

GONE VIRAL:

Protecting Your Employees and Your Bottom Line from the Effects of Pandemics



Agility Recovery

INTRODUCTION

Every time we seem to overcome a new virus strain, we breathe a sigh of relief. After fighting the Asian SARS outbreak in 2002, the H1N1 virus pandemic in 2009, and the cholera outbreak in Haiti from 2010-2013, you might think we are safe for a while. Not so. Here we are in another year, and the health risks are higher than ever.

First, there is the Ebola virus. In August 2014, a woman in the Democratic Republic of Congo contracted Ebola virus disease (EVD), also known as Ebola hemorrhagic fever, when she butchered a bush animal. Since that time, EVD has spread quickly to other people within the DRC and in surrounding countries, including Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Nigeria. The U.S. recently reported its first cases of Ebola in Texas.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated the mortality of the current outbreak of EVD in West Africa to be approximately 55%; and if it's not brought under control soon, WHO predicts 1.4 million cases by January 2015.

The Ebola virus shows us how quickly a community can lose control if not prepared. But Ebola is not the only virus the world's population is dealing with today. From EV-D68 (enterovirus D68), which has afflicted 514 people across 43 U.S. states and Washington, D.C., with respiratory illness, to the chickungunya virus, which is transmitted through mosquitoes and has affected people in 32 countries, these pandemics are spreading fast. There is even a canine virus, which is sickening and killing pets.

Health-related work losses can have a tremendous negative effect on an organization's productivity, its ability to meet delivery deadlines and its expenses as employees and their families are stricken. These losses are estimated to cost employers more than \$260 billion a year.

Meanwhile, a death could mean the loss of a valuable and well-liked employee, as well as more downtime from people taking funeral leave. But all of this can be prevented if companies have a strategy for preventing the spread of viral infections at their facilities and among their employees.

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Flu Facts

5%-20%:

The percentage of Americans who get the flu every year

70 million:

The number of work days Americans miss as a result of the flu

\$10.4 million:

Annual direct costs for hospitalization and outpatient visits

Source: http://www.cdc.gov/flu/pdf/businessToolkit_Seasonal_Flu_For_Businesses_and_Employers.pdf

WHO'S MOST AT RISK

Ebola is spread through bodily fluids. In Africa, medical workers are at high risk, particularly because they do not have enough latex gloves to protect their hands. Also, the virus' gestation period can range between 2 and 21 days before diagnosis, so those who have contracted the disease may also spread it to several friends and family before they are even diagnosed.

Sweeping the United States right now is Enterovirus D68 (EV-D68). This disease is targeting infants, children and teenagers because, at their age, they lack a strong immunity to such viruses. Children with asthma and other respiratory ailments are having the worst reactions. Meanwhile, even though adults are fighting off EV-D68 better, those with children at home, as well as teachers who are around children every day, and people who come in contact with parents and teachers in public places, are at high risk of both contracting and spreading the disease to others.

EV-D68 can be found in an infected person's respiratory secretions, and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) says it likely spreads when an infected person coughs, sneezes or touches contaminated surfaces. Mild symptoms may include fever, a runny nose, sneezing, coughing, and body and muscle aches. However, people with asthma have also presented with difficulty breathing and wheezing.

Employees need to be particularly cautious in the work environment when they come in contact with other employees. Viruses can easily be passed from one person to another simply by distributing papers around a conference room table, shaking hands with a customer, sharing a phone or having a face-to-face conversation in front of the coffee machine.

