

Is Pandemic Planning Cause for Concern?

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Nearly 75% of global corporations either have a detailed avian flu pandemic readiness plan in place or are in the process of developing one, according to a report released by The Conference Board, New York, the global research and business membership organization.

Large and publicly held companies appear to be the most advanced in their preparation. Approximately 95% of companies with more than \$5,000,000,000 in sales either have an up-to-date preparedness plan or are in the process of creating one. However, 65% of companies with less than \$100,000,000 in sales do not yet have any plans in place specifically addressing the impact of an influenza pandemic.

"The variability of business responsiveness to planning alone—with large companies more willing and able to do so than smaller firms—underscores vulnerability in the current state of pandemic readiness planning," contends David J. Vidal, research director of Global Corporate Citizenship. "Given that successful pandemic containment would require extraordinary levels of business, social, governmental, and individual awareness, knowledge, and cooperation, these gaps provide reason for pause."

According to the report, the most significant disadvantage in not conducting formal pandemic preparedness planning may be the virtually total absence of coordination with the public sector. An overwhelming 94% of companies say they have not had discussions with government officials at any level about their particular organization's ability to provide essential services or access to facilities, equipment, or staff during a pandemic.

In the event of an outbreak, companies are most concerned about the health and welfare of employees (98%), operational continuity (96%), and the telecommuting capabilities that would enable employees to work from home (93%). Most companies are expected to rely on information technology so employees will be able to continue to function away from the workplace. Seventy percent currently are enhancing existing capabilities to allow employees to work from home or from a satellite facility during a pandemic. Firms say that they intend to employ e-mails (82%), intranets (76%), management briefings (58%), and crisis hotlines (57%) when given a choice of which methods of employee communications to use.

There does not seem to be strong consensus on any specific criterion that would activate an organization's pandemic preparedness plan. Close to one-third of the survey participants report that their plan will go into effect when the World Health Organization declares Alert Level 4 (increased human-to-human transmission). Eighteen percent indicate that their plan will get the green light when a pandemic situation is declared in a country where their organization has an operating presence, while 15% simply do not know.

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