

How technology can help control a virus spread

Face-to-face contact is reduced when IT is used. This critical factor can help contain a contagion. SERENE LUO finds out how companies have armed themselves for D-Day



PHOTO: AP

GLOBAL ALERT: Increasing globalisation, speedy air travel and greater face-to-face contact increase the chances of a world-wide influenza outbreak. The World Health Organisation predicted a pandemic today could result in up to 7.4 million deaths.

A world influenza outbreak that could kill millions of people is a scenario waiting to happen, say medical experts.

Globalisation, speedy air travel and more face-to-face contact could make that scenario a reality (see sidebar).

But there is an under-appraised saving grace — or at least a tool that could impede the speed of transmission of bugs like those of the avian flu or bird flu.

IT can play a “tremendous and essential” role, said managing director of the Asian Risk Management Institute, Mr Marc Ronez, because technology can minimise face-to-face contact, which is how a virus spreads.

Work practices can be organised to integrate technology so people can use teleconferencing or video conferencing, while workers can log on to work from remote locations.

“A big part of absenteeism at work will be because people are scared, quarantined or have to take care of their children because schools are closed,” said Mr Ronez.

It will be an organisational shift.

Even those in the manufacturing sector may have to look at using online transactions or IT to improve communications with headsets, for example, so that operators do not come into contact.

When a global flu pandemic strikes...

THE WORLD HEALTH Organisation, citing epidemic models from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, USA, has predicted that a pandemic today may result in 2 million to 7.4 million deaths.

Thirty to 40 per cent of the world's population are likely to get sick, while two per cent will die.

Meanwhile, the flu epidemic will spread rapidly from country to country because of “the speed and volume of international air travel today”.

While it took between six and nine months for pandemics to spread globally — and that was when the primary mode of travelling between countries was by ship — it will now only take three months before every country is affected.

Already avian flu or bird flu has spread out of Asia to places such as Europe, Canada and now, Iraq.

Certainly, several IT players are all ready for red alert.

For example, IBM has put in place its own Contingency Planning Assessment plan, which covers a wide spectrum of areas such as human resource planning, monitoring of employees and impact on supply chains. It will go as far as working with the Government to ensure that work goes on as normal.

During the financial industry's preparation exercise in May, homegrown DBS Bank made sure its employees were prepared by testing and fine-tuning its business continuity practices.

It has alternative sites and back-up systems, in case any one of the sites or systems go down. And all its self-service banking facilities will be able to handle the additional load, albeit with some “bottlenecks” or “slowness in response”, said its spokesman.

Internet service providers here assure users that their infrastructures will be able to withstand the sudden loading, as more people work from home during a critical period.

Senior vice-president of StarHub's Internet Protocol services Thomas Ee said that residential broadband networks were made such that “home connections

are often comparable to office connections in terms of quality”.

SingTel's spokesman Chia Boon Chong also said that the company's network was designed to handle peak traffic load, judging from evening time on regular days “when most customers surf the Internet”.

This traffic also tends to be more data intensive, he said.

“We do not anticipate the overall traffic load to change much if customers were to access the Internet more frequently during the day,” he said.

“In fact, traffic from office-related data may be less intensive than Internet surfing data.”

Currently, the Asian Risk Management Institute is unsure if avian flu will be the flu strain that starts a pandemic, said Mr Ronez.

But if companies and people are to wait till it strikes, “it will be too late”, he said.

“You cannot put in place backup system protection overnight.”

Go to www.arimi.org for further information on the Asian Risk Management Institute.

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