Understanding Pandemics and Preparing Your Business for a Health Emergency

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From SARS and H1N1 to Ebola and the recent coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, concerns about pandemics and other health emergencies have become widespread. While the personal and social impact of such disease outbreaks is well documented, how might they affect your business and employees?

This guide aims to help you understand the key issues and how to prepare your business.

What is an Outbreak/Epidemic/Pandemic?

Outbreak, epidemic, and pandemic are often used interchangeably. While the terms are related, there are some important differences in their definitions [1].

- Epidemic - An increase, often sudden, in the number of cases of a disease above what is normally expected in that population in that area.
- Outbreak - Carries the same definition of epidemic but is used for a more limited geographic area.
- Pandemic - An epidemic that has spread over several countries or continents, usually affecting a large number of people.

The term "health emergency event" covers all three of these definitions.

How Can You Better Prepare Your Business?

Various factors can disrupt crucial business functions during a pandemic or other widespread health emergency–absenteeism may increase, supply chains can be disrupted, and customer demand reduced. If any of these are a risk for your business, there are steps you can take to reduce their impact, such as creating a health emergency plan.

1. Employee health
In our society of global and mass transport, businesses need to think about their response when employees come to work sick or, conversely, how to keep employees healthy.

With the outbreak in China of COVID-19, it is ever more critical for the business sector to provide reliable information to employees regarding methods to help prevent the spread of infection, especially for those who could be exposed to at risk individual(s), whether in their homes or their workplaces.

2. Remote work
During a major disease outbreak, employee absentee rates may drastically increase. Consider whether your business can continue to function effectively with 50-60% of its workforce; and whether working from home is a viable option for your employees.

3. Supply chain disruption

A reduced workforce and potential restrictions on travel, particularly cross-border travel, could have a significant effect on the supply chain your business may rely on. Many businesses operate on a "just in time basis" of buying raw materials or component parts. Without a regular delivery of these materials, how long can your business continue to produce and provide goods? Similarly, if your transport service is affected by absenteeism can you still get your goods to market?

In the case of service orientated companies, it may be difficult to access clients. Building in the ability to reach your customers remotely–e.g. by teleconference–is something you can plan for now.

4. Commerce patterns

In the event of a global health emergency, individuals may try to reduce their contact with others. Certain industries like leisure, tourism and others could be disproportionately affected by these adverse events.

There could also be a change in consumer shopping habits, with greater reliance on e-commerce and home delivery services. Consider what additional infrastructure can be planned for or implemented in order to provide such services.

Business Continuity Planning

Business continuity planning has traditionally addressed the potential for localised disasters such as hurricanes, floods, fires and chemical spills, etc. However, it's just as important to be prepared for viral outbreaks and major disease events.

Planning for a health emergency situation is similar to general business continuity planning and may even form part of the same process.

When developing a business continuity and/or health emergency plan, it is critical to get support from top management and assign someone to be responsible for overseeing the process. The plan should outline both your emergency response and the steps you'll take for business recovery.
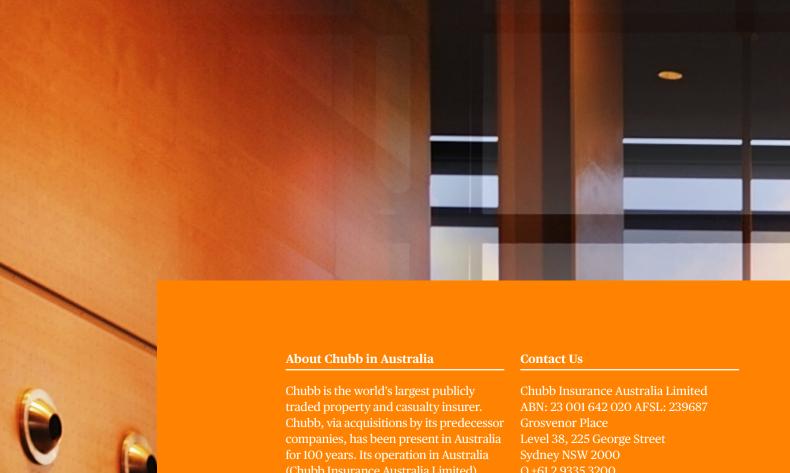
Your Human Resources team should also be a key partner in your health emergency response planning. Working with Human Resources, businesses should consider alternative working models that your organisation can implement from remote working to specific local hygiene protocols.

Remember that, whilst many factors may be beyond your control, the implementation of your health emergency response plan can make all the difference in ensuring that your business survives, and your employees are safe.

Useful Information Sources

An excellent starting point is to regularly monitor the World Health Organisation (WHO) website. WHO is the directing and coordinating authority for health within the United Nations.

- Australian Government COVID-19 Resources
- Department of Health
- SafeWork NSW COVID-19 Guidance
- Health Direct

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