DEALING WITH MANDATED SHUTDOWNS:
BEST PRACTICES FROM AN EMPLOYER'S PERSPECTIVE
While the general mass is reeling in the shock of COVID-19, business owners are forced to make critical decisions with limited insight into what is coming. And with regulatory bodies enacting stringent, preventive socio-economic restrictions, many businesses are taking an insurmountable hit. They are forced to face operational setbacks as they struggle to comply with social distancing, which is the only perceivable way to stop the disease from spreading. Even though the options are limited at this point, organizations can still make strategic moves to ensure business continuity.

As the pandemic progresses, businesses that have implemented the preliminary measures, which include following the WHO and CDC guidelines, should also anticipate and prepare for the possibility of a complete shutdown.
Ensuring business continuity during shutdowns

To mitigate damages while workplaces are shut down, organizations must frame and subsequently implement robust and sustainable Business Continuity Plans (BCP). Even though the on-field operations might take a hit and face complete closure, official communication and other basic, but critical, business functions need to continue.

In a robust BCP the organization identifies the section of the workforce that will be working remotely. The next steps are largely preventive and ensure that their infrastructure, applications, and technology platforms, support the reality of working remotely. There should also be set countermeasures against any points of failure during remote operations. A competent IT team should be geared up to support the employees during any stage of this process.

Another major point of consideration is data and systems security. Organizations should verify that the support team is monitoring the security of applications for remote access. All the business-critical data and applications should be pre-tested with stringent security measures in place. This may include third-party security suits and usage of a VPN.

Seamlessly transitioning to remote operations

Once an organization is prepared to work remotely, they should review the processes at the employee/worker level to ensure a successful transition. Other than providing them basic system and technological support, there are several aspects that need to be considered at the employee-end to ensure smooth functioning.

Time management training:

With manager-employee interaction severely cut down, there will be plenty of opportunity for productivity to wane. Review potential productivity tools and training to manage their work within set timelines.

Training remote employees to use organizational skills:

Leaders of organizations should help their employees realize the importance of staying motivated while working remotely. If seniors can demonstrate this it will help spread the expectation among the rest of the employees.
Open communication channel:

Keeping up with the theme of productivity and continuity, an organization needs to keep up constant communication with employees/contractors regardless of where they are working. Providing employees with a platform to engage and share will go a long way in establishing a strong communication channel. This will also lead to worker welfare and higher productivity gains.

Managing fear and uncertainty among employees

Understandably, a global incident such as the COVID-19 pandemic is enough to create substantial fear and panic among the employees. A never-seen-before disruption of this kind will naturally develop a feeling of uncertainty among employees with respect to their careers. It is, therefore, important that organizations do their best to assure employees, and help them overcome their fears. Dealing with your employees’ concerns with empathy and rationality may become the benchmark of leadership for years to come, and stand out as a definitive sign of an organization’s capabilities.

For employees feeling a sense of uncertainty over payments, the U.S Department of Labor’s Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) has clear guidelines on payments during business closure. The first deciding factor is whether an employee can be deemed an exempt or a non-exempt employee.

**Non-Exempt Employees:**

Under the FLSA, employers must pay all non-exempt employees only for the hours of work they put in, and not the actual hours they would have in case businesses remained open. In case of non-exempt employees working remotely, employers are obliged to pay 1.5 times the hourly wages for any overtime.

**Exempt Employees:**

All exempt employees are eligible for a full salary for any work they perform during closure. However, employers are not required to pay the employees in case they perform no work.
Other than this, there are general guidelines that any employer can follow to address employee anxiety over the pandemic.

- For an employee, fear of an uncertain future is often their first concern during mandated shutdowns. Sharing sections of your business continuity plan with employees may bring comfort to them during this time. It may also serve an organization well to compile a list of FAQs pertaining to the specific scenario and distribute it with answers among the employees.

- Keeping employees updated with developments and new information may go a long way in reassuring employees. An open channel of communication cannot be overstated for a well-functioning employer-employee relationship.

- Empathizing with and reassuring employees is a sign that they are valued as a resource to the organization. This can boost the morale of the anxious employees and provide them some much-needed assurance. In addition, it will build loyalty which has been proven to improve the bottom line.

- Organizations should be aware of the stress generated among the employees due to the outbreak. They should appreciate the situation at large and encourage employees to self-care and take time to manage stress.

- Since it’s no longer “business as usual,” there’s a chance that productivity may see a downturn. It is very important to manage individual and organizational expectations accordingly in tandem with time and events.
In conclusion

Irrespective of whether businesses have operations in COVID-19 impacted zones, there are bound to be repercussions of the pandemic felt across all industries. Restrictions on travel and mandated shutdowns of facilities will have larger implications in the form of supply chain breakdowns across the world. However, companies with operations in the COVID impacted zones are at a particular risk of upheaval. With companies already confirming serious sourcing issues across the procurement value chain, the need of the hour is to find alternatives to established supply chain partners. And, it is here where wider supplier networks can create the difference.

With the help of Avetta, you can gain access to a network of 95,000+ potential suppliers spread across 125 countries. The network can essentially help you reroute your supply chain to alternative regions that are less affected and engage with suppliers who are aligned to your safety, sustainability and quality requirements.