

Business

WWII-Like Mobilization Thrusts Private Sector Into Virus Fight

By

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- Companies producing surgical masks, ventilators, sanitizers
- Until now, 'our generation has never been tested like this'



Miroglio Fashion Srl has switched its production line from clothing to protective masks in Alba, Italy, on March 19, 2020. Photographer: Francesca Volpi/Bloomberg

The U.K. government invoked wartime mobilization to track down ventilators. South African officials seized a hotel and turned it into a quarantine center. U.S. President Donald Trump can now order the private sector to ramp up output of gear for doctors and nurses. He hasn't yet, but companies, their businesses suddenly in tatters, are jumping in with acts of altruism and self-preservation.

The Covid-19 crisis has reminded many in the U.S. of the dark days after Sept. 11. It is swiftly coming to resemble those after Pearl Harbor, when a Japanese attack drove a reluctant nation into World War II.

As President Franklin Roosevelt declared then, "Powerful enemies must be out-fought and out-produced." Major industries refitted themselves from producers of consumer goods to providers of war material, almost overnight. Auto manufacturers, which had churned out 3 million cars in the previous 12 months, made only 139 for the rest of the war. General Motors turned to airplane engines and Chrysler to fuselages.

Now, with thousands dying and hundreds of thousands falling ill from the novel coronavirus, a similar effort is under way around the globe to make up for shortages of surgical masks, ventilators, sanitizers and more -- and to give idle workers something to do.

"Our generation has never been tested like this," U.K. Health Secretary Matt Hancock wrote in The Telegraph newspaper. "Our grandparents were, during the Second World War, when our cities were bombed during the Blitz. Despite the pounding every night, the rationing, the loss of life, they pulled together in one gigantic national effort. Today our generation is facing its own test."

Companies of all shapes and sizes are trying to help -- even as many industries beg for government bailouts.

Gaming-hardware maker Razer Inc. said although people stuck at home are eager for its products, it is switching over to surgical masks. "Razer understands that all of us have a part to play in fighting the virus -- no matter which industry we come from," Chief Executive Officer Min-Liang Tan said on Twitter.

Yossi Sheffi, who directs the supply-chain management program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said he talked with a company in Hong Kong that had specialized in women's clothing but now is making protective gear for medical workers, "running 16 hours a day every day. Why are they doing it? Simple: Nobody's buying women's clothes right now, and there is a huge need for the gear."

Ferrari NV and Fiat Chrysler Automobiles NV are in talks with Italy's biggest ventilator manufacturer to help boost its output. French sugar producer Tereos SCA will start making hydroalcoholic gel, used for sanitizers, at five of its factories. In the U.S., GM has said it could use some excess factory space to build hospital ventilators. Offers to help have poured in from all industries, from JCB, a construction-equipment manufacturer, to Rolls-Royce Holdings Plc to vacuum-cleaner maker Dyson Ltd.

In Scotland, the brewer BrewDog has begun making hand sanitizer; in Norway, spirits maker Arcus is producing disinfectant liquid for hospitals and emergency services. Luxury conglomerate LVMH, whose perfume and skincare brands include Dior and Givenchy, is working on large quantities of hydroalcoholic gel.

In Argentina, a farming association in the province of Entre Rios said it could lend machinery that typically sprays herbicides on crops for "urban disinfection" tasks. Farmers in Spain have been using a mixture of water and chlorine to clean their streets and parks.

Sheffi of MIT said some of the switches can be done in days; others will take weeks. He called for governments to make more demands on the private sector. "We have amazing capabilities, we just have to marshal it, and we haven't yet."

People on the front lines are desperate. Hospital workers in Washington state have been making protective medical gear out of office supplies and other run-of-the-mill materials as they deal with a severe shortage of equipment needed to care for patients who may have Covid-19. AFT Nurses and Health Professionals, a national union, issued a plea for equipment for members under "grave threat."



A worker fills a bottle with hand sanitizer solution made from distilled alcohol byproducts at a distillery in Seattle on March 18, 2020.

Ford Motor Co. is pulling all of its ads promoting its vehicles and replacing them with somber announcements reminiscent of World War II that describe how the Dearborn, Michigan-based company is responding to the virus, including giving Ford Credit customers some payment relief. The ads note that Ford, with its century-long history, made tanks and planes during wartime and offered relief during natural disasters.

The spots were produced rapidly last week as it became clear that nothing was going to be normal for quite a while, company officials said.

As in wartime, governments around the world are imposing massive closures on schools, travel and gathering places, and barring many workers from going to work.

Some also are pushing limits that worry civil-rights activists.

In Israel, for example, the security services are tracking infected people and the people they visit with cell-phone monitoring developed for tracking

terrorists. In New York, Governor Andrew Cuomo ordered prisoners to make alcohol-based hand sanitizer that they themselves are banned from using because of the alcohol content.

And some executives have been more reluctant than others. Elon Musk, who's been publicly skeptical about the gravity of the coronavirus, tweeted on Friday that SpaceX and Tesla Inc. are helping to make ventilators "even though I think they probably won't be needed."