Pandemic Business Continuity Planning

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic was a disruption to businesses and society. Appreciative inquiry discovers the best processes and designs leaders and organizations have to offer within their stories.[1] The purpose of this qualitative appreciative inquiry was to analyze small business leaders' temporality stories of preparedness to develop business continuity plans that address pandemics. The main research objective was to encourage present and future small business leaders to develop business continuity plans to address pandemics to avoid business closure in the future. All participants expressed that having business continuity plans to ensure continued operations during unforeseen events was important for the sustainability of the business. A purposeful sampling of eight small business owners were interviewed using semi-structured and open-ended questions. The responses to the interview questions led to the emergence of three major themes: (a) COVID-19 pandemic: Adapting to an unforeseen environment, (b) business continuity planning is essential to organizational profits and sustainability, and (c) adaptive leadership: Securing the future through business continuity planning. Each of these themes demonstrated minor themes which spanned the categories used to develop each theme. The understanding of how a lack of established business continuity procedures takes effect during turbulent times, particularly the coronavirus pandemic period, impacted business operations was an essential aspect of this qualitative appreciative inquiry. Leaders and practitioners could benefit by addressing pandemics within their business continuity plans.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, business continuity, sustainability, adaptive leadership

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic was a major exogenous shock to the international environment that altered the global business ecosystem.[2] More than 700,000 people from the United States have died from the coronavirus (e.g., COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2 virus), and 5 million globally since November 2021.[3] During the onset of COVID-19, local and state governments enforced social distancing mandates.[4] The coronavirus altered every facet of businesses and society, causing economic distress with long-term implications for the United States economy.[5] Most small businesses with customer proximity business models closed as a safety precaution to decrease the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Prior to reopening, businesses were provided guidelines to measure the protection needed to operate in a safe environment.[6] Business continuity planning is standard practice for most businesses; however, most businesses fail to address a biological outbreak or pandemic within their business continuity plans.[7] This study aimed to encourage small business leaders to address pandemics within their business continuity plans. Providing this information to present and future small business leaders may reduce business closures during the next pandemic or COVID-19 variant.

Pandemic Problem and Leadership

The problem is that most business leaders failed to address pandemics in their business continuity plans, resulting in temporary or permanent business closures during COVID-19.[8] The general feeling among some business leaders was that they were less interested in investing in business continuity plans and more interested in earning and saving capital.[9] The existing leadership before and during a pandemic may not have been the most prepared and qualified leadership to lead a business out of a pandemic.[10] In some cases, leadership may be the ultimate reason for the lack of preparation in pandemic business continuity planning.[11]

Why This Study?

This qualitative appreciative inquiry was not unique due to continuous research performed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, the findings of this study might be significant and may add to the existing body of literature. Each small business within this study remained open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic by adhering to strict governmental guidelines and continues to do business today. The goal of this study was to encourage small business leaders to address pandemics within their business continuity plans. As a result, present and future small business leaders may reduce business closures during the next pandemic or COVID-19 variant. The potential benefactors of this study are the following:

- the academic community
- future and present small business leaders
- employees and customers

This qualitative appreciative inquiry provided small business leaders with a guide to business continuity procedures and processes during pandemics.

Framework and Literature

The conceptual framework for this qualitative appreciative inquiry study was based on an emergency management standard used by emergency management agencies in the United States and refined by the National Governor's Association.[12] The conceptual framework assisted small business leaders in implementing business continuity plans to address disasters like pandemics. The overarching theory responsible for developing emergency management theories is Henri Fayol's classical management theory.[13] Various theories associated with disaster preparedness

and leadership were discussed, comprehensive emergency management (CEM) theory, emergency management theory, and various leadership theories for example.

The Past

The origin and meaning of the word pandemic depict an infectious disease that spreads rapidly over a wide geographical area infecting a significant number of people during the process.[14] Throughout the history of pandemics, most infectious diseases transmitted from animals to humans through direct or indirect contact is defined as zoonoses.[15] There were world pandemics before the current era (BCE) and during the current era (CE) that resulted in devasting deaths of people and animals.[16]

The Plague of Athens is said to have originated in Ethiopia and then migrated into Egypt and Libya killing millions within its wake.[17] The Justinian plague is believed to have originated in Egypt and migrated to the Roman Empire, infecting, and killing many people within the European population.[18] The Black Death or bubonic plague was categorized as one of the world's worst pandemics originating somewhere in Western Asia and Euorpe.[19]

