Flu Pandemic Preparedness
Hot, achy, and sore all over: Don’t let the flu make your business sick!

Bird flu, swine flu, what’s next flu? That’s the question many businesses are asking as they develop flu preparedness plans to respond to the next big epidemic.

Even though flu hasn’t grabbed many headlines this year, a report from Harvard University’s School of Public Health says employers are still concerned about absenteeism from a possible flu outbreak. The researchers surveyed more than 1,000 businesses nationwide. Two-thirds said their business couldn’t operate normally if more than half their workers were out for two weeks and four in five predicted severe operating problems if half their employees missed a month of work.¹

Really though, what company could operate “normally” if half their staff were out? But that’s what companies need to be planning for in the event of a pandemic. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) predicts a flu pandemic could affect as many as 40 percent of the workforce during periods of peak illness.²

And even if the country isn’t facing a pandemic, illness can spread through individual offices creating serious localized absenteeism. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), on average 13 percent of the U.S. population gets the flu every year, with active flu seasons seeing closer to 20 percent, or more than 62 million Americans. A Walgreens survey estimates that the 2010 flu season resulted in 100 million lost work days in the U.S.³

How well your company plans its flu response will directly impact productivity and profits in the face of an outbreak. In this Blue Paper® and podcast we will explore a strategy and tactics on how best to compile a flu preparedness plan for your business or organization. Read on to learn how and when to act, how to build awareness and how best to communicate your plan to employees.

Flu response team

If you don’t have a flu response plan already, your first step is to develop a corporate “flu team.” This group should include representation from a wide range of departments including HR, facilities, finance, and IT. After all, since this is the group responsible for developing and enacting a plan, you want to be sure they’ve considered how a pandemic could impact every aspect of your organization.

These individuals will be tasked with both development and, if necessary, implementation of the plan. In the plan, clearly define who has authority for which specific functions, including who makes the decision to suspend certain operations and under what conditions.

Remember, even if your company is small, your flu response team should include more than one person in case the responsible party gets sick. Businesses with more than one location should identify coordinators at each site to monitor local flu situations and manage response plans.

Deciding when to act

Deciding when to enact a flu response plan can be a difficult decision. Ryan Fiorini holds a Ph.D. in microbiology and immunobiology and assisted organizations like the Coast Guard and TSA with flu preparedness from 2005 to 2007. He warns that businesses should avoid using the mainstream media as their primary source of information regarding the severity of an outbreak. “Data can be manipulated,” he warns.

During the avian influenza outbreak in 2006, Fiorini recalls some news outlets reporting the flu had a 90 percent death rate. Yet those numbers were based on international reports, stemming largely from countries where access to healthcare is poor. Moreover, he says, it didn’t account for people who were misdiagnosed as not having avian flu or people who never went to the doctor in the first place.

Fiorini recommends businesses rely on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) for more accurate flu reports and guidance. Flu.gov is a U.S. government-sponsored resource and was developed to be extremely user-friendly. The site includes a FluView® map, updated weekly, to show influenza activity reported by state. Businesses will also want to identify the appropriate flu reporting centers for their state and/or county.
When deciding whether to act, businesses should look at the number of people who are sick and the severity (i.e. hospitalization and death rates) for their community. It’s also a good idea to track seasonal absenteeism data for the company itself so organizations can determine when an illness is spiking above the norm in their own organizations.

Businesses will also need to consider whether their employee or customer population has any particular vulnerability to flu complications (children, elderly, pregnant women, or employees with chronic medical conditions). A comprehensive plan will also include situations in which employees may be well themselves but are unable to get to work due to school or daycare closures.

**Social distancing**

When illness is present in the workplace, one way to reduce the risk of infection is to limit employee contact. This goes beyond encouraging sick employees to stay home. It means encouraging telecommuting for any employees who are able, holding meetings via teleconference, canceling travel and conferences, or even shutting down all non-essential operations.

