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'Head in the sand' attitude towards pandemic preparedness is bad for business

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Two years ago, Hewitt Associates conducted one of its short, online Rapid Response surveys and learned that only a quarter of the 155 organizations that responded had a complete pandemic preparedness plan in place—even after the 2003 SARS outbreak and subsequent outbreaks of Avian Flu. Another 26% of respondents were working on a plan. Less than a year ago, in a survey sponsored by GlaxoSmithKline of Canadian businesses with at least 500 employees, half of the respondents had no plan. Of those without a plan, 40% did not intend to create one.

It's clear that many Canadian organizations are not taking pandemic preparedness seriously, despite the fact that we again find ourselves facing a possible global influenza pandemic. Having a plan in place is obviously important to stop the spread of infection within a workplace. If that wasn't reason enough to create a plan, the economic case for being ready to address business interruptions, especially high absenteeism, is compelling.

But companies know and understand this, so why is there any reluctance to create a pandemic preparedness plan? The answer likely lies in the fact that creating an effective plan can be complicated and time-consuming. However, there are several resources available to help:

1. The World Health Organization (WHO) has published a guidance document, "WHO Checklist for Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Planning" While this publication is not directed primarily at businesses, it highlights the essential and desirable aspects of a plan. It is also a good idea to become familiar with WHO and its Web site, as it's the international authority on pandemics and other world health issues.
2. For Canada-specific information, visit the Public Health Agency of Canada's website. Note that a plan created by a global organization may require some tailoring for Canada.
3. The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety (CCOHS) has a more specific, business-oriented "Business Continuity Plan" guide on its website. This thorough publication outlines a four-step approach, starting with developing a policy and then designing, implementing and testing/maintaining/auditing a plan. Handy checklists are also included. Likewise, the Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters' website.
4. The Canadian Centre for Emergency Preparedness has templates on its website for business continuity plans, including pandemic preparedness. Certain industry associations have templates that are tailored for its members.

None of these resources, of course, provides the perfect "how to" kit for creating a pandemic preparedness plan, as the ideal program will be tailored to an individual company's circumstances. When embarking on the process of creating a plan, organizations may want to think more widely than just pandemics and create an emergency response plan that covers all sorts of crises, from power outages to terrorist attacks.

Of course, the best time to create a pandemic preparedness plan is not when a pandemic is looming, as is the case now with the H1N1 flu. Even if employers don't have a plan, certain actions are imperative now: organizations must inform themselves (see the WHO and Public Health Agency of Canada's sites, above); then they must inform employees, answering their questions as completely as possible; and, finally, given the dynamic nature of the virus, they must keep themselves updated and continue to communicate with their staff. Here are some important questions to answer in a corporate communiqué:

- What is "swine flu" or H1N1 flu?
- How does the flu spread?
- What should employees and their families do to stay healthy? CCOHS has "Slow the Spread!" posters as well as those promoting hand washing available on its site.
- Is there treatment for the flu?
- What happens if an employee or family members become ill or are quarantined? Quarantined employees are generally entitled to the same consideration as if they were actually ill, in the eyes of the law. Schools may close down, meaning that employees' children may have nowhere to go during the day. Employers will need to determine whether employees can work from home or if children can come to the workplace.
- Are there limitations on travel, especially to Mexico? It's important to note that some group insurance policies that provide out-of-Canada medical coverage will not reimburse expenses incurred if employees travel to Mexico right now.

Employees may have additional questions about pandemic issues. Organizations may want to provide them with a means to ask questions that the communication team can respond to quickly and easily. Alternatively—or in addition—employers can refer their staff to the information sites noted above.

It is too early to tell at this point whether the spread of H1N1 flu will escalate to a full-blown pandemic. Even if short-lived, it will hopefully have been enough of a wake-up call to finally convince organizations to better prepare themselves for the next pandemic.

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