



## **Pandemic Flu: Not If, But When, Experts Say**

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**Beth McConnell**

Cold and flu season starts in two months. Is your business ready? And is it ready for a possible outbreak of pandemic flu, which could incapacitate 40 percent of the world's workforce?

At a recent panel discussion hosted by the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#) for government and private-sector employers, federal experts advised both groups to take advantage of published policies and tips and start planning now for the inevitable.

Dr. Rajeev Vankayya, special assistant to the president for biodefense policy in the White House Homeland Security Council, told the assembled employers, federal government workers and contractors that President Bush had released a national strategy for pandemic influenza in November. In May, the Homeland Security Council released an implementation policy for that strategy. Guidelines for preparing for a pandemic flu outbreak can be found at [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov).

Experts and the government are sounding the alarm bells because of a particularly strong strain of avian flu that has appeared in China, India and some countries in Europe. The virus is not easily passed from birds to humans, and it is even less easily passed among humans, Vankayya said. But 230 people have been infected with the H5N1 virus, and 130 people have died. There is no human immunity, and no vaccine is available, according to the government's flu web site.

"We don't know if this flu will become pandemic," Vankayya said. "We are concerned about this emergence because it has shown up over the past three years in 50 countries across three continents. That's not a typical spread."

If the virus mutates in certain ways, to become more easily transmitted to and among humans, then a global outbreak of flu may occur because of a lack of immunity and vaccines.

In the event of pandemic flu, Vankayya said, the federal government estimates that 40 percent of the workforce will be unable to report to work, whether because they are ill, taking care of an ill family member, too scared to go to work or caring for children whose schools have been closed. Because many people unable to go to work may actually not be ill, Vankayya suggested, businesses should begin creating or adapting telecommuting policies for this scenario.

Now is also the time to begin training employees in "social distancing," Vankayya said. "It's not a good idea to teach new behaviors during a

pandemic.”

Employers can provide inexpensive alcohol-based hand cleaner and encourage employees to wash their hands frequently, especially before and after shaking hands with others. Also, companies can investigate using teleconferencing for all meetings, even the ones with co-workers in the same building. Face-to-face meetings should be kept to a minimum.

The federal government is investing \$7 billion in preparedness activities. “But at the end of the day, the transmission [of any flu or cold virus] is from individual to individual,” Vankayya added.

Ambassador John E. Lange, special representative on avian and pandemic influenza in the avian influenza group of the Department of State, told employers to advise employees living abroad to visit their embassy or consulate for advice on coping with pandemic flu. However, he cautioned them not to rely on the embassy to provide antiviral medication or vaccines—the State Department can give those only to State Department employees and their families, he said. Also be aware that the embassy may advise people to shelter in place, so employees should have stockpiles of supplies.

“We need your help. You need a plan,” said Capt. Lynn Slepski, senior public health adviser to the assistant secretary for infrastructure protection in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, to the employers.

Slepski urged employers to visit [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov) for more tips on preparing for pandemic flu and other disasters. There is a lot of information there, and at [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov), and more will be added.

“Not all of the information is packaged together neatly in a toolkit,” Slepski said. “We will post guidance as they are developed. But don’t wait—start gathering information now.”

Slepski had some points to help the employers develop their plans:

- Everyone is depending on the Internet to stay up and running. Talk to your IT staff; who supplies your access to the Web? What is the vendor’s business plan, if they have one? What plans do all of your vendors have to secure the supply chain to and from your company?
- Think about social distancing; ask delivery services to leave boxes and packages by your back door. Pick them up after the driver has left.
- What are your triggers for action? An alert from federal or local government? Illness of a top executive or a certain percentage of your workforce?
- Will you keep employees at home if they are sick, or if they have sick family members? When will you allow them to return to work?
- What are your priorities, and what can wait for six to eight weeks? Pandemic flu likely will roll through a region in several waves, meaning

that one group of people will be sick, then another group several days after that, and then another.

### **Who is doing what?**

Leaders from large companies across the country shared their plans for dealing with pandemic flu.

Andy Malay, vice president of the federal civilian division of SAP Public Services Inc., said his company has updated emergency contact lists, something that proved valuable during the tsunami and hurricanes last year. It also has already moved to automating work processes—"we don't need face-to-face meetings," he said.

"We're just the opposite," said C. Randal Mullett, vice president of government relations for Con-way Inc. The freight delivery company's truck drivers must be physically in and out of dozens of locations, Mullett said. So the company has trained the drivers on how to interact with customers in case of an outbreak. They examined their IT systems and found many legacy programs that only one or two longtime employees could run and repair. Con-way is now cross-training employees to avoid that limitation. Mullett added that he was impressed that their health care provider had provided them with a wealth of information on preventing and minimizing the impact of pandemic flu and had helped Con-way model different scenarios to help the company plan better for several outcomes.

Roche, the makers of Tamiflu, a medication that is taken during the onset of flu symptoms and is designed to halt the virus's spread through the body, had each of its functional areas go through a simulation of a pandemic. Michael McGuire, vice president of commercial operations, said Roche identified essential employees and back-up employees and screened and prescribed Tamiflu for all workers. "We determined that every employee is essential," he said.

J. Michael Hickey, vice president of government affairs, national security policy, for Verizon, said that his company thinks a lot about business continuity after its hurricane experiences last year. Verizon has a full-time pandemic team. Employee skills are being assessed, like at Con-way, and employees may be reassigned to cover for absent co-workers.

It's not in New York Life Insurance Co.'s culture for employees to telecommute or stay home in the event of illness or bad weather, said John M. Hayes, vice president of business resilience. "That will have to change," he said. The company's HR department built flexibility into New York Life's leave policies, he added, so that employees can use their leave as needed. "They've done a good job," he said. And because the insurance company has independent agents all over the country, the company is exploring ways to identify them all, locate positions far from an outbreak and transfer work to those agents.

### **When is it coming?**

The panel moderator quoted Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt as saying, "If you're a bird, you're living through a pandemic. If you're a human, you're not."

None of the panelists would hazard a guess as to when a human outbreak would occur, but they were all certain it will happen.

“We don’t have a pandemic yet,” said moderator Alfonso Martinez-Fonts Jr., assistant secretary for the private-sector office of the Department of Homeland Security. “Now is the time to prepare. These companies have taken steps, but there are no perfect answers.”

Don’t wait for the outbreak to occur, or for government agencies to drop a package of information on your doorstep, he urged. Start planning now.

*Beth McConnell is associate editor for HR News. She can be reached at [emcconnell@shrm.org](mailto:emcconnell@shrm.org).*