

H1N1 business survival guide

Prepare for the worst

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Published October 2, 2009



Nearly 600 business people recently gathered at the Hilton Milwaukee City Center hotel for the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce's annual Future 50 Awards program.

During the networking portion of the event, participants shook hands, slapped each other on the back and moved throughout the crowd. Some even exchanged hugs and kisses. During the lunch and panel discussion, they passed rolls, salad dressings, butter, salt and pepper and other condiments.

From a pathology standpoint, the event was a disease-spreading paradise. People were both in physical contact and breathing in a confined environment, crammed with hundreds of potential hosts.

Executives, salespeople and service workers are in similar situations every day when they call on clients, attend meetings or entertain clients for lunch or cocktails.

For the next few months, however, they might want to rethink those day-to-day practices.

Federal officials are warning of a resurgence of the H1N1 influenza this fall that would push the infected numbers to even greater pandemic heights.

According to a report issued by the U.S. President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST), 30 to 50 percent of the U.S. population could become infected by the virus, which could hospitalize more than 1.8 million people. About 300,000 of those people could require intensive care treatment. As many as 90,000 people could die from H1N1, according to the report.

Because so many people could be infected, businesses need to take steps to try to limit infection among their employees and prepare for high absentee rates.

"It is definitely more prudent to be on the safe side, and taking a precautionary approach to this virus will undoubtedly serve your company in other situations as well," said Jeffrey Clark, attorney and shareholder at Reinhart Boerner Van Deuren S.C. in Milwaukee. "Companies need to not take this too lightly. Even if it doesn't end up being the pandemic we have predicted, it is here, and it's real. They need to consciously be in touch with their local health department and monitoring the status of the virus and information relating to the spread of the infection."

Communication counts

Companies need to prepare both internal and external communication plans for employees and customers, said Carl Mueller, president of Milwaukee-based Mueller Communications Inc.

“Employees need to keep each other well-informed on the work they are doing on specific projects, and they need to understand each other’s responsibilities in case someone gets taken out of the process due to the flu,” he said. “All companies need to develop greater depth and bench strength on tasks and projects that need to get done because the client still needs to be served.”

“Companies need to be prepared. They need to have a plan in place so that individuals can be called in, information can be passed along and the plan can be executed correctly because everybody is familiar with it,” said Chip Nickolet, president of Brookfield-based Comprehensive Solutions and senior director of consulting services for California-based Ingres Corp. “Planning for those types of decisions needs to be done now so that it can be executed properly if and when disaster does strike.”

Comprehensive Solutions specializes in disaster recovery and business continuity planning.

Sussex-based Quad/Graphics Inc. has created a response team that is planning for an outbreak, said Dr. Tom Van Gilder, medical director for quality initiatives at the company.

“Essentially, the major thrust of our plan is communication,” he said. “(The team is) speaking on a weekly basis, asking what do we need to have in place and what is going on, and looking at what triggers we will look at in the wider community. That way, we can get information quickly into the hands of decision-makers.”

Quad/Graphics also is actively communicating with its workers on the importance of sanitation and social distancing to minimize infections in its facilities, Van Gilder said.

Lori Lorenz, human capital director for Milwaukee-based Robert W. Baird & Co. Inc., said communication between an employer and its employees is the most important part of any contingency plan.

“Open communication provides re-assurance and reduces employee stress,” she said. “Be thorough when coming up with scenarios, developing and implementing solutions. Get business units actively engaged in the process.”

Sick day policies

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that people showing symptoms of the flu stay at home, and if they become sick at work that they be asked to go home. With potentially widespread infection, many businesses may need to adjust their sick leave policies.

Scott Schultz, senior client relations manager with the Pewaukee-based insurance consultant Burkwald & Associates Inc., says employers should be more flexible with their sick time this fall.

“We’re telling (clients) that they need to make their own decisions, but they should be very flexible with their written – in stone – flexibility policies,” Schultz said. “They need to limit contact with those who are sick. It could be detrimental to their own business if they spread the disease quicker.”

Companies can find a partial solution by switching their vacation and sick day policies to a personal time off (PTO) policy, said Jessica Ollenburg, president and chief executive officer of HRS Inc., an outsourced provider of human resources-related services based in Waukesha. A PTO policy can give employees a larger number of sick days to work with, which could be advantageous during an H1N1 outbreak, she said.

“With the fear of job security, some people might be afraid to take a sick day when they really need it,” Ollenburg said. “You want to keep contagiousness out of the (work) environment, while making sure employees are not abusing sick days for other reasons.”

Quad/Graphics is closely examining its sick leave policy to ensure that employees who may have been infected do not come to work.

Virtual workforce

To keep their doors open during an outbreak, some companies are installing systems that allow employees to work from home when they’re sick or showing signs of infection.

“The biggest thing is for companies to get prepared now. They need to start talking to their IT people and looking at what kind of things can be put in place to get ready for a worst-case scenario,” said Chris Wiser, chief executive officer Tech Squad, a Waukesha-based IT solutions provider.

