

Business Continuity Lessons Learned?

By Skip Williams
August 12, 2010

Way back on November 9, 2009, we first wrote about the H1N1 flu virus. What at first appeared to just be another in the typical “winter flu” phase, quickly turned out to be much more than that. Seemingly overnight, we went from flu epidemic to flu pandemic.

Cue the panic. Cue the stress. Cue the chaos.

No one was prepared. The international health bodies weren't prepared. Business wasn't prepared. School boards weren't ready. The general public was either consumed with hysteria or sticking its collective head in the sand pretending that H1N1 wasn't an issue.

Really we should be very relieved that we all came out of this pandemic as well as we did. And just to reinforce how well we did survive this pandemic, the World Health Organization announced on Tuesday August 10 that the H1N1 flu pandemic was officially over.

But this doesn't mean that you can forget about this pesky flu bug. Rather, this is the perfect opportunity to pay extra attention to what worked and what didn't work during this tense and stressful period. We should all take this experience with H1N1 as a learning opportunity and use it to be prepared for the next pandemic or equally serious threat or disaster.

In an article in the Vancouver Sun on Tuesday August 10, Dr. Kumanan Wilson, the Canada research chair in public health policy at the University of Ottawa, said “we need to be prepared to shift rather quickly our seasonal flu programs to reflect this new reality. It's a new disease. It's not the same disease as we've been treating. It's a disease that affects a different population with a different mortality rate.”

All this to say, that what worked in the past, won't necessarily work in the future. Just because your company survived the recent pandemic with little to no interruption to your business processes, doesn't mean that this will always be the case. Take a look at your business continuity and disaster recovery plans, did they include:

- Emergency contact information

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- Work from home options
- Details on the nearest hospitals and clinics

In addition, did you take a proactive approach for your employees and look into vaccinating staff against this disease? As we all know, the ad-hoc vaccination clinics set up through-out North America were not that effective in vaccinating people. How many work hours did your company lose to employees spending up to six hours waiting at their local clinic for the vaccine?

If you're still thinking of brushing off the H1N1 pandemic as a bit of hysteria on the part of the governing international health bodies, consider this statement from WHO director-general Dr. Margaret Chan, "pure good luck" helped prevent H1N1 from morphing into the killer first feared last year. The virus did not mutate during the pandemic to a more lethal form. Widespread resistance to oseltamivir (Tamiflu) did not develop. The vaccine proved to be a good match with the circulating viruses and showed an excellent safety profile." She added that the international community support ensured that countries with weaker healthcare systems were able to detect and report cases quickly.

"Had things gone wrong in any of these areas, we would be in a very different situation today."

So, a few things to think about when looking at your current business continuity and disaster recovery plans. Just because your business survived this recent pandemic, will you be prepared in the event of another such pandemic? There is no time like the present to update your plans – or if you don't have a plan – to do a complete threat risk analysis and business impact analysis and make sure your company is ready with well-defined and practical business continuity and disaster recovery plan.

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