The Present

Due to zoonoses, the World Organization for Animal Health was created in 1924, after the onset of the Spanish Flu (1918-1920), to serve as a liaison between national veterinary services to guide how to protect animals, respond to disasters, and evaluate risk.[20] The Spanish Flu of 1918 devastated almost one billion people on a global level within three years.[21] The swine influenza virus usually did not affect humans until spreading occurred from infected pigs.[22] The H1N1 swine influenza (flu) was discovered in North America in April 2009 and declared a pandemic in June 2009.[23] The Health Commission of Hubei Province, China, first announced the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China, on December 31, 2019, as a cluster of unidentified cases of suspected etiological pneumonia.[24] The COVID-19 virus has mutated several times since its introduction in 2019.[25] The probability of COVID-19 originating in Wuhan (China) and the pathogen being transmitted to humans was likely.[26]

METHOD AND DESIGN

An appreciative inquiry design was used in this qualitative study. The goal of an appreciative inquiry is to develop new ideas for organizing outside of the majority by promoting conversations to address present or future issues.[27] Appreciative inquiry discovers the best processes and designs leaders and organizations have to offer within their stories.[28] The qualitative appreciative inquiry study explored and analyzed the stories of small business leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic.

INSTRUMENTATION

The researcher conducted individual semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. The computer software tool Otter.ai for collection and transcribing interviews. QSR NVivo 14 was used to analyze exported data collected from Otter.ai.

Credibility and Transferability

The researcher's goal was to develop a reliable study that can be applied to future pandemics relating to small business continuity policies. The participants were credible because the researcher believes their perceptions were accurately captured. The study may not be transferable because of the small sample size.

PARTICIPANTS AND DATA

The recruitment process began after receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The population for this qualitative appreciative inquiry was 2.8 million small business leaders with businesses currently operating and licensed within the Southeastern Region of the United States.[29] The participants for the research consisted of eight small business owners. The study's participants were identified using purposive sampling to participate in semi-structured interviews. The data were collected via interviews by telephone. The business owners comprised four females and four males consisting of one participant in accounting, one participant in business consulting, one participant in information technology, two participants in retail, and three participants in the service industry.

Discussion of Findings

The results of this study included the discovery of multiple themes. The thematic analysis for this study concluded by addressing three major themes which support understanding small business owners' business continuity plans. The three major themes discovered were: (a) COVID-19 pandemic: Adapting to an unforeseen environment, (b) business continuity planning is essential to organizational profits and sustainability, and (c) adaptive leadership: Securing the future through business continuity planning. The three minor themes associated with the major themes were: (a) conducting business changed during COVID-19, (b) identifying a strategic plan, and (c) securing the future through business continuity planning.

Theme 1: COVID-19 Pandemic: Adapting to an Unforeseen Environment

The first theme addressed small business owners' experiences with business operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were asked how they adapted to the COVID-19 turbulence period that encompassed strict societal and business restrictions. The findings suggested seven participants relayed positive stories and experiences about the adaptation to the strict COVID-19 restrictions. Participant 2 stated, "So, it gave everybody an eye-opening moment in their life to, hey, we got to do something to improve business and make it palatable for everybody even through COVID and also improve ways and not just improve ways but also be more creative." The remaining one participant did not tell positive stories and experiences about the adaptation to the strict COVID-19 restrictions. The participants who did not express positive stories and experiences believed adaptation was not above conforming to the pandemic environment but more so about making significant changes to their business model. The majority of the participants, seven, were able to positively manage and respond to the daily changing circumstances while the minority, one participant, were unable to adjust positively to the changes. A summary of the responses led to the below minor sub-theme.

Sub-Theme 1a: Conducting Business Changed During COVID-19

The participants were asked how they kept their businesses operational during the COVID-19 pandemic period which resulted in international temporary and permanent business closures. The findings suggested all eight participants changed their business processes during the onset of COVID-19. Four of the small business owners discovered creative methods to maintain their businesses, like ascertaining special protective equipment, working virtually, and employing specialized personnel, like technology contractors.

Theme 2: Business Continuity Planning is Essential to Organizational Profits and Sustainability

Theme 2 addressed the participants' experiences with business continuity planning efforts. The participants were asked about the importance of having business continuity plans that address disasters. The findings suggested all eight of the participants expressed that having business continuity plans to ensure continued operations during unforeseen events was important for the sustainability of the business. The participants expressed that business continuity plans were essential for any business. The findings agreed with the body of literature in this study. Although business continuity planning is normal in most businesses, only one participant had a business continuity plan before the onset of COVID-19. Four of the participants adopted a business continuity plan after the onset of COVID-19. The remaining three participants stated there was no need for a business continuity plan due to the nature of their business. The responses led to the minor sub-theme below.

