

Think You're Out of the Woods on a Influenza Pandemic? Think Again.



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Even though the hysteria of the 2009-2010 flu season is behind us, it pays to be vigilant and keep your plans for this contingency up to date in your disaster recovery plan

Last year at this time the H1N1 influenza was constantly in the news. Cases were copping up worldwide while vaccines were in short supply. Awareness of H1N1 and influenza in general bordered times on hysteria. Companies developed contingency plans for an influenza pandemic as part of the disaster recovery planning process. Employees were encouraged to stay home and telecommute if they even felt feverish or ill. Thankfully, the worst did not transpire and there was no pandemic. This does not mean that we are out of the woods. Influenza viruses are notable for their resilience and adaptability. While science has been able to develop vaccines for many infectious diseases that threaten public health, acquiring appropriate and current vaccines is an ongoing challenge when it comes to the influenza virus. Changes in the genetic makeup of the virus necessitate new vaccines every year, which hopefully target the strains that are likely to predominate.

Despite the availability of vaccines, the U.S. sees 36,000 deaths and more than 200,000 hospitalizations each year attributable to the flu. The annual economic toll due to influenza is \$10 billion in the U.S. alone. Such an outbreak would overwhelm health and medical capabilities, and result in hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions of hospitalizations, and hundreds of billions of dollars in direct and indirect costs. Therefore, even though the hysteria of the 2009-2010 flu season is behind us, it pays to be vigilant and keep your plans for this contingency up to date in your disaster recovery plan.

What Should You Watch For?

Pandemics happen when a new virus emerges that can be easily transmitted between humans. Animals are a common source for these emerging viruses. Bird viruses played a role in the last three influenza pandemics in 1918, 1957 and 1968 that killed 40 million, 2 million and 1 million people respectively. Although the exact time for the next one cannot be predicted, previous pandemics suggest one to three pandemics every 100 years. H1N1 could still be the next one.

Three strains of flu are expected to circulate in the 2010-2011 season. The three flu strains, identified by the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, are the H3N2 strain, a B strain and the 2009 H1N1 pandemic strain. This year's flu vaccine provides protection against all three strains, and unlike last year, vaccines are in abundance. The CDC recommends that everyone 6 months of age and older get vaccinated this year.

Regarding last year's H1N1 virus, it is extremely difficult to predict how the virus may or may not change this season. The severity of illness that the H1N1 influenza flu will cause or the amount of illness that may arise during the 2010-2011 flu season cannot be predicted with certainty. Therefore, your organization should prepare to respond in a flexible way to varying levels of severity by taking the following additional steps if a pandemic flu develops early in 2011.

1. Make arrangements for widespread telecommuting, just in case.
2. Brief employees on sick leave policies and any employee assistance covered under any employee-sponsored health plans.
3. Document extraordinary sick leave policies that are flexible, non-punitive, and well communicated to employees, stressing that workers who have the flu should stay home and away from co-workers.
4. Allow workers to stay home, within reason, if they have to care for sick family members.
5. Allow workers flexible schedules or other accommodations in the case of school or day care closures so they can mind their children and keep them safe at home.
6. Determine who will be responsible for assisting individuals who become suddenly ill in the workplace.

7. Update your present business continuity plan so that if there is significant absenteeism during a major flu outbreak you can maintain operations or make a determination of a company wide shutdown, if feasible.
8. Establish an emergency communications plan identification of key contacts for tracking and communicating business and employee status. Consider an outbound notification system or recorded help line. There are also systems like those offered by companies like Telecom Recovery Inc., which can actually redirect inbound work calls to cell phones and stay-at-home workers, transparently to customers. Take a look at them
9. Do everything you can to create a corporate culture that encourages sick workers to stay at home without fear of any reprisals from the boss.
10. Promote personal hygiene in the workplace by providing tissues, no-touch trashcan, hand soaps and hand sanitizers, disinfectants, disposable towels and antiseptic wipes for employees to clean their work surfaces
11. Provide education and training materials to employees. The CDC web site for H1N1 is a good inexpensive source, as well as other sites like <http://www.flu.gov>.
12. Instruct employees who are otherwise well but have a sick family member to go to work as usual, but be able to monitor their health every day. They should be instructed to notify their supervisor and stay home if they become ill.
13. Encourage everyone to get a flu shot. If it is not covered in the company medical plan, reimburse employees the \$30. In the long run it's a good investment
14. If an employee does become sick while at work, quarantine the employee in a separate room or area away from other workers until they can go home

In addition, instruct employee to follow common sense measures, such as:

1. Wash hands frequently with soap and water for 20 seconds or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available
2. Avoid touching nose, mouth and eyes
3. Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue, or cough and sneeze into your upper sleeve. Dispose of tissues in no-touch trash receptacles
4. Keep frequently touched common surfaces clean; for example, telephones, computer equipment, door handles, etc.
5. Try not to use other workers' phones, desks, offices, or other work tools and equipment. If necessary, consider cleaning them first with a disinfectant
6. Get plenty of sleep in the wintertime. You are most likely to get sick when you are tired, stressed, worn out or just working too hard
7. Be especially vigilant if you or someone close to you is in a high risk group. According to the CDC:

Those at high risk of serious flu-related complications include: children younger than five years, pregnant women, people with chronic conditions such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease, adults and children who have a weak immune system, residents of nursing homes and other chronic-care facilities as well as persons aged 65 years or older.

Last flu season, for example, 80 percent of adults and 65 percent of children hospitalized from flu had a long-term health condition or were pregnant.

Symptoms of seasonal flu can include fever, runny nose, body aches, headache, tiredness, diarrhea, or vomiting. The CDC recommends that sick workers stay home if they are ill with influenza-like illness until at least 24 hours after they are free of fever (100°F [37.8°C] or greater) or signs of a fever without the use of fever-reducing medications. This would require employees to stay home for 3 to 5 days in most cases regardless of whether or not antiviral medications, like Tamiflu, are used.

The symptoms of H1N1 flu are similar and include fever or chills, cough and sore throat. In addition, symptoms of H1N1 flu can also include runny nose, body aches, headache, fatigue, diarrhea, or vomiting. Like seasonal flu, H1N1 flu may cause a worsening of underlying chronic medical conditions

Summary

While we may be temporarily out of the woods regarding the 2009-2010 H1N1 scare, we still live in a world full of virulent microbes, and the threat of a pandemic is always present. Remember, it is extremely difficult to predict how the flu virus may change from year to year; therefore, the severity of an outbreak in the 2010-2011 flu season cannot be easily predicted in advance. Your organization should keep a watchful eye and prepare to respond in a flexible way

to varying levels of severity, yet still be prepared to take additional steps in a pandemic flu develops early in 2011. Make sure that you have a plan.

About the Authors

Leo A. Wrobel has over 30 years of experience with a host of firms engaged in banking, manufacturing, telecom services and government. An active author and technical futurist, he has published ten books and over 400 trade articles on a wide variety of technical subjects. Leo pioneered carrier collocation by being the first in the USA to place a computer disaster recovery center inside a telephone central office in 1986.

Leo also served ten years as an elected Mayor and City Councilman (but says he is 'better now'). A sought-after speaker, he has lectured throughout the United States and overseas and has appeared on several television news programs. Leo is presently CEO of Dallas-based b4Ci, Inc. See <http://www.b4Ci.com> call (214) 888-1300 or at leo@b4ci.com.

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