

Does My Company Need a Contingency Plan for Avian Flu?

The Answer is yes. According to the World Health Organization, if the H5N1 virus changes into a form that is highly infectious for humans, spreads easily from person to person and causes a global pandemic, the death toll could be millions when no effective vaccine is available yet. If an influenza pandemic occurs, companies will face unprecedented difficulties:

1. Mass absenteeism. The WHO predicts that 25% of the employees will not be able to go to work while the US Federal Government estimates the level of absenteeism will be as high as 40%.
2. Delay or severance of the supply of goods and services.
3. People will avoid going out, causing a massive drop in economic activities. Sales will plunge while short-term fixed costs remain. Working capital might run short in any time. The situation may last for months or a year.
4. If an employee develops avian influenza, the Department of Health may instruct the company to suspend the workflow or close the workplace.

Thus, companies should be prepared and formulate a contingency plan to mitigate the risks of economic loss, legal liability and personal health exposed in the case of an avian flu outbreak. A contingency plan may include such key points as:

1. For essential operations (including relevant core staff and skills), there must be back-up arrangements such as having a second office at a different location and technical support for staff to work from home. There should be a Plan B to divide working groups into smaller groups, assign small group leaders and specify their responsibilities. In the time of an outbreak, members of different groups are not allowed to meet with each other to minimize infection.
2. The company should have access to multiple suppliers.
3. When face-to-face interactions are reduced, the Internet, video-conferencing and mailing may be used to continue the provision of goods and services to customers.
4. Financial planning should be prepared in case of a crisis in order to ensure sufficient working capital if the influenza is to last for months or a year.
5. Online/phone banking may be used to handle all daily bank transactions when there is an outbreak.
6. Some staff members should be designated to learn more about the transmission modes of avian flu, the ventilation and hygiene standard of the office and health measures necessary in case of an outbreak, to establish a stockpile of personal protective equipment, to regularly check the latest news on avian flu, and to understand WHO directives and government guidelines that the company must comply with.



7. The guidelines and arrangement in case of an outbreak should be effectively conveyed to different departments and staff members. Scenario-based exercises may be conducted to familiarize the staff with the procedures. The contingency plan should also be reviewed regularly.
8. A mechanism to allow effective communication with staff, customers and partners should be established. In case of a crisis messages and requirements can be honestly conveyed to all the parties and they can work together to solve the problems. The morale of staff is particularly important. Counseling should be provided to staff when necessary.

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