

Prepare your business for flu season

By **Gayle Nicholas**

managing director of Tandem HR

The President's Council of Advisers on Science and Technology is currently predicting an additional 30,000 to 90,000 deaths this year due to the H1N1 virus. Twenty to 40 percent of the population will display flu symptoms from the same strand. Couple this with the average 30,000 to 40,000 deaths—20 percent of the population—affected by the regular seasonal flu, and some businesses could be facing major employee shortages impacting business as usual.



Gayle Nicholas is the managing director for Tandem HR. A top-level executive in human resources with 30 years of experience, she specializes in the areas of compliance, benefits, recruitment, employee relations, payroll, performance management, and organizational development. Her experience in multi-industries proves invaluable in the PEO industry.

Although a vaccine for the H1N1 virus will be released mid-October, the resurgence of influenza in the U.S. could begin as early as September, and peak in October.

Employers play a key role in protecting the health and safety of their employees and customers, while limiting the impact of influenza on the community. It is important to take measures to prevent spreading illness through your office.

Educate your employees to adhere to the following guidelines to assist in your efforts:

- Wash your hands often.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Avoid close contact with sick people.
- Stay home if you are sick.

Educate your managerial team on symptoms of influenza. Give managers the ability to send employees home who display these symptoms. This should be done in a manner that guarantees employees will not be punished because of these absences.

Appoint a cleaning service or a staff member to clean surfaces and items frequently handled by multiple employees. This includes items at work stations such as phones, keyboards, mice and staplers, in addition to door knobs, copier buttons and counter spaces. Wiping with alcohol-based cleaners before and after the work day will assist in controlling the spread of influenza through the office.

Encourage your employees to get vaccinated with a regular seasonal influenza shot. Tandem HR, an Oak Brook-based professional employer organization, is sending a third party wellness company onsite to its Chicago area clients to provide flu shots for employees and their spouses.

"When the shots are offered at no cost to the employee and conveniently provided at the worksite, participation is much higher," observed Jennifer Oskierko, director of benefits and payroll at Tandem HR. "It also shows a great sense of concern for employees' well being."

Take measures to protect employees that are at a higher risk for complications from influenza infection, such as pregnant women, employees with chronic lung diseases (such as asthma) and those over 65 years of age. Educating all employees that these groups are at higher risk and encouraging the higher risk group to very closely monitor symptoms will aid in the prevention of spreading to this class of people.

Taking measures to prevent the spread of and minimize infection of influenza in your office is the first step. The reality is no one truly knows how serious this flu season will be. The CDC highly recommends creating two response plans. One plan would be executed in the case of a normal flu season and an additional one reserved for a more serious situation.

When creating your plans, review your company's history of absences during a typical flu season. Estimate the number of potential absences based on your company history and incorporate

the projected increase in cases due to the H1N1 strand. Identify a minimal number of employees with which you could continue operations. Determine whether these numbers match the number of working employees once absences are projected. Will you need temporary help? Are there key employees that can be cross-trained on various areas of operation?

Prepare your business for increased absences due to school or daycare closings. Consider allowing employees to telecommute or work remotely. What technology would you require for employees to perform key operations from home?

Although this may not be your optimal way to conduct business, it may be better than losing large groups of your work force who are well enough to work but at home caring for ill family members or waiting out the recommended time period—24 hours—after a fever breaks to return to work.

Every business will need to determine what plan is best for them. It is essential to have a plan, educate your employees and managerial staff on each plan, and announce who has the authority to execute the plans. With a little education and planning, you and your employees can face the upcoming flu season with good health and confidence.

Quick Facts

Tandem HR

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Tandem HR is a full-service professional employer organization (PEO) that partners with small-midsize organizations to further their success by providing expertise in human resource solutions such as payroll, benefit administration, people management, risk management and organizational development.

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