

Virus shutdown highlights technology, supply security

By Joe Keenan & Ralf Hennecke

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The pace of the mining industry's evolution towards automation will accelerate significantly following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. On the positive side, this creates opportunities for those suppliers who can closely align their ways of working with customer's new, post-Covid expectations and needs.



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This trend is likely to affect mines' choice of suppliers, with preference going to those service providers who offer digital and paperless solutions. It is becoming vital to reduce the points of physical contact, including truck drivers exchanging paper documents with mine security staff to gain access to site.

Digitisation is also likely to affect the sales and procurement process. With less personal contact and greater reliance on remote communication, mines' processes to approve purchases, for instance, will have to be streamlined. In turn, mines will be relying on suppliers to provide end-to-end connectivity that integrates with their systems.

On the positive side, this creates opportunities for those suppliers who can closely align their ways of working with customer's new, post-Covid expectations and needs. We have adapted how we communicate and share information with our mining customers. There will also be a growing drive from mines to do more with less, so digital technology will continue to be an important tool in achieving increased efficiency. Where some parts of the mining sector have moved slowly in this regard, we will now see a more rapid take-up of technology solutions.

Modus operandi

For now, though, there has been considerable disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, affecting all aspects of business. Even the way that we take daily operational decisions has been forced to change. Our traditional ways of engaging with colleagues to reach decisions are often quite informal in the office environment; this has all been suspended. Instead, the modus operandi is now based on more structured online meetings between colleagues.

After the initial lockdown, this had been necessary on a daily basis – moving gradually to every two or three days as the need required. There is also a need for regular update meetings on ‘hotspot’ issues that demand close monitoring.

The first phase of our response began before the lockdown, where the situation was really uncertain. We identified what aspects of the company’s activities could be done from home, and made arrangements for working remotely.

The challenge was to accomplish all this while learning what the regulations required, and securing the necessary permits to get our people and supplies to mines where possible. As the rest of the mining sector started gearing up, we were then able to scale up that experience to support them.

It is important to focus on how employees are managing this stressful time. In addition to the challenges of adjusting to a remote workplace and new health and safety protocols, there was great uncertainty which could cause further anxiety. While the available platforms and connectivity were leveraged to enhance contact with staff, there was still much to be learnt about this form of communication.

It has been crucial to keep all our teams engaged, especially as the mining industry ramps up under these new conditions. We are constantly re-strategising around what our ‘new normal’ really means to our daily responsibilities and key performance indicators.

Security of supply

The key to success is to remain focused on customers’ security of supply. At the same time, everyone needs to keep ‘touch points’ to a minimum and to maintain social distancing. Staff and customer safety needs to remain priority number one, so it is vital to adhere to regulations, processes and protocols.

A core lesson emerging from the pandemic is that the business sector’s risk register had simply not ranked pandemics as a serious threat. We need to rethink our risk models, to include the impact of virus-related economic shutdowns. This in turn should have us thinking more clearly about how each business in the supply chain integrates their crisis response with their customers and suppliers. The reliance on supplies from China had in particular exposed a significant risk that will need a longer-term and more sustainable solution.

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