

A(H1N1)



Influenza H1N1 - Lessons Learned
Re-tooling the plan before the next wave



The news of a worldwide outbreak of a previously unknown strain of influenza has taken many organizations by surprise. Just as companies are dealing with the impact of the recent economic downturn, the potential for a sustained Influenza H1N1 pandemic with major economic and human risks has led many to take action. In recent surveys by International SOS and The Conference Board, 53 and 55 percent of participants, respectively, reported that their companies have a pandemic preparedness plan and have activated it in response to the current outbreak. As the dust settles on the H1N1 outbreak in the Northern Hemisphere, companies with pandemic plans are re-tooling while those without plans are scrambling to make up lost ground.



While the recent H1N1 outbreak has served as a wake up call for some, for others it has been a useful test of their plan. In less than a week, the WHO moved from Phase 3 – where there are very limited human-to-human cases - to Phase 5. On June 11, 2009, 5 weeks later, the World Health Organization confirmed the virus had reached Phase 6, and declared a full pandemic. While initially there was great concern as to the scope and significance of the outbreak, it now appears that we likely have seen a relatively “mild” influenza outbreak, with limited community impact. This mild case scenario revealed weaknesses in many pandemic plans.

A majority of organizations have based their pandemic plans on the World Health Organization (WHO) pandemic phases. In particular, they used the Phases as “trigger points” to activate specific interventions such as door screening, working from home, travel restrictions, masks and antivirals, and quarantine. Many of these interventions carry with them significant costs, and cause business disruption in and of themselves. During the recent H1N1 outbreak, businesses generally did not feel that the influenza impact in their community warranted the phase-based interventions they had put in place. One of the most common complaints from corporate pandemic planners was that their plans, and the WHO phases, did not take severity and impact into account.

Severity can be considered the virulence of the influenza virus (ability to cause significant illness and death) and the contagiousness of the virus (ability to rapidly move through a significant proportion of the community). Even in Mexico City - where government offices and businesses were forced to close, social gatherings were cancelled and anyone in the street wore a mask – the severity of the influenza virus has been considered relatively mild.

A true pandemic “wave” is expected to affect up to one third of the population. For Mexico City, with a population of nearly 9 million, that would mean almost 3 million infected, which is not anywhere near what we have seen to date. For other affected areas, like New York, only a tiny fraction of the population has been affected, with very few severe illnesses or deaths.

Impact can be described as the social and business disruption caused by the pandemic virus. To date, Mexico has seen the most influenza impact, while in the USA and other affected regions of the world, life has continued, in most cases, just as normal. Another plan weakness that has arisen from this recent outbreak is the ability to differentiate within affected regions – some are more affected than others. While the USA and Mexico are considered affected countries, businesses were implementing more aggressive interventions in Mexico City, for example, than they were in Seattle.

Organizations are now being afforded some breathing room to get their house in order. How long we have though, is anyone’s guess. Speaking in early May, the World Health Organization Director General, Margaret Chan, said, “The virus may have given us a grace period, but we do not know how long this grace period will last. No one can say whether this is just the calm before the storm.”

It is somewhat ominous to note the historical timeline of the most deadly pandemic in the 20th century, the Spanish Flu of 1918. This pandemic, which killed over 50 million people globally, was also caused by an H1N1 strain of the virus and may have originated in Europe or America. This pandemic struck in waves, with the first, mild wave occurring during March and April of 1918. The second wave appeared in September, 1918 and was highly lethal, causing serious illness and death in a significant number of those it infected. In the month of October 200,000 Americans died.

Epidemiologists have noted that the current virus appears to be following a similar pattern with decreasing activity in the warmer weather and expect the virulence to diminish in the northern hemisphere as the summer approaches. However, the virus is starting to spread rapidly in the southern hemisphere as it heads into the colder months. Some virologists are warning that if a second wave occurs during the northern hemisphere’s winter, similar to what occurred in 1918; the pandemic could have devastating consequences.

As the largest global medical and security assistance organization, International SOS is advising its member companies and organizations to take this opportunity to shore up their pandemic plans to mitigate the risk. In general, the main focus of pandemic preparedness is to minimize the spread of the disease and to reduce illness while limiting the economic and social consequences of the outbreak. From a company's perspective, the goal is to protect the health of their employees while attempting to maintain essential services and business continuity. The measures an organization introduces to mitigate the impact of the illness on their workforce must be balanced against the impact these measures will have on their operations. A coordinated and well-rehearsed pandemic preparedness plan is essential to guarantee that all employees and managers are aware of their responsibilities prior to activation.

