

Flu and Infectious Disease Outbreaks Business Continuity Plan

HANDBOOK

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What is a business continuity plan?

It is a plan that describes how an organization will continue to function during or after some kind of emergency, disaster or event. It involves planning how your key services or products can be continued, and the recovery of key business and systems.

Please remember each business and operation is unique – the topics listed in this document are some 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 disease outbreaks or pandemics. 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 much more rigorous emergency steps, infection control measures, and workforce plans.

Is a plan for an infectious disease different than a regular business resumption plan?

In some ways, yes. Traditionally, most business continuity plans focus on what will happen if the building, equipment, products or services are damaged in some way. The plans also tend to assume that people will be able to return to the building, or begin rebuilding, almost immediately after the event (such as after a fire or storm, or if there is a utility shortage (hydro, gas, etc.)).

However, if there is a serious infectious disease, outbreak or pandemic, you must plan for the employees being unable to report to work (not damage to the building). In addition, during a pandemic, businesses, social organizations or schools may be required to take unique measures to help slow the spread of the illness including being closed by order of the medical officer of health or public health officials. Other public health measures may include limiting or cancelling social and public gatherings, stopping public transportation, requiring quarantines, etc.

In addition, recovery from these situations may not be able to start immediately. It is important to be sure that your core business activities can be maintained for several weeks or months with limited staff. You will need to be prepared to resume your business in a planned way.

Why will people be off work?

The reasons will include the person:

- being sick or quarantined (suspected, actual, or post-infectious cases)
- fulfilling volunteer roles in the community, including helping with emergency services
- caring for school aged children (if sick, or in the event schools are closed), or other family members
- preferring to remain at home, or under mandatory order by public health
- avoiding public spaces, including gatherings, and avoidance of public transportation

Other reasons include they may be on long-term disability, or in the worst case, died.



If there is a pandemic, how many people will be off work?

It is impossible to determine with certainty – estimates vary because no one will know for sure how ill the new virus will make people, how fast it will spread, or how many people will not go to work, until it happens.

However, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) advises that worker absenteeism rates during a pandemic could be significantly higher than during a normal cold and flu season. Employers will need to plan how to continue business operations with limited staff.

Public Health Agency of Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html>

It is important to know that a pandemic will come in 2 or 3 waves about 3 to 9 months separating each outbreak. Each wave is expected to last approximately 6 to 8 weeks. A pandemic may last in these cycles for up to two years or more.

The Public Health Agency of Canada also warns that, based on trends from past pandemic flus, there may be a higher average number of illness and deaths in age groups different than what we typically see during annual flu seasons. For example, the 1918 pandemic flu resulted in more illnesses among people under 65 and in particular people aged 20 to 40, unlike a “typical” flu that affects the very young and very old. If this historic pattern re-emerges, a large proportion of the workforce could be affected. Based on their model, an estimated 4.5 to 10.6 million Canadians would become clinically ill such that they would be unable to attend work or other activities for at least a half a day. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in almost 5 million Canadian cases, and over 59,000 reported deaths that can be directly attributed. Note: Due to changes in COVID-19 testing policies in many jurisdictions since December 2021, case counts are under-estimated.

More information is available from the **Public Health Agency of Canada’s Canadian Pandemic Influenza Preparedness: Planning Guidance for the Health Sector:**

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/flu-influenza/canadian-pandemic-influenza-preparedness-planning-guidance-health-sector.html>

What are some effects of a pandemic on a business?

Effects on business from a pandemic event can include:

- reduced labour supply, including your regular employees or availability of subcontractors or temporary employees
- customer orders cancelled or not filled
- interruption in getting supplies or materials (especially if imported by air or land, including goods that go through international borders and customs)
- change in demands (for example, increased internet use, decreased tourism/travel)
- reduction or restrictions on public meetings or gatherings (including sports, clubs, theatres, community centres, restaurants, religious gatherings, etc.)
- restrictions on travel (regional, national or international)
- reduced availability of health care or home care services
- in more extreme situations, possible disruptions in other services such as telecommunications, financial/banking, water, power (hydro), gasoline/fuels, medicine, or the food supply



What is included in a plan?

