

ENSURING WORKFORCE CONTINUITY DURING A PANDEMIC

COMMUNICATIONS BEST PRACTICES

Prepared by:

Varolii Corporation, in coordination with Organizational Resilience
International (ORI Consulting)



EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

As most of us witnessed over the past several years, when a major natural event occurs the government is limited in the degree of assistance it can offer. Warnings of a global influenza pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) underscore the need for organizations to engage in their own loss mitigation activities. Examination of contingency plans drawn up by state and local authorities only serves to highlight this need.

In the event of a pandemic influenza outbreak, the government has encouraged “social distancing” as the primary preventative course of action. Under those circumstances, effective communication will be of paramount importance. People are “social animals” and derive much of their sense of safety from the social groups to which they belong – work being a very important one. This sense of safety is invariably shaken with radical changes such as the proposed “distancing” or isolation. The uncertainty of a chaotic and unpredictable situation highlights the need for “knowing” what is happening around us. Thus the first goal of an effective communication strategy is to create a community, or “social context” for dealing with the unfolding situation.

When considering a comprehensive communication strategy that reflects “best practice” standards, it is useful to segment the event into three phases:

- Pre-event (mitigation, preparedness)
- Intra event (response)
- Post event (recovery)

Each one of these phases requires different communications emphasis. For example, in the pre-event phase communication will focus on creating awareness of a pandemic and of company policies and procedures.

Intra-event communication will focus on disseminating information about the “community” and the ongoing operational aspects of the business.

Finally, post-event communication will focus on updating various partners as to the operational status of the company, providing evaluations and assessment. Additionally, in each phase communication will be focus on two parallel tracks:

- One track relates directly to business operations and functioning.
- A second track relates to the “human” side of business: creating a “community context”, updating stakeholders, employees and other key parties, while providing a means for them to communicate inwards to the organization and its resources. This is not only the right thing to do – it’s critical to organizational continuity during a pandemic.

The communications plan must address the “who” (target audience and spokesperson), “what” (content), “when” (timing and frequency of communication), and finally “how” (technological and other solutions). In addition, the plan needs to incorporate the awareness that communication of needs is bi-directional – in other words, information needs to be communicated both upstream and downstream in order to fully support and strengthen the organization’s resilience. Integrated inbound communications capabilities enable employees to report on status, get information about colleagues, make requests for assistance, and more. As an example, an employee may be caring for an elderly parent, whose supply of an important maintenance medication is about to run out. Inbound communications enable the employee to make a request for assistance with this matter.

This blended mode of communications will play a vital role in ensuring organizational resilience in the event of a pandemic. It will help restore the three most important psychological elements in a crisis situation: safety, predictability and control. Careful attention must be given to the planning process so that communication will act to enhance the sense of community in the stakeholders and minimize disruptions to business.

LIVING WITH MACRO LEVELS OF RISK

If you watch television, read newspapers or listen to the radio, you’ve been besieged with information about “pandemic influenza.” Despite this potential journalistic overkill, there is serious, historic truth behind many concerns. Every credible source, including the US Centers for Disease Control and the Director General’s Office of the World Health Organization, believes we will again experience pandemic influenza. Indeed, governmental and other organizations have gone so far as to create detailed economic impact estimates.

Economic Impacts

The US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and other governmental bodies have estimated that “The estimated economic impact would be US\$71.3 to \$166.5 billion, excluding disruptions to commerce and society.”

Accordingly, organizations are preparing for what promises to be another event of global proportions – an avian flu pandemic. Pandemic varieties of influenza emerge regularly. During the 20th century, they appeared 3 times. In each case, they lasted about a year, spread in several “waves”, then disappeared.

The most likely candidate for the next outbreak is a strain of avian virus called H5N1. This form of virus is new, there is no immunity built up in any human populations. It has been successful at passing the “species barrier”, and now infects humans. According to the World Health Organization, 161 deaths from bird flu worldwide were recorded in 2006. There were 267 confirmed cases of human infection for the year.

LOSS MITIGATION REQUIRES PLANNING AND COMMUNICATIONS

Guided by history, we know when the next pandemic flu outbreak occurs, there will be severe dislocations. Services, even key services, may be curtailed, business operations and supply chain operations may be compromised, borders may close – the economic impacts will be huge.

Proper planning and effective communications are critical at pre-outbreak, intra outbreak, and after an outbreak to protect your people, help preserve capital assets, maintain supply chain relationships and work effectively in the communities where you have a presence. Without an effective communications plan in place, other efforts will be fragmented, there will be no audit capability, and you will not be able to protect your most important asset – your people.

