

## AVIAN INFLUENZA'S DISRUPTION OF BUSINESS

No-one knows, of course, when a pandemic will strike, and how severe it will be, but the experts say some form of pandemic is inevitable. On average there are three pandemics each century, the most severe of which was the 1918 Spanish influenza which killed at least 20 million people. In Canada, the economic cost is estimated as \$1.4 to \$2.5 Billion in Healthcare and business as a whole \$10 to \$24 Billion.

Given the uncertainties, and the potential worst-case scenario of an avian flu outbreak, now is the time for organizations to go through a thorough exercise in business continuity planning and to examine how their operations will be affected.

Business Continuity Plans should cover an event such as the Avian Influenza. Any plan is dependent on the nature of an organization and its activities, but some continuity measures would include getting employees to, as much as possible, work from home - a policy with potential implications for IT requirements.

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Companies should be prepared to protect their core activities in the hope of prolonging their sustainability, and must plan for between 25 and 40 percent of their staff being absent on any given day as a result of the disease. This could last for weeks.

Where possible, organizations should stock up on "emergency" supplies against the possibility that supply lines will be disrupted and, if they can, make plans to continue operating with sewerage, water, and electricity services interrupted.

There are also a number of measures that can be taken to limit infection in the workplace. Work hours could be staggered to limit the size of gatherings, and masks can be provided. Hand-washing should be encouraged.

Organizations will also have to get used to a different policy on sick leave. Employees should be encouraged to stay home when they are ill, and some organizations will have to review their policy on sick pay, to reduce the incentive to clock on even when sick.

The tourism, travel and hospitality industries will suffer, as will those industries where people gather in large groups, such as retailing, casinos, theme parks and mass entertainment such as cinemas and sport. Life and re-insurance companies will also be hit, property values will be likely to fall and, of course, the poultry industry and its suppliers will be the most affected of all. These likely impacts are foreseeable and undeniable, but with thorough business continuity planning the impacts on firms and their employees could be lessened, as long as we start planning now.

## **10 STEPS ORGANIZATIONS CAN TAKE FOR PANDEMIC INFLUENZA PREPAREDNESS**

\*Prepared by the British Columbia Ministry of Health\*

1. Check that existing contingency plans are applicable to a pandemic, and that core business activities can be sustained over several weeks in the event of high employee absenteeism.
2. Plan accordingly for interruptions of essential governmental services like sanitation, water, power, and disruptions to the food supply.
3. Identify your organization's essential functions and the individuals who perform them. Build in the training redundancy necessary to ensure that work can be done in the event of an absentee rate of 25-30 percent.
4. Maintain a healthy work environment by ensuring adequate air circulation and posting tips on how to stop the spread of germs at work.
5. Promote hand washing, and coughing and sneezing etiquette. Ensure wide and easy availability of alcohol-based hand sanitizer products.
6. Determine which outside activities, such as transportation systems, are critical to maintaining operations and develop alternatives in case they cannot function normally.
7. Establish or expand policies and tools that enable employees to work from home with appropriate security and network access to applications.
8. Expand online and self-service options for customers and business partners.
9. Tell employees about pandemic influenza and the steps the organization is taking to prepare for it.
10. Encourage employees to stay home if they are sick to stop the spread of illness, and update sick leave, and family and medical policies. Concern about lost wages is the largest deterrent to self-quarantine.