How detailed your plan should be depends on the type of business, how complex your organization is, and its size.

Essentially, you need to take a look at what is critical to your business. Determine how emergencies or events will impact your business. Remember to look at all aspects – for example, personnel, systems, site, supplies, transportation, utilities, etc.

Common areas to examine include:

Area	Action
Personnel	Identify and train back-ups for essential (or all) functions; plan for possible overtime requirements from available staff.
Equipment	What is essential? Do you need new equipment? Do you need duplicate or "back-up" equipment?
Availability of assets	Ensure that you have access to facilities, utilities, raw materials, computers, machinery or equipment, replacement parts, tools, vehicles, communication equipment on-site or off-site. Includes ability to access systems from remote or home locations.
Availability of other back ups	Plan for other items. These needs could range from paper and/or electronic media, equipment (including off-site facilities or storage), security, power generation, etc.
Business Commitments	Research possible contractual or legal implications for level of services or arrangements for non-performance of business agreements, etc
Chain of command	Ensure everyone knows who is next in line for management/decision makers should someone not be available. The alternates must be trained to fulfill their roles in the plan.
Accounting	Ensure continued payroll, finances, and accounting systems.
Emergency Contact List	Maintain an up-to-date contact list for your staff and your clients.



How do you set priorities?

In general, when creating a business continuity plan, you must look at what is critical and how the loss of this critical element will affect your business. The item that is critical can be any thing or any one: personnel, supplies, systems, site, and access to them.

It is essential to completely understand your business:

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

How detailed or extensive your business plan is depends on what priorities you decide upon. There may be some areas where you must maintain a fully operating back-up system, while other aspects may not be critical. Elements of a risk assessment process may also be helpful.

What steps are needed for a business continuity plan?

Once you have decided what elements of your business are critical and the consequences of the potential loss of these elements, you can develop plans to work around these situations.

Decide on your strategy — determine what your goals are for recovery or continuance of the business. What must be done in the short-term vs. long-term? Decide how you will overcome obstacles (contractors, facilities, on-site vs. off-site, etc.). For pandemic planning, it is also a good idea to choose flexible solutions that cover a wide range of events as the true impact of the pandemic will not be known until it happens. Since the pandemic will arrive in waves, you may also need to plan for both smaller and larger absenteeism rates.

1. Develop a clearly defined and documented policy.

Plan for the situation	Action
Establish a pandemic management team. It is important to know ahead of time who will do what, and who will be the leader/commander.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable
Appoint a pandemic manager who can co-ordinate prevention efforts, keep track of staff and who is available to come to work. They may be the person who is trained to determine the health status of employees and whether they should be sent home.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable
Prepare for, and have training, in crisis communications and/or media relations.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable
Establish what your needs will be, including contracts, level of service agreements, etc.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable
Cross train employees to help ensure essential functions can continue.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable

More information about emergency planning in general is available in **OSH Answers** (refer to end of document).

2. Develop a response plan.

Write down what needs to be done and the resources that are required to implement the plan.

3. Implement.

Circulate the plan, get feedback, and make sure that all employees know about the plan (education/awareness). Conduct any necessary training, especially for back-up positions and for implementing the plan itself.

4. Test/maintain/audit.

Try "desk top" or practice exercises. Allow back-up personnel to run the operations for a period of time. Make sure that there is ongoing review and testing of the plan, at least annually or more often if some aspect of the business changes.

You will also need to decide at what point your pandemic business plan will be put into action.

What are some examples of business continuity measures for a pandemic or other infectious disease situations?

Remember to plan for how your business will adapt when other organizations, and the community that you rely upon, are also in the same situation. Remember that absentee rates may be much higher than normal, with little outside resources available as a back-up (volunteers, contractors, temporary labour, etc.).

