

THE GREATEST THREAT OF OUR LIFETIME...OR NOT?

BY REGINA PHELPS



Health experts say it is not a matter of if, but when, the next pandemic will impact the globe. In the face of a pandemic, airports, airlines, businesses and many public locations may face the risk of quarantine; air travel could grind to a halt; schools, factories and offices may need to close; the death toll could be in the millions. With intense media interest (bringing with it the possibility of exaggeration and misinformation) coupled with an increasingly anxious public, our work as continuity planners is certainly cut out for us.

The key to developing a pandemic plan is to start. Don't let fear or lack of knowledge become an obstacle. Secure management approval right now and get started.

Why should we think of pandemics differently than the other disasters for which we commonly plan? First of all, think about the two hallmarks of business continuity planning (BCP):

1. Most BCPs assume you will return to "business-as-usual" in 30 days.
2. Your plan usually calls for leaving your "damaged" location and relocating to a secondary site to recover your business.

A pandemic, however, completely negates these two basic planning premises. Pandemics can last up to 18 months, with the most deadly time being the first 90 to 120 days. Of course, as the disease quickly spreads across the country and the world, there will be no such thing as a "safe or alternate place."

We will also face several significant issues, including:

- **Fear:** There is nothing more frightening than something you cannot see or an illness that has no cure or vaccine. We are likely to become fearful of each other.
- **Closures:** Many public places are likely to close, including retail stores, businesses such as theaters and restaurants and airports for a period of time. Not only that, but school closures will impact any of your employees with children.
- **Widespread Impact:** A pandemic will likely occur simultaneously throughout the US (and the world), preventing the shift of resources that normally occurs with natural disasters. Health officials describe it as a Category Five Hurricane in every state simultaneously.
- **Shortages:** There is likely to be a shortage of health care workers and first responders due to their high

risk for exposure and illness, as well as a shortage of critical personnel in important sectors such as military, police, fire and utility workers.

- **No Immediate Cure:** There is no medical "silver bullet" for a pandemic. Vaccines will likely not be available for at least six to 12 months from the time the organism is identified. Antiviral medications will also be in very short supply.
- **Effect on Communities:** There will be a prolonged effect on communities that could last for months, or maybe even as long as a year. It is very likely to change our way of living for some time.

Start with the Basics

Facing all of that, how can we change our planning to deal with a pandemic? First, we must understand that there is no immediate medical treatment and that we all need to go back to the basics:

- **Wash your hands.** It all starts with hand washing. Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for a good 20 seconds.
- **Don't touch your face.** Often, this is how we become ill. We shake the hands of someone with an illness, and moments later we scratch our noses or rub our eyes. Viruses and bacteria live on inanimate objects (including door-knobs, phones, pens, etc.) for about an hour, sometimes longer.
- **Stay home if you are ill.** Unfortunately, many corporate cultures often discourage employees from taking sick days. We are now plagued at work with people who bring illness into the work place and spread it to the workers.
- **Encourage employees to have a family plan.** Home preparedness is the key. Plan on at least two weeks with no outside assistance. Two good websites on preparedness are: www.ready.gov and www.72hours.org.

Find New Ways of Working

As the pandemic threat evolves, we will need to look at new ways of working together on the job. Some examples of this are:

- **Social distancing:** This involves spacing out staff at least three to six feet from each other. If you can't space them out, or if they need to work more closely, you will require masks.
- **Extensive workplace cleaning:** You need to ensure a thorough cleaning of all the surfaces hands touch or are exposed to a person's breath. This includes phones, doorknobs, handrails, phones, desks and keyboard surfaces. Staff may prefer to do this, so they will know it has been cleaned.
- **Masks:** Provide masks for those employees who request them, or if you cannot distance employees adequately.
- **Limit face time:** Once we have reached a level six pandemic (see sidebar on pandemic levels), cancel all face-to-face meetings. You should ensure employees do all work via conference call bridges.
- **No handshaking:** Institute a no-handshaking policy. Now that might sound extreme, but consider that your hands are your greatest sources of infection.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 72

World Health Pandemic Levels

In 2004 the World Health Organization developed a six level pandemic threat tool to keep the world apprised of the threat. Those levels are:

One	No new influenza subtypes in the human population
Two	No new influenza subtypes in humans, but one is circulating in the animal population that could pose a threat
Three	Rare cases of human infection
Four	Small clusters of human-to-human infection (families)
Five	Large clusters of human-to-human infection (town or city)
Six	Global pandemic

The world has been at a level three since 1997, when the WHO documented the first case of human H5N1.

