

It's Not Flu As Usual

WHAT BUSINESSES NEED TO KNOW ABOUT PLANNING FOR AN INFLUENZA PANDEMIC



Imagine that thirty percent of your employees are too sick to come to work on any given day. Imagine that cumulatively, a quarter of your workforce could be out for as many as three to four months. Imagine that the other businesses you rely on are facing the same massive absentee rates. Hard as it may be to believe, such a scenario could happen -- indeed, some health officials say it's inevitable. The cause: a pandemic flu.

What A Pandemic Flu Could Mean To Your Business

Each winter, the flu kills approximately 36,000-40,000 Americans, hospitalizes more than 200,000, and costs the U. S. economy over \$10 billion in lost productivity and direct medical expenses. Health officials are now warning of an influenza pandemic, concerned that the avian "bird flu" emanating from Asia could mutate to a new strain of flu for which humans have no natural immunity. The World Health Organization has said that a bird flu pandemic could infect 25-30 percent of the world's population. With that much of the population and workforce affected, a pandemic flu could disrupt your business -- perhaps even force it to close down for a time.

What To Do In The Event Of An Outbreak

Your company's managers, human resources department, and employees should pay close attention to the guidance provided by local and state health departments and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Other organizations that provide assistance in public health emergencies include the American Red Cross, and the World Health Organization. In a worst-case scenario, "business as usual" may cease. Government health officials may have to implement dramatic measures, including shutting down certain businesses that involve high levels of interaction with the public, such as restaurants and theatres. Health officials may also have to restrict travel, cancel public events such as concerts or sports, and close schools.

Plan Now To Keep Your Business In Business

"Business continuity" means ensuring that essential business functions can survive a natural disaster, technological failure, human error, or other disruption. In recent times, assuring business continuity has also meant planning for terrorist-related biological, chemical, or nuclear attacks. Many existing business continuity plans anticipate disruptions such as fires, earthquakes, and floods; these events are restricted to a certain geographic area, and the time frames are fairly well defined and limited. Pandemic flu, however, demands a different set of continuity assumptions since it will be widely dispersed geographically and potentially arrives in waves that could last several months at a time. Depending on the flu strain, and based on previous pandemics, public health officials project **cumulative absentee rates of 25-30 percent over three to four months.** Absentees will include sick employees, and those who must care for others who are sick. Fear will also impact rates of absenteeism.

BUSINESS PANDEMIC INFLUENZA PLANNING CHECKLIST

Plan for the impact of a pandemic on your business:

- Bookmark your computers to www.threeriverspublichealth.org for up-to-date, reliable pandemic information.
- Establish an emergency communications plan and revise periodically.
- Identify a pandemic coordinator and/or team, with defined roles and responsibilities for preparedness and response planning. Tell your workforce about the threat of pandemic flu and the steps the company is taking to prepare for it. In emergencies, employees demonstrate an increased tendency to listen to their employer, so clear and frequent communication is essential.
- Identify essential employees and essential functions required to maintain business operations. Who would you miss in keeping the company going? Then work out how you would cope if those people weren't there. Explore the possibility of these employees working from home to reduce the spread of the virus. Remote electronic working, where feasible, will reduce face-to-face meetings.
- Train and prepare back-up workforce (e.g. contractors, employees in other job titles, retirees) in the event of an absentee rate of 25-30%. Throughout the duration of a pandemic, it is likely that your workforce will be depleted. In preparation, you can ensure your workers are cross-trained so that remaining workers will not be required to carry out unfamiliar tasks.
- Develop and plan for scenarios likely to result in an increase or decrease in demand for your products and/or services during a pandemic (e.g. effect of restriction on mass gatherings, need for certain supplies). Also, do you operate on "just in time" inventory or do you need to plan for some in reserve when supplies are limited?
- Expand online and self-service options for customers and business partners.

Plan for the impact of a pandemic on your employees and customers:

- Think about employee absences due to personal illness, family member illness, community containment measures (quarantines) or school closures (child care).
- Ensure employees are educated about signs and symptoms and have access to healthcare services.
- Maintain a healthy work environment by providing infection control procedures such as alcohol-based hand sanitizer and tissues to help prevent the spread of the virus. Ensure adequate air circulation. Post tips on how to stop the spread of germs.

Establish policies to be implemented during a pandemic:

- Sick-leave absences unique to a pandemic (non-punitive, liberal leave). Communicate with employees about the importance of staying away from the workplace if they become ill. Concern about lost wages is the largest deterrent to self-quarantine.
- Flexible worksite (telecommuting) and flexible work hours.
- Prevent influenza spread at worksite (hand washing, immediate mandatory sick leave for those employees with influenza symptoms).
- Restrict travel to affected geographical areas.