**Business Continuity Planning and Pandemics**

**What is a business continuity plan?**

A business continuity plan is a document that outlines how an organization will continue to function during and after an emergency or event. It involves planning how your key services or products can continue.

Please remember... each business is unique – the topics listed in this document are general suggestions. You will need to create a specific plan that best suits your business and operational needs.

This document focuses on creating a business plan for infectious diseases such as a pandemic or severe seasonal outbreak that results from a virus or other agent.  It is intended for non-health care organizations. Health care organizations, as well as other first response agencies (e.g., police, emergency, first aid, ambulance) will require more rigorous infection control measures, and workforce plans.

**Is a pandemic plan different than a regular business continuity or resumption plan?**

In some ways, yes.

Traditionally, most business continuity plans focus on what will happen if the building or equipment is damaged. In other scenarios, the plan may assume that people will be able to return to a building after a single event (such as after a storm, or if there is a utility outage).

However, if there is a serious infectious disease outbreak, such as a pandemic, you must plan for the workers being unable to report to work for a period of time. During a pandemic, businesses, social organizations, or schools may be required to close by order of health officials to help slow the spread of the illness. These steps will influence how many people may be available to report to work.

It is important to plan to have your core business activities to remain operational for several weeks or months with limited staff.

**How many people will be away from the workplace during a pandemic?**

It is hard to say with certainty. Every pandemic is different. It will depend on the virus's “viral ability” – that is, how easily the virus spreads and how sick people become.  Workers may be away from work for various reasons (e.g., illness, caregiving, school closure).

Also note, as stated by the Government of Canada: “The pattern of disease is different in pandemics than in seasonal influenza. Pandemics may arrive outside of the usual influenza season and typically have more than one wave of illness. The total duration of a pandemic is likely to be 12 to 18 months.”

It will be important to make sure your plan will accommodate staff absences for more than a single period of time.

**What are some effects of a pandemic on a business?**

Possible effects on business from a pandemic can include:

* reduced labour supply, including your regular workers or availability of contractors or temporary workers
* reduced business or cancelled customer orders
* interruption in getting supplies or materials (especially if goods are imported by air or land)
* change in demands (for example: increased internet use, decreased tourism/travel)
* reductions or restrictions on public meetings or gatherings (including schools, sports, clubs, theatre, community centres, restaurants, religious gatherings, etc.)
* restrictions on travel (regional, national, or international)
* reduced availability of health care or home care services
* in more severe situations, disruptions in services such as telecommunications, financial/banking, water, electricity, gasoline/fuels, medicine, or the food supply

**How do you set priorities for your plan?**

In general, when creating a business continuity plan, determine what element is critical and how the loss of this element will affect the business.

1. Identify critical processes, operations, and functions.
2. Identify key internal and external dependencies – those things, people, or other business you rely on.
3. Identify what else can affect your business.

When planning for your priorities, examine:

* Personnel – Identify and train back ups for essential functions, including chain of command (management). Be sure you have consulted with staff, including any applicable union or collective agreements.
* Equipment – Make sure the available equipment meets the identified needs.
* Availability of assets – Make sure that facilities, utilities, computers, machinery, or tools also meet your needs (e.g., access to internal systems by staff working from home).
* Business commitments – Research legal implications for level of service arrangements (e.g., for non-performance or late delivery).
* Accounting – make sure you can continue your payroll, finances, etc.

Elements of a [risk assessment](https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/risk_assessment.html) process may also be helpful.

**What are elements that should be included in a business continuity plan for pandemics?**

How detailed your plan is will depend on the type of business, how complex your organization is, and its size. Allow your plan to be flexible and proportional to match the level of threat that is occurring at that time.  Your plan should include health, safety, human resources, and management elements.

Options include:

* Document guidelines for management and business decisions – remember, anyone can get sick.
* Create a pandemic management team that assigns who will do what tasks, establishes chain of command, coordinates prevention activities, etc.
* Make decisions about when to stay open, when to close to customers, and when to close completely.
* Assign a person or team, where appropriate, to help assess the health of workers (e.g., if the worker may be coming down with an illness).
* Cross train workers to make sure essential functions will continue (e.g., payroll, customer service).
* Provide handwashing facilities and/or alcohol-based hand sanitizers.
* Have a period of time between shifts to clean surfaces such as tables, door knobs, hand rails, or shared telephones and keyboards.
* Have up-to-date sick leave policies. NOTE: Be aware that doctors may have limited availability to provide sick-leave documentation.
* Maintain an up-to-date list of your staff and your clients (e.g., telephone trees, call-in numbers, hot lines for information, broadcast e-mails)
* Develop communication methods to reach all staff, especially if staff are working remotely.
* Develop methods to conduct your business, including using the internet, cloud-based workspaces, phone, video conferencing, etc.
* Develop methods that allow workers to use flexible work options, or [telework/work](https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/telework.html) remotely.
* Increase the distance between people (e.g., install a protective barrier for those working with the public, increase the distance between workstations, use larger meeting rooms).
* Consider providing transportation for those staff that use public transportation.
* Consider psychosocial issues (e.g., financial stress, caregiver burnout, occupational stresses, stigma, or social exclusion).
* Consider postponing or cancelling face-to-face meetings (including internally) as well as unnecessary travel.
* Create small working groups (e.g., a factory may keep the same group of people together on the same shifts).

**What are good practices to help reduce the spread of infectious diseases?**

Good health habits are important in preventing the spread of infectious diseases. Steps to take include:

* frequent [hand washing](https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/diseases/washing_hands.html) with soap and water
* using alcohol-based hand sanitizers when soap and water are not available
* avoiding close contact with sick people
* coughing and sneezing into your elbow, or use a tissue (and throw away the tissue immediately)
* avoiding touching your eyes, nose and mouth
* using [good hygiene practices](https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/diseases/good_hygiene.html), such as cleaning and disinfecting surfaces likely to be contaminated and touched by others, or practicing social distancing (e.g., keeping 1-2 metres between individuals, using teleconferencing or remote work technology)

In general, people should be encouraged to stay home if they are ill, **or if they think they are ill**. Allow time for complete recovery and a healthy return to work.

**What should we be aware of for COVID-19?**

When a person is infected with COVID-19, they may have little or no symptoms, and the symptoms they do show can be easily confused with a cold or seasonal flu.

COVID-19 appears to mainly spread from person-to-person when people are in close contact with one another (within about 2 metres or 6 feet) and through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs.

It is possible that it can spread from contact with infected surfaces or objects – when you touch a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touch their own mouth, nose, or eyes.

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| **Cold** | **Seasonal Influenza** | **COVID-19** |
| Chills but fever is rare | Fever | Fever |
| Cough, chest discomfort (mild but may last a while) | Cough, chest discomfort (dry cough can be severe) | Cough |
| Body aches, pains (mild) | Body aches, pains (can be severe) | Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath |
| Tiredness (you can still do your daily activities) | Bedridden (you may feel extremely exhausted) |  |
| Headache (mild) | Headache (can be severe) |  |
| Sore throat | Sore throat |  |
| Stuffy, runny nose, sneezing | Stuffy, runny nose |  |
| **Complications can include…** | | |
| Lung infections Throat infections Ear infections Sinus infections | Pneumonia Pre-existing health conditions getting worse (such as asthma) Hospitalization Death | Pneumonia in both lungs Death |

Table adapted from: Government of Canada, 2019. [Cold or flu: know the difference / Know the flu facts - Fact sheet](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/cold-flu-know-difference-fact-sheet.html) and Government of Canada, 2020. [Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Frequently asked questions (FAQ)](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/frequently-asked-questions.html)