

Global Killer

A microscopic view of a virus particle, likely a coronavirus, with a textured, orange-brown surface and a red, spherical core. The background is a dark blue with other blurred virus particles.

**Can Your
Organization
Survive The
Pandemic Threat?**

The word “pandemic” probably gets your heart racing – and for good reason. A pandemic can spread rapidly over large regions of the globe and result in millions of deaths.

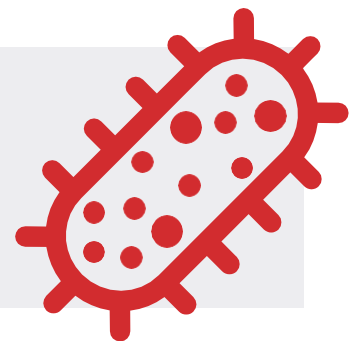
Unlike an epidemic, a pandemic is not confined to one specific geographic region. In simple terms, the World Health Organization defines a pandemic as a contagion that has gone global. Narrowed down a bit, it may be defined as a contagion that has spread across more than one continent, such as the Zika virus.

Pandemics pose some of the biggest threats to the world. That’s why organizations should have a plan for reducing the potential impact on their workforce, suppliers and customers.

You can’t stop a pandemic, but you can prepare for it.

From a civil, corporate and individual perspective, think of President John F. Kennedy’s famous quote:

*Ask not what your country can do for you
– ask what you can do for your country.*



As an emergency preparedness manager, don’t expect someone else to look after you or your organization. You need to ask, “What can I do to help prepare and protect my organization?”

By creating comprehensive pandemics planning strategies, you can help ensure ongoing business operations and better care for your employees.



Pandemics Have Caused Millions Of Deaths In The Past 100 Years

In the past century, pandemics have led to more than 80 million estimated deaths. The Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 was especially deadly, killing an estimated 50 million people worldwide, including many healthy young adults with strong immune systems.

In more recent times, the HIV/AIDS pandemic resulted in an estimated 35 million deaths since the early 1980s. HIV/AIDS serves as a reminder that, while influenza gains much of the attention, other diseases also present a serious threat.

Both a virus and bacteria can cause a pandemic. Bacteria can be good (think of the bacteria in our digestive tracts that we need) or bad, such as bacteria associated with illnesses like plague, salmonella, norovirus and E. coli.

Viruses are inherently bad, with the differences between them being varying degrees of danger. In addition to influenza and HIV/AIDS, in the last 50 years we've seen Ebola, Legionnaires' disease, SARS, MERS (Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome) and Zika.

What makes viruses especially dangerous is they can undergo mutations. When a major mutation happens (known as antigenic shift), no known vaccine or treatment is available, and that situation may persist for several months.

For instance, during the Spanish Flu of 1918, people were affected and dying, and then the virus mutated. It came back with renewed vigor. Some people felt fine at breakfast time, but they were dead by dinner time. The virus struck that suddenly.

The World Health Organization is closely monitoring the H5N1 strain of the avian flu. It's currently flagged as being in the alert phase, meaning a new subtype has been identified in humans and increased vigilance on monitoring is necessary. The strain may turn out not to be a major event, or it could mutate into a highly dangerous virus that hits in the not-too-distant future.



Proper Planning Is Key To Preventing The Spread Of Disease

The probability of a serious pandemic happening depends on where you're located. In the United Kingdom, the National Risk Register estimates the probability of a serious pandemic occurring within the next five years to be between 1 and 20, and 1 in 2.

The report, published in September 2017, also estimates that up to half of the U.K. population could be infected. Globally, the death toll could exceed 100 million people, and some experts believe that's on the low side.

How much warning would you get that a pandemic is coming? Potentially none at all. SARS was proliferating worldwide before the World Health Organization even knew it existed. But in the case of influenza, health organizations are monitoring on an ongoing basis.

*In the event of any pandemic, proper planning is key to preventing the spread of disease. As you work through your pandemics preparedness planning, consider how you can implement **the following best practices:***



Provide opportunities for remote working:

To facilitate working from home, make sure all employees have web-based access to their work files. Providing the ability to communicate via video or audio conferencing also helps with working remotely.

Consider the kind of projects you'll assign to remote workers. For example, tasks like white papers or competitor research are ideal, as they allow people to still contribute to the company while not at the office.

You'll want to consult your organization's leadership in advance to make decisions around remote working. They're in the best position to determine what roles are best suited for remote work.



Regularly disinfect office spaces:

For employees working at your offices, minimize their risk of diseases spreading by regularly disinfecting surfaces. While this is a general best practice at all times, during a pandemic you'll want to go even further.

As an example, if visitors sign in at a front desk, don't have a common pen that everyone uses. Instead, provide all visitors with a new pen that they keep. Also, discourage the exchanging of business cards and shaking hands.

No matter how hard you try, it's not realistic to constantly disinfect surfaces. For that reason, you don't want to have a communal drinking fountain, because lots of people will touch the surfaces. Encourage employees to bring their own beverages and cups to work.



Set up handwashing and sanitizing stations:

Make it as easy as possible for employees, visitors and vendors to regularly wash and/or sanitize their hands. It's an easy but effective way to help prevent the spread of infection.

