

SWINE FLU - A PRESCRIPTION FOR BUSINESS CONTINUITY

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Swine flu is in news again! Last time in 2009 Swine flu caused around 2000 deaths but fortunately did not reach epidemic or pandemic stage. The last flu pandemic happened in 1918 “Spanish flu” that was caused by influenza virus and caused upward of 50 million deaths in US and Europe. Businesses should be prepared for infectious diseases as part of its business continuity planning (BCP). Pandemic flu is different from ordinary flu because it is a flu virus that mutates fast and spreads very quickly from person to person worldwide. It is unknown at this stage whether this bout of infection will reach epidemic or even pandemic stage.

Impact on Your Business

Any epidemic due to infectious disease primarily will impact the “people” resources. The impact will be widespread and expected to affect every strata of our society. Here are few potential impacts due to any infectious disease epidemic.

- Large scale absenteeism of staff due to their own sickness or sickness in their family.
- Outsource providers and service providers such as banks, utilities, distribution also may be impacted due to absenteeism of their staff
- Your sales may get impacted due to increased morbidity and possible mortality. For example insurance companies, healthcare providers, pharmaceutical companies, FMCGs may see volatility in their sales numbers. Insurance companies will see higher claims as well as higher new customers (due to adverse selection).
- Restrictions on local commute as well as business travel. India government may put restrictions or foreign government may put restrictions due to quarantines.
- Possible Civic unrest due to pressure on our already creaking public healthcare infrastructure
- Employee benefits such as health insurance may get impacted in terms of increased premium, suspension of cashless service or even mid-term policy cancellations.

How fast it spreads?

In late April 2009, World Health Organization (WHO) first received reports of sustained human-to-human infections with a new influenza A (H1N1) virus in Mexico and the US. In less than nine weeks, the virus had spread to all six continents. Given the widening risk of disease caused by this virus and its unique genetic characteristics as an influenza of animal origin, WHO, in accordance with established procedures, increased the influenza pandemic alert level from phase 3 to phase 4 on 27 April 2009, to phase 5 on 29 April and to phase 6 on 11 June 2009

How to Prepare for Swine Flu

The business continuity response has to be graduated i.e. in line with the progress & impact of the disease. However help can be taken from following suggested list of measures.

MEASURES FOR MINIMIZING IMPACT ON BUSINESS

- Identify a pandemic coordinator and/or team with defined roles and responsibilities for preparedness and response planning. If there is a union then they should be made aware about the impact of infectious diseases on workplace.
- Identify essential employees and other critical inputs (e.g. raw materials, suppliers, sub-contractor services/products, and logistics) required to maintain business operations by location and function during a pandemic.
- Train and prepare backup workforce (e.g. contractors, employees in other job titles/descriptions etc). This may require cross training.
- Analyse and develop plans and scenarios likely to result in an increase or decrease in demand for your products and/or services during a pandemic (e.g. effect of restriction on mass gatherings, need for hygiene supplies). For example such pandemic can result in increased insurance claims as well as increased demand for insurance products (adverse selection)
- Determine potential impact of a pandemic on company business using multiple possible scenarios that affect different product lines and/or production sites.
- Determine potential impact of a pandemic on business-related domestic and international travel (e.g. quarantines, travel restrictions, border closures).
- Find up-to-date, reliable pandemic information from government, emergency management, and other sources and make sustainable links.
- Establish an emergency communications plan and revise periodically. This plan should include key contacts (with back-ups), chain of communications (including suppliers and customers), and processes for tracking and communicating business and employee status.
- Perform exercises/drills to test your plan, and revise periodically.

MANAGING IMPACT ON EMPLOYEES

- Develop plans for employee absences during a pandemic due to factors such as personal illness, family member illness, community containment measures and quarantines, school and/or business closures, and public transportation closures.

- Implement guidelines to modify the frequency and type of face-to-face contact (e.g. hand-shaking, seating in meetings, office layout, shared workstations) among employees and between employees and customers. Encourage online meetings to avoid infection spread.
- Evaluate employee access to and availability of healthcare services during a pandemic, and provide onsite services if possible.
- Identify employees and key customers with special needs, and incorporate the requirements of such persons into your preparedness plan.
- Establish policies for restricting travel to affected geographic areas (consider both domestic and international sites), evacuating employees working in or near an affected area when an outbreak begins, and guidance for employees returning from affected areas.

EMPLOYEE AWARENESS

Making employees aware about how infections spreads is critical for their health and their family's health. Employees can get exposed to infections from variety of sources such as from commuting in crowded buses & trains, from their children who can get exposed in their schools, from domestic helps, from neighbours etc.

- Develop and disseminate programs and materials covering pandemic fundamentals (e.g. signs and symptoms of influenza, modes of transmission), personal and family protection and response strategies (e.g. hand hygiene, coughing/sneezing etiquette, contingency plans).
- Provide information to employees including housekeepers on cleanliness and personal hygiene. A simple hand washing with soap can cut down the spread of infection.
- Anticipate employee fear and anxiety, rumours and misinformation and plan communications accordingly.
- Disseminate information to employees about your pandemic preparedness and response plan.
- Provide information for the at-home care of ill employees and family members.
- Develop platforms (e.g. hotlines, social media, and dedicated websites) for communicating pandemic status and actions to employees, vendors, suppliers, and customers inside and outside the worksite in a consistent and timely way, including redundancies in the emergency contact system.
- Identify & monitor sources for timely and accurate pandemic information (domestic and international). US CDC (Centre for Disease Control) (www.flu.gov) is a good site for information on pandemics.

Riskpro can help you prepare an effective and practical contingency to protect your services for epidemics or pandemics. If you already have a plan Riskpro can audit the plan whether it is fit for purpose or not.