FIGHTING THE FLU

FIVE QUESTIONS (AND ANSWERS) FOR DEALING WITH A FLU OUTBREAK IN THE WORKPLACE

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White Paper

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INTRODUCTION

Flu season can be harmful to your health. That applies not only to your personal health, but to your business' health as well. In an influenza outbreak, employees may be too sick to work, or forced to stay home to care for infected family members. Others may unknowingly bring the virus into the office, putting co-workers, customers and others at risk.

These circumstances can dramatically increase absenteeism and ultimately develop into a full-blown business interruption.   No matter the industry sector or geographic location, your company is at risk of feeling the adverse effects of a flu outbreak.

Last year's flu season, as indicated in a report from Walgreens[1], was one of the most severe in a decade. In comparison to a more typical flu season, 2012-2013 had two to three times more of a negative impact. The report concluded U.S. adults missed 230 million work days, while children missed more than 90 million school days due to flu-related illness.

According to Columbia University[2], predictions for the 2013-2014 flu season suggest some relief over last year. But higher rates of infection than those seen in recent seasons are nevertheless anticipated.

To help resilience managers contend with what may turn out to be another dangerous season, we at Send Word Now® are pleased to answer five key questions pertaining to flu preparedness and response. Read on to learn how these recommendations can support your organization's business continuity/disaster recovery (BC/DR) strategy, and ultimately, its goal to physically and financially survive the current risk.

1: http://news.walgreens.com/article_display.cfm?article_id=5809
2: http://www.mailman.columbia.edu/news/flu-forecasting-website-posts-first-predictions

QUESTION 1:
HOW DO WE BEST PREPARE FOR A FLU OUTBREAK?

The U.S. Health Department[3] estimates that on average the seasonal flu is responsible for more than 111 million sick days each year, totaling more than $7 billion in lost productivity.

Depending on the size of your organization, the flu could actually force you to alter business hours, or worse, close your doors, due to high employee absenteeism. While outcomes will vary depending on the strain, weather conditions, geographic location, etc., this worst-case scenario is clearly a real possibility. As such, preparation and response plans to this critical event should rank among the top events documented in your BC/DR strategy.

So where do you start if you have not done so already?

ANSWER: START WITH THE BASICS

There are a multitude of elements to consider when dealing with an employee health crisis. The following are helpful ideas for tailoring your preparation and response to its effects on your organization.

Start with the basics. Remind everyone to get a flu shot. Consider incentivizing people to get one by reimbursing them for the expense, or making immunizations available in the office free of charge. Encourage good hygiene by reminding employees to wash their hands with soap and water, and supply hand sanitizer. Also, urge employees to use sick time or work from home if they are experiencing flu-like symptoms (especially a fever) so as to not spread the virus to others.

Adopt targeted contingency plans. Make sure you have plans in place designed expressly to deal with a health crisis. Don't assume generic approaches will be adequate for this type of unique circumstance.

Know what to expect. Monitor the media, including your local news and The Weather Channel®, which offers the "Cold & Flu Report" daily. This way, you will know when your location(s) should reach peak flu season so you can plan for resiliency strategies.

Make plans clear. Even with all the predictions and pre-planning, circumstances surrounding a flu outbreak can change rapidly, and the unexpected can occur. Make sure employees know chain-of-command roles and responsibilities well in advance, and validate their (or someone else's) ability to carry them out if they too become sick. Delegate when necessary.

Assess worker health. An organization's most dedicated workers (those who vow never to miss work) may become its greatest health threat. Be prepared to assess health conditions and turn away employees who are ill or at high risk.

3: http://www.flu.gov/planning-preparedness/business

Address remote working policies. Many companies do not embrace work-from-home practices. However, widespread health threats may call for employees to fulfill their duties remotely. Implement policies and technologies that make this possible when required.

Alter travel policies. Whereas open travel for certain employees may be the norm, it may be necessary to enact restrictions that keep key personnel grounded. Travel hubs, such as airports and railway stations, are prime locations for spreading influenza. Reduce employee exposure by limiting travel during severe outbreaks.

