

Business Continuity Planning for an Influenza Pandemic: Case Study from an Accountancy Practice

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 real business, but is fictionalised in some respects. Key details have been altered to protect its identity.

As this business, 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 reflects this continuing planning process.

Background

The case study is based on an accountancy practice with two Partners and about 15 staff, based in a city location. Its clients are mostly small and medium enterprises, the majority of them owner-managed.

1: Planning Activities

One of the two Partners took responsibility for planning and preparing for an influenza pandemic.

He consulted information from a range of sources, including the Department of Health and Children and the World Health Organisation, as well as the material on pandemic influenza preparedness published by Forfás and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. He also checked with his professional body for information.

He consulted with the other Partner, and with a number of senior staff on the planning process.

The practice is not heavily dependent on any supplier of goods, or on suppliers of services other than electricity and telecommunications, for business continuity, so it was not felt necessary to consult with suppliers.

The Partner developed a plan, and reviewed it with a number of key staff. As a part of the review, the group worked through the practical implications of a number of scenarios.

2: Issues to be Addressed

The Partner looked at critical activities within the practice, essential for business continuity.

These included:

- Accounts
- Company secretarial
- Submission of returns
- Information technology

The key issue likely to affect these in the event of a pandemic is the availability of staff and Partners. The practice is organised so as to spread work evenly throughout the year, as far as possible, so absences at any time of year have the potential to affect business continuity. It has very low rates of unplanned absence among employees.

Some of the work (e.g. company secretarial) is undertaken by a small number of people with specialist skills, and two or three absences have the potential to shut these areas down.

Accounts is the biggest single area within the practice. It would be put under pressure by two absences, and might be unable to cope with the volume of work if more were unavailable.

The practice manager has the main responsibility for submitting returns, and for looking after the IT systems day to day. No one else has the skills and knowledge required to take on her work at short notice. However, the IT systems are fairly stable, and usually do not require much maintenance. If problems arose with the systems, and there were problems with getting support from a technician during a pandemic, this could be a problem for business continuity.

There is a well-established procedure for backing up data, which is undertaken daily. A number of staff are familiar with it, and could take on the work if the practice manager was unavailable.

The practice is organised on the assumption that at least one of the two Partners will be in the office during every working day, available to sign off on work, supervise and take decisions. If both were to become ill with pandemic influenza simultaneously, and be unable to attend the office for a number of days, this could be highly disruptive to the operation of the practice.

Face-to-face meetings with clients form a regular part of the work of the Partners, and of some other senior staff. They are important to good client relations.

The Partner considered what likely impact an influenza pandemic might have on attendance by staff.

- Most of the staff have children, and some might find it difficult to attend work regularly in the event that schools and crèches closed.
- A number of staff depend on public transport to get to the office. In the event of a pandemic, some might have trouble getting to work.
- At least one member of staff might be classified as at “high risk” in the event of a pandemic.

The Partner considers the practice to be in a relatively resilient position when compared with other small and medium accountancy practices. As the practice does not rely heavily on overtime, it is likely that it would be possible (in agreement with staff) to compensate for some absences with overtime working. In contrast, many other accountancy practices work long hours at busy times of year, which will leave them exposed in the event that an influenza pandemic wave coincides with the period leading up to an important date for the submission of returns.

The practice relies heavily on telecommunications and Internet services, and would have difficulty in operating if these were interrupted.

3: Measures to Underpin Continuity

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

- The plan identifies deputies to cover for the Partners in the event that they cannot work, and sets out the deputies' responsibilities and limitations.
- It envisages using a small number of well-trusted subcontractors in the event that significant numbers of accounts staff are unavailable, provided that the subcontractors are available.
- Staff who are still healthy may be asked to work overtime in the event of significant absences.
- The plan envisages that staff would be facilitated in working from home where it is not feasible for them to attend the office, and where this is can be made to be consistent with workflow and oversight requirements.
- A deputy will be cross-trained to fill in for parts of the practice manager's role.
- The practice already maintains home and mobile contact details for all its staff, and it will use these for communication in the event of a pandemic.
- The practice usually pays sick pay. It envisages continuing to do this during a pandemic, provided that the total cost remains supportable.
- The plan gives consideration to prioritising between clients in the event that an influenza pandemic makes it necessary to choose which work to do, and in the event that a pandemic triggers failures among client businesses.

4: Response to Workplace Risk

Measures planned to respond to workplace risk include the following:

- Unless the pandemic is particularly mild, the number of meetings conducted in person with clients will be reduced sharply during waves of peak infection, and possibly also at times when the pandemic is less active. While this would be damaging to the business under normal circumstances, it is anticipated that it will be seen in a positive light by clients during a pandemic. Eliminating many client meetings will also free up some manpower for other work.
- There is some concern that infection could be carried into the office during a pandemic on the large number of documents provided by clients and others. It is envisaged that the practice will seek information on the survival of pandemic strain viruses on paper in the event that a pandemic seems imminent. Depending on the information it obtains, it may respond with document handling procedures.
- The practice will lay in a stock of additional cleaning materials to be used in the event of a pandemic.
- It is envisaged that staff will be instructed to follow the Department of Health's guidelines on respiratory hygiene in the event of a pandemic. In addition, staff will be instructed to use only their own desks, and not to use each others' telephones, computers or chairs.
- Face-to-face contact between staff will be reduced to some extent, although there are limits to what is possible in a small, mainly open plan office.

- Cleaning will be stepped up during a pandemic, with office cleaners being asked to focus more on areas such as door handles and light switches.
- In the event of a pandemic, the Partners will watch for guidance on air conditioning and air circulation systems. The systems will be serviced in the immediate future, to ensure that the filters are in good working order and advice will be obtained as to how frequently they should be serviced in future.

Challenges of Planning for a 'Flu Pandemic

The key challenge in planning for a pandemic is with the possibility of staff absences, and with uncertainty as to how many will be absent, and whether everyone with a specialist skill might be unavailable at once.

A further challenge is that the amount of work to be done will not decrease with a pandemic. Accounts have to be prepared and audited, and returns have to be made, even if the volume of business done by client companies falls. Indeed, the demand for work could increase if any clients are driven into financial difficulties by a pandemic.

Planning had to be done in a way that reinforced confidence among staff, while avoiding understating or overstating the risks, and refraining from making commitments that might be difficult to live up to.

Conclusion

Accountancy is a people intensive business, in which a practice's capability to operate depends directly on its staff being available. This will be threatened directly by an influenza pandemic. An effective response to a pandemic will focus on minimising the risks to staff, and maximising their availability for work.