Investigate:

Flexible Work

Options	Action	Responsibility
When people cannot report to work but can work from home: set up infrastructure to allow people to work at home and continue job duties via the internet and phone.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	
Sequestering certain or essential staff.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	

Alternative Staffing Arrangements

Options	Action	Responsibility
Postpone face-to-face meetings, and unnecessary travel. Try phone or video conferences instead.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	

Alternative Staffing Arrangements (continued)

Options	Action	Responsibility
Increase the distance between the customer and the staff member by installing a protective barrier (e.g., a window). These acrylic or glass barriers may provide useful protection for people such as front counter staff or public transport drivers, whose duties require them to have frequent face-to-face contact with members of the public.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	
Create small working units to minimize their number of overall contacts. For example: a factory may keep a group of people on the same shift for the duration of the pandemic wave. Investigate having a period of time between shifts to allow time to clean all surfaces in the workplace before the next group of people enter the building (e.g., tables, door knobs, shared phones, etc.).	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	
Reduce the number of people per shift to allow for greater distances between people at workstations (e.g., factory or office stations may wish to stagger people so there is an unoccupied workstation in between each person).	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	

Alternative Ways to Conduct your Business

Options	Action	Responsibility
Are there aspects of your business that you can conduct using the internet or phone, more than you do now? Consider cloud services, video conferencing, or seminar options.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	
Can packages or information be shipped or delivered electronically instead of hand delivered?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	

Transportation

Options	Action	Responsibility
If public transportation is not available or not recommended, but staff are required to report to work, investigate car pooling or hiring a private bus.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	

Training

Options	Action	Responsibility
Cross train employees so they can effectively cover other duties.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	
Provide training on effective personal hygiene, including handwashing.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	
Provide supplies for handwashing and personal hygiene.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	

Human Resources Issues

Options	Action	Responsibility
Communicate the importance of employees staying home if they think they are ill, or if they are ill. Allow enough time for people to recover completely and return to work healthy.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	
Update sick leaves and family medical leaves. Make sure employees know exactly what your policies are for sick leaves or family care leaves and issues regarding pay. Communicate if the company will be following special rules for a pandemic situation.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	
Keep an up-to-date list of all employees for communication purposes.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	

Human Resources Issues (continued)

Options	Action	Responsibility
Track which staff are available to come to work.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	
Have a trained "reserve" workforce. Do you have recent retirees that can assist, or can you train people to serve on a contract basis?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	
Hire an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or counselling service to deal with stress and grief related issues	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	
Be aware of health and safety, employment or compensation legislation, and any emergency measures acts, and how they may apply in a pandemic situation to your business.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	

Management issues

Options	Action	Responsibility
Document guidelines for what, how, who and when business decisions are made – remember, the pandemic can affect anyone.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	
Be prepared to make decisions about when to stay open, when to close to visitors, or when to close your business completely	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	
Be sure that core business activities can be sustained over several months. Remember that recovery may not be able to start immediately.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	

Management issues (continued)

Options	Action	Responsibility
Make sure that everyone knows their roles – managers, employees, unions, health and safety committees, pandemic manager, etc. to avoid confusion.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	
Do you need to keep your building secure if staff are not present? You may be able to coordinate some of these functions with other local businesses in your building, area or industrial complex. For example, could a group of businesses share the cost of a security firm?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	

What else can a workplace do in the event of a pandemic?

Follow local and national news regarding the pandemic. Your local public health department or municipality will be able to provide information about conditions in your area.

In Canada, information will also be available from the Public Health Agency of Canada (<https://canada.ca/en/public-health.html>).

You can help minimize the impact by implementing staffing measures, encouraging hand washing, and other good hygiene practices.

For more information, please see the following OSH Answers fact sheets:

Business Continuity Plan - Pandemic

https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/planning_pandemic.html

Common Cold

https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/diseases/common_cold.html

Coronavirus

<https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/diseases/coronavirus.html>

Emergency Planning

<http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/planning.html>

Good Hygiene Practices – Reducing the Spread of Infections and Viruses

http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/diseases/good_hygiene.html

Hand Washing: Reducing the Risk of Common Infections

http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/diseases/washing_hands.html

Pandemic Influenza (Flu)

http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/diseases/pandemic_flu.html

Risk Assessment

http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/risk_assessment.html

Routine Practices

<https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/prevention/universa.html>

Sanitation and Infection Control for Cleaning Staff

https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/cleaning_staff.html

Telework / Remote Work / Working From Home

<http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/telework.html>



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