

Getting the job done during a pandemic

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When the World Health Organization bumped its pandemic alert level to 5 on Wednesday, Emera Inc.'s health and safety team activated a plan that immediately limited travel requests and meetings bringing large groups together.

The Halifax-based electricity company, which had planned a series of seminars by the Nova Scotia Occupational Health and Safety Committee, is investigating whether guest speakers can instead meet with employees via video link, rather than address 100 workers at a time in a conference room. Under its emergency plan, activated by the WHO's response to swine flu, Emera is also encouraging its 2,200 employees in Nova Scotia and Maine to stay away from big crowds outside of work.

Emera, whose subsidiaries include Nova Scotia Power Inc. and Bangor Hydro-Electric Co., went so far as to overhaul plans for its annual meeting in Halifax. The event will be broadcast over the Internet with streaming video and two-way audio so shareholders can ask questions. They also will be able to vote on resolutions online or by phone if they do not want to attend in person.

Like the WHO, companies are bumping up the alert level, having developed plans, as Emera did, in response to crises such as hurricane Juan in 2003 or, as in many cases, the SARS outbreak that same year.

For millions of Canadians, SARS was a frightening few months that disrupted routines and damaged the economy. But for prescient businesses, the respiratory disease was a warning to get ready for pandemics to come.

Besides obvious health concerns, there are business issues to be dealt with. Workplaces can be a key source of contagion – employees sit close together, share washrooms and eat together. And with the recession raising extra fears about job security, many workers may be more tempted to come to work even though they're sick.

Companies should prepare for the possibility that a quarter to a third of their staffs would be sidelined in a pandemic, either because employees are ill or have to care for a sick member of the family, Susan Toutanen, a microbiologist and infectious disease consultant at Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital, said yesterday.

Her estimate is based on figures from past pandemics, which tend to occur in waves, so "it's worthwhile to start preparing for that," she told human resources professionals in a presentation.

Many are doing just that. On Monday, for example, just as the WHO raised its alert to level 4, Hank Stackhouse was chairing an extraordinary meeting of the corporate response team at Delta Hotels and Resorts.

As chief executive officer of the 44-hotel chain, which houses visitors from around the world, Mr. Stackhouse had been watching closely as swine flu spread beyond Mexico.

After the two-hour meeting in downtown Toronto, six senior executives on the response team moved quickly to prepare the chain's 7,100 employees, all of whom have been shown a public health video and power point presentation this week on procedures such as proper hand washing.

Cleaning at the hotels has gone into overdrive, with bathrooms and doorknobs disinfected more frequently, and extra-strength antibacterial soap placed in bathrooms.

The group is on duty around the clock, working with general managers across the chain. Each manager has a local hotel response team. Staff, who were affected by the 2003 SARS outbreak, were reminded to stay at home if sick, and hand wipes were distributed throughout the chain.

"Clearly the best thing that came out of that was a solid pandemic plan that's now in full deployment, so people aren't questioning what they need to do," Mr. Stackhouse said.

At Telus Corp., senior managers were already laying the groundwork to deal with future outbreaks before public health officials had brought SARS under control.

The Vancouver-based communications company had an emergency operations plan in place long before SARS struck. But the outbreak intensified efforts to make sure employees would be protected and able to keep working in the event of future pandemics or crises.

Today, six years after SARS gripped the country, almost all Telus office staff across the country are equipped to do their jobs remotely, with the aid of company laptops, software and security programs. About 18,000 employees are able to log in from home anywhere in Canada, including 700 customer service reps who already telecommute.

Like other companies, Telus is monitoring swine flu developments daily. Members of the company's emergency management operations committee gather each morning to assess the spread of the virus and to monitor new guidelines coming from international and domestic public health officials.

"At this point in time, our thinking is that we're not going to reach the need for those 18,000 remote connections. But we could ramp up," said Kasey Reese, vice-president of risk management and chief internal auditor at Telus.

"One of the key learnings that came to us from SARS, in addition to the technology and being able to support workers, was around the need for timely, accurate and aligned communications across the organization and with the local, provincial and federal health authorities," he said. Twice a year, Telus tests its business continuity with emergency exercises, including scenarios involving pandemic flu.

The plan to turn its employees into a remote team is not just about pandemic readiness. The benefits of being able to have staff work offsite and to shift work loads to different regions of the country as needed have already been proven repeatedly, Mr. Reese said.

A bad snow storm, for example, will push remote usage up to 3,000 or 4,000 people. In 2003, back-to-back crises tested the concept, beginning with SARS and followed by a massive global computer virus, devastating forest fires in British Columbia, an unparalleled power blackout in eastern Canada and the United States, and, to top it off, the accidental cutting of a key telecommunications cable in downtown Vancouver. A four-month labour dispute at Telus in 2005 also put this emergency planning to the test.

Tom Frank, who oversees business continuity planning for Bank of Montreal, spent the week meeting with BMO's chief medical officer and a pandemic planning committee, ensuring staff review emergency plans, keeping top executives in the loop, crafting e-mails to a staff of 37,000 and setting up a hotline for employees.

"SARS definitely gave people a wake-up call," Mr. Frank says. "There's a huge awareness now about the importance to have strategies and plans to help mitigate the risk to our employees and potentially the risk to our ongoing processes."

"Anyone who went through SARS is much better prepared now," says Mario Possamai, a Toronto-based independent consultant who specializes in critical incidents, and who was a senior adviser to the SARS Commission.

He advises employers not to prepare specifically for a pandemic, but rather to plan for a "critical incident" that lasts longer than a few days, causing business interruptions, absenteeism and supply chain disturbances. "If you're ready for a pandemic, you're probably ready for an ice storm or a power outage or a hurricane."

While some Canadian workplaces may be better prepared than most, efforts are still the exception. About 80 per cent of Canadian executives fret about the impact of a pandemic on their companies, and half have no pandemic plan, a 2008 survey of 418 businesses conducted by Leger Marketing indicates.