COVID-19 pandemic:

Return to a new normality

Content

INTRODUCTION

Since the SARS-CoV-2 virus outbreak, China has returned to normality in parts of the country. Germany sees itself forced to act as well. Restrictions are gradually being relaxed so that public life and the economy can start up again.

At the beginning of the pandemic, it quickly became clear to companies that normal operations were no longer feasible. The majority of employees have to work from their home office or are no longer employed. Overtime reduction and short-time work were the first controlled measures. The maintenance of liquidity against the background of a not yet foreseeable duration of the exceptional situation has an existential priority for most companies. The loan guarantees and subsidies provided by the German government are intended to prevent the economy from collapsing during this phase.

In this situation, many companies were not clear about the extent to which they are or will be affected by this pandemic. Is the company affected? What needs to be done so that the service or product can continue to be offered to customers? But unlike local crises or events that only affect their own company, many companies are also faced with the question of demand. If the forecasts come true, the demand for capital goods and high-priced consumer goods will decline significantly in the next few months and perhaps recover much more slowly than hoped for. Customers' priorities are shifting and past purchasing behavior is being questioned at a time when many people are also concerned about existential fears.

INTRODUCTION

An event of this magnitude, which has never happened before, puts the world economy in a state of shock. Supply chains break down, employees are laid off, sent on short-time work or ordered to the home office and from there they have to maintain business operations and reorganize their private lives at the same time.

Now that executives and management have managed to orchestrate the emergency operation, another challenging task lies ahead - to prepare the new normal operation under increased hygiene measures and to plan the return of the employees under consideration of a step-by-step concept.

Only when this planning has been completed can employees return to work step by step.

COVID-19-
PANDEMIC

A pandemic cannot be directly influenced by individuals or individual companies. We are dependent on the rate of infection, the development and release of a vaccine, possible mutations of the virus and the government's response to this ever-changing situation. If the virologists are to be believed, this pandemic will keep us busy well beyond this year.

Nevertheless, we are forced to consider how we can make the best of this situation and gradually return to a new "normality". The recommendations of the experts and government decrees must be taken into account and the health protection of employees must be ensured at the highest possible level.

