

Swine flu: what should you do?

Swine flu is here in the UK, and no-one is sure how widely it will spread, and how severely it will strike.

Forward planning can help, no matter how unpredictable a pandemic might be. Flu planning needs to take account of changed ways of working that may last for months.

A pandemic could escalate quickly, last for many months and infect 25% or more of the world's population, according to public health experts. Many organisations believe that at the peak of a severe pandemic, up to 75% of the workforce may be absent from work.

To address this risk, companies need to monitor the situation very closely, paying particular attention to government and World Health Organization advice. There is much that employers can do to prepare for an epidemic. Here are some key steps to take to ensure you are as fully prepared as possible.

Swine flu: Be prepared

1 A sensible starting place would be to consider the basic requirements of the business without which it will not be able to function. Particular regard should be paid to the minimum number of employees required to run each office or department.

As part of this exercise, it would be useful to compile a list of the transferable skills of each staff member, and consider which staff could be easily retrained or redeployed in the event of a heavily depleted workforce.

2 Throughout the duration of a pandemic, it is likely that the workforce will be depleted. In these circumstances, it is important to ensure that appropriate training is given to any remaining workers who may be required to carry out unfamiliar tasks.

You should also be prepared for the possibility of hiring and training additional temporary staff to supplement departments where staff numbers have fallen below the minimum level required.

Remember that young and pregnant workers are a particular category of employee to be borne in mind in any temporary reorganisation, and should not be substituted into inappropriate work.

3 Advise your staff to stay at home if they are sick, and be prepared for the possibility that it will become harder for employees to attend work. For example, travel restrictions may be put in place, or public transport may be suspended. Employers should consider using technology such as remote access via broadband or satellite connections, to enable employees to work from home.

Bear in mind, however, that imposing travel bans or quarantines to protect employees from a swine flu pandemic could land HR in serious legal trouble as they would ignore privacy and employment law.

4 Allowing employees to work more flexible hours may also enable them to undertake their obligations to care for sick relatives, or for children whose schools have closed, without having to



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stop work completely. If you have employees who can safely work from home then this should be identified and encouraged.

Use technology to keep lines of communication open. Services such as Twitter or Yammer offer significant advantages over simple e-mail and telephone contact.

5 Consider how information will flow to employees, suppliers and/or customers and clients. Communications may be of vital importance in keeping the business running smoothly, so an emergency communications plan should be put into place, which identifies key contacts and sets up chains of communication so that information can be disseminated quickly to the relevant people.

6 The Health and Safety executive says opting for video-conferencing or teleconferencing where possible instead of holding meetings is a practical precaution. Remote electronic working, where feasible, will reduce face-to-face meetings. Even technology more usually used for leisure, such as webcams or real time e-mail conversations, could be remarkably effective in allowing businesses to continue at levels as close to normal as possible.

Swine flu: Policy rethink

7 All these suggestions will require careful implementation, so employers should consider whether it might be necessary to put further employment policies in place to deal with them.

In particular, employers should consider flexible working policies, covering flexibility of both hours and location, health and safety policies aimed at preventing the spread of the illness among employees who do attend the office, and policies that deal with how to reintegrate employees back into the office environment after they have been ill or caring for sick relatives.

Review sickness policies to ensure they deal with all the relevant issues, including the potential for employees to be absent for extended periods, and the appropriate compensation in such a situation.

Swine flu: Dealing with absence

8 In the event of a pandemic it is likely that as well as employees who are absent through sickness or caring responsibilities, there will be some employees who do not wish to come to work – taking ‘sickies’ because they are frightened of contracting the virus.

The legal position is that employees are not entitled to refuse to come to work on the basis of such a fear alone, but employers must accept that such fears might outweigh concerns about being subject to disciplinary action.

Employee sickness absences may create a need for other employees, if willing, to work longer hours in order to keep your business going. In this event, you will need to comply with the requirements of the Working Time Regulations 1998 as amended to ensure appropriate length of daytime working hours and rest breaks.



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Swine flu: The impact on the business

9 No matter how careful the preparation, some companies could lose business as a result of a pandemic, and this may force employers to consider making employees redundant.

Employers should ensure that they consider potential redundancies very carefully – even extreme circumstances such as a flu pandemic do not negate the requirement to carry out a fair procedure with proper selection and consultation and compliance with statutory dismissal procedures, and failure to comply with these requirements could lead to claims for unfair dismissal.

10 Equally important, workplace etiquette will need to change. Pandemic flu will usually be transmitted via coughs and sneezes.

A colleague who doesn't bother to use a handkerchief could be spreading a potentially fatal disease. Surgical masks made familiar in the SARS outbreak in Asia may not be needed, but consistent hygiene will be essential.

As door handles and taps are another common breeding ground for infection, expect to enforce the mandatory use of antiseptic wipes to keep all common work areas germ-free. HSE's advice is to continue running any air conditioning system already provided for the workspace.

In the meantime, don't panic – plan ahead.

Summarised from Personnel Today article 'Swine flu: 10 things HR professionals and employers need to do now'

<http://www.personneltoday.com/articles/2009/05/01/50513/swine-flu-10-things-hr-professionals-and-employers-need-to-do-now.html>

