

# Leading in a crisis: Ukraine war forces business to step up

## Global business

Russia's invasion of the Ukraine has forced business leaders to take a stand, make fast decisions often with little information and step up to protect and support staff and their families.



A week on from the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Vladimir Putin's military aggression shows little sign of ceasing. The international community has been united in its condemnation of Russia's attack, while businesses are also showing solidarity with Ukraine.

As part of the corporate backlash, the world's most valuable company Apple suspended sales of its products in Russia on Tuesday, car manufacturers Ford and Jaguar Land Rover have paused activities in Russia and retailers Nike and H&M have stopped exports to the country.

However, for many businesses there is more than sales riding on their response to Russia's attack. As the Russian invasion of Ukraine escalated,

companies operating within the country had to quickly mobilise to protect their employees.

## International businesses evacuate Ukraine

For PwC, which has offices in the Ukrainian cities of Dnipro, Lviv and the capital Kyiv, the first priority was for the safety and wellbeing of its people. The professional services company has had a presence in Ukraine since 1993 and has a team of more than 750 people working in the country.

A spokesperson for the company says: “We are in very regular contact with our colleagues in Ukraine and providing all the support we can... our sole focus and the only priority for our people is the safety and wellbeing of themselves and their families.”

So far, this support has included providing transportation, advice, and legal and financial support for staff and their families who are attempting to leave the country, as well as accommodation for those that are fleeing current conflict zones.

Multinational businesses will have been assessing the geopolitical risk of continuing their operations in Ukraine over the course of the past month, as Russian troops began amassing on the border. Randall Peterson, academic director of the Leadership Institute at London Business School, claims that the safety of their employees will take precedence in these moments as businesses have a legal duty of care for their people.

International financial services firm Allianz took measures to safeguard staff in Ukraine by setting up a free telephone hotline and is providing transport, accommodation and financial assistance for Ukrainian colleagues, on top of a €12.5m donation to humanitarian aid causes.

Manufacturing multinational Hilti also has a presence in Kyiv. A company spokesperson says that it is in “very close contact with our team in Ukraine, both from the regional as well as the international crisis management team” and the company has completely suspended business activities in the country.

The use of crisis management and security consultants has also been crucial for some businesses when trying to ensure the safety of their staff. Peterson explains that many of these business leaders will have little to no experience of a warzone and effective leadership relies on prior experience of a situation.

British fintech company Revolut, whose co-founder and CTO Vladyslav Yatsenko is Ukrainian, brought in the expertise of a global security solutions provider that is assisting with security updates and emergency logistical support and guidance. Its CEO Nik Storonsky has said that its employees in Ukraine are his “top priority” and efforts to safeguard them began at the outset of the crisis.

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A spokesperson for the company adds: “In recent days we have been evacuating staff or taking them to safe shelters, and have been in constant communication with those who decided to take their own routes. We continue to support those who cross the border.”

The UN estimates that more than 1 million refugees have now fled Ukraine. Revolut has pledged to match every donation made to the Red Cross Ukraine appeal this week via its services, up to £1.5m.

Ride hailing app and grocery delivery platform Bolt has a large presence in Eastern Europe. In response to the invasion of Ukraine, the company has committed to donating 5% of every order in Europe to NGOs supporting Ukraine and its people, as well as making its own donation of €5m. All products produced in Russia are being removed from its delivery services and it has suspended operations in the neighbouring country of Belarus – a key Russian ally.

A spokesperson for Bolt adds: “We have given the option of working remotely from in or outside Ukraine to more than 100 employees based in the country, and provided them with a budget for relocation as needed. We hope all Bolt employees, our tens of thousands of drivers, couriers and restaurant partners, and all those in Ukraine remain safe.”

## Leading through a crisis

Peterson has sympathy for the CEOs who are having to lead their businesses through such challenging circumstances. “It’s an incredibly tough ask,” he says. “A totally different style of leadership is needed in this scenario, when the consequences are life and death. I am hopeful that they can make a difference and take care of their people.”

In a [post on LinkedIn](#), former Refinitiv CEO David Craig, outlined some of the lessons he learnt from leading the business through crises including hurricanes, the financial crisis and armed conflicts and sanctions. “It sometimes takes a true crisis to test your strategy and leadership skills,” he wrote. “And the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces is certainly the largest test that many of us have ever faced, or ever wanted to face.”

He explained that such circumstances require companies to clearly communicate the priorities and objectives that will guide decision-making, as these will have to be made “quickly, under pressure, and sometimes with poor information”. He adds that, although those in the CEO seat may not have all the answers, “you will be asked what your position on this crisis is, what principles do you stand for?”

Many organisations have now taken a principled stance, whether that be through direct support for Ukraine, donations to appeals or boycotts of Russia. Peterson says: “There are a lot of organisations doing much more than the basic duty of care that is required of them. Many are now actively supporting Ukrainian people and setting up support lines, which is really impressive.”

As Moscow’s offensive on Ukraine continues, there will be growing [pressure on those that have remained neutral](#) to take action. As Allianz CEO Oliver Bate says: “We are an international organisation, but we are not neutral in our values. We stand firmly with all of our employees and all people whose lives have been affected by these events.”

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