

Responding to COVID-19

Case study

Insights and ideas from our own response to help you navigate uncertain times.

Rethinking business continuity

The COVID-19 emergency is, among other things, an unprecedented test of business preparedness. Before this, many companies saw continuity planning mostly as a redundancy play. It was supposed to answer questions like, What happens when a critical service fails? How do we maintain operations when there's a local disaster? Where do we shift the work if it stops in one area?

COVID-19 has forced business leaders to completely rethink preparedness. Even enterprises that considered themselves ready for an all-encompassing crisis discovered that they had unanticipated gaps. Many found themselves on their back foot, unable to serve their customers adequately, unable to address employee needs and in some cases, unable to maintain operations at all. But now leaders are moving from survival and triage to stabilization and a new normal, on the way to reimagining continuity. That's necessary, but it raises new questions and challenges.

Like you, we've thought deeply about business continuity—maybe more than most. Verizon is in the network and communications business. It's part of our mission and our DNA to think about disasters and how to respond to them, because a communications failure on top of a natural disaster multiplies the problem. We're used to working out details. We do scenario planning. We practice and war-game those plans. We learn, refine, improve. It's a core and critical differentiator for us—a central part of our culture.

Our response to COVID-19 is still evolving and was not perfect. No response is. Yet we've had many customers ask us to share what we've learned over decades of preparation and readiness. This paper is designed to share top-line ideas and best practices along with insights gathered from the teams that helped us respond.

Insights from the front lines

There are many lessons yet to be learned and processed. While keeping in mind that the impact of the COVID-19 crisis is far from over, we thought it would be helpful to our customers and business partners to share what we've learned so far, and what we will learn as we continue to operate our business in today's challenging environment.

1. Culture is more important than business continuity plans.

We have deep business continuity plans at Verizon. We are very accustomed to responding with speed and agility to planned for or unforeseen events. When these happen, we deploy network engineers, and send in network response centers, gas tankers and generators. We coordinate with local governments. We know how to do this.

But COVID-19 represents an unprecedented challenge that requires unprecedented responses. Typical disasters let us shift work around geographies for limited amounts of time.

This was different.

A key difference was scale. We knew how to move some employees, but moving all of them was something we had not planned for.

Our core crisis response team began preparations during the first week of March. On March 11, Verizon leadership was briefed that most of the 135,000 employees would need to begin working from home. Within days, this was communicated to employees and on March 23, we went from 4,000 remote employees to approximately 115,000 remote employees.¹

How was this possible? In lieu of having a plan, we leaned into our culture of readiness to figure it out. When plans go sideways, culture takes over—for better or worse.

In our case, we quickly learned that not every employee was equipped to work successfully from home. They may not have had the right devices or enough bandwidth, or their job function wasn't one designed for remote work. We empowered our management teams to understand individual employee needs and worked with IT to deploy the right equipment—either from inventory or from desks inside offices—and got it deployed. In just two days, we supplied thousands of laptops and more desktop systems where needed.

2. In times of uncertainty, principles drive decisions.

Overarching operating principles are a distilled expression of your culture. Clearly articulated principles help leaders react and respond independently when the rules don't apply. We have four principles:

1. Assuring the safety and well-being of our employees
2. Maintaining network operations and performance for our customers
3. Supporting society in times of accelerating change
4. Recognizing that extraordinary times require unprecedented response

Normal decision-making is too slow in a crisis, but knowing your values and principles lets you respond faster when you need to. At Verizon, we're biased toward action in emergencies; that's what serves our people and customers best. We've learned that if you wait to see how others work or respond, you'll be late and the situation on the ground probably will have changed. Being principle-based helps you make important decisions immediately in ambiguous situations.

With the breadth of the COVID-19 emergency, our reliance on principles helped our critical response team be maximally flexible, with centralized and local elements responding to situations on the ground as needed, and without necessarily going through usual channels. We had many rules governing what kinds of work could be done from home, but those rules quickly became moot.

3. Communication helps manage uncertainty.

It's a challenge to keep about 135,000 employees on the same page, even in the best of circumstances. With many of them working from home, daily stand-ups at retail stores were far fewer, and gatherings at call centers stopped entirely. We established a daily all-employees briefing to communicate the truth and tamp down inevitable rumors. It sometimes seems repetitive, but we are constantly finding that we're not communicating enough. The cadence and volume keeps people at ease.

We soon found, however, that not everyone had a company-owned device and was therefore unable to access our internal communications channel. Our best choice was to use a not-quite-finished smartphone app for employee communications. It's on the public app stores. It's far from a perfect solution, but since we always opt for transparency anyway, we decided we can live with the possibility that the public may see behind the curtain a little bit.

Being in the network business, and with the core value of employee safety and well-being, we know that communications go in both directions. It's vital that companies listen to their employees. When we get the same questions repeated, we know that we need to address them quickly.

