

Business Continuity Planning for an Influenza Pandemic: Case Study from a Food Processing Company

Introduction

This case study is one of ten written as a part of a study undertaken on *Business Continuity Planning for an Influenza Pandemic*. The objective is to raise awareness among business enterprises in Ireland of the need for business continuity planning (BCP) for the possible arrival of an influenza pandemic in Ireland.

The case study is based on a real company, but is fictionalised in some respects. Key details, including the company's name, have been altered to protect its identity.

As this company, like many in Ireland, is only beginning to appreciate the need to plan for an influenza pandemic, its plan is not yet complete. The case study necessarily reflects this continuing planning process.

Background

Good Food Limited is a large food processor in Ireland with over 1,000 employees and with a range of almost 500 products, the majority produced in its 3 manufacturing plants in Ireland, and the remainder produced under contract by processors in Ireland and elsewhere in Europe.

- The products are distributed via a network of depots and agents to its 5,000+ retail customers, including grocery multiples, using an in-house fleet of 70 delivery vans as well as agents' vans.
- The products are mainly chilled food of relatively short shelf life. They require regular and frequent deliveries, using refrigerated depots and delivery vehicles.
- As a food producer, the company has been alert to the potential risks of an avian influenza outbreak among birds in Ireland and the related risk of an influenza pandemic.
- As a large food sector company, Good Food is aware of the need for business continuity planning to address food specific issues that may arise such as product contamination and recall, as well as by issues, such as computer failure and factory or warehouse fire or flood, faced by businesses in other sectors.

Adding preparation for a 'flu pandemic to Good Food Limited's existing business continuity planning activities has been a clear priority. A project team was established, led by the HR Department to undertake the necessary planning. The team has undertaken the planning process as set out in the steps below.

1: Planning Activities

Planning involved the following steps:

1. The project team developed a planning schedule with action steps based on the 'Checklist', deadlines and associated responsibilities.
2. The project team identified various sources of information (e.g. Department of Health and Children, Health Service Executive, World Health Organisation), about the pandemic threat and impact, and collected and disseminated this information among the team.

3. A list of employees, representing all aspects of the business, was identified for consultation. A questionnaire was developed and circulated to obtain information to act as a basis for an initial impact assessment.
4. Employee representatives were contacted and made aware of the issues. Their cooperation and involvement sought for the planning process.
5. Good Food's suppliers were contacted to request details of their business continuity plans for an influenza pandemic.
6. Based on the WHO 'Alert Framework' the project team identified trigger points to be included in the plan.

2: Issues to be Addressed

The following were the main issues addressed in planning.

1. The project team identified critical activities within Good Food's business, essential for business continuity. These included:
 - Raw material and packaging supplies
 - Finished goods supplies
 - Production including production maintenance
 - Quality Control and Laboratory Testing
 - Logistics
 - Cleaning
2. The project team assessed the impact of these critical activities suffering 40% absences.
 - Good Food Limited has several thousand suppliers of raw materials and packaging. The team assessed how critical each is to the production process, and to resilience in the event of a pandemic. Where a supplier was assessed as being very significant to Good Food, they were contacted and asked to supply details of their business continuity planning. Significance was not always a factor of size.
 - Good Food has a total of 16 suppliers of finished products. Each of these was contacted in order to understand the status of its business continuity plans for a 'flu pandemic. As many of these suppliers also produce products under their own brand, difficult questions relating to priority arose when assessing the impact of significant employee absences. In many cases these questions could not be satisfactorily resolved and remain open. Similarly, it is possible that suppliers in the UK and Continental Europe might give priority to their domestic markets in the event of product shortages.
 - Good Food has three manufacturing locations. The possibility, in the event of significant employee absences, of rationalising the range of products and package sizes, and of consolidating of production at a single site is being evaluated. This would also allow for maintenance to be centralised, and could maximise production efficiency through longer production runs of a limited product range.