Recommended Response Plans

Gartner recommends that organizations have in place completed pandemic/IT response plans that:

- **Enable large numbers of knowledge workers to perform their duties from home for an extended period of time**
- **Provide the means for workers to collaborate remotely**
- **Ensure that consistent communication with suppliers, partners, customers and other stakeholders can be maintained**

COMMUNICATIONS IS CRITICAL TO ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE

We know one thing– during an event of the scale and type of a pandemic influenza outbreak, many things will happen that are outside our control – even beyond our prediction. That’s one of the reasons it’s critical have a clear, effective communications plan in place.

During a pandemic, it’s critical to communicate effectively with employees and account for both their well being and their whereabouts. High absentee rates make these communications even more critical to effectively managing your workforce; and by managing we mean providing them with reliable and accurate information, assessing their well-being, and identifying those employees that are available to work.

Also, because a pandemic is not limited to an individual company instead affecting regions or perhaps the entire country, communications are a critical tool in identifying and

Communicating with employees on a strategic level...a tactical level...and an operational level keeps everybody ‘on the same page’. Coupled with empowering employees to take actions when necessary, such extensive communications allow them to contribute efficiently to flexible operations.

- ***The Resilient Enterprise***
Yossi Sheffi

mitigating impact on your supply chain, which, like your organization, is also likely experiencing high rates of absenteeism.

SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION PLANS FOR PANDEMIC PUT PEOPLE FIRST

Picture yourself at home during a pandemic influenza outbreak. Your first concern is for your family and loved ones. You've been forced to isolate yourself and are socially distanced from your community and colleagues. Your state of mind is likely to be highly agitated. News is intermittent, you're not certain if you can get groceries or even water for next week, and your children haven't been in school for at least several days.

A solid communications platform will be the proverbial “water cooler” where people gather to connect and find out the “real deal” information.

- ORI Consulting

Communications around a pandemic is not limited to a disaster planning group or a specific set of stakeholders. Communication is a global activity that will affect every employee in your organization, vendors and others in your supply chain, as well as customers and communities you serve. And – communications means more than status updates, collaboration on projects, and other direct, work-related activities. It means connecting with associates, friends and family.

Providing people with this ability to connect helps ensure that individuals are better-informed, and feel more in control – primary requisites for workforce continuity.

COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGES DURING A PANDEMIC

Thus, an effective communications plan that contributes to the safety of people by enabling them to both obtain important information and communicate back with status and other information will also strengthen organizational resilience – the ability of your organization to bend without breaking. During a pandemic, these challenges will be magnified. Organizations can count on having to work with a dispersed employee base, extended high rates of absenteeism, and an overloaded public infrastructure.

Communications Challenges

- **Pandemic effects not limited to one or even several companies**
- **Wide spread, extended absenteeism**
- **Key suppliers out of touch**
- **Customers will be out of touch**
- **Transportation capabilities restricted**
- **Public infrastructure overloaded**

In short, even the most elaborate communications equipment and plans require one common element – people – in order to function properly.

Your organization's people, your suppliers, even your communities, will be concerned with the need to gather general situational information, speak with their friends, find out who's doing well – to re-establish a social context. Until they have met these basic needs, they will be unlikely to perform business tasks and communications with any degree of success.

STRATEGIZING THE CHALLENGE – LOSS MITIGATION

Communications will play a critical role in helping you manage your business effectively during a pandemic influenza outbreak. Strategizing the challenges presented in the previous section will help to reduce downtime, mitigate financial loss, and protect your people, while maintaining better supply chain and community relationships.

Consider the challenges – what happens if you are not able to account for your employees and manage your workforce; what happens if you are not able to keep stakeholders updated and informed; what happens if incorrect or damaging information is released due to lack of control over information flow? What will happen if you're not able to keep your partners and members of your supply chain informed of status? Next, we discuss some communications best practices to help you plan for these challenges.

