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Getting armed and ready

How prepared is your organisation for a major health scare? Plan early to protect your staff and minimise the impact on your business



FILE ILLUSTRATION

YOU could be forgiven for thinking that all the talk about Avian flu causing a human pandemic influenza is a lot of hype, but make no mistake, this is not another Y2K bug! While nobody can predict exactly when it will happen, most medical experts agree that at some point in the near future, it will occur.

So if a pandemic influenza does not come from H5N1 — the virus causing Avian flu — it will come from another virus. For this reason, organisations should recognise that the threat is real and prepare for it carefully. After Sars, H5N1 is another wake-up call for organisations to get ready before it is too late.

What to expect in case of pandemic influenza?

If H5N1 does mutate and ignite a real pandemic, it will spread like a wild

fire, with intensity ranging from relatively moderate economic disturbances (Hong Kong flu in 1968) to chaos (Spanish flu 1918).

In a moderate pandemic, much of the impact on businesses will come from exceptional levels of absenteeism. During peak periods, absenteeism could range from 15 to 30 per cent, due to sickness, travel restrictions, quarantines, family care responsibilities, and fear of contagion. All that could dramatically damage organisations' ability to continue operations.

The bigger picture will involve the likely disruption of supply chains and distribution networks around the world due to increased border controls and failure of key partners.

In the worst case scenario, there may be a breakdown of essential services such as water, electricity, telecommunications and food supplies, which may in turn, lead to the collapse of social order and security.

Where to start?

Any preparedness plan must address both human and operational factors while answering three key questions:

- How do you best protect and prepare employees to minimise absenteeism?
- How do you effectively continue operations with a workforce that is reduced by 15 to 30 per cent for a period lasting a few weeks?
- How do you operate if the supply/distribution chain is disrupted?

Every organisation will be affected by a pandemic in one way or another. The only way organisations can prepare is to conduct a risk-management assessment of their operations to clearly identify their specific vulnerability

profile in case of a pandemic.

It is essential to start by learning more about pandemic flu — the possible scenarios, modes of transmission, symptoms and virulence — to assess its potential impact and understand what effective measures can be implemented. You should also liaise with local health authorities to understand their plans and what support or constraints can be expected in an outbreak.

What should businesses be doing to get ready?

Considering the modes of transmission of the flu — essentially through direct contact with infected people or surfaces such as doorknobs, light switches, and elevator buttons — the best way to protect your staff is to design and implement an operational infrastructure for your organisation that will ensure the following:

- Maintenance of a clean workplace. Improve air circulation/filtration and arrange for adequate cleaning in work areas, washrooms and lifts to minimise cross-contamination.
- Proper education on simple personal hygiene such as effective hand washing and the correct use of masks/gloves. Stock up on masks, sanitisers and disinfectant wipes.
- Minimal face-to-face contact among staff, with suppliers/customers and any other people in general. Replace business travel, meetings, seminars and conferences with web-based and teleconferencing alternatives.

Plan for split locations, staggered work hours and the facilitation of online work from home.

Set up procedures to report, isolate the sick and quarantine the suspected cases. Adjust your sick leave

and pay policies to encourage staff to stay home when they are ill.

- Availability of “back-ups” for essential work functions, key suppliers and customers. Start cross-training employees, succession planning, increasing inventory, and arranging for alternative suppliers/distributors.
- Maintenance of open communication. Develop a system that allows your employees to know about corporate policies regarding health insurance, telecommuting, leave and hygiene practices implemented to fight the pandemic.

Although all this preparation may result in significant spending, organisations with no or inadequate business continuity plans will face dramatic disruptions. A wait-and-see approach is not an option!

Article contributed by Marc Ronez, managing director of Asian Risk Management Institute (ARiMI). He can be contacted at marcrounez@arimi.org. ARiMI is conducting a two-day workshop on August 28 to 29 to help organisations understand the potential impact of a pandemic. Website: <http://www.arimi.org>

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