

Pandemic planning in the workplace

A guide for Queensland's small and medium businesses

Business continuity planning for any contingency has similarities. However, there are some unique risks to individuals and businesses associated with an influenza pandemic. This fact sheet aims to help businesses identify some of the specific issues they should consider when developing or modifying business continuity plans for pandemic influenza.

An influenza pandemic could last for 7–10 months, with severe illness occurring throughout the community in waves. It may take up to seven days before a person shows symptoms and individuals may be infectious before onset of symptoms. The period of infectivity varies by age. Adults may be infectious for up to seven days after the onset of symptoms, and children for up to 21 days. Influenza is most commonly spread through droplets (e.g. coughing and/or sneezing), by direct physical contact between people, and by touching contaminated surfaces and then touching your mouth, eyes or nose.

More detailed information can be found in the *Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*, and further information will be provided by governments in the event of a pandemic, when more will be known about the virus.

Alternative methods for trade

During an influenza pandemic, workplaces should consider using the telephone and internet to conduct business, rather than face-to-face interactions. Businesses should also consider alternative methods for trade such as self-service, call centre or internet options to reduce personal contact. If face-to-face interactions are necessary, large and well-ventilated areas are best, with people remaining one metre or more apart. People should avoid hugging and shaking hands, and avoid crowded areas such as waiting or tea rooms.

Contact lists

Given the significant number of staff that may be away, working from home, or working in different shifts or different jobs, up-to-date and easily accessible contact lists (including home phone and email details) will be important.

Employment conditions, including leave

At the peak of an influenza pandemic, between 30 to 50 per cent of staff may not present to work. People will be advised to stay at home if sick. Others may stay at home to look after friends and family (especially if schools close), because they are afraid to come to work, or because they cannot get to work (if public transport is disrupted). Employers should consider how they will manage conditions such as sick and recreation leave, noting that existing legislation will apply.

Flexible working hours

Workplaces might consider enabling staff to work in shifts so that there are fewer people in the workplace at any one time. An alternative could be to arrange remote working arrangements for a greater number of employees (businesses would need to assess IT and telecommunications capability and current service level agreements).

Hygiene facilities

Health experts advise that during a pandemic people should wash their hands frequently to limit the spread of the virus, and practise cough and sneeze etiquette. Workplaces should provide readily accessible sinks, water, soap, paper towels, tissues and no-touch receptacles for waste disposal. Where no water is available, workplaces should consider making available alcohol-based hand rubs (gels, rinses or foams). Pre-prepared posters are available to explain effective hand washing (*refer to Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*).

Note that certain masks and respirators may help prevent the spread of the virus. If staff are to wear masks, it is important that they are trained in how to use them. Also note that these products are likely to be in high demand during a pandemic. Further advice and information on the use of masks and respirators during an influenza pandemic can be found in *Masks and antivirals: Fact sheet 5*.

Immunisation and antivirals

An influenza pandemic vaccine can only be developed when the virus strain is known, and even then, it may take some time to produce. Seasonal flu vaccines will not protect against the influenza pandemic virus, but may protect people from less severe strains of flu. Given the finite supply of antivirals, they are unlikely to be available to organisations generally for use by staff.

Information for employees

Keeping employees informed may reduce the impact of a pandemic in the workplace and reduce fear and anxiety. There are many pre-prepared materials available now (*refer to Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*) and more will be made available in the event of a pandemic.

Managing employees who become ill at work

Workplaces should consider what they will do if an employee becomes ill at work (for example, employers might be able to contact the employee's relatives, recommend they seek medical advice, keep that person away from others, clean their workstation, consider leave arrangements, check on the employee during their absence and encourage them to return when healthy). See the Queensland business continuity planning notes at www.qld.gov.au/pandemic for more detailed advice.

Overseas travel

At the start of a pandemic, the Commonwealth Government may consider restricting international travel to minimise the risk of the virus entering Australia. This could affect the movement of people and goods into and out of Australia. See the Australian Government website www.smartraveller.gov.au for updated travel advice. Workplaces should consider how they will manage staff based overseas and staff who travel overseas regularly for work.

Seating and movement within the workplace

Health experts advise that to limit the spread of the virus, people should remain one metre or more apart. Businesses might be able to rearrange workplaces so that staff sit/work further apart, and encourage people to talk across a desk or table, rather than sitting close to each other to talk. Employers may be able to encourage employees to take the stairs instead of the elevator, or have only two people in the elevator at any one time.

Travelling to and from work

Given public transport tends to be crowded and enclosed, advice during a pandemic could be to walk, cycle or drive to work if possible. Some public transport services may be cancelled or disrupted. Workplaces might consider making available additional car park spaces for individuals wanting to drive. Flexible working hours may further assist people travel in off-peak times.

Workplace cleaning

Given an influenza virus may live for some time on surfaces outside the body, workplace surfaces should be cleaned regularly (recommended at least daily, depending on the circumstances) with a neutral detergent, then a disinfectant solution. This includes sinks, handles, railings, counters, telephones, keyboards and elevators. For recommended cleaning products, refer to *Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*. It will be particularly important to clean and disinfect the workstation of any staff member who becomes ill.

Workplace ventilation

Improving ventilation may assist in limiting the transmission of the virus (e.g. air-conditioning and opening windows if possible). Influenza viruses are not known to be transmitted through air-conditioning systems.

Visitors and customers

Workplaces may consider entry notices advising customers and visitors not to enter if they have influenza symptoms. It might also be feasible to provide visitors and customers with the same hygiene facilities available for staff. Barriers or screens could help protect front-counter staff if customers need to visit you rather than access your business services via phone or internet.

