

# Is your company preparing for a pandemic?

Is your organization prepared for a pandemic? Or have you, like many people, done nothing, because you fall into one of these three categories: (a) you're not even sure what a pandemic is; (b) you hope it'll just go away the way the threat of a bad Y2K did; or (c) you figure you'll get around to planning for it when you have more time.

Let's deal with the excuses one at a time:

What is it? A pandemic is a worldwide disease. An influenza pandemic occurs two or three times per century, spreads quickly and affects healthy adults. Experts say the next one has the potential to kill tens of thousands of people in Canada. There is currently a virus strain, H5N1, being carefully tracked by the World Health Organization, that is spreading quickly among migrating birds. Health experts say that the strain could mutate and spread between humans.

Will it go away? While this particular strain may not spread to humans, it seems unlikely that the threat of a pandemic will disappear. Unlike Y2K this is not a single-event threat. History tells us that if the bird virus does not mutate, then something else may well come along. If you conduct even a minimal amount of research you will realize that the threat of a pandemic is real. If you think that it isn't and continue to do nothing, you are putting your organization at risk.

Is there lots of time? You may have time to plan - or you may not. No one knows. But

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## HUMAN CAPITAL



once an influenza pandemic has been identified IT WILL BE TOO LATE TO PLAN! Your organization will be caught unprepared. If you are an HR professional, or have responsibility for employee matters, you will be at fault for not having taken the lead. Why you? Because this is primarily an issue affecting people, health, production and jobs - all HR-related functions.

It is estimated (by various sources) that a full blown influenza pandemic will result in a

reduction of the workforce by 25 per cent to 50 per cent for several weeks at a time, in repeated waves of infection, over a period of one year. This workforce reduction will be due to absenteeism, not only of employees who are ill, but also employees who must stay home to care for children because schools are closed, or to care for other family members who are ill. The impact on an organization's productivity and the overall economy will be devastating as people stay home and avoid public places.

The Human Resources Professionals Association of Ontario (HRPAO) recently partnered with First Reference Inc., a publisher of compliance-based resources, to produce a Whitepaper entitled: Pandemic Planning: a Guide for HR Professionals.

Researched by John Johnson of HRPAO and written by Colin S. Braithwaite of First Reference, this report, available through HRPAO for a small fee, emphasizes the lead role that HR professionals should take in building organizational pandemic Business Continuity Plans (BCPs). A well thought-out BCP will ensure that an organization's business continues and will help to prevent the disease from spreading.

The implementation of a BCP will result in the formulation of a committee comprised of HR, health and safety reps, IT staff and other key personnel, including a Pandemic Liaison who manages the required tasks before and during the pandemic. Here are examples of some pandemic related considerations that an

organization will face:

- Examining the impact of a pandemic on the business - increase or decrease?
- Monitoring the execution of the BCP - assemble committee(s), ensure task completion
- Establishing communication channels - external and internal (employees, unions, suppliers, customers, partners)
- Planning for IT requirements - ensure employees / customers have remote capabilities to work and access products / services
- Liaising with health organizations and government - monitoring / disseminating the facts
- Identifying key positions and skill sets - planning for and providing cross-training and back up (for absent employees)
- Monitoring absenteeism and safe returns to work
- Modifying policies and procedures
- Working with partners - unions, insurance carriers, suppliers, etc.

Planning for a pandemic is complex. It is a necessary part of risk management strategy and it is not something that can be thrown together in a few days. Braithwaite makes an important point about your other disaster or emergency plans - they will not double as a pandemic plan because the nature, extent and duration of their impact is different. An influenza pandemic revolves around people and requires separate planning.

If you, like me, are kind of a last-minute person I implore you to change your habit in this one case. Start working on your pandemic plan today. This time, your procrastination will mean more than a missed deadline or a bad grade - it could result in the devastation of your organization. Even if there is no influenza pandemic in your lifetime, leading the development of a risk management strategy is never a waste of time - especially when it's about life and death.

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