

Preparing for the Impact of a Pandemic on the Workplace

While the timing and severity of a worldwide pandemic is difficult to predict, the World Health Organization (WHO) warns that the risk of an influenza pandemic is serious. If one occurs, we can expect it to have a significant impact on the communities in which we live and work.

History has demonstrated that three to four pandemics can be expected to occur over the course of a century. In 1918, the world experienced the deadliest pandemic ever known, accounting for the deaths of over 50 million people worldwide. Although mild by comparison, two subsequent pandemics swept the world, these being the “Asian flu” of 1957-1958, and the “Hong Kong flu” of 1968-1969. At a National Summit in February 2006, which addressed business planning for pandemic influenza, Secretary Michael Leavitt of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services told participants: “We are overdue and underprepared.” Most managers hope not to have to deal with the impact of a pandemic in the workplace, yet gambling that one is unlikely to occur, or that its impact will only be minimal, could prove catastrophic to business.

In the event of a major global pandemic, it is preparedness and proactive planning that will enable organizations to maintain business continuity, and as well, to protect the health and well-being of their employees. Essentially, businesses need to have a plan in place for communication, containment and contact management, and business continuity.

Communication

Throughout the pandemic cycle, employees will be exposed to information on the spread, intensity, and impact of the virus. As new risk factors occur, it can be expected that media will provide emotionally charged coverage. One of the consequences of this coverage will be the rapid development of fear and panic among the general population.

As such, it will be extremely important that employers provide accurate and timely information and advice on the following:

- The progression of the pandemic.
- How the business is planning to respond and manage the threat.
- What changes in the workplace will be required.

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Containment and Contact Management

It is critically important that employers develop strategies for reducing the risk of contagion in the workplace.

Several key factors will be important in keeping employees healthy and mitigating the effects of a pandemic, including:

- Adherence to personal hygiene guidelines.
- Use of hygiene products, including hand sanitizers, surgical gloves and certified face masks.
- Upgrading cleaning protocols in the office environment (sanitizing phone headsets, keyboards, door handles and communal lunch areas).
- Limiting the frequency of contact between people by using telephone, on-line or video communication, and planning for and encouraging employees to work from home.
- Prominent notices advising staff and visitors not to enter company premises if symptomatic.
- Educating employees about possible symptoms and encouraging and reminding them to stay at home if they are experiencing symptoms of the flu.
- Immediate segregation of employees who become ill at work; employees should be provided the necessary medical care and transported to the appropriate quarantine facilities.
- Employees who have had contact with infected individuals should be sent home, encouraged to consult with their doctor, and advised to remain home until otherwise instructed; employees should be medically cleared prior to returning to the workplace.

Business Continuity

In the event of a pandemic, it is the human resource challenges that will undoubtedly have the greatest impact upon business continuity. During the height of each pandemic wave (which may last three to eight weeks), organizations can reasonably expect an absenteeism rate of 20% to 60% – and

senior managers and executives will be just as likely to become affected by the virus as frontline workers. Given this risk, it is critical that businesses prepare a plan to manage what could be a periodic as well as extended disruption to business operations.

Some essentials include:

- Developing a crisis management team with cross-functional representation as well as representation across different regions.
- Defining core activities and determining the minimum number of people required to ensure continuous performance of these operations.
- Conducting rigorous cross-training to ensure continuity of critical business functions.
- Establishing a back-up site for critical business functions.
- Developing alternate arrangements for outsourced services.
- Revising and updating HR policies and insurance benefits commensurate with the scale of risk.

Useful Web Sites and Resources

- **World Health Organization (WHO):**
www.who.int/en
- **Public Health Agency of Canada:**
www.phac-aspc.gc.ca
- **Center for Disease Control and Prevention:**
www.cdc.gov
www.pandemicflu.gov

Family Services Employee Assistance Programs (FSEAP) offers confidential professional assistance on a wide variety of personal and work-related issues. For more information on your EAP, go to www.familyserviceeap.com or call 1-800-668-9920.