

ANALYSIS

Pandemic strategies in play

Firms are gearing up for escalation, with many already conducting test runs for the eventuality of further coronavirus spread, write Post reporters



Ranging from small startups to large multinational corporations, businesses across the board have been gearing up contingency plans for if the government orders a lockdown as the coronavirus pandemic escalates in Thailand.

In the latest worst-case scenario projected by the Thoracic Society of Thailand, there could be 200,000 people infected with the coronavirus and 540 deaths in the period spanning next month and March 2021.

Somchai Pornrattanacharoen, president of the Wholesale and Retail Association, said he does not foresee the need to lock down the country, noting that nations that have already introduced such measures have not succeeded in preventing infections.

"Shutting down the epicentres of the coronavirus

infections is sufficient," Mr Somchai said. "What the government should do is be more prompt in acting to handle the outbreak, and the measures taken should be more offensive than defensive."

According to Mr Somchai, even if the country is locked down, the impact is unlikely to be dramatic — particularly in terms of access to food, since Thailand is an agricultural economy.

He said the pandemic has created a huge opportunity for traditional retail businesses such as grocery stores.

Since the pandemic broke, grocery stores have seen sales grow by 20-100%, depending on location. More people are opting to shop at neighbourhood grocery stores. With this trend, most grocery stores have already stocked inventory for at least one month, Mr Somchai said.

HUNGRY HOMEBODIES

Online food delivery platforms have seen a considerable rise in demand as Bangkok residents attempt to limit time outdoors to avoid exposure, with the major delivery players competing to retain drivers with insurance and other incentives, and calming customers' nerves with intensive hygiene measures.

Alexander Felde, chief executive of Foodpanda, said that to fight against the disease, the company has developed various safety policies to make riders, restaurants and customers feel safer throughout the delivery process.

No delivery fees are being charged to customers who place orders of at least 50 baht within a 5km distance countrywide, except in Tak, Chaiyaphum and Phetchaburi provinces and provinces where services open after April. This applies only to restaurants under Foodpanda's campaign until June 30.

"Online delivery will provide extra income for restaurants in this challenging time," Mr Felde said.

Waranan Chaungcham, head of marketing and business development for Line Man, said the company continues to recruit drivers and is managing to maintain ratings quality while pushing for a threefold boost in transactions.

The company is considering adding incentives for drivers and streamlining the process to allow new restaurants access to the platform's 3 million users. In addition, any merchant is able to post on Line Man's Facebook fanpage.

Line Man will also add a "contactless" feature that lets customers opt not to pick up food directly from drivers.

"We provide alcohol gel and masks and check drivers' temperatures at restaurants," Ms Waranan said.

UNINTERRUPTED SERVICES

As the rising number of infections puts pressure on corporations and state agencies to let employees work from home, concerns have been raised as to whether the existing internet and mobile capacities offered by telecom operators are capable of handling the soaring demand for bandwidth.

Takorn Tantasith, secretary-general of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC), confirmed that nine internet service providers have committed to providing services that operate efficiently in terms of internet quality and speed during this difficult time.

"All internet service providers have to carefully maintain their systems to prevent accidents from happening in services that could adversely impact customers," Mr Takorn said.

The NBTC also asked the Metropolitan Electricity Authority and the Provincial Electricity Authority to suspend putting overhead cables underground in Bangkok, adjacent provinces and other provinces to prevent disruptions in internet coverage.

Advanced Info Service (AIS), the country's top mobile operator by subscribers, has said it's ready to provide uninterrupted services through call and data networks and internet broadband with fibre optics.

"If a problem is found, it will be solved immediately,"

said Prathana Leelapanang, chief consumer business officer of AIS. "We also have a call centre team to help customers and ensure the best quality service for 24 hours a day on both mobile and data networks."

No.3 mobile operator Total Access Communication (DTAC) said it was aware that corporate customers are concerned about internet speeds and secure remote connectivity as many organisations let staff work from home.

DTAC rolled out an internet package to support remote work, insurance for the coronavirus and powerful network solutions that allow secured remote connections to access corporate enterprise or cloud

applications, said Rajiv Bawa, chief business officer of DTAC.