Experts say these policies can limit the spread of a deadly infection by at least half, if steps are taken early. In researching the 1918 pandemic, considered one of the deadliest natural disasters in human history, Harvard School of Public Health professor Marc Lipsitch found that communities that implemented social distancing procedures had weekly death rates that were about 50 percent lower than communities that acted later or not at all.4

Whether you’re talking about limiting serious hospitalizations or simply limiting absenteeism, the faster you respond to a flu outbreak, the better off your employees will be.

**Social distancing: schools & daycares**

Many schools and daycares will already have social distancing policies in place, activating closures when illness reaches a certain tipping point. Businesses need to be prepared for the impact those closures will have on their workforce when parents need to stay home with their children. If business policies penalize

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parents for missing work in these situations, parents will coordinate their own shared care arrangements—effectively defeating the purpose of school and daycare closures. Consider a flu contingency plan that suspends any punitive absentee policies during times of public outbreaks and communicate that to employees.

**Social distancing: telecommuting**

The CDC recommends telecommuting as part of a corporate flu pandemic plan. From an IT perspective, businesses should ensure they have the necessary infrastructure to support increased telework demands on the company network.

“A lot of companies have plans in place to work at home. However IT goes out all the time,” says Fiorini. “If there’s no one at your location to take care of the servers, what are you going to do?”

If telecommuting is part of your pandemic plan, identify secondary resources that could be called on to service IT resources in case of an emergency. Next, Fiorini recommends that companies test their server capacity for company-wide telework. “Have everyone telecommute one Friday and see what happens,” he suggests. Fiorini knows companies will be reticent to affect a whole day’s worth of productivity, but he says testing is the only way to know if your systems are really going to work. “In the grand scheme of things, maybe eight hours of downtime isn’t a big deal.”

Kyra Cavanaugh, a workplace flexibility consultant with Life Meets Work, knows that business continuity is just one of many bottom-line reasons organizations implement telecommuting. But she cautions against planning on telework as a crisis-only response. “The best way to make sure telecommuting is going to work for you in an emergency is to use it every day,” she says. “Make telecommuting a regular part of your corporate culture. That way, when an emergency does arise—be it flu or a natural disaster—you’ll have a much smoother transition. Employees will already know how to log in, access files and communicate with each other in a productive manner.”

Fiorini advises companies to consider an investment in telecommuting technology as an investment in insurance. “You think, ‘That’s a big expense,’ but if you’re down for a day or a week or a month—what are you spending there?” he asks. “Is it worth it to be ready? Some companies think it is.”
Social distancing: cross-training

Part of social distancing is making sure your company has more than one person who can do a job. Assess company operations and determine which staff, equipment and materials are critical functions. Cross-training is one way to maintain operations even when absenteeism is high. In fact, pandemic flu guidance issued by OSHA recommends that businesses develop “triple redundancy” for critical functions in anticipation of high rates of absenteeism.  

That’s exactly what’s already in place at Tailored Label Products in Menomonee Falls, Wis. General manager Jeff Kerlin estimates his company could lose five to ten percent of its workforce to the flu and still be able to function. Every Tailored Label shop employee is fully trained to perform three different functions and, in turn, every function has at least three people qualified to execute that job. And in 2009, when H1N1 was affecting millions worldwide, Hormel Foods in Austin, Minn. made news when it implemented a regular cross-training program on Friday afternoons. Company spokeswoman Julie Craven said the cross-training was meant to ensure that Hormel could keep operating if many employees specializing in one task contracted the flu simultaneously.

By the same token, talk with your vendors about maintaining critical supplies and services during a flu outbreak. “I think everyone in your supply chain and everyone you contract with needs to know what your plans are and what you are expecting of them,” says Lisa Koonin, senior advisor for H1N1 influenza response at the CDC. “Make sure the people you depend on are planning and preparing.”

