Can I really rely on my entire workforce to support a recovery ?

Authors Note: I originally wrote this article in 2016 but with the outbreak and proliferation of the Covid-19 pandemic, it has become even more relevant.

In the northern hemisphere we have entered the flu season and people are starting to become sick. As each new season is different from its predecessor it makes it difficult to predict how mild or severe it might be. Influenza continually circulates round the world while the viruses mutate hence creating the need to offer annual vaccinations because for the more vulnerable in society it could prove fatal. Moreover, based upon the recent experience of Australia, this has been the worst year for some time. In fact, a number of prominent clinicians have predicted that it could be comparable with the Hong Kong flu outbreak of 1968 which resulted in around 1 million global fatalities.

This reminds me of a UK press article that I read in 'The News' last year which reported that Portsmouth City Council had lost more than 33,000 days last year to staff sickness. With a workforce numbering around 3,600 the article estimated that this was the equivalent of each employee taking an average of 8.42 days sick leave during the year 2015/16. At first glance, the figure of 33,000 may seem staggering and it certainly beats the UK's average figure of 6.9 sick days as established by a Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development survey. Even so, with the survey suggesting a median cost of £554 for each sick day taken, the cost to the council in lost productivity would have been in excess of £18 million.

But let's add some perspective to this and just consider for a moment how often can we expect 100% of an organisation's workforce to actually be at work. Staff can be absent for any one of a number of perfectly justifiable reasons – business trips, vacation, jury service, reserved armed forced training, maternity or paternity leave not to mention sickness. The list goes on. In an attempt to quantify this I refer back to the five year period when I was Fujitsu Consulting's Resourcing Director for Northern Europe, a position which came with responsibility for a pool of around 1,500 consultants. For planning purposes I worked on the basis that the average number of consultants available to assign to client activities would be 80% which took account of the various acceptable reasons for absenteeism. I would expect other organisations that have been through this type of exercise to have come to a similar conclusion.

I am raising this issue because from time to time I come across Business Continuity Plans and IT Disaster Recovery Plans which explicitly document expectations that every employee will be available to support any appropriate recovery activity following a disruptive incident. Yet, as you cannot rely upon your entire workforce to be consistently present for 100% of the time, this could be a very dangerous planning assumption to make. Moreover, if faced with a serious incident that is also life threatening, organisations need to be prepared for a loss of employees due to injury, trauma and even fatalities. It will also be fate that dictates whether any key employees, perhaps considered vital to a recovery, actually number amongst those 'lost employees' statistics. In my book "In Hindsight", one case study looks at the 2005 Buncefield Oil Depot explosion which measured 2.4 on the Richter scale. Neighbouring Northgate Information Services' head office was destroyed but the company responded with a text book IT disaster recovery. However, Business Recovery Director Mark Farrington later remarked: '*Had we lost any of the thirty core support staff that knew the systems best, we would have been stuck.*'

Fortunately for Northgate, despite the disaster being described by emergency services as apocalyptic, fate was kind that day as the incident occurred around 6 am on a Sunday morning and remarkably injuries were slight with no fatalities. Had this event instead occurred during the working week, a very different and tragic outcome is highly likely. Such scenarios equally apply to an organisation's suppliers and in fact Northgate was a vital supplier to many high profile clients. It was also responsible for processing the payroll for around one-third of the entire UK workforce and yet despite the disaster occurring just a few days before Christmas, everybody received their salary remittance on time. Conversely, in another incident I can recall, a supplier on a 24/365 two-hour response time contract was requested by a client to participate in a live unannounced exercise for which provision had been made in the contract. A rather embarrassed supplier manager had to admit that the entire company had literally just sailed off

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across the English Channel on a 48 hour Christmas jolly to France. During this time had the client been faced with a genuine incident, the supplier could not have met its contractual obligations as its entire workforce was legitimately absent from work with nobody left to respond to any client demands.

As part of their BCP validation plans, organisations need to consider scenarios dealing with recoveries that are deprived of those key employees who would normally be an automatic choice in resolving incidents. Ideally these key individuals will have named backups and simulations of life threatening scenarios can provide these backups with invaluable opportunities to get hands on incident recovery related experience. One such exercise I was involved with randomly selected 50% of the employees to act as 'lost employees' following a life threatening incident. The exercise proceeded with the 'survivors' endeavouring to demonstrate that they could recover without being able to refer to those 'experts' who were amongst the victims.

But how often are organisations statistically going to be faced with the prospect of losing up to 50% of its employees in one incident ? Admittedly, not often and organisational risk assessments are likely to reflect that. Even so, it does happen and certainly the increasing threat from terrorism needs consideration especially in the aftermath of 9/11 and the more recent high profile attacks including the 2015 targeting of the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris. There are certainly organisations out there that consider themselves as potential terrorist targets not to mention others that realise that they are located in close proximity to a potential target and face the prospect of collateral damage. Nonetheless, while individuals involved with civil emergency planning will almost undoubtedly have terrorism on their radar they will also be aware of the looming threat from pandemics with avian flu currently in poll position in presenting the greatest threat. The 2017 UK National Risk Register records the probability of a serious pandemic occurring within the next five years as being between 1-in-20 and 1-in-2 with the expected impact rated as 'catastrophic'. Current estimates show that as many as 50% of the UK population could be infected with as many as 750,000 resultant fatalities. Such an occurrence is likely to make Portsmouth City Council's sickness absenteeism record diminish into insignificance. With the threat of what is being referred to as '*Aussie flu'* looming large, could 2018 be the year of the pandemic?

History has also taught us that influenza pandemics usually come in waves and can last for up to two years. They also present a multifaceted threat and organisations need to be prepared to deal with the impact of not just their own workforces suffering the effects of a life threatening contagion but also those of its suppliers and customers alike. In addition to a likely increase in sickness with potential associated fatalities, the reasons for absenteeism from work could also include bereavement, fear, transport disruption, and caring for sick relatives or children (if kindergartens and schools are closed). In Hindsight also considers the case of the 2002-3 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak when circa 25,000 were quarantined in Toronto with a further 18,000 in Beijing. To add a further degree of complexity, we must not forget that during a pandemic there will be no moratorium on other serious incidents occurring and for the likes of fires, floods, cyber-attacks, terrorism and natural disasters et al; it will be business as usual. Consequently, organisations can still expect to have to deal with these incidents with the likelihood of being dependent upon a seriously depleted workforce.

So in conclusion, how should organisations respond to the title question 'C*an I really rely upon my entire workforce to support a recovery*?' Even when faced with a non-life threatening incident, I believe it would be unwise to make such bold assumptions and organisations should plan accordingly. However, in addressing serious incidents that could well have a detrimental impact on the health and safety of the workforce, being prepared to respond with limited resources and possibly even without your most experienced staff being available could make the difference between survival and total catastrophe.

Robert A. Clark MSc FBCS FIBCM MBCI MSyI - www.bcm-consultancy.com