

# HOT-WASH YOUR COVID-19 RESPONSE

STORY BY LINDSEY MCFARREN

**H**opefully, by early June, the COVID-19 outbreak in the U.S. and around the world is reasonably contained and we are back to business as usual – even if it’s a new “normal.”

If you own or manage a repair station, flight school, charter operation, or any other aviation business, you’ve probably made some difficult decisions in the past several months. What would you do differently if you had to do it again?

COVID-19 isn’t the only highly contagious illness to consider. In 2009, swine flu (H1N1) led then-President Barack Obama to declare a national emergency. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control estimated almost 61 million cases in the U.S. with over 12,000 deaths. And even seasonal flu can shut down an office, spread quickly between pilots and passengers, and can be fatal.

Pandemic response is an important part of emergency planning, but many companies don’t have documented policies and procedures or conduct regular exercises to be sure those policies and procedures are appropriate.

Did your organization put its emergency response plan and business continuity plan into action when the pandemic

started, or did you face the pandemic without a plan? If your organization had an emergency response plan, did it work as written? In either case, a thorough “hot-wash” – or after-action review – can help your organization respond better to a future crisis.

Get your safety committee, department managers, or even your whole team together to determine what worked, what didn’t, and how you’d deal with a future pandemic or other health crisis.

Here are some considerations:

**Have a written emergency response plan, including business continuity policies and procedures.** If you didn’t have an ERP prior to this or your ERP didn’t consider pandemic, now is the time to start writing.

**Update and keep current all appropriate contact information.** Were your employee, client, and vendor contacts up to date? Could you easily reach employees, clients and vendors as necessary during the crisis? Update those lists now.

**Know how to stay informed.** Throughout the U.S. response to the COVID-19 crisis, messages from mainstream



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media and politicians were often contradictory or unclear. Keep a list of reputable sources for health information. The CDC is a good start, and the World Health Organization can provide a global perspective.

**Dedicate appropriate resources.**

Stay-at-home or shelter-in-place orders impacted almost all of the U.S. during the COVID-19 crisis. Ask employees who were working from home if they had the equipment needed to do their jobs. It's common for some types of businesses to use shared computer stations or shared laptops. Was there enough equipment to get the job done? If not, take inventory of what is needed to respond in the future, purchase adequate equipment, and test it regularly to be sure it works as expected.

**Verify communications capabilities were adequate and used correctly.** If you use a recorded greeting for incoming calls, was it changed in a timely manner to reflect different hours, office closure, or other conditions?

**DID YOUR ORGANIZATION PUT ITS EMERGENCY RESPONSE PLAN AND BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLAN INTO ACTION WHEN THE PANDEMIC STARTED, OR DID YOU FACE THE PANDEMIC WITHOUT A PLAN?**

If employees worked from home, did the phone lines transfer properly and were cellphone greetings changed if necessary? Did you have adequate access to web meeting and document-sharing platforms?

**Develop risk exposure mitigation policies.** During a health crisis involving a contagious disease, consider rotating shifts to minimize the number of people in the building at one time and dedicate specific workstations to individual employees so employees aren't working in close quarters. Always abide by safe policies regarding working alone, though. Some tasks are too high-risk to have one person conduct without assistance or at least someone else present to monitor the activity.

**Plan for trip interruptions.** If you operate a flight department or charter operation, have a written response plan in the event a passenger or pilot gets sick on a trip. After

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ensuring the sick individual is receiving care, be prepared to help authorities trace contact to other crew members, passengers and others who had contact with the individual or the aircraft, and have a recovery plan for any stranded crew members or the aircraft (after a thorough cleaning and disinfection, of course).

**Communicate, communicate, communicate.** Have a plan to talk with your team regularly and share information about how the company is managing the crisis. Schedule frequent web meetings to keep everyone on the same page. If you normally have a Monday morning meeting, don't skip it because everyone is working from home or employees are working rotating shifts. Find a way to continue connecting with your team.

Also, have flexible work-from-home policies and moderate your expectations to the extent possible. How many of your employees were caring for children at home or helping aging parents? Even if personal commitments didn't increase, the stress of ongoing uncertainty weighed on us all and work production certainly suffered.

**Consider establishing a business relationship with more than one financial institution.** Some banks and credit unions were better prepared than others to handle Small Business Administration loan programs, but most would only work with or prioritized existing clients. In the event of a future crisis or natural disaster, it might be helpful to have a relationship with a large, national bank and also with a local bank or credit union.

**Restart operations.** Clean and disinfect your facility in accordance with CDC guidelines. To the extent possible, be sure employees are asymptomatic prior to coming back to work. Unless testing capabilities improve dramatically, there will likely be no way to know for sure who is infected and who isn't, so take appropriate precautions including extending employee work-from-home time, using good social distancing practices, reminding employees of symptoms, and telling your team not to come to work if they have any doubts. Also, be prepared to start the whole process over again if you learn an employee was unknowingly infected and came to work.

Once you've reviewed the valuable (and probably painful) experiences from the COVID-19 crisis, consider how this experience might apply to other crises, including a natural disaster or a facility fire.

**Test your plan regularly to be sure it is still accurate and appropriate to your organization, then update it, as necessary.** The COVID-19 crisis is devastating – for those who lost loved ones, for those who lost jobs or experienced significant financial hardship, and – to a lesser degree – those who watched it all happen, feeling helpless and anxious. But there are lessons to be learned. These lessons will make us better people, better leaders, and better companies.

When the time comes – and hopefully it already has – to restart your operation, don't waste these valuable lessons. Take time to be better prepared for a future crisis. □