QUESTION 2:
HOW DO WE ALERT EMPLOYEES TO THE POTENTIAL RISK AND PROVIDE INSTRUCTION?

As any business resilience manager will attest, communication is the single most important element of an organization's BC/DR strategy. And, since a flu outbreak has the potential to affect every employee, it is imperative that it be executed, from start to finish, to the best of your ability. That said, these plans should include comprehensive measures to ensure frequent and reliable communication between executive management, department heads, employees, suppliers, customers (if applicable) and other stakeholders.

So how do you get this information out and into the hands of those who need it most when you may be short staffed already, or, when your workforce is scattered across the country or globe?

ANSWER: EMERGENCY NOTIFICATION SERVICES

Emergency notification services like Send Word Now allow for immediate, "multimodal" communications, i.e., sending alerts through a wide variety of devices and channels. Multimodal alerting includes methods such as:

- Recorded messages sent through traditional or mobile phones
- Text messages converted to speech and sent through traditional or mobile phones
- SMS text messages
- Email

While the aforementioned devices and channels cover many of the communication bases, when choosing an alerting service, it is wise to consider other modalities as well. For example, the Send Word Now service provides capabilities for delivering messages through:

- BlackBerry® PIN
- Desktop Alerting (messages "pop up" on computer monitors)
- Cisco® IP phones (messages are delivered to the screen of the phone)
- Digital displays
- Web services

The emergency notification service should also provide mobile apps for on-the-go activations. Send Word Now does so, putting all the capabilities of the standard alerting service in the palm of your hand through Apple®, Android® and BlackBerry® smartphone apps.

Additionally, comprehensive emergency notification services like Send Word Now make notifying and coordinating response teams easy and fast, even when resources may be limited or under the weather. When considering a notification service, make sure it offers features for automated outbound conferencing.

For example, Send Word Now lets you easily manage outbound conferencing as an integral part of its notification service. Here's how it works. A group of response team members is created within the application. Generally, this is set up long before a crisis hits, but it may be created on the fly as well. With the click of a few buttons, response teams are notified of the emerging crisis. While any contact device may be targeted, mobile or traditional phones are most useful in this case as, upon receipt of the notification call, recipients are given the option to press "1" for automatic transfer to an open conference bridge. The conference bridge can be a service already used by the company, or it can be a bridge provided by Send Word Now. This feature can dramatically reduce the time it takes to gather crisis response team personnel.

The decisions reached during these critical calls can easily be communicated to employees using the emergency notification service or posted to an inbound message board.

MULTIPLE WAYS TO INITIATE NOTIFICATIONS

Browser
Quick Send
Email

Online

Mobile App

24x7 Customer Support

Web Services API
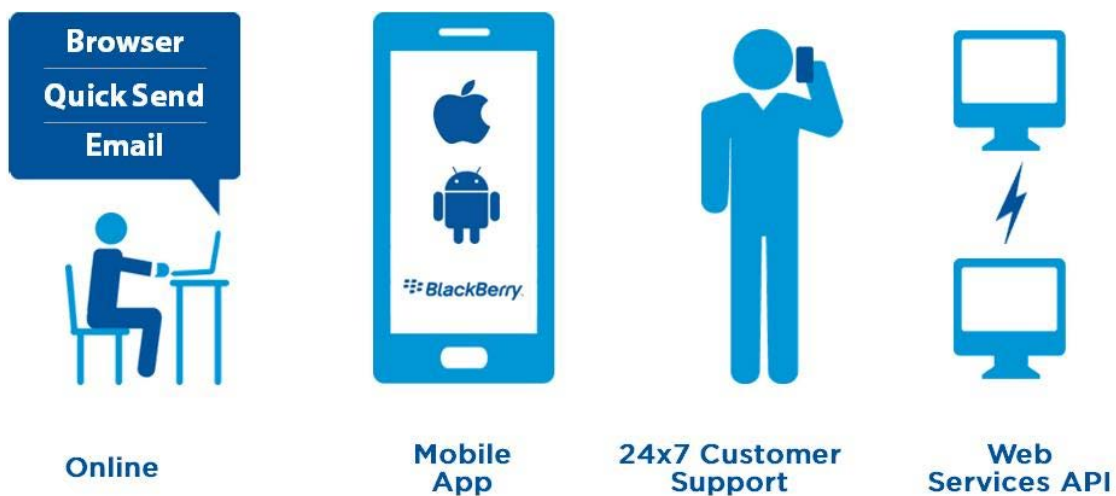
QUESTION 3:
HOW WILL WE ACCOUNT FOR THE WELL-BEING OF EMPLOYEES?

