

Preparing for an Influenza Pandemic

A pandemic is a global outbreak of a disease, such as influenza. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), past influenza pandemics have led to high levels of illness, death, social disruption and economic loss. The recent H1N1 influenza pandemic, which affected 213 different countries and has led to over 16,000 deaths, is just a small example of the potential impact of such a pandemic. Though it is too early to evaluate the full economic and social impact of the H1N1 pandemic, it is safe to say that it could have been much worse. Due to the world's ever-expanding population and the prevalence of international travel, the worldwide impact of a pandemic could be catastrophic, and predicting the size of the threat is difficult. Given the uncertainty of future flu outbreaks and their potentially enormous impact, businesses need to take steps to prepare themselves now.

Though flu pandemic is top of mind due to the H1N1 situation, planning shouldn't be limited to influenza pandemic, but rather based on the need for business continuity planning in general. All countries are subject to some kind of natural disaster, such as a flood, winter storm or earthquake. Man-made disasters, such as an oil spill, bio-terrorism or fire, can also be devastating. Preparation today helps you plan for your business' survival tomorrow.

Planning for a Pandemic or Other Disaster

The first step is to create or update a business continuity plan. It should include preparation and planning for disasters, such as an influenza pandemic, and be integrated into business processes.

When planning specifically for a pandemic, your business needs are unique, so you'll need to conduct a risk-management assessment of your own business to

ensure continued operation. Here is a sampling of things to review and consider:

- Identify an individual in your organisation who is responsible for all disease planning, monitoring of situations and emergency actions.
- To minimise business disruptions, review how you work with employees, customers, consumers, contractors, media, etc.

Regardless of the size of your company or of the disaster, business continuity planning is a must.

- Do you have the infrastructure you need to run your operations with up to 40 per cent of your staff out ill or caring for ill family members?
- Identify essential job duties, operations, work functions, personnel, supply chains and distribution methods. Create or identify backup workers, methods or processes in the event of business interruption.
- Consider building up inventories in case foreign or domestic suppliers and transport services are interrupted.
- Keeping people apart to limit the disease's spread will be crucial in a pandemic situation. Consider supplying employees the equipment and support the need to telework if their jobs allow.
- Develop other strategies for reducing close contact in the workplace, including utilising email, phone

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and other digital communication methods rather than in-person meetings.

- Consider expanding your online business opportunities.
- Promote awareness of the problems associated with pandemic flu: alert employees about what steps you're taking and what they can do to limit the pandemic's impact.
- Develop strategies for communicating with employees, customers, consumers and the media.
- Review sick-leave and pay policies to ensure they don't discourage workers from staying home when they're ill. In the event of an influenza pandemic, ill employees should be encouraged to stay home to prevent the spread of disease.
- Make backup plans if you need to pull people out of countries where the epidemic strikes.
- Develop a travel policy that restricts travel to areas where the virus is active.
- Stock up on masks and sanitisers, and consider staggering work hours during pandemic situations to limit the size of gatherings.

Use History as a Guide

During pandemics prior to the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, up to 30 per cent of the population was affected, and roughly 10 to 20 per cent of workers were affected for periods that ranged from two to four weeks. These statistics may be useful benchmarks to determine the level of disruption that could potentially impact your operations. Remember that many healthy workers would also need to miss work to care for ill family members. Also anticipate and prepare for major breakdowns or disruptions in services, such as sanitation, water, power and transport, plus access to hospitals and health care systems.

Business Continuity Planning

Regardless of your company's size, business continuity planning is a must. Begin crafting a business continuity

plan today to avoid potentially catastrophic losses from now on.

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