
Pandemic Flu Preparedness in the Office and Contact Center

How to Prevent the Spread of Illness and Avoid Its Negative Impact on Business

With flu season just around the corner, businesses are beginning to consider how best to encourage the health of their employees to keep absenteeism to a minimum. This year, businesses have even greater concerns to weigh, as the threat of a H1N1 flu outbreak looms. According to WebMD, a CDC flu expert estimates that without a widely available vaccine, current trends suggest that 12 percent to 24 percent of Americans might contract H1N1 this fall and winter.

Many businesses will suffer greatly if hit by a pandemic flu and must take measures now to try to prevent employees from contracting and spreading the illness. By giving employees the proper tools to stay safe and healthy, organizations will be able to protect themselves from some of the negative affects of a potential H1N1 outbreak.

Equipping Employees with Tools to Prevent the Spread of the Flu

Most flu viruses, including the H1N1 virus, are spread from person to person through droplet transmission, which typically means coughing or sneezing, and can occur over a distance of up to six feet. An influenza virus can survive on environmental surfaces and can generally infect a person for about 2–8 hours after being deposited on the surface. Hard, non-porous surfaces are particularly vulnerable—one study showed that flu viruses can live for up to 48 hours on hard surfaces.

With these types of surfaces (like desks and computer keyboards) prevalent in offices, and with employees usually sitting in very close proximity, especially in cubicle environments, businesses may need to be particularly diligent in their flu prevention efforts. The risks for spreading illness are only exacerbated in offices that practice equipment sharing with shift workers, such as contact centers.

Making Shared Headsets Safer

Whenever fiscally and logistically possible, a prudent way to avoid spreading the flu is to eliminate the need to share equipment. The equipment commonly shared in these types of office environments includes computer monitors and keyboards as well as telephones and headsets. While it's unlikely that a company will be able to afford an investment in new monitors or phones to help prevent the flu, it may be possible to purchase new telephone headsets for each employee. There could be a strong return on investment for this, since shared headsets' proximity to the nose and mouth could play a role in spreading illness. In fact, MedPrep Consulting Group states that at a minimum, call center and office employees should have their own headsets and keyboards to help stop the spread of the flu virus.

If personal headsets are not an option, companies may choose to purchase disposable headset covers that individuals can employ each time they use a shared headset. While this is an inexpensive way to help limit the exposure to germs on a headset, it will likely have a negative effect on call sound quality.

Another option that companies can consider if sharing headsets is unavoidable is to purchase replaceable voice tubes for their headsets. For a minimal cost, employees can switch out these pieces to potentially avoid the spread of germs. However, noise-cancelling headsets do not use voice tubes, so if that style of headset is deployed, disinfectant wipes become the key weapon against the flu (see below). For less than \$5 companies can also provide employees with individual ear cushions to use with a shared headset during their shifts. These can be marked or kept in a personalized container like a zipped plastic bag so that each employee can keep track of their own.

Keeping Shared Headsets Clean

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends in its “Preparing for the Flu” report that businesses clean surfaces and items that are more likely to have frequent hand contact daily.

Organizations can purchase special towelette packs to clean shared headsets. These cleaning cloths can be used to wipe down the earpiece, voice tube or microphone boom and connector. Alternatively, individuals can use a disposable tissue and antibacterial cleaner to wipe down their headsets between shifts or at the end of each day. It is important to note that any cleaning agent used on a headset should not include alcohol, as alcohol can make some materials brittle, which may damage the headset. The headset cords are particularly vulnerable to this type of damage. Businesses should also take care to provide cleaners that are hypoallergenic, since headsets come in close contact with sensitive tissue around the ear and face.

Reaping the Benefits of a Healthier, More Productive Workforce

Regardless of whether the H1N1 virus reaches pandemic proportions this flu season, employees and organizations can benefit from taking actions to prevent the spread of illness and reduce absenteeism by minimizing equipment sharing when possible and keeping all shared equipment clean. Encouraging flu prevention in the workplace can stop the spread of many illnesses that would otherwise result in absenteeism and decreased productivity.

With some planning and the proper tools, businesses that make an investment now will keep employees safe and healthy this flu season and beyond.

Business Resources for Pandemic Flu Preparedness

The Centers for Disease Control
<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/Pandemic/>

The World Health Organization
<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/pandemic/en/>

Flu.gov
<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/>

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
http://www.dhs.gov/files/programs/editorial_0760.shtm