

How organizations should prepare for bird flu or other business disruptions

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The following are considerations for your business continuity planning.

Include the possibility of an avian flu pandemic in your business continuity planning and crisis management preparations. The Gartner Group, the world's leading provider of research and analysis about the global information technology industry, points out that a pandemic wouldn't affect IT systems directly, but it would likely cause considerable economic disruption through its impact on the workforce and on business activity.

IT managers can plan for threats such as avian flu because many contingency strategies use IT to keep business running - even with travel restrictions, quarantines or problems with vendors or employees because of illness or fear. IT managers should ensure that their organizations plan for a possible outbreak whose course and consequences are unpredictable.

Use scenario planning to assess possible business impact and as the basis for developing appropriate contingency plans for different situations, says the Gartner Group.

The 2003 SARS outbreak suggests that a pandemic may have the following effects:

- International travel: Depending on the severity of the outbreak, quarantines may result in travel bans or travel delays. Health checks for travelers would likely be commonplace. Many trips could be cancelled.
- Local travel: In cities or countries where an outbreak occurs, travel may be severely restricted or even impossible for periods of time.
- School closures: Schools in affected cities would likely close, forcing many parents to stay home and care for their families.
- Health systems: Medical facilities could be overwhelmed, depending on the size and virulence of the outbreak - particularly in less-developed nations with already-strained healthcare resources. As with SARS, containment methods would likely be low-tech, relying on awareness campaigns, surgical masks and isolation.
- Economic impact: Experience with SARS demonstrated that industry sectors such as travel and hospitality would be rapidly affected, with flow-on effects occurring in other parts of the economy. The effect on individual communities could be prolonged if outbreaks recur, as has happened during previous flu pandemics.
- Supply chains would likely be affected because of inspections and logistics disruptions, especially where countries with high infection rates are involved. Also, certain animal products or other products might be banned.
- Personnel: Widespread illness could result in staff shortages for providing essential community services - particularly in medical staffs.
- Overall business slowdown: With travel limited and spending reduced in many areas, sales and marketing campaigns would be affected. Deals and transactions - domestic and offshore - could be delayed.
- Fear, uncertainty and doubt (FUD): Even if only a few people are infected, the threat of disease could greatly affect the behavior and normal business activities of others. Discussion and speculation about the situation would further reduce workforce productivity.

Don't wait for an outbreak to review or establish contingency plans, urge the researchers. Many strategies take time to set up. Gartner recommends the following key activities:

- Make your workforce aware of the avian flu threat and the steps you're taking to prepare for it.
- Assess your business continuity preparedness for this type of workforce outage scenario and try to improve it (if necessary).
- Assign someone in your business to track biological threats such as the avian flu. He or she should regularly review business continuity plans and update them in response to new information.
- Establish or expand policies and tools that enable employees to work from home with broadband access, appropriate security and network access to applications.
- **Expand online transaction and self-service options for customers and partners. Begin using online collaboration and communication tools now so that your people are prepared and comfortable with them.**
- Work with customers and partners to minimize any disruption by developing coordinated crisis response capabilities.