

Be Prepared: Planning for the Pandemic

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Just because it's not making headlines doesn't mean it won't happen. Scientists and researchers around the world agree – sooner or later pandemic flu *will* happen. Although it cannot be predicted exactly when the next pandemic will arrive, there is no doubt that one is sure to affect us at some point in the future. But, what *is* the pandemic flu, why do scientists think it's coming and how can you begin planning for the unknown?

The term "pandemic flu" implies a rapid spread of a severe human disease resulting in respiratory infection with fairly predictable symptoms. It affects a wide geographic area and an exceptionally high proportion of the population. In the past century, pandemic flu has been responsible for at least 52.7 million deaths worldwide and at least 779,000 deaths in the United States alone. It is believed that when the next pandemic comes to the United States, 20 to 47 million people will become ill, causing between 89,000 and 207,000 deaths.

A pandemic can be broken down into six phases. The first two phases, or the Interpandemic Period, are periods when no new influenza virus subtypes have been detected in humans, however, a new influenza virus subtype *may* be present in animals. During Phase One, there is little risk of human infection, whereas during Phase Two, there is a substantial risk of human infection. The next three phases make up the Pandemic Alert Period. We are currently sitting in Phase Three, where humans have become infected with the new virus subtype, however human-to-human transmission is minimal. During Phase Four small clusters of human-to-human transmission of the virus occurs, however the spread is highly localized. During Phase Five larger clusters of human-to-human transmission of the virus occurs, however it is still highly localized. Phase Six is the Pandemic Period, where there exists sustained human-to-human transmission of the virus in the general population.

During Phases Five and Six, temporary food shortages are possible, travel advisories and limited travel to specific areas will prevail, large public gatherings will be limited, schools will be closed, public transportation will become available on a limited basis, quarantines of exposed persons will occur (voluntarily, at first) and infected persons will become isolated. During this time, there is the potential for high levels of illness and death, social disruption and economic loss, especially as the health care delivery system becomes overwhelmed.

It is likely your organization will be affected by 25-50% absenteeism, supply chain interruptions, public services (water, power, waste disposal, communications and transportation) interruptions, janitorial services degradation, security services

degradation and more. However, even though you may have a business continuity plan in place, you may not, in fact, be prepared to handle the catastrophic nature of a pandemic.

A pandemic is different from other critical incidents and has several unique characteristics that make preparation and planning very different from preparing for a terrorist attack, fire, hurricane or massive data loss. Pandemics are prolonged, concurrently disruptive, international occurrences. A pandemic may come in several waves, with successive waves becoming ever more severe. Each wave can last several weeks and may be separated by a few months or even a year before the next wave hits.

During a pandemic, operations cannot be moved to alternate facilities because incidents are happening simultaneously across multiple areas around the world. The prolonged nature of a pandemic (likely lasting 18-24 months, with two to three waves) causes erosion of economic interdependencies and crumbling infrastructures. Unprepared businesses may never recover, and whole industries may be completely eradicated.

From a practical perspective, pandemic planning focuses on maintenance of essential business activities while containing or minimizing the spread of the infection through the workplace. A pandemic is not a single critical incident, but a prolonged series of critical incidents in which limited social contact is a requirement. Therefore, an organization must prepare for a pandemic in a totally different manner from standard business continuity planning.

In addition to your organization, businesses around the world will suffer. Supplies may be disrupted. Subcontractors may be unavailable. Public utilities and transportation may be disrupted. Public places, such as museums and theaters, may be ordered closed to help slow the spread of disease.

In the long term, changes in demand for services could have a significant impact on your organization. A disproportionate death rate among 20- to 50-year-olds, as in the Spanish Flu, could significantly affect varying markets.

To learn more details about planning for the pandemic, listen in to our eight-part "Continuity Talk" series beginning August 21, 2007. For more information on the "Continuity Talk" podcasting service, email us at info@raconsulting.net.

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