International SOS has therefore applied the following principles to its own operations and is advising its member organizations to do the same and ensure they are prepared:

- Monitor the pandemic, as it is a dynamic situation.
- Review all travel plans and consider deferring nonessential travel to affected areas.
- Keep up-to-date with recommendations from health experts, which are likely to change in different phases of the pandemic.
- Ensure clear communication between staff, health practitioners, government and non-government organizations involved with policy and disease control.
- Reduce the chances that employees become infected.
- Reduce the chances of all employees and mission-critical staff becoming infected at the same time.
- Identify those employees and dependents that fall into the "high risk" group and ensure their health care is optimized.
- Identify if and when essential staff and dependents should be moved from their present location, and to where they should be relocated.

Contingency planning for a company should address issues such as staff travel, evacuation, workplace safety, screening, hygiene, antiviral policy, communication and human resource management to name a few.

In addition to corporate measures, International SOS advises that instructing employees on how they can protect themselves is essential. To reduce the risk of spread of influenza in the workplace and protect the traveler when business travel is necessary, actions at the individual level can help prevent the spread of disease. Employees should therefore be educated on appropriate practices, including:

- Monitor the latest information on the virus and be aware of quarantine procedures being implemented at both the origin and destination sites.

- Avoid people who are obviously sick, maintain good personal hygiene and wash hands frequently. Carry a hand sanitizer for use when soap and water are not readily available and avoid touching their face. Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue or a mask.
- Stay at home if unwell. Contact a health care provider if the employee or their family members develop flu-like symptoms and do not attend work until cleared.
- In affected locations (and for travelers originating from affected areas), companies may consider a screening process for personnel prior to entering the workplace to minimize the risk of contagious individuals attending business essential areas of the organization.

Other measures to consider, particularly when traveling in an area where influenza is circulating in the community:

- Consider an employee's general health prior to travel. Pregnant women and people with underlying health conditions (such as diabetes, asthma, other lung diseases, heart disease, obesity) are at higher risk of severe infection.
- Ensure all routine vaccinations are up-to-date. People who have not had an annual flu vaccination should consider having one to prevent regular seasonal flu.
- Avoid crowds as much as possible. If crowds cannot be avoided, consider wearing a face mask or respirator as directed by the country's Health Protection Authority or Center for Disease Control.
- Travelers should monitor their health closely and seek prompt medical attention if they become unwell.

Influenza pandemics are real and have the potential of generating a major economic and business continuity impact. We are witnessing the beginning of the next pandemic, and now is the time to ensure preparations are in place. Having a pandemic plan is not only expected, but it is the best approach for an organization to mitigate risk, provide an appropriate duty of care to their employees and minimize the potential impact on business continuity.

The screenshot shows a webpage from International SOS titled "Pandemic Preparedness Influenza H1N1 (swine flu)". The page content includes a navigation menu (Home, Resources, Glossary, Help) and a main heading "How is the new influenza H1N1 spread?". Below the heading is a list of four bullet points:

- It is spread from person to person, probably in the same way as seasonal flu.
- Virus particles are contained in droplets coughed or sneezed by an infected person.
- Most droplets fall quickly and land within 1-2 meters (3-6 feet). Surfaces can become contaminated with virus.
- Some particles float in the air (for a time) and can be inhaled.

 To the right of the text is an image of a man coughing into his elbow, with a cloud of virus particles shown emanating from his mouth. Below the image is the text "Prevent the spread. Cover your cough and sneeze". At the bottom of the page, there is a footer with "Influenza H1N1 / How is it spread? Page 3 of 18" and "© International SOS, 2009. All rights reserved." along with "Back" and "Next" navigation arrows.

About International SOS

As the leading provider of medical assistance, international healthcare and security services, International SOS has over 20 years experience in helping companies manage the health and safety of their employees. Since early 2005, a team of medical specialists has been continually researching and monitoring the risks, consequences and mitigation factors of a flu pandemic. Now recognized as one of the leading global consultancies in pandemic preparedness, International SOS works with organizations worldwide to enhance their planning and risk management efforts.

International SOS is a global leader in pandemic preparedness planning, and has been providing pandemic planning tools and services since 2004. International SOS has launched a dedicated Pandemic Preparedness website accessible via the following link: <http://www.internationalsos.com/pandemicpreparedness>, which assists organizations and business travelers alike in keeping them up educated and up to date with influenza pandemic threat.

References:

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