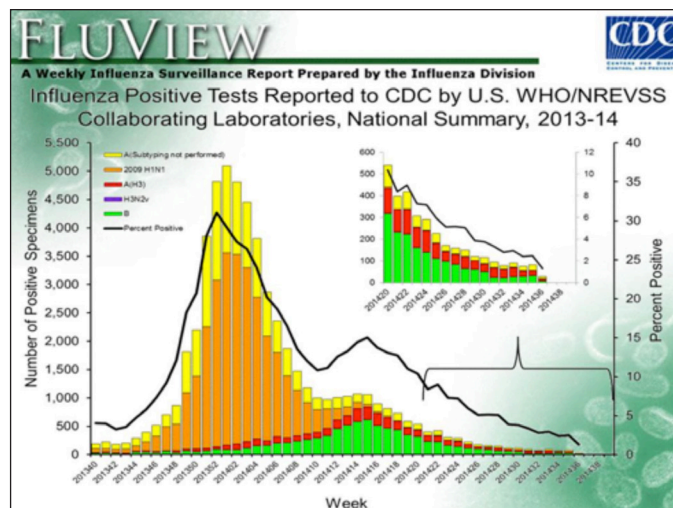
Finally, the influenza season is also gearing up for the fall and winter months. People who are susceptible to bronchitis and pneumonia are at higher risk of the seasonal flu. According to the CDC, during a regular flu season, about 90 percent of deaths related to flu occur in people 65 years and older.

39% of U.S. adults are "concerned" Ebola is headed to America and 26% are worried they or an immediate family member is going to get infected.

Harvard University poll; source: Crain's Cleveland Business

In addition to the human cost, the flu hurts business: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that more than 110 million workdays are lost to it every year, equaling about \$7 billion in sick days and lost productivity.

Source: Crain's Cleveland Business



HOW TO REDUCE THE RISK OF ILLNESS IN THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

Per capita national health expenditures were \$8,915 by 2012 and climbing. In total, they reach \$2.8 trillion, or 17 percent of the gross domestic product, according to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

To get expenses and our employees' health under control, particularly during flu seasons, organizations should set up a health and wellness team responsible for employee education, illness prevention and health management.

Start by assigning each team member specific tasks and ensure that at least two people are fully knowledgeable of every responsibility. Meet once a year to discuss potential scenarios and how they should be handled.

1) Keep everyone informed and gauge potential risk to the organization. The team should start by understanding the potential risks. The Centers for Disease Control (www.cdc.gov) maintains a "Flu Tracker" that updates weekly with the number of influenza cases reported by state.

In calculating overall risk, it may be helpful to know how many of your employees have school-aged children or spouses who work in public facilities such as retail, hospitals or schools.

2) Encourage employees to get flu vaccines. If possible, offer vaccines free of charge or for a nominal fee at your place of business. Also, publicize information about the availability of flu vaccines offered in your local communities, such as at doctors' offices, hospitals and pharmacies.

3) Take preventative measures. Place dispensers of alcohol-based hand sanitizer, or baskets of single-serve packets, in every bathroom and kitchen. Hang posters that encourage everyone to take maximum risk prevention, including covering their mouth when they sneeze or cough, and washing their hands and using hand sanitizer before they leave the washroom or touch food. If they interact with the general public, consider having them use rubber gloves.

4) Provide your road warriors with face masks. Also, consider making the highest-risk areas, such as West Africa, off limits for in-person meetings.

5) Promote telecommuting. If possible, expand on your work-from-home policy to allow employees to work more days from home during the cold and flu season. This may require the purchasing of equipment that enables working in the cloud or through virtual technologies, such as video conferencing, but it will be well worth it.

6) Encourage employees who don't feel well to stay home. The CDC recommends that anyone with flu-like symptoms and a temperature of 100oF or higher stay home for at least 24 hours or until the fever breaks.

7) Routinely clean all common area surfaces such as kitchen countertops, conference room tables and door handles with a germ-killing solution.

Flu vaccination was associated with a 71 percent reduction in flu-related hospitalizations among adults of all ages and a 77 percent reduction among adults 50 years of age or older.

Source: Centers for Disease Control, 2011-2012 flu season

MAINTAINING MAXIMUM PRODUCTIVITY THROUGH ANY HEALTH CRISIS

With job redundancy, organizations can ensure that productivity continues smoothly during any crisis situation. Following these seven steps will ensure maximum productivity while putting employees first.

- 1) Develop a work redundancy plan to ensure that every employee is trained to cover at least one other person in their group.