As part of your pandemics training, have employees use Glo Germ, which is a liquid that goes on people's hands like a lotion and glows brightly when exposed to ultraviolet. Ask employees to go wash their hands, and after washing when they look at their hands under a blacklight, they'll see all of the places they missed. It's a fun and educational way to reinforce the importance of thorough handwashing.

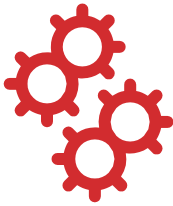
In addition, encourage everyone in your organization to get a flu shot each year. Consider having a flu shot clinic with vaccinations offered onsite at your locations to make it simple for employees.



Resources To Help With Planning

During your pandemics planning, start building relationships with regional resources at agencies like the World Health Organization and, if you have locations in the United States, the Centers for Disease Control. Within the CDC, the Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response has regional coordinators responsible for specific territories. A disaster is the wrong time to exchange business cards.

Be proactive about using resources that these agencies offer. [Download our pandemics communications guide](#) to get a full list of templates, checklists and tools to help in your planning.



How To Build Your Pandemics Communication Plan

As part of your pandemics preparedness planning, you'll want to construct a communication strategy. You should work with representatives from not just communications but also from your HR department and leadership. Getting a cross-departmental group that feels strongly about protecting your organization is key to building a good communication plan.

Your plan needs to include information about how employees request support if they or their family members fall ill. Do they go to their managers or fill out a form on their intranet? Outline the process and be sure employees understand it.

As a company, you'll also want to determine what services to extend to those who are ill or die from the pandemic. Do you want to offer benefits like life insurance, short-term disability, long-term disability or death benefits? If those benefits are in place, how do employees in need access them?

In addition to your employees, a well-rounded pandemics plan should also address your customers as well as your suppliers and vendors.

A few examples of questions you may need to think about include:

- What if vendors are unable to access your facilities during a pandemic?
- What if you require a new phone number (or additional numbers) for your customer service line?
- What is your plan for reducing onsite visits with customers if necessary until the pandemic ends?

It's important to think through these policies so you can decide how to handle difficult situations as a company. From a pure business perspective, you want to consider how the pandemic is going to affect your organization's ability to function and understand the downstream implications.

An emergency notification systems (ENS) is a great tool for helping you communicate during a pandemic. It allows you to quickly distribute information, and anyone with authorization can send messages from a smartphone.

In a longer crisis like a pandemic, an ENS also helps you keep employees updated and do wellness checks. For instance, you could send a reminder in the morning: "Do you have a fever? Don't come to work."

You may need to open up communications to employees' families, as well. If an employee is very ill and can't check email, you'll want to give the family alternative ways to communicate with the company. Make sure that employees' close family members (such as a spouse) know how to contact the appropriate people at your business during a pandemic.



Write Alerts And Messages To Clearly Communicate

As you start working on alerts and messages to include in your communication strategy, look at what you want your employees to know and the triggers for issuing a message. Often, it'll be an alert from the World Health Organization or Centers for Disease Control.

One of the biggest challenges with messaging is making sure you're providing the right message at the right time. From a pre-planning standpoint, focus less on what the specific messages are going to be, and focus more on creating a plan around what information to convey at what point.

For example, your organization may decide that once the health threat reaches Level 3 on the World Health Organization's pandemic scale, you'll send a simple message to partners, customers and employees that says, "We're aware of the situation and we're monitoring it."

You want to have the framework of your communication planned before a pandemic strikes. Then, as the situation evolves, you can send messages specific to the health threat. If you know the threat is something aerosolized, then airborne transmission is the biggest concern and you want to focus your education and mitigation strategies around this area.

While your early communications are going to be specific to the threat, keep these best practices in mind when creating your pandemics planning strategies:



Help people find more information:

Think about where you'll direct people to find more details. If your company uses a certain channel – like an emergency notification system or Twitter – to communicate, you can plan for messages that say, "Look for alerts on the ENS" or "Monitor our Twitter channel for updates." This is especially helpful if you're closing offices.



Make your messages clear and concise:

A big mistake companies make is putting too much information out to people. Tell people what you want them to do, but don't tell them what you do not want them to do. People only hear bits and pieces of messages, so they must be short and focused on the actions you want them to take.

Repeat messages and use multiple channels: Information needs to be repeated at least three times for people to understand it. Within your communication

plan, information is going to be redundant, and that's OK. Plan to send messages on multiple channels, such as through your ENS.

Pre-script specific holding statements when applicable: If you know there's an inherent threat of vector-borne diseases like Zika, you can pre-script those statements before mosquito season starts. Those messages are then ready to be pushed out when needed.



Create a dialogue with your employees:

As you're working on pandemics communications during your planning, ask employees what they'd like from the organization. How can you reassure them? What kind of messages would help them most? The more employees contribute, the more buy-in you'll gain. Plus, they may have a different perspective that's incredibly valuable to your planning strategies.



Prepare Your Organization To Withstand A Pandemic

Building a pandemics preparedness plan requires thoughtful consideration to identify emerging threats and determine specific actions you'll take if your organization is impacted. You don't want to be figuring out the details when a pandemic strikes.

Start working with leaders from across your organization to prioritize critical tasks, communicate important messages, ensure business continuity and care for your employees.

With a well-crafted plan in place, you can feel more confident that your organization is prepared to withstand a pandemic.

Need advice on how to communicate effectively during COVID-19?

**Get in touch with our team of experts for
communication best practices**

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