As a result of some of the feedback, we started changing benefits to address evolving work models. We've added leaves to support our employees with underlying conditions and childcare/caregiver needs. We also enhanced our existing backup childcare benefit. We're getting personal protective supplies to workers who deal directly with customers. Generally, we are providing benefits that help put our employees at ease.

4. Customers need your help more than ever.

In the COVID-19 crisis, many (if not most) of our customers needed to reconfigure their businesses around their network. Network usage and traffic was at a higher level, with no end in sight.

For example, in a relatively short time we saw a 50% increase in customer VPN traffic² and a 26% increase in peak video traffic.³ At the same time, we realized that not all customers knew their own needs. These demands hit all at the same time and when our resources were already constrained.

But, because we had prepared we were not caught flat footed. We worked across organizational silos and found ways to help customers rapidly, completing installs in days which normally would take weeks or months.

We've also been working closely with our partners to expand our customers' capabilities, including robust teleconferencing and VPN installations.

However, we also found that while our salespeople knew that they needed to contact their customers quickly, it took our marketing department a couple of days to establish consistent messaging and procedures to be effective. Our sales reps continue to have regular check-ins with our customers as COVID-19 unfolds, so that we can help their solutions evolve accordingly.

We also cared for our retail customers in unique ways. We closed 50% of our retail storefronts, displacing thousands of retail store employees. But, we were able to redeploy 15,000 retail employees to other duties such as calling customers or helping with teleconferencing services.⁴ For stores that remained open, we made other adjustments. We required cloth face coverings and encouraging appointments rather than walk-ins, we established a number of social distancing protocols to protect employees and customers. Those include reconfiguring stores and implementing digital services, including self check-in, contactless payments and co-browsing on customer devices. We've made 46,000 appointments since the outbreak began, and have helped fulfill 100,000 in-store pickup orders.

Employees stepped up, too, running group chats to keep teams connected and creating simple how-to videos to help support customers.

Importantly, we're also thinking about the impact of the choices we made in retail, and are taking this opportunity to look at the customer experience we will deliver when the emergency is over.

5. Management structure allows operational flexibility.

In any business continuity and emergency response crisis, you need an established decision-making structure defined and practiced well ahead of time. In extraordinary times, we recognize that normal decision-making processes may not work. But at the same time, our emergency management structure makes clear who acts in an advisory role and who acts in a decision-making role. Clarity of authority is key.

In many cases, people who are tasked with emergency response duties will need to appoint proxies to handle the responders' usual jobs—something that's not always apparent until it becomes an issue. Crisis management in a crisis is a job of its own.

With a clearly defined team, established communication channels, and the ability to focus, we could improvise where we needed to.

6. Embrace emotional intelligence.

Working at home is different than working in an office. In some ways, it's proving to be an advantage; certainly, it's better than not working at all. Productivity remains an open question, and it is unquestionable that some job functions are more amenable to remote work than others.

But one thing we do know is that people miss people. There's an irreplaceable camaraderie among employees, and we recognize that spirit is a corporate asset. We are sensitive to the anxiety of what is, for most people, an entirely new way of working. Even when it is possible to move some functions to remote work, we are carefully considering all the implications.

In the meantime, our leadership teams are taking extra care to see that our people are being kind to one another. We have become accustomed to barking dogs in the background of teleconferences, or when a child climbs into a parent's lap or when someone shows off a cute duckling from the backyard. Work has inevitably become less formal and more personal.

We can help.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges to businesses and strains to continuity plans. At Verizon, we found that when our planning did not fit facts on the ground, we were able to fall back on our corporate culture and guiding principles. We leaned into more, not less, communications and we are adapting as we learn new lessons along the way. This is not just a response, but an approach to how we do business. We intend to continue being smart about our processes and being as flexible as we serve our employees, customers, shareholders, and the broader society.

As we face the new normal head on, both of us have an opportunity rethink business. As you consider your evolution, we invite you to reach out to us. We can be a practical and insightful partner to tackle this work together, especially as you plan to connect with your distributed business, automate operations, virtualize network services, and secure your business across the network. We're confident that we have the right experience, people and expertise, and smart solutions to help you navigate this new world of work.

How can we help?



1 <https://www.fiercetelecom.com/telecom/verizon-embraces-change-innovation-time-coronavirus-crisis>

2 <https://hbr.org/2020/04/verizons-ceo-on-peak-traffic-cybersecurity-and-leading-a-team-from-home>

3 <https://www.fiercetelecom.com/telecom/verizon-and-ncta-network-usage-settles-during-covid-19-crisis>

4 <https://www.fiercetelecom.com/telecom/verizon-embraces-change-innovation-time-coronavirus-crisis>