"The company would like to support our corporate customers during this period so that their businesses will continue as usual and their services remain unaffected," Mr Bawa said.

KEEPING THE LIGHTS ON

Energy firms are rapidly moving to have employees work from home and maintain strict hygiene measures at essential plants in order to keep critical infrastructure running smoothly during this crisis.

Rapidly adopting social distancing guidelines, the state-run Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (Egat) became the first state firm to adopt a work-from-home concept.

Egat's announcement was made two weeks ago to limit the spread of the disease by fully supporting equipment and human resources for work at home.

Suttichai Juprasertporn, deputy governor of administration at Egat, said the test period for working from home started last week in order to prepare to monitor electricity generation and transmission at home if Thailand moves into Stage 3 of the pandemic.

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Siam Square, a popular destination for foreign tourists and Thais alike, was nearly deserted last week as local infections shot up. NUTTHAWAT WICHEANBUT



A worker disinfects an SCB branch. Spraying disinfectant is a coronavirus prevention measure that nearly all major companies are applying. WICHAN CHAROENKIATPAKUL

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Getting ready for the worst case

Egat is Thailand's sole power generator or enhanced single buyer of electricity, making its work indispensable for national stability.

A month ago Egat strictly prohibited staff from going abroad and visiting risky countries or engaging in activities with large groups of people.

Non-employees have been barred from entering power plants and power control systems.

"We have prepared for Stage 3 of the pandemic," Mr Suttichai said.

National oil and gas conglomerate PTT plans to repeat the business continuity management (BCM) plan that the group used when the headquarters was severely flooded in 2011 and later when it was temporarily taken over by protesters in 2013.

PTT chief executive and president

Chansin Treenuchagron said the group has conducted a BCM rehearsal by simulating damage to the feedstock transmission system, which affects the volume of business and public utilities in the oil refinery, petrochemical and power generation industries, resulting in disruption to the operations of most factories.

The results of the rehearsal will be used to enhance PTT's business continuity plan.

PTT has developed an incident management system to prevent emergency situations from escalating into crises and to implement the BCM.

CAPITAL MARKET

Despite the Philippine Stock Exchange's decision to shut down trading for two days, the Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET) has vowed to continue operations, adhering to the bourse's objective to provide trading liquidity for investors.

"Normally the SET operates in line with the country's financial system," said SET president Pakorn Peetathawatchai. "If banks operate, the SET

also operates correspondingly because securities clearing and settlement have to be completed via banks."

The bourse has a backup site to facilitate its huge market capitalisation of about 12 trillion baht, Mr Pakorn said.

The SET has allowed some staff to work from home, such as those in public relations, as the number of infections rises locally.

For press conferences and Opportunity Day, the SET will use an online platform via the bourse's internal broadcasting system and Facebook page, with conference details communicated through the Line chat app.

Voravan Tarapoom, a member of the SET's board of governors, said the exchange and financial institutions have devised preparations for their business continuity plan.

Trial runs have prepared for the possibility of headquarters closing and operations moving to other sites or if travel restrictions are imposed, Mrs Voravan said.

The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) has sent a circulation notice to capital market stakehold-

ers on preparing BCM in the midst of the outbreak.

The SEC has asked business operators to take actions for business continuity that cover the order processing system and risk control system in order to maintain the net capital rules, investment management system and communication channels if there are changes in service.

BANKING SECTOR

As infection numbers rise, banks have taken precautionary measures and tested their BCM plans in an effort to avoid potential coronavirus-related disruptions and contain the spread.

All banks have imposed a range of travel restrictions, including prohibiting staff from travelling to countries and territories with a high risk of virus contraction and restricting non-essential overseas travel, with a practical guideline in case workers or service users have been diagnosed with the disease.

Steps include area closure for intensive cleaning, asking staff with exposure to diagnosed patients to self-quarantine for 14 days and requiring those who enter headquarters to pass a thermal scan.

On Wednesday, the Bank of Thailand required all financial institutions to ensure that they continue providing seven financial services to prepare for the epidemic spreading further and faster.

Somkiat Kimawaha, executive vice-president of the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC), said the bank has set up a war room to monitor the situation around the clock and activate backup facilities.