Make a priority list of every office and facility location, and the distance between them, in case someone has to come in from another location.

Hold meetings and 'run-throughs' to ensure that pandemic team members and employees understand what is required of them in an emergency. Have back-up employees visit other locations to get a feel for how to perform in any building configuration or situation.

Evaluate and, if necessary, update your human resource, sick leave and insurance policies.

- 2) Communicate. Set up a system for automated telephone voice messaging, text messaging, email, mailings and in-office posters so you can keep employees up to speed on the organization's emergency policies and other pertinent information at a moment's notice.

Keep everyone's contact information in an easily accessible (but completely private) location accessible to the pandemic team both internally and remotely via a user name and password.

- 3) Build relationships with external organizations. Develop a relationship with your local temporary personnel agencies for fill-in employees as needed. Have meetings with your vendors and partners to discuss best practices and how you can work together to get things done in an emergency. Consider diversifying your supply chain to prevent delays in delivery or other services.

Have team members sign up for alerts and timely announcements from state and local health departments, as well as from the national Centers for Disease Control.

- 4) Monitor and report any unusual increases in absenteeism. Assess essential business functions to determine the threat that absenteeism would cause to those functions. Determine the threshold for needing replacement staff, then take precautionary measures to ensure absenteeism does not reach those thresholds.

Prepare for school and other business closures that would require healthy employees to stay home with their children. Develop a plan for alternative work methods for these employees such as secure, remote access to the organization's network.

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Source: Centers for Disease Control, 2011-2012 flu season

MAINTAINING MAXIMUM PRODUCTIVITY THROUGH ANY HEALTH CRISIS (CONTINUED)

5) Set threat-level guidelines. Determine appropriate threat levels for cancelling meetings or travel and activating extended work-from-home or other protective policies.

Include a contingency for social distancing — moving employees farther apart from each other if necessary. The recommendation is at least six feet of distance between people.

6) Set aside funds. Encourage direct deposit for employee paychecks. In addition, be prepared to handle a larger volume of insurance claims and set aside enough accessible cash to maintain business operations for a couple of months.

7) Develop an emergency policy and guide for travelers. Create helpful procedures for employees who may get sick while out of town or country on a business trip, to help them handle the situation. Advise employees to compile their own list of emergency phone numbers for the nearest office to where they will be, as well as any embassies, consulates, local hospitals, etc.

The CDC offers a handy travel guide at <http://wwwn.cdc.gov/travel/content/novel-h1n1-flu.aspx>.



CONCLUSION: THOROUGH PLANNING = SMOOTH OPERATIONS

The flu season is unavoidable. Every year, a new strain makes its way into the population, causing thousands of people to become sick.

But employers can help reduce their employees' risk, and at the same time reduce the organization's risk as well. With proper planning, education and services such as the flu vaccine, an organization can minimize sick days and reduce health costs, while ensuring that productivity and quality care maintained.

Following these simple steps will help protect your operations from the effects of the flu and other viruses.

RESOURCES

Seasonal Influenza Checklist, Agility Recovery

<http://www2.agilityrecovery.com/portfolio/seasonal-influenza-checklist/>

CDC Seasonal Flu Website

<http://www.cdc.gov/flu>

Seasonal Flu Information for Businesses and Employers

<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/business>

What's New on Seasonal Flu

<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/whatsnew.htm>

Seasonal Flu Free Resources

<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/freeresources/index.htm>

Print Materials

<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/freeresources/print.htm>

Video/Audio Tools

<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/freeresources/media.htm>

More Information about Preventing Seasonal Flu With Vaccination

<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/vaccine/index.htm>

What You Should Know about Treatment and Flu Antiviral Drugs

<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/antivirals/index.htm>

National Foundation for Infectious Diseases, Help Reduce Flu at Work

<http://www.nfid.org/idinfo/influenza/flu-at-work.pdf>

National Business Group on Health, Vaccinating Against the Flu: A Business Case

<http://www.businessgrouphealth.org/pdfs/Final%20Proof%20-%20Seasonal%20Influenza.pdf>