Keeping it clean

Have a workplace cleaning plan for preventing an outbreak and one for decontaminating afterwards. Talk with your cleaner contractors to find out if they have the training to deal with flu outbreaks and other super bugs. If they’re not prepared for a full-scale decontamination, identify a specialist who you will call in the event of an outbreak.


That said, you can work with your standard cleaning contractors to develop procedures for the flu season. Ask for special attention for any shared work areas, employee gathering spaces, and any surfaces regularly touched by more than one person. (Think doorknobs, elevator controls, water cooler and coffee pot handles, printer/copiers, microwave doors, etc.) Ask that these surfaces are wiped down at least once a day when flus or colds are present in your workplace. Work with HR to develop a system that will trigger elevated cleaning procedures when employee sick days spike.

Fiorini, whose company develops antibodies, said his organization made the investment in copper-coated fixtures like door handles and toilet levers because some studies show that copper has antimicrobial properties.

If copper fixtures aren’t in your budget, look for smaller changes you can make like no-touch garbage cans and paper towel dispensers. Provide canisters of cleaning wipes throughout the building so employees can regularly wipe down phones, keyboards and public surfaces.

Employers may also want to stock up on alcohol-based hand sanitizer and tissues in preparation for the cold and flu season. But Fiorini advises employers not to bother with masks, particularly surgical masks. He says even the N95 masks, which are often marketed for flu protection, are ineffective. “The N95 masks are good if worn properly, but you can’t ever take it off and that’s irrational. You’re going to take it off to eat,” he says. “And, if you rub your eye with your mask on, you’re still going to get infected.”

Employee awareness

Establish a process to communicate flu response information to your employees. This includes encouraging employees to stay home when sick, hand washing/cover-your-cough reminders and HR policies. As you create your communication plan, the CDC reminds businesses to “anticipate employee fear, anxiety, rumors and misinformation” and act accordingly. In other words, there’s no such thing as over-communication! A little extra information can go a long way toward reassuring your team.

Awareness: vaccination

The CDC encourages employers to support flu vaccination efforts by offering free

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flu clinics in the workplace. Even if you don’t have an on-site occupational health nurse, you can contract with pharmacies or community vaccinators to provide this service on-site.

That’s what Jay Rosenberg, president of JSR Advertising in New York did. “In the past we had terrible flu problems at our ad agency,” he says. “My solution was to bring a doctor to the office to give the shots. We paid for his time and for the shots. It was certainly worth it many times over. It’s a fun, positive bonding experience for just about everyone and it saves us weeks of lost time each year.” Be aware, however, that while you can offer in-office vaccination clinics, you can’t require employees to accept a flu shot if they don’t want one.

Awareness: hygiene
It might seem like common sense, but it never hurts to remind employees to cover their mouths when they cough and wash their hands during flu and cold season. Studies show most people do not wash their hands properly for a full 30 seconds and then dry them fully afterwards. Include hand-washing education in all company bathrooms and station alcohol-based hand sanitizers throughout the workplace. You can also provide employees with cleaning wipes to sanitize office equipment and surfaces. Employers can access free flu-prevention hygiene flyers at Flu.gov.

Awareness: sick leave policies
According to the Walgreens Flu Impact Report, nearly 80 percent of those who got the flu in 2010 season say they still went into work at some point. Of those workers, approximately 60 percent felt some remorse and were at least fairly concerned they would expose others to the illness. Yet despite those concerns, they went into work anyway.

Some employees come in because they feel obligated to tough-it-out or because they believe they are indispensable to the workplace. Others come in because they don’t want to use up their sick days or take an unpaid day off.

Tell your employees to stay home from work when they are sick, when they think they MIGHT be ill, or even when family members are showing symptoms. Explain that limiting workplace exposure is a professional obligation of their job. Then, consistently enforce your policy by sending sick employees home.

