

On the October article on PM Skills to survive a pandemic¹

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

22 October 2020

Ref: Bucero, A. (2020). Project Management Skills to Survive in Pandemic Times, *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue X, October. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/pmwj98-Oct2020-Bucero-PM-skills-for-pandemic-times.pdf>

Dear Editor and readers,

I'm grateful to Alfonso Bucero for his excellent article "*Project Management Skills to Survive in Pandemic Times*". I'm sure you and our readers will join me in sending our condolences to Alfonso and his family for the untimely death of his sister-in-law. As always, Alfonso offers clear and helpful advice on how to develop practical and emotional resilience to cope with adversity, based on his direct personal and professional experience.

But I wanted to question the very first sentence of his article: "*Nobody could imagine some months ago the current pandemic worldwide situation.*" In fact, a global coronavirus pandemic has been expected, predicted, discussed, and reported on regularly. We've known about the possibility of a global coronavirus pandemic since the 1918-20 so-called "Spanish flu" (which was nothing to do with Spain, of course), followed by the Asian flu pandemic of 1957. More recently, we've had experience with SARS (2002-3), swine flu (2009-10), MERS (2012), and avian flu (2013). These are all coronaviruses that caused significant outbreaks in multiple countries across the world. Indeed, the official WHO name for the virus that causes Covid-19 is "Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2" (SARS-CoV-2), because it is genetically related to the original SARS virus from the 2002-3 outbreak.

Here are some of the more recent occasions when a future coronavirus pandemic was predicted by risk advisors and other specialists and you'll see that we knew it was coming – we just didn't know when:

1. The first issue of the **UK National Risk Register** in **2007** identified Pandemic Influenza as a top risk, stating "*Experts agree that there is a high probability of another influenza pandemic occurring, but it is impossible to forecast its exact timing or the precise nature of its impact.*" See here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61934/national_risk_register.pdf
2. In **October 2016**, a simulation called **Exercise Cygnus** was carried out across all major UK government departments, NHS England and local authorities to estimate

¹ How to cite this work: Hillson, D. (2020). On the October article on PM Skills to survive a pandemic, Letter to the Editor, *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue XI, November.

the impact of a hypothetical H2N2 flu pandemic on the UK. Results were startling, highlighting gaps in Britain's Emergency Preparedness, Resilience and Response (EPRR) plan. <https://paxsims.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/460161101-cygnus-redacted-annex-01scribd-redactedv3.pdf>

3. The **January 2019 London Risk Register** identifies Pandemic Influenza as the second-highest risk (after failure of transmission network). See here: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/london_risk_register_2019.pdf
 - *“A worldwide outbreak of influenza occurs when a novel flu virus emerges with sustained human to human transmission. Up to 50% of the population may experience symptoms, which could lead to up to 750,000 fatalities in total in the UK. Absenteeism would be significant and could reach 20% for 2-3 weeks at the height of the pandemic, either because people are personally ill or caring for someone who is ill, causing significant impact on business continuity.”*
4. The **"World at Risk"** report published in **September 2019** says
 - *“The world is not prepared for a fast-moving, virulent respiratory pathogen pandemic. The 1918 global influenza pandemic sickened one third of the world population and killed as many as 50 million people - 2.8% of the total population. If a similar contagion occurred today, 50 - 80 million people could perish. In addition to tragic levels of mortality, such a pandemic could cause panic, destabilize national security and seriously impact the global economy and trade.”*

The report makes seven recommendations to governments. See here:

https://apps.who.int/gpmb/assets/annual_report/GPMB_annualreport_2019.pdf

5. The **"Global Risks Report 2020"** from the World Economic Forum, published **15 January 2020**, states *“An assessment of 195 countries in October 2019 found fundamental weaknesses around the world: no country is fully prepared to handle an epidemic or pandemic.”* The report is available online here: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risk_Report_2020.pdf

So it really isn't true to say that *“Nobody could imagine some months ago the current pandemic worldwide situation.”* Instead, perhaps we should be asking why decision-makers around the world didn't listen to and act on the warnings from their risk advisors and others. Closer to home, and on a lesser scale, we might ask whether our own organisational leaders are taking note of risks that might have a severe impact on their businesses.

Yours sincerely,

Dr David Hillson, The Risk Doctor, PMI Fellow, HonFAPM

THE RISK DOCTOR PARTNERSHIP
email david@risk-doctor.com
web www.risk-doctor.com