

CORONAVIRUS: COPING WITH LOCKDOWN.



THE VIEW FROM AN SME

The prolonged period of lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on businesses and private individuals, and almost every company will come out the other side worse off than when it started. Sadly, they are the lucky ones; some will not have survived.

Just like every other SME, MS Instruments, has found it tough, although we are one of the lucky ones and, so far, are still here to tell the tale; but how did we manage to survive this significant impact to our standard operating practices?

The secret was in a robust, well prepared, and well established Business Continuity Plan that had been built up over many years; it wasn't something hurriedly cobbled together when COVID-19 struck. We always hoped we would never have to use it but never took the attitude that "it couldn't happen to us". Our thinking was based on the usual fire, vandalism or bad weather preventing us from getting in to work, but never expected that a worldwide crisis such as COVID-19 would be the emergency that would test it, and for so long.

We had plans in place so that even if our IT systems were damaged at our premises, we had offsite back up systems. Yes, there were times when we wondered, "do we really need such an elaborate system?", but having the ability to access securely all of our IT from remote locations at any time has proved invaluable. Each staff member knew their role such that they could still interact from home without having to make physical contact with the others. We were also fortunate in having a willing workforce, who were keen to continue working wherever possible, to ensure that tasks were completed.

Luckily, we still had orders to complete at the time of lockdown, and therefore had work to see us through until we could return to work. However, our delivery timescales elongated, as our suppliers were either closed or otherwise suffering from effects of lockdown.

The return to work was simplified because office staff all have their

own cellular offices, and the engineers already sit far enough apart to enable work to continue.

It was only the production staff who worked in close proximity to each other, however, by constructing screens, and moving one production worker into what was a test room, we were able to return to work fully.

We adopted a robust cleaning and socially distancing policy informed by Government advice and also a specialist COVID-19 cleaning company. This has ensured that staff are protected as much as possible and they, themselves, feel safe.

As our area of expertise is in ballistics, our equipment is used in forensic science, and the work of those laboratories didn't stop during the lockdown. In order for those laboratories results to be acceptable in a court of law, that equipment still needs to be calibrated. Thanks to our willing and professional workforce, we were still able to carry out these calibrations when they came in. Some were already with us but with couriers and shippers still able to work, customers could still get their items to us, and we could work on, and return them.

In the middle of all of this, a few days after lockdown, we had a very substantial Government tender to respond to, taking many weeks of work for a number of the team. With intense cooperation required between members of the team, the technology very much proved itself. The fact that we were able to respond not only in a timely manner but also without having to request an extension to do this on time and with an accurate and acceptable set of documents was well received and we hope to have some good news in the next few weeks.

The main issue we have at the moment is waiting for hotels to re-open in the UK, overseas travel restrictions to ease, and the 2m social distancing regulations to reduce. This means that, at present, we are



not able to utilise fully our range test facility some 3 hours from our Orpington base, or travel any distance (or overseas) to conduct some field visits, or provide installation and training.

Life hasn't been easy for any of us, and we still stand ready to take appropriate action when needed, but things could have been much worse. We cannot stress too much how important it is to have a good Business Continuity Plan and lines of communication in place.



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