Ophelia Galindo is a national leader of absence and productivity solutions with Buck Consultants. She told Employee Benefits News that employees are increasingly willing to complain about coworkers who do come in sick. “Some of my employers have their occupation health department or HR department getting calls saying ‘My co-worker is hacking up a lung, what can you do to make her go home?’” Galindo says. “I think employees are a little bit more vigilant and a bit more outspoken about wanting to limit their risk in the workplace.”

Determine if and how leave policies will change during a flu outbreak and communicate that to employees. Adjusting leave policies will encourage sick employees to take time off without fear of losing their job, reducing overall workplace exposure to the flu.

You might, for instance, allow employees to use their sick leave to care for a child or other family member. If employment policies do not already allow for it, you may also wish to consider an arrangement that allow staff to take an advance on their sick leave during a flu outbreak. You may also consider extending sick leave and sick leave pay during high-risk occasions to encourage employees to stay home. And consider your policy on doctor’s notes: During the H1N1 pandemic in 2009, U.S. Commerce Secretary Gary Locke urged employers to waive such requirements saying, “It has the potential to overload a health care system that is [already] likely to be stressed.”

Exercise the plan

When it comes to any crisis response plan, you can’t be sure it’ll work unless you’ve tested it. That could mean tabletop exercises, acting out a simulated response, or actually running a physical drill.

“We saw a lot of people saying, ‘Well we sort of exercised it,’ Fiorini recalls from his government consulting days. Until they really tested it, he says, they were bound to miss things.

One example Fiorini gives is that of a hospital running an emergency response drill to a “dirty bomb” or radiation bomb. They had all these crisis plans, “binders and binders” of it he recalls, but they decided to have everyone come out and run a drill in full gear. When the trucks pulled up to the hospital’s brand new parking garage they found out the garage had been built half an inch too short. “They

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had to come up with a totally new plan," he said.

In another example, Fiorini describes a scenario in which a school shutdown mid-day and parents had to pick up their children. The school didn’t have a plan for that beyond putting one of their transportation staffers outside to direct traffic. “All of a sudden you have 400 cars out there,” he says. “Parents are driving right around the guy.”

Put your flu response team in a conference room and have them practice their response to a hypothetical outbreak. And, as indicated before, test your IT system to ensure it can handle a full telework load.

And now for a short sidebar: flu in campus environments

Schools and universities with residential campuses have additional layers of responsibility in the event of a pandemic flu outbreak. At the most basic level, student affairs professionals, including health center and housing staff, need to educate students on how to lessen the spread of infection, employing sound hygiene habits and practicing social distancing.

Keep an open line of communication with students and their parents. Encourage families to develop their own plans for travel home in the event of a school closing. Monitor incidence of infection and suspend co-curricular activities as necessary. Provide transportation for students needing health evaluations. Establish a quarantine area, in the event it is needed. And, even in the event of a school closing, be prepared to provide housing for those students who cannot travel, either due to their own ill health, or (with particular respect to international students) if travel from one part of the world to another becomes difficult.

Finally identify essential functions, and work with HR to develop staffing plans for those essential functions—including dining, health and counseling and campus safety—that support residential students.

Plan for your health (and your reputation)

Remember if a pandemic hits, you’ll be managing more than business operations. You’ll be managing your reputation too. People will judge you on how well you responded it, how well you protected your customers and employees and how well you recovered after a shutdown.
A well thought-out plan that has been developed by an organization-wide team and then tested for effectiveness is the best way to ensure your response will be timely and appropriate in the face of a flu pandemic or other fast-spreading illness.

Remember, to put a comprehensive plan in place you’ll need to:

1) Gather a flu team
2) Identify plan triggers and reliable information sources
3) Review HR policies and adjust as appropriate for pandemic situations
4) Develop business continuity measures like telework, cross-training, and supply chain backups
5) Develop a communication plans for both overall wellness and pandemic situations
6) Develop flu season cleaning practices and pandemic remediation plans
7) Practice plan simulations

Until next time, this is 4imprint saying, “Be well.”