- As in any food company, compromising quality control and laboratory testing is not an option. The project team has set in motion a process to identify staff who could be cross trained to undertake some of this work. It has also contacted the nearest Institute of Technology to assess its capacity to support the company's test laboratory in an emergency.
 - Good Food's logistics is largely an internal activity, although with some agents, and with a small element handled by third parties. The Logistics Director has been asked to prepare a contingency plan to cater for a pandemic.
 - Good Food's cleaning is conducted by a contracted agency. The project team has contacted this agency for details of expected continuity plans in the event of a pandemic, and assurances that the cleaners have the necessary knowledge and training to cater for a pandemic. Mindful of the fact that the contracted agency will itself be impacted by employee absences, and will also be in significant demand in a pandemic situation, the project team has recommended that selected internal staff receive appropriate training in cleaning.
3. The project team has contacted the company's major customers, and asked them for information on their business continuity plans in relation to continuity of supply. They found that the grocery multiples are aware of the need for business continuity planning for a 'flu pandemic, although some, like Good Food, are still at an early stage of this planning process. It is envisaged that the grocery multiples will take responsibility for allocation of supplies to their stores in the event of shortages. Allocations to independent grocery stores might have to be administered by Good Food based on sales history. The Good Food sales team would inform retailers of the planned approach to allocations in advance of the pandemic spreading to Ireland.
 4. Based on the information received to date and on the assumptions made, the project team has prepared financial impact statements for the business for review by the senior management team.
 5. In relation to administrative employees, the project team has identified those tasks which could be managed from home (e.g. administrative, finance and some IT work), and have identified the IT resources required. Sales contact with customers will be essential during a pandemic to keep customers advised of the status of supplies. This contact will be by telephone or e-mail only. Delivery staff cannot avoid contact with customers but will be trained to minimise the risk of infection, and will be supplied with hygiene kits for their vehicles.
 6. The project team has identified a small number of employees who are potentially at higher risk to receive special medical advice in the event that a pandemic emerges.
 7. The team has analysed business related travel for the last year as a guide to action steps required. Most travel related to visits to customers, particularly the grocery multiples, for regular management and coordination meetings. It has been agreed that in the event of a pandemic, such meetings would be replaced by telephone or e-mail contacts. Teleconferencing has been evaluated, but is considered unnecessary.
 8. The Financial Controller has been asked to develop a plan to manage day to day financial requirements. This plan will be submitted to the project team for review and inclusion in the overall plan.

3: Measures to Underpin Continuity

1. After obtaining appropriate medical advice, the project team has developed policies for returning to work after infection, and for those showing symptoms while at work.
2. It has also developed policies to facilitate working from home where this is appropriate, including expenses related to telephone calls and installation of broadband.
3. A contingency plan for key employee replacement in event of illness has been prepared.
4. An emergency communications plan has been developed. This is based around collecting contact phone numbers and e-mail addresses of all staff for use in an emergency.
5. Good Food's insurance company has been asked to review all policies and to advise on any necessary amendments to cater for a pandemic.

4: Response to Workplace Risk

1. Hygiene notices are being drafted for printing, using suggested wording drawn from various informed agencies.
2. Good Food's cleaning is conducted by a contracted agency. The project team have contacted this agency for details of expected continuity plans in the event of a pandemic and assurances that the contract cleaners have the necessary knowledge and training to cater for a pandemic. The project team has recommended that some internal staff should also receive training in appropriate cleaning techniques.
3. Stocks of hand wash, towels, tissues and cleaning materials have been ordered.
4. Policies have been developed to reduce face-to-face contact internally, particularly on Good Food's production floor and in its open plan administration.

Challenges of Planning for a 'Flu Pandemic

1. Food will be an essential commodity during a pandemic. Ensuring continuity of supply will be a major challenge in the face of possible disruptions to supplies and staff absences. Achieving the maximum cooperation with the grocery multiples will be if significant stock outs are to be avoided.
2. Planning without creating unnecessary panic is a challenge.

Conclusion

Good Food operates in a sector where planning for a pandemic is important both to businesses themselves, and to the wider community. It is important that food businesses should prepare effectively for the challenges potentially posed by an influenza pandemic.