

## Business Continuity Planning for an Influenza Pandemic: Case Study from a Software 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 a 'flu pandemic in Ireland.

The case study is based on a composite from a number of real businesses, and is fictionalised in some respects, including the name.

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

Diltisys is a Dublin-based software company, which was established in the late 1990s. Its business is based on licensing its financial software product, and on providing associated services, both remotely from its Irish operation and on-site.

It has a number of customers in Ireland and the UK, and has made its first sales in the US. It is working hard at growing its sales in North American markets, and is developing its product to better meet the needs of US customers.

It employs 40 staff in Ireland and three in the UK. It has a small US office with two American sales staff and two Irish engineers.

### 1: Planning Activities

The management team agreed that the Human Resources Manager should take the lead in planning for the possibility of an influenza pandemic, as many of the key issues were felt to relate to people management.

She consulted information from a range of sources. These included the Department of Health and Children and the World Health Organisation, the material on pandemic influenza preparedness published by Forfás, and also material from the US and the UK where the company is active. In addition, she also consulted with her counterparts in other Irish software companies through the industry organisation.

She consulted with other members of the management team, including the Vice-Presidents responsible for sales, and for consulting & services, who manage the overseas-based staff.

She developed a draft plan, and after discussing it with the CEO, brought it to the management team for discussion and sign-off. As part of this process, the team worked through the implications of a scenario based on a fairly severe pandemic with significant staff absences and disruption to international travel.

## 2: Issues to be Addressed

The Human Resources Manager considered the activities within the company that are critical to business continuity. She decided that these fell into two categories:

- Some activities are required to keep the company operating day to day, such as IT systems and customer support.
- Some activities, particularly sales and work on product development have to continue if the company is to meet timing-critical constraints on its success and survival. The window of opportunity is of limited duration. The business has to satisfy its investors on meeting agreed milestones. Unplanned delays in obtaining a return on its investments in product development and sales could force the company into seeking more funding, which might not be successful, and which would in any case dilute the founders' shareholdings.

Consulting with the other members of the management team, and with the systems manager, she concluded that there would be scope for many staff to telework. The company already has the required infrastructure, and most staff have broadband access at home. There are limits to what can be done at home arising from security and work process considerations, and there could also be productivity issues. However, teleworking could allow many staff to keep working if kept out of the office by sick dependents, school closures or moves to limit the risk of workplace infection. Some staff (mainly in sales and consulting) spend relatively little time in the office under normal circumstances in any case.

Business continuity requires that the company's customer support services and IT systems are kept in operation. As the number of people working in these areas is small, continuity could be threatened if a small number of people became ill simultaneously.

The Vice-President responsible for sales observed that the sales environment might become more difficult during a pandemic. It might become more difficult to get the attention of customers, as companies become more concerned about continuity in the systems already in place, giving them less time to think about new developments. Some customers might avoid face-to-face meetings, and, indeed, sales staff might have concerns about face-to-face meetings themselves.

Disruption to travel might also have a negative impact on sales activity. Difficulties in flying internationally, or internally within the US could make meeting with customers meetings by sales staff and senior executives difficult to arrange, even without any reluctance to meet face-to-face.

The Vice-President responsible for consulting and service observed that any issues with meeting customers face-to-face or with travel could also make it difficult for his staff to do their jobs.

## 3: Measures to Underpin Continuity

Measures envisaged in the plan to underpin business continuity include the following:

- The company already has a system of deputies in place to allow business to continue when key managers are travelling, and it is envisaged that this will be used if needed during a pandemic.
- The plan envisages making the company more resilient to staff absences in customer service by introducing occasional cross-training sessions for technology staff.
- A small number of technology staff will be nominated as deputies for IT systems staff, and will be trained in the basics of keeping the company's systems up.

- The company already has home contact details for its employees. The plan envisages circulating staff with e-mail messages, and using telephone contacts if any information has to be disseminated urgently. The company will use its website for customer and staff communications.
- The Vice-Presidents responsible for sales and for consulting & services will work together to develop practical approaches to working with customers during an influenza pandemic.
- The Human Resources Manager will assess the healthcare options available to US-based staff, and will confirm that their health insurance will cover any necessary treatment.
- In the event that the WHO influenza pandemic alert level rises to 5 (significant human-to-human transmission), the company will develop a policy on overseas travel taking account of the potential for a pandemic. Managers and team leaders will also start planning how best to use teleworking during a pandemic.

#### 4: Response to Workplace Risk

Measures planned to respond to workplace risk include the following:

- The company envisages facilitating staff in teleworking in the event of a pandemic, particularly at the height of waves of infection. Depending on the severity of the pandemic, it may actively encourage staff to telework.
- Face-to-face meetings with customers are likely to be less common in the event of a pandemic in any case.
- Staff will be advised to follow the Department of Health's guidelines on respiratory hygiene in the event of a pandemic. They will be asked not to use each others' telephones, computers, desks or chairs.
- The company will lay in a stock of cleaning and hand hygiene materials to be used in the event of a pandemic.
- Face-to-face contact between staff will be reduced to some extent, although there are limits to what is possible in the open plan offices where the majority of staff work. If numbers in the office are reduced, it may be possible to reduce mixing between teams.
- Cleaning will be stepped up during a pandemic.
- During a pandemic, staff will be encouraged to choose non-classroom approaches to training and learning.

#### Challenges of Planning for a 'Flu Pandemic

A small, internationally focused software company like Diltisys cannot afford to let its existing customers down, and cannot afford to interrupt its sales efforts or development work. Maintaining continuity in these areas in the face of staff absences and changed customer behaviour will be a challenge.

#### Conclusion

An influenza pandemic poses significant potential risks to a software company, both in terms of people availability, and access to customers. While small software companies often have difficulty in looking beyond their immediate short term priorities, it is worthwhile for them to give some thought to business resilience in the event of an influenza pandemic.