Unique BCP Strategies

What are some of the likely business continuity strategies in the face of a global pandemic? First of all, realize that whatever steps you take to prepare your company for a pandemic will greatly enhance the overall recovery capabilities and resiliency of your company.

- *Begin by looking at your business impact analysis through a set of pandemic planning assumptions:*
 - 18-month duration
 - 90 to 120 days of intense illness
 - 30 to 40 percent absenteeism (employees, vendors, contractors)
 - No immediate medical remedy
 - Will likely have less than six weeks of warning
- *Develop a robust work from home program now, before a pandemic strikes. Make sure all identified mission critical staff can work remotely, if at all possible.*
 - Deploy all necessary equipment such as laptops, printers, faxes and other required peripherals. Do employees have a high-speed internet connection? Lastly, have them work at home at least one day a month to confirm appropriate functionality.
- *An interesting issue to ponder is the national phone system. Most phone systems (landline and cell) are made for 10 to 12 percent capacity. What are some possible workarounds if the phone system becomes overloaded?*
 - Web-based solutions might include voice-over-Internet, instant messaging and web meetings.
 - Text message is a quick communication tool. Text messaging takes very little bandwidth in comparison to a phone call and the message will queue until it can go through.
- *Cross training is essential. Look at your plans now to ensure you have sufficient documentation for someone to fill in for a sick employee if necessary.*

Diseases – It’s all About the People

Another important aspect of pandemic planning is looking at all of the human resource issues. After all, a disease out-

break is all about people. Here are some areas to think about:

- Develop an employee policy that requires ill employees to stay home.
- You also need to screen visitor and vendors. Develop visitor/vendor protocol and then train security to screen all visitors once the WHO pandemic level reaches five. After we reach a level six, you should not allow any visitors into the building.
- Develop a travel policy. If people travel to areas with an outbreak, consider placing that person on home quarantine for 10 days upon their return. If it were a work-related trip, this would be compensable; if it were a personal trip, then it would not be.
- There are many compensation issues to consider. How long do you pay staff that are not mission-critical and are not working? What if their child is sick but the employee is healthy? Do you want them to come to work? Do you pay those who must come to work any special premium pay?
- Look at your dependence on third-party vendors. Ask those vendors for a copy of their pandemic plan now. They are not likely to have one, but this will be their impetus to develop one.
- Do you have ex-pats in your company? What do you do if their family wants to come home?

Finally, when it comes to a pandemic, one of the biggest issues is fear. What can you do to minimize fear in the workplace? Educate your staff now about what they can do to keep themselves and their families healthy.

And finally, Communicate, communicate, communicate! Use the web, your employee 800 number, notification systems, e-mail and whatever other mechanism is viable.

Going Forward

It is important you stay informed as this threat continues to evolve and change. There are many excellent websites with helpful information. But one word of warning: Exercise caution

when looking on the web, as there are already individuals and companies selling all types of products, medications kits and potions to ward off a pandemic. It is buyer beware!

The key to developing a pandemic plan is to start. Don’t let fear or lack of knowledge become an obstacle. Secure management approval right now and get started. After all, it’s not a matter of if a pandemic will strike. It’s just a question of when.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Regina Phelps, CEM, RN, BSN, MPA, is the President of Emergency Management & Safety Solutions. You can contact her at www.ems-solutionsinc.com or e-mail Regina@ems-solutionsinc.com

Suggested Websites to Check Frequently

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) – Avian Flu Web Site
www.cdc.gov/flu/avian

Centers for Infection Disease Research & Policy – CIDRAP Pandemic Influenza News
www.cidrap.umn.edu/cidrap/content/influenza/panflu/index.html

PandemicFlu.gov – Official U.S. Web Site for Information on Pandemic Flu and Avian Influenza
www.pandemicflu.gov

ProMed Digest (sign up for their daily digest, with no fee)
www.ProMedMail.org

World Health Organization (WHO) – Influenza Web Site
www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en

Flu Wiki (helps local communities prepare for and perhaps cope with a possible influenza pandemic)
www.fluwikie.com