

Business continuity planning for a pandemic situation

Plantronics wireless devices



Prepare and prioritise

As the H1N1 virus continues to spread, business continuity planning (BCP) is rightly on the agenda for many organizations that need to ensure they are able to provide services, produce products and do business whatever course the pandemic takes.

The risks posed to organizations fall into two categories

- Absenteeism – e.g. what happens if a large proportion of the workforce reports being affected by the virus?
- Business continuity – e.g. what happens if the virus becomes so widespread that governments impose bans on travel?

When sick employees go in to work, known as “presenteeism,” there is a significant and costly impact on an organization, not only in terms of risking the spread of disease, but also in terms of diminished productivity, quality and attention to safety

By taking the two-pronged approach of giving employees the proper tools to stay safe and healthy and putting in place a continuity plan to prevent business interruption, organizations will be able to protect themselves from some of the negative affects of a potential H1N1 outbreak.

Background – The Swine Flu Virus and BCP

Business Continuity Planning means making sure you have the right resources in place to continue operating in the event of a crisis. Considerations include:

- People
- Raw materials
- Logistics and supply chain

The way we use communication equipment and services can have a big impact on our preparedness for any kind of crisis.

This whitepaper sets out some best practice for the use of telecommunications and IT equipment which will help to stop the spread of infection in the workplace, and minimize the impact to business communications if government crisis plans prevent staff from travelling.

Continuity planning for a Pandemic Flu

Most flu viruses, including the H1N1 virus, are spread from person to person through droplet transmission, which typically means coughing or sneezing, and can occur over a distance of up to six feet. An influenza virus can survive on environmental surfaces and can generally infect a person for about 2-8 hours after being deposited on the surface. Hard, non-porous surfaces are particularly vulnerable – one study showed that flu viruses can live for up to 48 hours on hard surfaces like desks or computer keyboards.

Medical professionals have suggested that the most effective defense against a pandemic flu is seclusion. In the US, the Centre for Disease Control agrees, recommending that organizations have a continuity plan that allows the flexibility for employees to work from home in the event of an H1N1 outbreak. Taking this into account; giving workers the ability to effectively do their jobs from home can help prevent the spread of illness and its related financial impact.



Making a plan that enables Telework

With regards to the H1N1 virus, individuals should not come in to work if they feel sick or have signs of a fever. Additionally, the plan should offer flexibility so that employees can work from home if they need to care for a sick family member or for children in the case that schools are closed. It might also consider the possibility that a large-scale quarantine could require all employees be secluded at home for a period

Giving employees the tools to remain productive at home

Employers will want to consider what tools are necessary for their workers to remain productive at home. In many cases these will include a laptop computer, secure access to the corporate network, and instant messaging, conference calling and remote meeting capabilities. Enablers for effective home working include:

- Mobile phones/PDAs
- Laptop or Desktop computers
- Broadband connectivity
- Unified Communications
- Audio solutions for communication

Mobile

Smart phones have become familiar to most of us in our business and personal lives and can be a powerful tool for personnel who need to work from home. In addition to enabling users to make and receive voice calls practically anywhere, the right choice in mobile can give staff access to:

- Push email
- Synchronized calendar and tasks
- Instant messaging
- View and edit documents, presentations and spreadsheets
- Social media applications
- Broad and rapidly growing array of software and applications

WiFi connectivity available on many phones can help to keep mobile data costs to a minimum while improving the user's experience of the device. However, the screen size of most mobiles and PDA's mean that they might not make the ideal longer term solution for communications other than voice.

Headsets for mobile phones can improve communications by using technologies like Plantronics proprietary AudioIQ² and Windsmart to improve intelligibility for both parties of a conversation.

As well as keeping you compliant with driving legislation, headsets encourage ergonomic safety, a common concern of HR and legal departments, since they let workers talk on the phone and type or sort through files simultaneously without awkwardly cradling the telephone handset between their head and neck. Headsets also help users prevent injury while uncomfortably.



Key considerations when choosing headset for mobile phones include:

- Audio technology – technologies like Plantronics AudioIQ² and Windsmart improve user experience and productivity by cleaning up audio
- Bluetooth or Corded – Bluetooth headsets may suit users who need to multi-task, while a professional corded headset can provide better audio and improve the phone's battery life
- Plantronics Multipoint technology enables a connection to multiple devices including other mobiles, desk phones, and computers

Unified Communications

Unified communications (UC) generally means the integration of real-time communication services such as IM, video conferencing and IP telephony with non-real-time communication services such as voicemail and e-mail within a consistent user interface. As UC tools gain popularity, including Skype and the Microsoft UC suite, they are increasingly used to improve the telework experience. Not only do they save companies money by helping to reduce costly phone bills, but they enhance connectivity for remote workers, especially if a traditional landline no longer exists in the home. A UC solution can play a huge role in continuity planning, as it provides an excellent collaboration platform for employees in disparate locations.

If a UC system is in place, it will be essential for businesses to provide employees with a headset for telework in order to ensure professional audio quality. This means that when considering tools for a successful continuity plan, headsets will need to be included. There are many styles of headset available that connect (either with a wire or wireless) to a computer's USB slot so that users can take advantage of Voice over IP communication.

