepared plans suitable. Because all threats (including the unexpected ones) will result in a limited number of consequences, the organisation will be able to address the continuity risks if the plan is based on these limited consequences.

Understand the Governments' Responses and Adapt

Governments around the world have stepping up precautions against the virus spread to their countries in response to the development of flu outbreak and WHO announcement.

The measures vary from country to country including health screening at entry point, travel restriction, border control, home quarantine order, ban of pork imports and slaughtering of the pig population. Some of these measures create tensions between countries, and protest from the farmers. The controls and restrictions are effectively slow down the movement of goods and people, and in some cases may shut down the business.

The lesson here is that any organisation needs to understand the responses of governments of the countries where the business operate and where its key dependencies are located. With the knowledge, the organisation will be able to identify the threats and vulnerabilities along the supply chain which may impair the organisation ability to continue its operation.

Assess the Impact to Business; React Proportionately and Timely

Despite the imminent threat of pandemic, the business impact of the diseases outbreak is not equally felt but rather depending on the country and the industry sector. Unlike the SARS time, business in Asia countries are generally not impacted with exceptions on public healthcare service and immigration/custom; which control activities are implemented.

The business in Mexico is severely impacted by the outbreak and the government order to shutdown the activities; the businesses in other countries are generally not impacted by the outbreak. The global financial market only briefly showed concern of the possibility of global pandemic before return the attention to the sign of global economy recovery.

Travel and tourism are as expected take a hit as more countries and individual businesses issue travel advisory and individuals refrain from doing unnecessary travel, but business are increasing for the healthcare, pharmaceutical, and telecommunication sectors . In fact, pandemic creates opportunities for some business.

Understanding the nature of the pandemic crisis, organisation should react proportionately and timely. Crisis will punish those organisations that are slow or not adequately react; however, over-react also has the risk of bringing crisis to the organisation before the crisis even come. Such timely and proportionate response will be possible by implement a systematic approach to monitor the event, assess the impact, and decide on the appropriate strategy and plan to respond to the situation.

Turn Crisis into Opportunity

In this article, we have discussed the valuable lessons of the current H1N1 outbreak. Smart organisation can turn the pandemic crisis into an opportunity for the organisation to review their BCM and improve resiliency of the organisation. When the next wave of pandemic comes, the built-in resiliency and the capability to respond to risk will enable the organization to survive and to seize opportunities where the others struggle to survive.

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