IT providers can create secure systems that allow employees to log on to their workplace server from home, Wiser said.

“If they don’t have something like that in place, that is the first thing we are going to look at,” he said. “Nine times out of ten, that most likely means that they will need to put in an additional server in order to maintain the capacity for the remote log in.”

Companies that have newer phone systems can also be reconnected to a remote location and function as a virtual office, Wiser said.

Milwaukee-based Marshall & Ilsley Corp., corporate parent of M&I Bank, has created systems for its non-branch employees to work from home if they are unable to get to work, said Barb Feiertag, corporate wellness manager.

“What we are doing is encouraging any one (of our employees) with a laptop to take it home on a daily basis,” she said.

M&I and its affiliated companies have a secure log-on system that encrypts data, allowing employees who deal with sensitive financial information to work from home while still complying with federal security guidelines, Feiertag said.

Some companies that rely on face-to-face contact with key customers may consider installing a video conferencing system that can be used in the office and accessed remotely.

Video Guidance, a Minnesota-based video conferencing provider that is creating a new Wisconsin office, has seen more customers asking about its services while preparing for a possible flu outbreak, said Michael Werch, president of the company.

“We did the first time it came around (this spring), too,” he said. “The technology allows companies to continue to function. The idea is communicating face-to-face, no matter where you’re at.”

People solutions

For manufacturers, distributors and other industries that need people on the job, having employees work from home during an outbreak is not an option. Instead, those companies need to do their best to prevent infection among workers and determine how to fulfill orders if a large number of employees call in sick.

“For those (companies) that need to have people on site and working together, it absolutely would be a hardship if they had to shut down,” Ollenburg said.

To prevent infection, HRS recommends that manufacturers bring flu education and vaccination seminars to their workplaces to ensure that employees receive information and vaccines, Ollenburg said.

Manufacturers should create a contingency plan with a provider of temporary employees, Schultz said. They should also think about how to fill skilled positions in a pinch.

“If there is something that requires training or certification, something you can’t bring a temp in to do, you should communicate with those that are already qualified for that job and say, ‘We may be calling on you,’” Schultz said. “You can encourage them to do some reading or maybe have them run a machine for a period of time. For factories that have shifts, you can start planting the seeds that there may be opportunities for overtime in multiple shifts that workers could sign up for.”

Dickten Masch Plastics, a plastic molding and engineering firm located in Nashotah, is doing exactly that, said Steven Dyer, president and CEO.

“We have three trained backups on every piece of equipment in our finishing operations,” Dyer said. “And we’ve hired some new temporary labor to start training now so we have qualified employees. We’re asking all of our employees to get qualified on nine different skill sets, our salaried personnel too. I am a certified forklift operator, and if I need to, I’ll get out there and drive one.”

Although the company believes it is prepared for a significant temporary labor shortage, Dickten Masch will suffer if half of its workers are incapacitated at one time, Dyer acknowledged.

“I think we can handle absenteeism in the 25- to 30-percent range, but if it gets beyond that, it will have an impact on our customers,” he said.

A growing number of manufacturers have started reaching out to providers of temporary workers in order to prepare for a large-scale flu outbreak.

“For the last two months, we have been getting a lot of inquiries from different manufacturers regarding a potential outbreak or pandemic,” said Manuel Perez, president and owner of JNA Temporary Services Inc., a Milwaukee-based provider of temporary employees, which serves many manufacturing companies in southeastern Wisconsin. “We have clarified the positions that we can work with them on and we have studied their requirements to maintain a pool of people that are qualified.”

To prepare for an increase in demand for its temporary workers, JNA has increased the number of drivers it has on call, its roster of full-time workers and its pool of available temporary workers, Perez said.

JNA has created its own sick leave policies for its temporary workers.

“If they are sick, they are guaranteed not to lose their job,” Perez said. “We are encouraging self-isolation for 24 hours after they are feeling all right. We want them to stay home one more day.”

Although its employees do not have paid sick days, JNA encourages its workers to apply for unemployment benefits for those days.

Quad/Graphics will be able to shift work to other locations if it has large numbers of workers out in specific plants, Van Gilder said.

“Again, it’s about communication and being aware of what is happening in each plant, what capacities we have and how we can shift things,” he said. “We might hear of something happening in Oklahoma or Nevada and maybe moving some of that work across the country.”

For more information:

- Centers for Disease Control H1N1: www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu
- Centers for Disease Control H1N1 resources for businesses:
- www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/business/

- Midland Health: www.flushots4u.com/swineflu
- Milwaukee County Health Department: www.milwaukee.gov/flu
- President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology H1N1 Report:
www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/PCAST_H1N1_Report.pdf
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services flu website: www.flu.gov
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security H1N1 preparedness for Small Businesses:
www.sba.gov/idc/groups/public/documents/sba_homepage/sba_h1n1.pdf
- Wisconsin Pandemic Flu Resource: pandemic.wisconsin.gov