

## Employers Play Dr. Mom Over Swine Flu Threats

TRENTON, N.J. (AP) — Big businesses are spending serious time and money trying to limit the swine flu pandemic's impact on operations, from bankrolling video on good hygiene to training employees to cover for co-workers with critical jobs.

Companies from health insurer UnitedHealth Group Inc. to beverage can maker Ball Corp. are arranging for employees with flu symptoms or sick family members to work from home where possible, holding fewer in-person meetings, even discouraging handshakes. And hand sanitizers, disinfectant wipes and tissues are at the ready everywhere as employers make keeping workers healthy their first line of defense.

Employers are playing Dr. Mom, teaching about hygiene, distributing information about the pandemic, telling folks to stay home if they get sick — generally with pay — and scrapping the required doctor's note. Some companies have even distributed "wellness kits" with thermometers and face masks.

Whether those efforts and other measures will protect businesses will depend largely on whether the swine flu mutates into a more-dangerous virus.

"Large and mid-sized organizations are not going to go bankrupt. Small organizations, that could be different," says Jim MacMicking of business continuity consultants SunGard Availability Services.

His company has seen a surge of customers seeking guidance on preparing for swine flu and either beefing up their telecommunications capacity or, if they can't afford it because of the weak economy, reallocating laptops and other equipment to key personnel.

Dozens of companies interviewed by The Associated Press report little effect — so far. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention pandemic planners also have seen no big disruptions.

But a large Harvard School of Public Health study found two-thirds of businesses could not maintain normal operations if half their workers were out for just two weeks. And the CDC estimates every person who comes to work with swine flu will infect 10 percent of co-workers.

So companies are heeding advice from health and business groups on how to avoid a catastrophe. Many have provided seasonal flu vaccines free to employees or even employees' families and stepped up cleaning schedules.

Data storage company EMC Corp. now has doorknobs and handrails in every office scrubbed daily. Ford Motor Co. disinfects the work areas of anyone who's had the

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virus.

Just about every company has done staff presentations on swine flu or set up an information site on its intranet. Health insurer Aetna Inc. posted a video internally and on YouTube in which cute little kids explain how not to get the flu:

<http://tinyurl.com/yjzsjzl> [1].

Besides promoting healthy behavior and arranging to temporarily get by without some workers, many employers are making backup plans for distributing their products and asking key suppliers what they've done to ensure they can keep delivering during a pandemic.

"That is really one of the major concerns," particularly for manufacturers that keep tiny inventories of raw materials on hand, says MacMicking.

If the pandemic worsens, companies will step up efforts.

Credit card lender Discover Financial Services and other companies with multiple locations plan to shift workloads around if one location is swamped by sickness. Cable TV operator Comcast Corp. has backup cable technicians set to take over appointments of sick ones.

Utility companies, retailers, restaurants, construction firms and many other businesses likewise can't simply have workers phone it in. Smaller firms, with few resources and small talent pools, also are in a tight spot. They can't do much cross-training, so they are mainly promoting health.

VitalSmarts, a Provo, Utah, consulting firm that trains workers in interpersonal skills, held a class on how to clean under rings and fingernails. The company also gave out free seasonal flu shots not just to the company's 85 employees, but to their family members as well, and isn't counting days spent home with the flu toward annual limits.

American Electric Power, one of the largest U.S. power generators, plans to sequester its most critical employees for a while if needed — housing, feeding and otherwise caring for them. The Columbus, Ohio, company has run drills to ensure it can keep the lights on if one-third or more of the work force is out sick, and stocked a 90-day supply of surgical masks, disinfectants and respirators for 20,000 employees and 5,000 contractors, says Ted Kwiatkowski, manager of business recovery services.

"We are not planning for what it is today. We are planning for what it could eventually be," he says.

Telling people to stay home if sick is fine for those guaranteed a paycheck, but a tough sell for the 50 million U.S. workers who have no paid sick leave.

"I think what you'll see there is people will want to come to work even if they're sick," says Ann Beauchesne, head of emergency preparedness at the U.S. Chamber

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of Commerce, which represents small businesses.

*Associated Press Writers Ashley Heher in Chicago, Tom Murphy in Indianapolis, Deborah Yao in Philadelphia, Dee-Ann Durbin in Detroit, Sara Lepro and Mike Obel in New York, Mark Williams in Columbus, Ohio, and Sam Hananel in Washington, D.C., contributed to this story.*

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[1] <http://tinyurl.com/yjzsjzl>