

RiskTopics

COVID-19 outbreak and property protection

Many businesses are experiencing changes due to the COVID-19 outbreak. These include:

- Increased production rates of critical products
- Changed processes to focus on critical products
- Production of totally new products where a level of unfamiliarity exists (i.e.: alcohol based hand sanitizer)
- Reduced or stopped on-site operations

While these changes are essential, they may be occurring suddenly and without change management controls.

At the earliest point, implement change management measures to:

- Assess all changes
- Identify additional needed controls
- Protect vital services from avoidable interruptions

Introduction

Zurich loss experience indicates uncontrolled changes may cause or contribute to losses. Should such a loss occur during the COVID-19 outbreak, it may:

- Interrupt the delivery of vital products or services
- Place unnecessary demands upon emergency responders
- Make employees more vulnerable to injury or harm

To avoid losses that may hinder the COVID-19 outbreak response, consider steps to safeguard assets so they remain available.

Discussion

Change management at this time should consider:

- Employee fatigue – A focus on the crisis response may distract employees from following routine practices. Production efforts may bypass breaks and extend work hours. Loss experience shows these conditions may cause or contribute to losses that interrupt operations.
- Utilities and processes – Ramping up production may strain utilities and process systems. And, a sense of urgency may reduce or eliminate normal care and maintenance.
- Buildings – Building occupant are often the first to detect abnormal conditions, perhaps well before a loss occurs. Eliminating shifts, reducing staffing, and closing buildings are cases where the ability to detect abnormal conditions before a loss may be compromised.
- Stock – Ramping up production may increase stock levels. Any uncontrolled increase in combustible load could overtax fixed fire protection systems should a fire occur.
- Protection and detection – Fixed fire protection and detection systems need to be available and reliable.

The objective is to support the COVID-19 outbreak response by keeping essential production in operation while avoiding unnecessary demands upon emergency responders due to losses at non-essential facilities.

Guidance

At the earliest possible point, assess what has changed and identify actions to provide or maintain needed controls.

Contact your local Zurich risk engineering team

Whether operations are being reduced or ramping-up, take time to consult with Zurich risk engineering to discuss change management.

Facilities reducing or stopping on-site operations

For facilities with reduced operations or building closures, work to maintain care, custody, and control over all buildings and assets.

Locations with reduced shifts or no staffing

For further information, contact Risk Engineering for the RiskTopic :
Management practices: Locations unoccupied temporarily.

Facilities ramping up production

In a crisis such as the COVID-19 outbreak, all sense a duty to respond. The duty to respond includes maintaining the response without interruption.

For facilities ramping up production to support the COVID-19 outbreak response, consider the following actions.

Employee fatigue

Normal operations are sustained by employees who benefit from periodic breaks and limited work hours.

As production ramps up in response to a crisis, employees may bypass breaks and work extended hours. While these efforts may be sustainable for a short period, they may begin to contribute to losses that interrupt operations.

Take time to assess the impact of increased operations on employees. To reduce the likelihood of mistakes due to fatigue, consider measures such as:

- Maintaining breaks
- Controlling work hours
- Monitoring impairment levels through cognitive alertness tests.

Utilities and processes

Normal operations are sustained by routine maintenance and standard operating procedures. These practices are intended to help avoid equipment breakdown, fire, freezing, collapse, or other forms of loss.

There may be a tendency to trade routine maintenance and standard operating procedures for increased production. Experience indicates, this approach may increase the likelihood of a loss which interrupts the vital production.

Take time to confirm routine maintenance and standard operating procedures are not modified without authorization. Of specific concern:

- Inspection, testing, and maintenance programs for:
 - Utility systems
 - Production machinery
- Production machinery operating procedures including:
 - Start-up procedures
 - Operating procedures
 - Shutdown procedures
 - Emergency shutdown procedures
- Hazardous materials practices including:
 - Storage practices (where hazardous materials are kept)
 - Handling practices (how hazardous materials are dispensed and moved to a point of use)
 - Use practices (how the hazardous material is used)
- New or alternative processes and materials
 - Review safety certificates for new material to understand their characteristics and hazards
 - Review process and material changes for compatibility to avoid equipment breakdown, fire, or explosion

Employee training

For further information, contact Risk Engineering for the RiskTopic :
Management Practices: Training employees regarding fire.

Stock

Ramping up production may increase stock levels. Identify the storage capabilities of your fire protection systems (especially storage heights) and take steps to maintain storage within those limits. Any uncontrolled increase in combustible load could overtax fixed fire protection systems allowing the potential for a catastrophic loss should a fire occur.

Yard storage

Ramping up production may increase the level of combustible stock or waste in the yard. Verify buildings and other structures are not exposed by increased levels of combustible stock or waste in the yard.

Measures for all facilities

During a crisis such as the COVID-19 outbreak, do not forget the basics.

Housekeeping

Maintain housekeeping and waste disposal standards. If production, storage, and waste increases, housekeeping may be adversely affected. Consider increasing cleaning frequencies to keep pace with increased production. Specifically, increase cleaning frequencies to maintain control over processes producing fugitive combustible dusts or oily residues.

Hot work

Do not allow hot work to be performed in a permit-required area without following all elements of a hot work permit system.

Hot work program

For further information, contact Risk Engineering for the Risktopic :
Management Practices: Hot work in permit required areas.

Fire protection impairments

Avoid un-necessary impairments; however, for those impairments that do occur, follow all elements of a fire protection impairment program.

Impairment program

For further information, contact Risk Engineering for the Risktopic :
Management Practices: Fire Protection Impairments.

Fire teams

A fire team is intended to support firefighters responding to an emergency at your facility. The fire team performs non-firefighting tasks in support of those who fight the fire. For unoccupied periods (idle shifts or closed locations), consider contingency plans to support the responding public fire service. For example:

- Provide the public fire service with access to building keys as well as maps showing building layout, hazards, and locations to shutoff or isolate utilities.
- Prepare a means to have fire team members return to the location should a fire occur.

Fire team program

For further information, contact Risk Engineering for the Risktopic :

Manual firefighting: Fire team.

Emergency response plans

Maintain an emergency response plan for each facility whether operating or closed. As a minimum, update the emergency phone lists and share with local staff working at operating locations or periodically visiting closed locations. The emergency phone list may include fire, police, management, utilities (electric, gas, water), sprinkler contractor, etc.

Conclusion

During the response to the COVID-19 outbreak, manage change including actions to ramp-up production of essential products or closing non-essential facilities.

When ramping-up processes, take steps to avoid losses that may interrupt the delivery of vital products or services.

When reducing operations, take steps to avoid losses that may place unnecessary demands upon emergency responders.

In short, during this challenging time, take intentional steps to avoid losses that may hinder the response.

References

Zurich RiskTopic

Risktopic. Management practices: Locations unoccupied temporarily. Zurich: Zurich, 2020.

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