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Essential Businesses Respond to the Early Phase of the Pandemic

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Critical Asset Management at the Start of the Pandemic

Essential Businesses Respond to the Early Phase of the Pandemic

COVID-19 has changed the daily lives of so many people and forced many companies to examine their way of doing business, including their Asset Management programs. This virus has given way to an unprecedented set of challenges to continue conducting business as usual when everything is unusual.

On June 16, 2020, members of the Northern California Chapter of the Association of Asset Management Professionals came together for a panel discussion on Critical Asset Management during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Participants were representatives from health care, water, and national security, which are all considered essential industries.

The panelists included: Gary Walker, Administrative Director of Facilities, Infrastructure & Safety for Stanford Health Care; Neil Meyer, Maintenance Division Manager for the Central Contra Costa Sanitary District (CCCSD); Andy Yang, manager of Asset Management for San Jose Water; Kris Olsen, Systems Engineering and Reliability Group Lead for Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL); and Dave Lockhart, Support Services Administrator for Kaiser Permanente Roseville Medical Center.

Surprisingly -- or perhaps not so surprisingly as we have found in the past for diverse organizations when it comes to reliability -- there were more similarities than differences in their approach to each of their experiences with COVID-19 interruptions and to restarting operations.

The health and safety of each institution's employees was their primary concern, prompting unparalleled measures taken to protect them. On March 19, 2020, California Governor Gavin Newsom issued a statewide shelter-in-place (SIP) order to protect the health and well-being of all Californians and to establish consistency across the state to slow the spread of COVID-19. Each establishment had to weigh their mission needs against the safety of their employees. The due diligence of risk management programs helped decide what parts of their businesses were considered essential and what were considered secondary.

For example, the Kaiser Roseville Medical Center stopped all elective procedures and closed its clinics. Those resources were instead allocated to incoming COVID patients. The reliability of HVAC and filtration systems became critical; experts discovered that airflow and ventilation are central tools to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Stanford Health Care's portable HEPA filters were vital for their patients.

This unexpected situation cast a wide net of unprecedented challenges. Each institution had some sort of emergency procedure in place, but no one had anticipated a global pandemic. The level of detail focusing on the individual was not present, as Neil Meyer from CCCSD pointed out.

San Jose Water and LLNL made an executive decision to err on the side of caution and send employees home before the statewide SIP order was put into effect. Working from home was a straightforward way for people who worked in an office to maintain social distancing guidelines, and it became the new normal. However, it tested each organization's limitations. Webex and Zoom meetings were common applications that replaced in-person meetings. Working remotely put extra stress on IT and cybersecurity systems.

Different sets of challenges emerged for employees who remained essential and still had to physically go into work. The solutions to maintaining social distancing with patients or other technicians were not as

simple as working from home. New engineering controls and protocols were developed to keep employees safe.

LLNL imposed mandatory training for anyone returning onsite. Staff at San Jose Water were required to fill out a survey before returning to work. Both medical centers brought in tents and trailers to accommodate the surge of patients. LLNL, San Jose Water, and CCCSD scheduled staggered shifts, balanced group sizes, and imposed a limit of one person per vehicle. Stringent sanitation housekeeping guidelines were adopted for open areas and designated break rooms at all the companies.

Demand for supplies of health hygiene products abruptly increased. Across the board, face masks became a requirement, PPE was expected, and building entry and exit processes were implemented. Meeting that demand was difficult.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic caused a major shift in the comfort and security of everyday work life, several positive effects emerged from adjusting our normalcy. Stanford Health was able to put protocols in place that previously were only in the testing stage. CCCSD elevated an exposure prevention plan to goal number seven of the district's executive plan. Andy Yang from San Jose Water noted that some ideas that might have taken 20 years to accomplish were now done in four months.

Each panelist agreed the comradery of employees has been outstanding. The quality of every establishment's workforce was notable. The support of fellow co-workers brought people together. New leaders were able to step up, new ideas were uncovered, and new ways of thinking were accepted. For example, Stanford Health Care implemented virtual visits. Most importantly, this pandemic validated the importance of maintenance and reliability, even when no one is there to physically monitor the equipment.

The future of asset management is going digital and incorporating offsite monitoring. Each business is already at different levels of incorporating offsite monitoring. However, the idea brings its own complications. CCCSD has not gone digital yet, but the COVID-19 experience has given them an opportunity to evaluate it. San Jose Water already uses remote monitoring, and it helps them be more agile. However, they have concerns over cybersecurity. LLNL has firewall concerns as well but adopted a new approach to cybersecurity.

COVID-19 has changed how business is conducted and there are several recommendations to consider for the future, which might become even more reliant on digital technologies and IoT (Internet of Things) devices such as remote monitoring equipment.

Cross-training employees for redundancy in the workforce is practical to prepare for any kind of emergency. For example, having a prepared plan to offer employees flexible schedules and/or telecommuting in the event of a crisis will make the transition less stressful. Emergency procedures need to be updated for situations we may not have even thought of today. Preparing an emergency stock of supplies so the supply chain is not disrupted will have its advantages.

While each of these essential businesses and organizations learned individual lessons from the COVID-19 experience, they all learned that you must be flexible and adaptable to ever-changing circumstances. Nearly a year into the pandemic, we continue to adapt and improve and meet each new challenge with brave leadership.

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