Sub-Theme 2a: Identifying a Strategic Plan

The impact of COVID-19 on business processes shaped the views of all eight participants who created business continuity plans during the onset of COVID-19. Identifying and supporting a practical strategy to address future environments where contingency plans are necessary was seen throughout all eight participants interviewed. When asked by the interviewer, "What are your views about creating a business continuity plan that addresses pandemics?" Participant 3 stated, "Nothing was altered, from COVID, in my opinion, for closely held businesses that I have nothing because they still had no plan." All eight of the participants felt having a business continuity plan was important, especially to address pandemics.

Theme 3: Adaptive Leadership: Securing the Future Through Business Continuity Planning

Theme 3 addressed the future of business readiness during future pandemics or other unforeseen disruptions to the environment. The participants were asked about leadership creating, maintaining, and practicing their business continuity plans that address pandemics and preparing for future pandemics. The findings suggested seven of the participants relayed positive stories and experiences about having ongoing business continuity reviews and training to ensure the company will continue to function in the event of environmental changes. The remaining one participant did not tell positive stories and experiences about having ongoing business continuity reviews and training to ensure the company will continue to function in the event of environmental changes.

Sub-Theme 3a: Securing the Future Through Business Continuity Planning

The understanding of how a lack of established business continuity procedures takes effect during turbulent times impacted business operations is an essential aspect of this qualitative appreciative inquiry. When asked by the interviewer, "What are your views about maintaining a business continuity plan that addresses pandemics?" Participant 8 stated, "So I think it's something that would be awfully easy to maintain." When asked by the interviewer,

"What are your views about creating a pandemic scenario?" Participant 6 stated, "To clarify, as part of our standards already implemented, and have another pandemic, if CDC advises us to do something else and we will add that to our current plan." Participant 5 stated, "So it seems like as an American society, you know, it is a thing to have these drills to prepare for events. So, a drill was to be created, you know, to see how we will react pandemic was to happen again… I am pretty neutral." When asked by the interviewer, "Where do you see your organization successfully addressing the next pandemic?" Participant 9 stated," I would take more precautionary suggestions that were made by doctors and the government because I had no clue how bad it was going to be." Preparing for the future, as it refers to business continuity planning, all eight of the participants from all industries found the concept to be a priority.

LIMITATIONS

The business environment was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and as a result, could have resulted in a limitation of the depth of data collected. Another limitation of this study was that the participants were limited to business owners who were familiar with the researcher. The researcher used purposive and convenience sampling in order to move the study along.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO LEADERS AND PRACTITIONERS

Leadership is viewed as one of the essential skills that an organization can use in response to emergencies in the business environment.[30] The conceptual framework was built on these theories because leaders are the only ones who can integrate the findings of this study. The first recommendation is to encourage small business leaders to develop a business continuity plan in the event of a disaster. The second recommendation is to encourage small business leaders to develop a section within a business continuity plan to address pandemics. Finally, the last recommendation is to encourage small business leaders to maintain a business continuity plan and execute the plan on an annual basis as a minimum.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The study provided insight into small business owners' preparedness to develop business continuity plans that address pandemics. The small sample size of eight participants cannot completely address how leaders can prepare for unforeseen disasters such as pandemics. The geographical area for this study was the Southeastern region of the United States, and the findings are not likely, for other areas within the United States. More research must be conducted linking the small business owners and how business continuity plans may minimize the risk of business closures.

One recommendation for future research is to expand the study to multiple metropolitan areas within the United States to increase the transferability of the results. A second recommendation is to discuss the availability of strategic planners within businesses who have the skill sets to develop and maintain business continuity plans. A third recommendation is focusing on the themes identified in this research may lead to areas that need further research to help the leadership to implement strategies that will assist with the development and maintenance of business continuity plans.

CONCLUSION

The study provided insight into small business leaders' stories of preparedness to develop business continuity plans that address pandemics and highlighted the positive aspects of the current organizational processes which promote business continuity planning. The findings can support best practices needed to positively manage and respond to unforeseen events in the business environment. The potential benefactors from the study's results were the academic community, future and present small business leaders, employees, and customers who need to understand the importance of business continuity during disasters and other unforeseen events. The appreciative inquiry provided insights into the small business community leadership and decision-makers to develop and maintain business continuity plans.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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