

SARS Outbreak Highlights the Need for Teleworking

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Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) has led Hong Kong authorities to impose controls that may keep employees from traveling to work. The crisis shows why enterprises should enable telecommuting as part of business continuity planning.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Event

On 28 March 2003, Hong Kong responded to the outbreak of SARS, which has killed 10 people and infected 316 others in Hong Kong, by closing all schools, applying strict quarantine regulations and improving health inspection in all control points. The moves follow China's admission a day earlier that three people in Beijing and 31 people in Guangdong province had died from SARS, and that 792 others are infected by the mysterious flu-like virus. SARS has spread to 12 countries around the world.

Analysis

Since the Sept. 11 attacks and the war in Iraq, many enterprises have paid greater attention to their business continuity plans, but most focus on infrastructure and the ability to continue business by relocation or backup facilities. Few enterprises have addressed the type of crisis that results from a biological or health threat that affects employees' ability to travel to the workplace. The SARS crisis made many Asia/Pacific enterprises aware they are poorly prepared to support a remote workforce — a good way to continue operations while public authorities tackle the outbreak. China's revised figures fueled nervousness in Hong Kong and across Asia, with a number of countries introducing various control measures. As a result, staff may not be able travel to the office for a number of reasons:

- Fear
- Taking care of children while schools are closed
- Transport shutdowns
- Quarantines
- Travel delays

A basic checklist for supporting telework should focus on facilities and the workers themselves:

Facilities

- Ensure virtual private network (VPN) facilities are in place to provide secure access to corporate data and applications. Plan to acquire additional hardware to support an increased amount of VPN traffic in the event of a sudden increased need.
- Prepare plans in advance for acquiring, leasing or renting laptop computers, especially for staff that use desktops in their daily role.
- Prepare and update contact lists for all employees. Set up call forwarding via office lines for employees that do not wish to disclose personal contact numbers to other employees.
- Provide calling-card facilities for long-distance calls, as well as remote-conferencing facilities.
- Add a remote-access policy to disaster workforce planning and management procedures.

People

- Permit staff to work at home if uncomfortable with the risk of travel or the office environment.
- Have a single source (usually the human-resources department) disseminate information on the health issue and actions staff should take. This will save time, resources and confusion.

Now is the time to get serious about setting up a virtual workplace or to justify investments toward enhancing such a workplace. Virtual workplaces don't just support business continuity; they can also offer benefits when there isn't a crisis.

Analytical Sources: Dion Wiggins, Steve Bittinger and Bob Hayward, Gartner Research

Recommended Reading and Related Research

- "Telecommuting in Wartime: Draft a Remote-Access Program" — Remote access coordinated by a network of disaster management teams allows enterprises and employees to work from anywhere and to move out of danger zones. **By John Girard**
- "Safeguarding the Workforce in Uncertain Times" — To continue operating effectively, enterprises must anticipate and address workforce-related problems that could arise during crises or times of uncertainty. **By Diane Morello, Bill Keller, Jenni Lehman, Michael Bell and Cassio Dreyfuss**

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