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The Importance of People-Focused Pandemic Planning

As the threat of a pandemic receives increasing attention, retailers are considering how to prepare. Are you ready?

What is a “pandemic”?

Pandemic refers to the spread of illness or disease across a wide area. Recently, media focus has been on a strain of the influenza virus commonly referred to as “avian flu”. To date, this flu has shown a tendency to be easily transmissible between birds, and between birds and humans. The fear is that that avian flu will mutate to become transmissible between humans, and then spread quickly around the world.

How would a pandemic affect your organization?

Should a pandemic develop, employee absenteeism will be a significant problem for all employers. During a pandemic, it is estimated that between 1/3 and a 1/2 of a given human population will become sick. This translates to a rate of employee absenteeism of approximately 30%. Even if they do not become ill directly because of a flu virus, your employees may be absent from work out of fear, to care for others, or because the surrounding infrastructure breaks down.

As well, in addition to employee absenteeism within your own organization, you must consider the impact that similar absenteeism rates may have on your suppliers and customers.

Why must Human Resources be involved in planning?

Experience has shown that in a crisis, business continuity planners and

crisis responders tend to focus on rescue and restoration of hard services, such as IT. Yet the most important asset of an organization is human capital. As such, organizations should develop an effective people strategy as a component of a business continuity plan. To this end, human resources leaders and professionals will be front and centre. They understand the logistics, demographics and culture of their organization, effective modes of communication, and can anticipate employees’ motivations and needs.

Some planning considerations.

A pandemic plan should encompass all areas of operations. This includes planning for labour shortages and determining how to manage employees during a crisis. The following is a summary of a people-focused, pandemic checklist:

1. How prepared is your organization?

- How will your organization identify a pandemic (if not by government declaration)?
- Is there a protocol in place to alert management of the transmission of illness in the workplace?

- How will you communicate effectively with employees, in the workplace and at home?

2. How might a pandemic impact your workplace?

- How is work performed in your organization?
- How would absenteeism affect operations?
- How might a pandemic impact your supply chain and your ability to serve customers?
- How flexible is your workforce, and are there limiting factors – factually (e.g. specific skills not easily transferred) and legally (e.g. collective agreements)?

3. What preventative measures can you take?

- Each organization should take steps to reduce the likelihood of influenza gaining a foothold in the workplace. This includes: employee vaccinations, enhanced personal hygiene, re-organizing work to limit employee interaction and training employees in preventative measures.

Particularly within the retail section, measures to minimize the spread of influenza will be critical.

4. If a pandemic arrives, how can you mitigate its impact?

- Can operations be reorganized?
- What is the minimum number of employees necessary to keep the organization functioning?
- Are employees trained to assume other roles?
- Are employees able to work from home?
- Do you have sufficient and appropriate insurance to cover anticipated losses?

5. Extended Leaves

The recent enactment in Ontario of Bill 56 means that if an emergency is declared employees will be eligible for extended leaves of unpaid absence, if the absence is related to the emergency. The government may also order the temporary closure of businesses.

6. Implementation

- Is management committed to preparing a continuity plan?
- Has the plan been communicated?
- Have employees been trained to respond to a pandemic?

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