

Are businesses ready for H1N1?

By John Larsen And Bob Klay, For The Calgary Herald, October 7, 2009

Before you say you've already heard all you want to hear about the impending second wave of the H1N1 flu, please hear this. Much of the thinking about how to respond to this threat --a serious reality that is becoming clearer as the second wave shifts from Australia, through South America, and eventually to Canada--is misguided.

Most companies are either ill-prepared for the next wave because they weren't affected by the first wave that broke in the spring, or the companies that hope to be ready are relying on an amended application of their standard emergency response plan; a plan that won't work in the face of H1N1. The off-the-shelf emergency response plan or business continuity plan simply does not have enough detail to handle the realities that'll be presented by the next H1N1 ordeal.

H1N1 readiness isn't really about good emergency preparedness. It's not just another hazard.

Why is that?

Because corporate emergency planning is based on the assumption that we'll be facing a critical incident that forces us to take steps to "resume" our regular business operations. It's about how we can best adjust internal processes to "get back" to what we normally do. Implicit in this business resumption mentality is the assumption that we'll be able to leverage additional human resources.

But, when H1N1 returns --next month or the next --your company won't have all those people identified in the carefully designed emergency response plan. Some experts put employee absenteeism as high as 38 per cent. In the military, they call it the centre of gravity; the one key element that, if it goes wrong, will foil your plan for success. The centre of gravity for effective emergency planning is human resources and H1N1 will hinder that.

So, preparing for the second wave of the flu isn't so much about business resumption as it is about business continuity. You don't have to fix anything that went wrong; you just have to keep doing what you normally do well.

It's about using flexible procedures to maintain your company's regular operations when faced with limited staff. That means taking the time to build an integrated business continuity plan that focuses on the three key elements of human resources, facilities/ technologies and communications.

These are the three most important support services for your company during a pandemic.

Whatever you do, you have to prepare to have trained and authorized staff to fill these critical positions in the very real event of high absenteeism. Your plan also has to effectively communicate your contingency policies about employee sickness, and be able to inform employees about what actions they should take if they fall ill.

People need to believe that their workplace is clean and safe, and that if they are unable to come to work --or are even uncomfortable being near others --you will provide them with the technological ability to work from home.

A solid business continuity plan builds communications linkages to employees and customers which help manage the effects of the flu. Good communications will let employees and business stakeholders know how your human resources will be managed, what alternate work arrangements have been adopted, and how business will continue, albeit in a modified form. Messages should address risks realistically, communicate with compassion and provide clarity in laying out the various operating options.

Charles Darwin said that it isn't the most intelligent species that survives, or even the strongest, it's those that are most adaptive to change. An organization can have an exceptionally well conceptualized designed crisis or emergency management plan, and it can have strong and secure internal systems, but neither of these will mean much if it hasn't deliberately thought through how it will sustain everyday operations when its employee base is drastically diminished.

How will your organization adapt to the changes you'll need to face when the second wave of H1N1 hits? Common sense and thoughtful planning will get us through this next pandemic event, and beyond.

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