The bank stands ready to implement BCM plans to prevent operations disruption in the event that the outbreak situation worsens, he said.

The state-backed farm bank's BCM plans include moving all operations online, shifting to backup IT sites in case the main site faces any difficult situations, and working from home for

employees responsible for main financial services if either Greater Bangkok or the country is shut down.

Some 80-90% of BAAC customers make financial transactions through ATMs, while 75% of smart SME customers have downloaded the bank's mobile banking app.

GH Bank president Chatchai Sirilai said the seven services include crucial services that banks must continue operating.

The bank's BCM plan comprises three parts: splitting staff at headquarters into at least two teams to ensure available employees if one team is infected; allowing some employees at headquarters to work from home to reduce congestion; and moving backup facilities online in case of a lockdown of headquarters to ensure that financial services remain available.

Piti Tanthakasem, chief executive of TMB-TBank, said the bank has split operations into several sites depending on the role and importance of business or services.

An IT infrastructure base is critical to support all business units and services to maintain smooth operations, while readiness for payment systems, both online and offline, is needed to serve all customer segments, especially the mobile banking platform in case of a lockdown, Mr Piti said.

All ATM machines must have enough money, and branches likewise need to be ready to serve the non-digital customer segment.

If some brick-and-mortar branches have to temporarily shut down for security purposes, other bank facilities in the area must be ready to accommodate clients.

"In case of a lockdown, the payment system of the overall banking industry must remain functional to enable people to continue their lives uninterrupted," Mr Piti said. "For instance, online payment for food delivery. This will build up people's confidence and relieve anxiety."

The bank also plans to make hotel bookings and prepare sleeping bags for

staff working at each site.

TMB-TBank plans to test working from home for all staff and C-level executives, starting March 23.

Krit Jitjang, senior executive vice-president of Kasikornbank (KBank), said the bank has prepared five operational sites: Ratburana, Phahon Yothin, Chaeng Watthana, the Kaskikorn Business Technology Group building and KBank's learning centre at Bang Pakong district in Chachoengsao.

KBank has split up critical business teams, particularly those working on IT and payment systems, to work separately from at least two different sites, while high-level executives, including the bank's four presidents, also work at different sites.

The bank has prepared an IT system to support working from home or remote working. This measure will be applied in line with the outbreak situation.

Social distancing is another measure under the pandemic BCM plan, Mr Krit said, noting that KBank is using conference calls to replace traditional face-to-face meetings.

LOCKDOWN DRILL

Developers have embraced working from home, using teleconferences for meetings with external parties and making phone calls to close condo sales.

Naris Cheyklin, chief executive of SET-listed developer Singha Estate, said the company is setting up an IT system to prepare staff for working remotely if necessary.

"If any employees are infected, we will permit working from home," he said. "We are not allowing external people to meet staff at the company, as we want to minimise risks from outsiders."

Singha Estate will use teleconferences for meetings with partners and the board of directors.

Opas Sripayak, chief executive of SET-listed LPN Development, said the company began working from home as an attempt to cope with the outbreak.

"We implemented these protocols immediately after the infection escalated," he said. "We prepared a plan and set up a special team to keep the system running smoothly and provided services to customers without any interruptions."

LPN will also focus on prompt and correct communication amid the crisis.

The developer began these communication procedures last Tuesday



We have prepared for Stage 3 of the pandemic.

SUTTICHAJ JUPRASERTPORN

Deputy governor of administration, Egat

to reduce congestion and opportunities for infection.

The number of staff working at headquarters on Rama IV Road has been cut in half and employees are rotating shifts with those working from home.

The working system, IT and technology are ready for more flexible communications and meetings.

Staff working in sales offices and juristic persons at projects remain on duty as usual but are prepared for any emergency.

"We're preparing to face Stage 3 of the pandemic," Mr Opas said. "When all of our offices need to shut down, customers can be confident that we will still operate seamlessly."

LPN also revoked a fingerprint scanning system, which can lead to virus infection among staff.

The company is spraying disinfectant at headquarters and using a monitoring system, as well as taking care of any infected staff and buying them health insurance.