CEO Connection Call

Walking towards the Omicron challenge

Summary of calls with 48 CEOs in early February 2022

Some things haven't changed

Uncertainty continues

Almost all CEOs reflected on the ongoing unpredictability, uncertainty and shifting requirements that Omicron has thrown up. Many also commented about how this chronic uncertainty is taking its toll on energy around the leadership table.

The main controls still stand

There was strong agreement that the core controls businesses can deploy are known, understood and well-practiced - our core approaches, strategies and health responses remain central.

Vaccinations and boosters were universally seen by CEOs on the calls as the critical protective control to protecting people from severe illness and minimising absenteeism.

There is fear and worry

Many CEOs referenced that people continue to be worried, scared and tired, despite the summer break.

A recent national political poll indicated that 56% of those surveyed were worried about becoming "severely ill", the highest equal result for the entire pandemic. Of course, the reality is in fact the opposite – that the likelihood of severe illness has never been lower due to the current strain and high vaccination rates.

A significant number commented that they felt this this was a reflection of official communications not successfully articulating the shift from Delta to Omicron; nor addressing the differences between "likelihood and consequence" of Omicron – i.e., greater risk of infection, but reduced health consequence for the vast majority who are vaccinated.

Some things have changed

Transition to "health-induced business continuity" risk

All CEOs agreed about the shift in risk that Omicron has introduced – from solely a health risk to a business continuity risk. Omicron's increased transmissibility but reduced severity, coupled with now high vaccination rates means the fatal health risk of contracting Covid has reduced (in relative terms), but large-scale workforce disruptions from isolation requirements is now the risk.

On a recent Forum virtual event with Dr Ian Norton from Response Global in Australia, attendees were polled on what they thought the biggest challenge of the next three months would be. Of the nearly 100 people on the event, 59% said staff absences would be the biggest challenge, followed by supply chain constrains and contact tracing and isolation requirements.

Close Contacts and isolation

Given the increased focus on business continuity as a risk – there was a lot of CEO discussion about the importance of confidence, consistency and capability to ensure responsible discipline about determining who is a "close contact" and minimising unnecessary levels of worker isolation. Below are some example tactics shared by CEOs.

Build frontline capability and communicate clearly
Some members invested time and effort into frontline manager training about what a close contact really was, practicing different scenarios to responsibly "tighten the reins" around close contacts. This was about building supervisor and manager confidence, engaging workers to ensure those who need to isolate do, but also avoid overly cautious interpretations.

Others spoke about consistent and clear communications about the business' interpretation of Public Health advice to ensure consistent understanding.

Ensure critical workers and critical teams are well protected
A common and well-practiced approach was ensuring that critical workers and critical teams were effectively managed to minimise avoidable close contacts at work – i.e., dedicated bubbles, alternative site access options, work site design (e.g., sufficient space) and mask mandates.

Bluetooth tracing for collective assurance
A number of members discussed Bluetooth contact tracing solutions. One solution being used by Forum members is SaferMe, using a personal Bluetooth card, providing real-time work location and interaction data (encrypted and privacy secured) so that close contacts can be swiftly and accurately identified. See below for a case study. We are keen to learn of other digital solutions to contact tracing – so let me know if you're using something worth sharing with others.

There is some grounded reason for cautious hope that we're moving from pandemic to endemic

There is emerging evidence emerging from the WHO and medical experts, that the Omicron surge could mark a transition from a pandemic, to endemic risk. A recent Lancet Journal article spells out the evidence supporting this. Whilst there remains a possibility that a more severe strain could emerge, the growing view is that there is credible evidence that we could be entering the end stages of Covid as a global pandemic.

RATs

Deployment options– be deliberate and effective

It was really encouraging to hear many CEOs talk about being deliberate and purposeful in how they are using RATs. This is important so deployment is effective, and efficient due to current supply constraints, but also the simple cost per test – ranging from $8-15/test rationed appropriately.

Both expert advice and user experience shows that return-to-work testing is the most cost-effective deployment of RATs as a means of expediting isolated critical workers back to work.

Expert advice is that RAT efficacy as a surveillance tool is only effective when community infection is running at 5 cases per 100,000 people or more (which we are far from currently). For more information look at video of the *Responding to Omicron* expert virtual event with Australian expert Dr Ian Norton – see below for link.