Recovered and actively infected
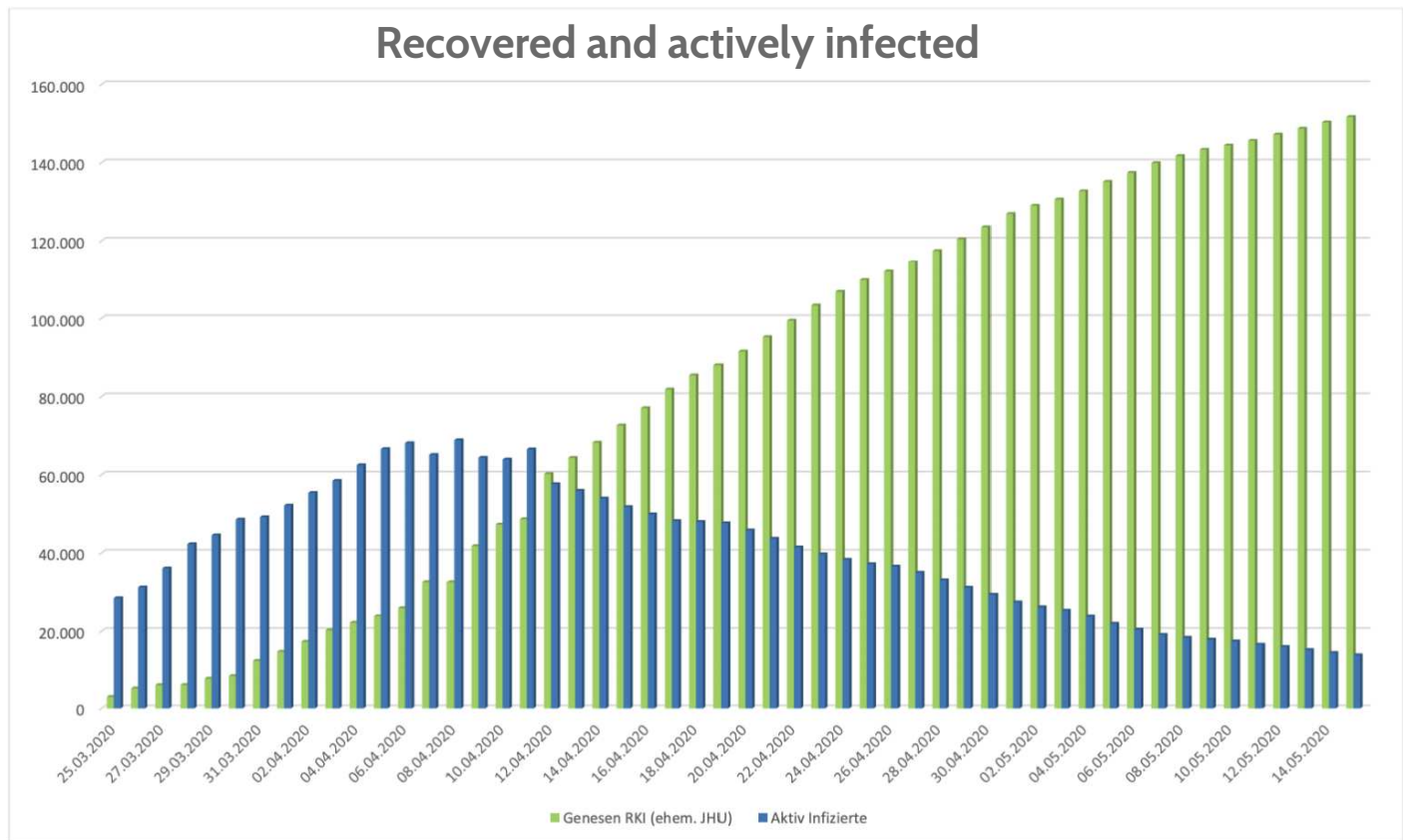
SHUTDOWN WITH AND WITHOUT PLAN
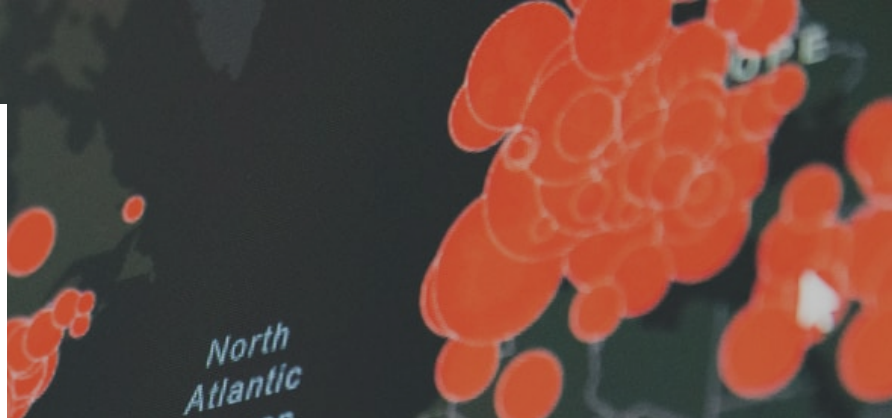
Companies often proactively managed the shutdown of production and processes, often before the first decree of the respective state government came into force. Companies that orchestrated the shutdown without experience, carrying out the so-called "shutdown" without Business Continuity Management, sometimes found it very difficult.

They had to make the right decisions in this particular situation, prioritizing which resources should be allocated to which areas and business processes. Some IT departments performed almost superhuman tasks in this situation - working through weekends to enable as many employees as possible to work from home.

Many companies without BCM experience had to deal with challenges that they had not yet thought about in such a concrete way. They were forced to act within a very short time without a business impact analysis or even a business continuity plan.

Companies with a Business Continuity Management System were surprised by the dynamics and were confronted with having to activate all plans within a very short time. But even companies with a sophisticated BCM system faced new challenges. Since a BCM system should always be implemented with a sense of proportion and thus focus on the most time-critical processes, the necessary resources were not available for all departments.

Remote accesses were often designed so that only people who were intended to work from home or were on an emergency team had the appropriate equipment. The companies therefore had to purchase laptops at short notice and expand the remote infrastructure.

RETURN *TO* NORMAL OPERATION

Preparations to return to normal operation depend on the following factors:

- Easing of measures and restrictions imposed by state governments and authorities to enable the start of work in the enterprises;
- Involvement of relevant stakeholders (suppliers, service providers, customers, etc.);
- Creation of a phased concept for the return to "normal operation" per site;
- Examination and, if necessary, adaptation of own concepts for occupational health and safety and other safety concepts.

Local, national and international regulations must be taken into account when developing the step-by-step concepts.