Communications Needs

- Disseminate reliable information
- Reduce downtime and mitigate financial loss
- Manage workforce
- Keep all stakeholders updated
- Provide guidance
- Protect your people
- Help keep public informed as to status
- Communicate up and down supply chain

COMMUNICATIONS BEST PRACTICES – PLANNING FOR THE UNPLANNED

There are many elements to effective communications planning. In this section, we offer several key best practices for both communications and for enabling technologies. Effective communications occur during three stages of an event:

- Pre event
- Intra event
- Post event

During a pandemic influenza outbreak, each one of these phases requires different communications emphasis. For example, in the pre-event phase, communications should focus on communicating the pandemic plan including expected roles and actions of employees, company policies such as telecommuting and when employees can come back

from work. Intra-event communication need to focus on communicating information about the community of affected stakeholders and the ongoing operational aspects of the business, as well as acquiring information from the field about employee status and safety. Post-event communications focus on letting employees, partners, and your supply chain know you are operating under normal business conditions, providing updates as normal business activities resume..

For maximum effectiveness during each phase, your communications need to address two individual tracks, namely:

- Communications that relate directly to business operations and ongoing functionality.
- Communications that relate to the people side of business.

This second track of communications will help create a community context, as they update stakeholders, employees and other key parties. The more connected people feel, the safer they feel – and the better positioned they will be able to act on more operationally-related communications.

Effective strategies take the differences between these stages into account and are specifically developed to communicate appropriately on both tracks at each stage. This more holistic view of communications enables not only planning and testing for anticipated incidents, but planning for and testing management of the unexpected.

COMMUNICATIONS BEST PRACTICES INCLUDE:

Establishing Consistent Policies – Developing a Communications Plan

Clear policies and protocols make it easier for people to know what to do over the course of a pandemic (or other emergency) event. Typically, a modern communications plan will cover Who (e.g. who needs notification? Who decides notification is required? Who will be the spokesperson?); What (e.g. What needs to be communicated? What do you want people to do? What are the triggers?); When (e.g. When do you start calling? When do you stop? When do you update?); and, finally, How (e.g. How will you inform your people?)

The choice of an internal spokesperson can be critical. Research has shown that the source for any crisis communication needs to be trusted in order to ensure maximal compliance. This depends more on the person than on their role in the organization.

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Ultimately, a key factor in the success of the communications plan is executive collaboration and decision-making. For example, it's critical to determine exactly when certain notifications are necessary. Frequently, communications plans should require that members of a senior management team make that determination.

Using the automated communications system senior management can stay abreast of the situation in real time, perhaps automatically bridging key executives into a conference call for live real-time collaboration and decision making.

Additionally, interactive capabilities provide the ability to create an audit trail of their decisions, e.g. “press one to confirm that this message should be sent to all employees”. This will require that executives are included in the training and testing of the service, and perhaps more importantly, are bought into the communications plan.

Message Management – Content and Channel Selections, Validation, Interaction

What you say and how you deliver your message is critical in an emergency – particularly a broad-based emergency such as a pandemic influenza outbreak. Best practice recommendations in these areas include:

- Provide regular update and status information
- Avoid over-communicating – it dilutes important information (the 11PM News effect)
- Use multiple communications channels to enable message prioritization
- Send time critical messages by phone
- Send follow up messages or non-critical status messages via e-mail or bulletins
- Reference other available device channels in all communications to ensure employees have these in mind during a very stressful time.
- Pay specific attention to tone of voice and pace. During an emergency, the simple sound of a known voice speaking calmly and deliberately can reduce uncertainty and stress.

Testing – and Testing Again

Proper and regular testing are essential to the success of any communications plan, regardless of design. During testing, you will not only test the plan itself, and the physical infrastructure (automation and communication) that you have put in place, but you will also be reminding employees and other potential notification recipients such as supply chain partners, and others.

When you test, it’s important to simulate real conditions. For instance, instead of simply testing all communications via a cell phone channel, test all devices. It’s critical to find a balance between having people accustomed to the system and having them ignore it because it’s so routine.

Create venues for participant feedback. By giving participants input into the actual deployment, it invests them and makes them more committed to the plan’s overall success.

TECHNOLOGY BEST PRACTICES

Above, we described certain best practices in communications. Similarly, there are a wide range of best practices for enabling technologies including:

- Automation to ensure timely delivery of communications with verifiable audit trails.
- Verifying delivery and reliability metrics.
- Using a blend of both inbound and outbound multi-channel interactive communications.

This blended form of communications is particularly critical during a pandemic or other large scale event. During these events, it's imperative to close the loop – to obtain reports back from outlying staff and other stakeholders, as well as providing information to those individuals. For maximum benefit, any communication systems associated with workforce continuity planning must blend both inbound and outbound communications capabilities.

A Forrester report recommends that employees need a formal emergency communication and notification system linking the organization to workers, enabling the delivery of key communication from the firms and tracking worker status.

