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The Importance of Business Continuity and Planning for Pandemic Influenza

BARBADOS EMPLOYERS' CONFEDERATION,

Maintaining business operations in the event of disruption is critical to demonstrating resilience and achieving sustainability. Natural disasters, IT and utility failures, widespread illness such as dengue fever or the current Covid-19 pandemic, as well as industrial action, can result in severe dislocation and even permanent closure of companies, regardless of the size of the organisation. These possibilities make it ever more important to protect our organisation by ensuring it's not left vulnerable to disruption.

By taking a company-wide view of Business Continuity we can protect our organisation from unexpected threats and give our businesses a competitive edge. ISO 22301 is an ideal framework to help us, do just that!

ISO 22301 is the International Standard for Business Continuity Management. It specifies the requirements for a management system to:

- Protect against;
- Reduce the likelihood of; and
- Ensure our business recovers from disruptive incidents.

ISO 22301 is the international standard which specifies the requirements for a business continuity management system. It helps us to identify potential threats to our business and build the capacity to deal with unforeseen events. Many persons view standards as being just for big companies because they're complex and expensive tools.

They're not! So regardless of your industry, alignment to an international best practice standard shows the world that you work in the smartest, most efficient ways and that you are continually improving your performance.

Some benefits include:

- Identify and manage current and future threats to your business.
- Take a proactive approach to minimizing the impact of incidents.

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- Keep critical functions up and running during times of crises.
- Minimize downtime during incidents and improve recovery time.
- Demonstrate resilience to customers, suppliers and for tender requests.

How do we embark on such a programme?
1. Begin by conducting a self-assessment, where you identify the gaps between what you have in place and the requirements of the standard.
2. Educate a team of persons on the requirements and use them to assist in making improvements in your program.
3. Once the requirements of the standard are understood, use the standard to help your company ensure the preparedness of your critical suppliers.
4. Use the standard as a measuring tool against which to evaluate your critical suppliers.
5. Monitor the programme you have established and conduct periodic reviews.

Effects of pandemics on business?

- Various interruptions to your operations such as, obtaining supplies or materials (especially if imported by air or land, including goods that go through international borders and customs).
- Changes in demands (for example: increased internet use, decreased tourism/travel) – for countries that depend significantly on tourism as the main driver of the economy, one can quickly understand the vulnerabilities that exist.
- Reduction or restrictions on general activities including public meetings or gatherings (including sports, clubs, theatre, community centres, restaurants, religious gatherings, etc.)
- Reduced availability of health care or home care services due to quarantines and demands on the general health care system as a result of widespread instances of the virus.
- The most likely impacts will relate to reductions in the labour supply, including your regular employees or availability of subcontractors or temporary employees – without staff to execute critical business functions, what do you do?

- Cancellation of customer orders, bookings etc. – these actions can clearly have a negative impact on revenue and profitability.
- In more extreme situations, possible disruptions in other services such as telecommunications, financial/banking, water, power (hydro), gasoline/fuels, medicine, or the food supply can severely hamper any efforts to still operate your business and cripple cities.

It is therefore inevitable that in an influenza pandemic, employers will be expected to assume key roles in protecting the employees' health and safety as well as in reducing the impact on the economy and the wider society. Key to managing such scenarios is planning and preparation through robust risk management systems that are embedded in how your company operates. If implemented and monitored effectively, such systems will help to reduce the impact of a pandemic on your business and enhance prospects of sustainability.

Some Tips to get yourself prepared
You will need to plan for how your business will adapt when other organisations and the wider community are also in the same situation. Remember, it is estimated that absentee rates can be as high as 50% or higher, with little outside resources available as a back-up (volunteers, contractors, temporary staff).

- Develop a plan that includes pandemic preparedness - Once you have decided what elements of your business are critical and the consequence of the loss of this critical element, you can develop plans to work around these situations.
- Where possible, minimise exposure to fellow employees or the public. For example, can some employees work from home? This consideration may require enhancement of technology and communications equipment but will be more than worthwhile.
- Prepare and plan for operations with reduced staffing levels.
- Identify essential positions and persons required to sustain those operations. Prepare to cross-train or develop ways to function in the absence of these personnel.

- Consider alternative ways of conducting some of your business activities.
- Ensure that your plans cater for core business activities being sustained over several months. In extreme cases, recovery may not be able to start immediately.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of actions. The intent was to stimulate discussion and place you in the frame of mind to seriously consider your present state of exposure and trigger you into action.

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