



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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The Benefits of a Flu Plan

A pandemic is defined as a 'global outbreak resulting from an emerging virus to which humans have little immunity'. A major human pandemic can cripple business operations and the workforces' ability to function normally.

If the predictions of infectious-disease experts are to be believed a major pandemic is waiting to happen. Are organizations prepared to protect themselves in the event of major public-health crises?

Frightening facts

A recent survey reflected the lack of corporate preparedness. Two-thirds of respondents were convinced that in the event of a major flu outbreak both their operations and bottom lines would be severely affected. 39 percent said that there was little that their organizations could do in advance.

Worse still, some organizations did not even know whether they would allow potentially contagious employees to stay at home during a flu outbreak. To sum up, most organizations do not have clearly stated contingency plans, leave alone, well-defined flu plans.

Even as the risk of avian flu exposes their unprepared state, employers continue to resist planning for any serious public-health crisis. "Companies who were impacted by the SARS outbreak a couple years ago are taking it far more seriously than others, but still I think there is a lot of denial," notes Kim Elliot, the deputy director of a health policy organization.

It is not that organizations do not realize the consequences of a flu outbreak. Most employers know that the fallout of any major contagious disease is organization-wide, long-term absenteeism. That apart, a pandemic can affect business operations, productivity, international dealings and customer relations.

In short, the absence of any planning will make it difficult for organizations to deal with huge percentages of absenteeism. And yet, there is a lack of planning!

Gearing up

According to experts, most employers may see absentee rates of 25 to 35 percent over three to four months. Therefore, organizations should be prepared to address this issue of long-term absenteeism. A few organizations with plans in place say a good response to a pandemic is preventive planning.

As part of its prevention program, a utility holding company distributes free flu vaccines to its staff of 14,000. "Employees are urged, especially those with chronic conditions to get their flu shots," says the company spokesman. Other effective prevention methods include:



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- Regular and stringent health monitoring of employees, their families and company visitor
- Choosing teleconferencing over face-to-face meetings
- Installing germ-killing hand washes in offices

Additionally, the plan disallows work travel to branches in affected areas and discourages employees from meeting those with potential risk, even for social occasions.

Planning guidelines

Given the serious consequences of a pandemic and the fact that planning helps organizations cope better, the appropriate way to prepare for public-health crises is to develop a flu plan. The primary objective of this plan is to help the organization prepare for the impact of a pandemic on its business, employees and customers.

When developing the plan, assign a coordinator or a team of health care professionals with the responsibility of preparedness planning. These individuals are in-charge of ensuring that the organization has sufficient resources to protect its employees and business during a sudden outbreak. Additionally, their tasks involve maintaining a healthy work environment and promoting hygiene.

Besides educating employees on the symptoms of diseases and illnesses and distributing basic infection-control information, a good plan keeps them informed on the HR policies that come into play during an outbreak. For instance, a high-risk employee must know if he can go on long-term sick leave a pandemic or whether the organization pays employees during a crisis.

"Many times they (employees) want to be seen as an employee who is so necessary they cannot take a day off and other times they have a real fear of lost wages, especially for hourly workers," says an executive. Communicating the organizations' personnel policies takes care of such misconceptions.

The plan should also identify critical business functions that are at high-risk and suggest alternatives in the event that these functions are disrupted during a pandemic. The plan identifies key positions and individuals and prepares for their absence during an outbreak by providing redundancy training so that others can temporarily fill-in the skills gaps.

Even a rudimentary flu plan can help an organization operate its essential functions using a depleted workforce.

The plan should provide resources such as web-based tools, teleconferencing and instant messaging so that employees can work from home during sickness or while convalescing.

The company is also working on a mechanized process where tapes are automatically uploaded into its satellite transmission system to keep popular stations on air.

In most organizations, flu plans are a part of a general disaster plan which unfortunately does little to address the possibility of long-term absenteeism and business interruptions.



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In addition to adopting risk-management strategies, a concrete flu plan is a must to see an organization through a major health crisis.