Restrictions on the commencement of normal operations, which also affect the company, should be considered in detail:

RETURN TO NORMAL OPERATION

Capacity

A step-by-step concept for the return to normal operation should be developed, describing when and under which conditions which level of performance is to be achieved. At least two weeks should be scheduled between the individual stages in order to isolate possible cases of infection.

Supply chains

In parallel to the own company, the suppliers are also affected. Accordingly, in-house production is only conceivable once all necessary supplies can be made. The step-by-step concept must also be coordinated with the suppliers and service providers.

Consumption

Each economic sector is dependent on the demand for its own products and services. In the step-by-step concept, the possibly lower demand must be taken into account in production planning in order to avoid a cost-intensive storage of finished products.

Disinfectants

In order to keep the risk of infection low, sufficient disinfectant must be provided for all employees. The current high demand on the world market makes it difficult to cover one's own needs. First the demand in hospitals and other critical facilities is covered before the private sector demand can be satisfied. Increase your storage capacity for disinfectants - the current delivery time for disinfectants is at least three months.

CONTENTS OF A STEP-BY-STEP CONCEPT

The following contents should be considered in your step-by-step concept for returning to normal operation:

- **Definition of the time stages** – Define from when and to what extent employees should start returning to work - there should be a period of at least 14 days between stages.

Step 1 100% Homeoffice Risk: Very high	**Step 2** 65% Homeoffice Risk: High
Step 3 25% Homeoffice Risk: Moderate	**Step 4** 0 - 5% Homeoffice Risk: Low

- **Requirements for returning to normal operation**

1. Virucidal disinfectants at entrances/exits as well as washrooms and toilets must be provided and areas with high turnover must be cleaned regularly - disinfectants and other protective equipment must be planned and stored in sufficient quantities for a period of at least 18 to 24 weeks. Consumption must be checked so that disinfectants can be reordered in good time;
2. Protection and hygiene instructions should be posted visibly at entrances and in special areas (toilets, smoking areas, areas of lifts, stairways, etc.);
3. Break times and the maximum frequency of use of a break room, dining room, smoking area and other common areas should be assessed and regulated;
4. Risk groups are to be considered separately and, if feasible, to be kept busy from the home office;
5. Communication of the measures decided upon to employees, suppliers, service providers and customers.

CONTENTS *OF A STEP-BY-STEP CONCEPT*

- **Return to the workplace**

  1. The minimum distance (1.5 – 2 metres) and/or the number of people in a room or office must be observed;
  2. Until an effective vaccine is available, it should be avoided that complete teams return to the workplace – for such teams a division and a 14-day rotation between home office and workplace should be planned;
  3. office workplaces should be shock-ventilated every hour;
  4. Masks should be compulsory – depending on the stage planning, a concept should be developed for this – please take visitors into account;
  5. Increased cleaning of workplaces – especially in shared desk models;
  6. Sensitisation of employees with regard to unconditional sick leave in case of cold symptoms;
  7. Logging of each visitor (name, date, time) with contact details and the people in the company with whom the visitor has had an appointment;
  8. All measures are to be checked regularly (on a weekly basis) – according to the step-by-step concept, further relaxation or tightening is then possible.

CONCLUSIONS

Please always keep in mind the sense and effectiveness of all planned measures! For example, protective walls made of Plexiglas should be installed where there is a lot of public traffic, such as at the reception. Such measures are not effective for office workplaces where employees spend the whole day. Here, regular airing and sensible rotation planning are much more effective.

The return to normal operation will be a return to a new normality. The COVID 19 pandemic will have a lasting effect on our working concepts. Until now, most German companies have been geared towards office operations. In all "office operations" the actual place of work is not important. Methods, meetings and events could in future increasingly be conducted virtually. Issues such as alienation and social distance to work colleagues through a virtual work environment must be countered by skilful personnel management measures.

Traditional meetings will of course remain part of the company routine - but in the future it is important to find a balance between virtual meetings and face-to-face meetings. The need for whole teams to attend project meetings in one place will certainly be looked at more closely in the future.

Companies should ask themselves the following questions today:

- How will this crisis change the way we work? What are the risks and opportunities?
- Will we (have to) rethink when we meet and interact with customers, business partners, suppliers, service providers, applicants, interested parties, etc.?
- Will the production location have to change and is production sufficiently secured?
- Is the existing supply chain reliable or does it need to be improved?
- Does our IT strategy need to be reconsidered so that collaboration becomes more interactive?

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