- Forrester – Workforce Continuity Best Practices, December 26, 2006

Outbound communications are critical for notifying workers of an unplanned event, providing accurate, tension-defusing information, and delivering critical status information.

Inbound communications enable workers to report on status and well being from the field, let others know of urgent needs, and provide on the spot assessments of work-readiness in the field – in short, inbound communications aid organizations in developing a real-time “picture” of what’s happening with employees. This provides a further safety net for workers, both from an organizational and psychological standpoint.

The best practices recommended above describe a portion of the activities necessary to put an effective communications plan in place – a plan that will work to help keep people calm, informed and connected and that will work to mitigate loss during a severe event such as a pandemic.

CASE STUDY: GLOBAL FINANCIAL SERVICES FIRM MANAGES WORKFORCE CONTINUITY WITH BLENDED COMMUNICATIONS

As part of their workforce continuity initiatives, a large global financial services firm put a blended communication plan in place to survey their worldwide employees daily during potential future outbreaks of pandemic influenza. Using an outbound phone questionnaire, the survey was designed to determine each employees work availability and

health status. The inbound component of the communications plan enabled the company to post status and operational information about each office location. For example, if an office were closed, information about alternate work sites could be posted.

The questionnaire asks employees if they are able to work, where they will be working from for the day, or, if they are unable to work, why and when will plan to return to work. Further, employees can transfer directly from the survey to the employee assistance line for additional help if needed.

The organization recognizes that acquiring this information on a daily basis allows managers to redeploy their workforce in critical areas of the business, as may be necessary. According to a senior business continuity manager for the firm, “This communications capability gives me information about my group's well being that I need to have. The knowledge will help me to assign or reassign work as necessary. The ability to track daily attendance will be important for monitoring deliverables with hard deadlines.”

PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST ENSURES WORKFORCE CONTINUITY

Developing an effective, blended communications strategy is a critical component in protecting and helping manage your workforce, during a pandemic. It also can help with efforts to maintain supply chain relationships and ensure that all stakeholders are kept informed about important information in a timely fashion.

Effective communications programs can further assist organizations in overcoming the challenges of prolonged absenteeism, degradation of public infrastructure across both the organization and supply chain, as well as the challenge of working with customers who themselves are likely to be out of touch. These plans can enable stakeholders to be in a better position to manage the communications, collaboration and efforts that will help maintain the organization in the face of such an event.

While high reliability, high availability automation is critical to developing a plan that enables rapid, interactive communications, equally critical are such elements as developing an effective, best practice based plan that can be rigorously tested in a wide range of ways.

Nobody – not even business continuity professionals – enjoys thinking about the difficulties that such a widespread event can cause. It's more useful to focus on the positive aspects of what can be done to protect and connect your people, retain organizational resilience, and mitigate loss.

In January 2007, the National Infrastructure Advisory Council (NIAC), in its final report on Prioritization of Critical Infrastructure During a Pandemic Outbreak, noted:

NIAC recommends . . . a consistent pandemic communications plan complete with tailored communications to specific target audiences.

About Varolii Corporation

Varolii provides on-demand communication software and services that enable organizations to more effectively reach and interact with their customers and employees, getting the best result from every interaction. By automating the processes required for personalized communications such as flight cancellation notices, fraud detection alerts and prescription pick-up reminders, Varolii helps its clients reduce operational costs, increase contact center efficiency, and get more out of their existing IT investments. More than 380 companies, including many of the largest U.S. banks, airlines, wireless carriers, utilities, and healthcare organizations trust Varolii send nearly 4 million communications every business day.

Varolii is headquartered in Seattle with offices in the Boston and Denver metropolitan areas. For more information, visit www.varolii.com.

For more information, please contact Varolii Corporation at:

1-800-206-2979 or info@varolii.com

Or visit: www.Varolii.com

821 Second Ave. • Suite 1000 • Seattle, Washington 98104

About Organizational Resilience International, LLC

Organizational Resilience International, LLC (ORI) provides Human Impact solutions to organizations of all sizes. ORI's solutions cover the entire life cycle of Disaster and Crisis Management: mitigation, preparedness planning, response and recovery. ORI is a pioneer in the field of Human Impact Preparedness for organizations and provides services globally. ORI's services ensure 'human continuity' and reduce the adverse effects of disasters and crises on employees, organizations and their stakeholders.

For more information, please contact ORI Consulting at:

1-800-807-6125 or info@oriconsulting.com

Or visit: www.oriconsulting.com

85 Warren Street • Concord, NH 03301