Supply

There are growing frustrations at the constrained supply of RATs in the country currently, especially given the prolonged period of them being restricted. Reports appear to indicate that supply should begin to free up in the next 4-8 weeks.

Executive attention is going to some clear priorities

Workforce continuity

The number one area where all participants were focusing their attention, was looking to minimise disruption to their workforce and key contractor suppliers. These efforts can be categorised into two complementing approaches:

1. **Protecting the supply** of workers
2. Deliberately **managing demand** on a constrained workforce.

Example approaches to *protecting workforce supply* included:
- Tightening the reins around close contact definitions, by proactively ensuring there was clear understanding of what a close contact is, and what information is needed to verify that – this involved frontline management training to empower them in those discussions with staff
- Clear plans, processes and policies to minimise the expanding numbers of "close contacts"
- Bluetooth contact tracing solutions – see example below
- Re-instigating work cohorts
- Encouraging/requiring work-from-home where possible
- Mask mandates inside

Example approaches to *managing workforce demands* included:
- Prioritising work activities for profitability and survival
- CEO invitation to department heads to identify what could be stopped, slowed down or must continue
- Clear encouragement and empowerment to management and frontline to consolidate (now) in order to cultivate (later) – now is not the time for "surplus activities".

Communicating the right balance

The perennial lesson of this crisis has been the importance of effective two-way communication with people inside and outside the organisation. At the same time, many CEOs spoke about the need to find the right communications balance, recognising we're more than two years into the pandemic.

The risk of too much communication is that it can stoke fears of "pending chaos". There is also a need to ensure staff and suppliers have clear expectations and understanding as possible through communications from the CEO and other leaders that "cuts through the noise".

CEO bandwidth and Board engagement

Some CEOs spoke favourably of their Boards, giving them sufficient space and scope to make necessary operational decisions given the ever-evolving nature of the Omicron situation. These CEOs spoke freely about their own wellbeing being valued and prioritised as part of the governance discussion.

Conversely, other CEOs shared some challenges of some Boards overreaching into the CEO and executive team's work, and consequently overwhelming already stretch capacity.

Supporting resources:

In addition to the insights shared by the CEOs on these calls, we have outlined a range of supplementary resources to support CEOs and their teams walk towards this challenge successfully.

1. **Lancet Journal article** – potential end game (let us know if you would like a copy)

2. **Bluetooth contact tracing**
   SaferMe provides contact tracing to businesses, with more than 100,000 users across 30 countries – mainly US, NZ and Australia. Clients in NZ include a number of Forum members.

   SaferMe provides bluetooth cards, which are worn by each employee or contractor (on a lanyard, or a belt clip, or an arm band). When there is a Covid event, the button of the card is pushed, and all contact data is instantly available to the business. This cuts contact tracing time from 2-3 days, down to seconds. Making contact tracing actually practical.

   The advantages of not having to wait for slower contact tracing methods, is centred around being able to make key decisions on exactly who does, or doesn't, need to isolate or need a RAT. Faster contact tracing helps protect staff from infection, and also provides more robust data to keep businesses open.

   All data is fully encrypted, and there is no Personally Identifiable Information (PII) or location data stored on the cards. All contact data is discarded from the SaferMe system after 42 days. You can see more about this tool in this One News item: https://youtu.be/oJDP17o3zJU

   There are other digital tracing solutions in the market – please let us know if they are working for you, and would benefit sharing with other Forum members.

3. **Responding to Covid –** virtual expert video with Dr Ian Norton, Wendi Croft (Chief People Officer Fletcher Building) and Darren Evans (GM Safety Air New Zealand). Please email us for a recording of this one-hour session which looks at lessons NZ organisations can learn from Australia's Omicron outbreak, and how Fletcher Builder and Air New Zealand are preparing for the Omicron surge.

4. *Living with Covid Principles –* an expert developed set of principles and assurance frameworks developed by the GM Safety Forum and endorsed by Ministry of Health and WorkSafe.

5. **RAT implementation advice –** practical experiences gathered from Forum members involved in the initial RAT trials in late 2021.