



INFLUENZA >> BUSINESS PLANNING >> NEWS >>

Businesses urged to avoid pandemic planning pitfalls

Lisa Schnirring ■ Staff Writer

Oct 9, 2008 (CIDRAP News) – The current financial crisis may be pulling time and resources away from business pandemic planning, but two experts on the topic today told corporate leaders they can improve their firms' survivability during a global health emergency by avoiding specific mistakes.

The two—infectious disease expert Michael T. Osterholm, PhD, MPH, and risk communications expert Peter Sandman, PhD—spoke at a webinar today that was sponsored by the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP) Business Source, an online infectious-disease preparedness resource for business. Osterholm directs CIDRAP, based at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, and Sandman is a risk communication consultant from Princeton, N.J. About 326 people from 83 sites took part in the webinar.

Osterholm and Sandman told the group that business pandemic planners face tough challenges, not only in managing problems caused by the financial markets, but also in keeping the preparedness momentum going amid "pandemic planning fatigue."

Sandman said he has detected a shift in the business pandemic planning approach over the past 6 months to what he calls "an island of preparedness." Over the past few years, many businesses had the mindset that each firm must do its share and that firms would prepare together, he said. "For a while that was working, but then interest waned."

Now, Sandman said, more businesses seem to be deciding what to do on their own to cope when an influenza pandemic strikes. "If other islands appear, you can build bridges," he said, adding that the shift in focus is disappointing but has important planning ramifications.

Seven mistakes to avoid

Osterholm and Sandman advised business leaders to avoid seven specific pandemic planning mistakes:

- Depending on the news media to sound the pandemic alarm early enough
- Relying on public officials or government efforts
- Not involving employees in planning
- Lumping pandemic preparation into "all-hazards" planning
- Being afraid to scare people
- Resting on past planning laurels
- Thinking that pandemic planning is futile

On news monitoring, Osterholm said now is the time to establish trustworthy sources for news about pandemic developments. He said governments won't always be the best sources because some might have political or economic reasons for keeping a lid on disease outbreak news.

Sandman advised Webinar participants to keep certain media tendencies in mind. "Typically, on the road to a pandemic they overplay small problems but they tend to underplay big ones," he said.

Also, he said groups such as the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention won't be the first to sound a pandemic warning; their roles will more likely be to "certify" that one exists. Besides monitoring these official sources, a helpful information strategy is to track sources that report and attempt to clarify rumors, which could contain some of the earliest information about an emerging pandemic, Sandman said. "Rumor surveillance is a very important part of this."

Federal health officials have been honest in warning that states, localities, businesses, and individuals shouldn't rely on the government for every aspect of pandemic planning and response, Osterholm said, adding that the global nature of the financial crisis serves as a reminder of how interdependent global supply chains are.

Sandman added, "The issue is going to be how prepared are you to help yourself."

Including employees can pay off

Including employees in pandemic planning can yield an important payoff for business continuity during a pandemic: increasing the likelihood that they will come to work, Sandman said. For example, urging employees to prepare their families for a pandemic, letting them know that the business has a pandemic plan, and preparing them to cross-train for emergency duties are all tactics that might make employees more comfortable and motivated to work during a pandemic.

Osterholm and Sandman both urged businesses not to dilute their pandemic planning efforts by including them in all-hazards disaster planning, but both acknowledged that not all companies have the resources to do both, particularly during tough economic times. Osterholm asked the participants to remember that a pandemic is different because it will strike in waves and that a global outbreak could sever weak global supply chains. "Remember, there are 50,000 ocean liners circling the globe now that are the world's warehouses," he said.

Sandman said that from a practical standpoint, business pandemic planners may have an easier time getting upper management support for an all-hazards planning approach. "It's better than nothing, and it's being more ready than we are now," he said.

Using fear effectively

Businesses shouldn't steer away from using fear in their pandemic planning messages, Sandman said. "Fear is a level of concern that produces the most caution," he said, adding that the most effective strategy is to oscillate between fear and concern. An efficient and practical way to achieve that balance is to capitalize on teachable preparedness moments, such as hurricanes or other emergencies.

Near the end of the session, Osterholm said his own experience has shown that those who strongly advocate pandemic planning may be criticized both for being too alarmist and for not revealing enough about the true danger. "We want to be bringing people to the middle," he said, reminding the group that like the current financial crisis, "A pandemic is going to be tough, but we'll get through it. History will hold us accountable."

See also:

CIDRAP Source link to [webinar information](#)

Center for Infectious Disease Research & Policy
Academic Health Center -- University of Minnesota
Copyright © 2009 Regents of the University of Minnesota