Teleconferencing

Making sure you have teleconferencing services available to you can relieve the need to travel and limit the risk of infection, replacing face to face meetings with virtual meetings.

To successfully replace the value of face to face encounters with virtual meetings, you need to make sure you're using the right equipment. This ensures not only that everyone is understood clearly with minimum interference, but also that participants can express themselves well and convey meaning.

In addition to choosing the right platform or service, we advise you put some careful consideration into selecting

- Speakerphones – reduce interference where you have several conference participants in the same room
- Headsets improve communication and audio quality
 - Look for corded headsets if professional communication is your top priority as they will deliver the best audio quality
 - Go for wireless headsets if your staff need to move around while attending a conference call, or if multi-tasking is a high priority

The right Audio solution for teleconferencing is important because pitch, tone and pace carry so much meaning in conversation and this expression becomes even more valuable when you meet remotely.



Videoconferencing

If you are unable to travel or meet in person, videoconferencing can add an extra dimension of communication to your virtual meetings. Again you should take care to ensure that your team is properly equipped to optimize communication in a remote working situation.

In addition to a Webcam or video conferencing solution, a call bridge is needed for voice communication. To ensure the quality of voice communication in this situation, you should always use speakerphones and headsets.

It should be stressed that the audio equipment in use for videoconferencing is as important as it is for teleconferencing; wideband audio, digital signal processing and noise canceling technologies should be used to achieve more natural, human communication.

Webconferencing

Adding webconferencing to your voice or video conferencing solution enables you to share information and ideas during your virtual meeting, enabling you to present or collaborate without all participants being in the same location.

For webconferencing to be effective it needs to be used in connection with voice or video communication and the same considerations for audio quality apply in order for participants express themselves professionally.

Home Office

Home working (sometimes known as teleworking) is a solution that can stop the internal spread of an illness within an organization.

In addition to ensuring that staff contracts allow home working, it's important to properly equip your team to work in this situation.

Any organization including home working in it's crisis plan should ensure all phones, PC's and network connections have been tested and approved upfront.

Ensure that staff have access to the communications equipment they need to do their jobs at home, these may be

- Standard phone
- Mobile phone
- VoIP
- Unified Communications Software



Because the home environment is out of the organization's control, it's important to use headsets to limit the interference caused by any background noise.

Whatever phone solution you use, you can limit this interference by making sure staff are equipped with:

- Corded headsets with premium audio quality where the clearest possible communication is paramount
- Any cables needed to connect corded headsets to phones, mobiles or PCs
- Wireless (DECT or Bluetooth) headsets if employees need to move around and multi-task

An additional advantage here is that headsets can continue to be used after a crisis and have additional benefits including increase employee productivity.

If you use Unified Communications as part of your solution, headsets with wideband audio will ensure clear and natural communications. USB speakerphones and handsets are also available for a more familiar user interface.

You can reduce the strain on IT support for home workers by using a Plantronics IP40 IP audio processor which eliminates the need for a fully featured IP desk phone or PC upgrade for the home based softphone user.

Contact Centre

Because they tend to be highly populated, contact centres can be a high risk area when it comes to the spread of infection.

Most contact centers already use headsets and audio processors to ensure clear communications, better ergonomics, and compliance with noise at work legislation.

There are some simple steps you can follow to ensure that risks are minimized for contact centre staff.

- Regularly clean desks, computers, display and phone equipment
- Never share handsets or headsets – make sure that calls are transferred where necessary
- Regularly clean and disinfect noise canceling microphones or replace voice tubes on headsets
- Regularly replace headset ear cushions

It's never recommended for agents to share a headset; however, re-using headsets when agents leave makes good economic and environmental sense. There are certain best practices you should follow to minimize the spread of any infections.

First of all, quarantine the headset for a fixed period. The H1N1 virus can survive outside the body for up to eight hours so we would recommend a period of 24 hours before reusing the headset. Next, replace all of the consumable parts on the headset – the ear cushions and voice tubes (if applicable). Whilst you are replacing these consumable parts, use an anti-septic wipe to clean the headset thoroughly.

The headset can then be placed back into stock for re-use by a new agent.

As part of an overall maintenance contract, Plantronics can offer a hygiene service. This is a regular visit to a contact centre where all ear cushions and voice tubes are replaced, and the headsets treated with an anti-septic wipe. This ensures your headsets are in the most hygienic condition, and in condition to provide the best audio quality.



Reaping the benefits of a healthier, more productive workforce

Regardless of if a severe H1N1 outbreak affects business this flu season, companies will benefit from equipping employees with the tools necessary to prevent the spread of illness and to work productively from home. Whether it's a pandemic flu, an earthquake, a flood, severe storms, or even just bad traffic or a sick child home from school, continuity plans are valuable assets that help reduce costly absenteeism and keep a workforce productive.

Similarly, encouraging flu prevention in the workplace can stop the spread of many illnesses that would otherwise result in absenteeism and decreased productivity.

With some planning and the proper tools, businesses that make an investment now will keep employees safe and healthy this flu season and beyond.

Resources for Pandemic Flu Preparedness

The World Health Organization

<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/pandemic/en/>

European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control

[http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/healthtopics/Pages/Influenza_A\(H1N1\)_Outbreak.aspx](http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/healthtopics/Pages/Influenza_A(H1N1)_Outbreak.aspx)