Resiliency professionals who are considering the implementation of a notification program are generally drawn to the technology for its ability to send outbound alerts very rapidly. This is understandable, as some services such as Send Word Now are capable of sending tens of thousands of messages within just a few minutes. However, with such rapid outbound capabilities, managers may overlook the benefits of receiving information *back* from recipients. Allowing alert recipients to indicate their health/safety status, ability to respond to a situation, confirmation they have received instructions, etc., through all of the various communication modalities can be a powerful tool for employee accountability and crisis response.

ANSWER: GET WORD BACK

When selecting a notification solution, be sure to choose a service that allows you to ask recipients a question and capture their feedback from within the notification. The management of this feedback loop should be simple, fully integrated into the message building process, and not presented in a separate application or screen. Recipients should be able to respond to the question using any communication device. And, data should be captured and summarized in easy-to-read reports for quick analysis and decision-making.

For example, Send Word Now offers its highly useful Get Word Back feature. This capability allows message originators to construct a question and its associated response options from within the message creation screen. Recipients can respond to the question by using their touchtone phone, replying to an email or SMS message or utilizing other device-dependent means.

In the event of a flu outbreak, Send Word Now's Get Word Back feature could provide answers to questions pertaining to employees' current work or health status, helping managers to make better, more informed decisions concerning employee workloads.

Additionally, Send Word Now's AlertTracer® feature provides date and time stamps on all messages sent and received, allowing for detailed accountability and after-action review.

QUESTION 4:
HOW WILL WE KEEP EMPLOYEES AND OTHERS IN THE KNOW AS THE SITUATION PROGRESSES?

Rapid, automated outbound communication is generally the primary reason companies subscribe to emergency notification services. With such powerful capabilities at their fingertips, resilience professionals sometimes fail to adequately plan for *inbound* communication channels as means to communicate with employees and other stakeholders. Yet, in critical situations, such as a flu outbreak, where circumstances may evolve over time,

employees, suppliers or others may attempt to call the company's main phone number seeking new information and instruction. This activity can bog down phone lines, consume scarce personnel resources and delay information getting to the people who need it the most.

ANSWER: INBOUND MESSAGE BOARDS

To avoid this potential mistake, make sure your notification service provides capabilities for calling into a designated number to obtain information. For example, Send Word Now offers two types of message boards for addressing inbound communication: recipient message boards and shared message boards.

RECIPIENT MESSAGE BOARDS

Recipient message boards allow individuals to retrieve specific messages that were previously distributed via an outbound notification. So, for example, an employee who missed an outbound voice notification could dial into a dedicated toll free number, enter her credentials, and hear a playback of the message. In addition, the employee is not limited to simply hearing a static playback of the recording; she is also able to respond to a question such as "Are you OK?" from within the voice message using her touchtone device. Her feedback is captured and available for reports which can be further used by administrators and incident managers for crisis response purposes.

SHARED MESSAGE BOARDS

Shared message boards are useful for posting recorded messages or instructions to a wider audience. Such messages, including status updates, can be retrieved by Send Word Now accountholders and non-accountholders alike. Shared message boards are great for disseminating non-sensitive information such as business hours updates, workload expectations, etc.

MANAGING IVR CALL FLOWS

In either situation, it is important inbound callers be greeted with clear interactive menus and automated instructions that allow them to find needed information quickly. To customize this interaction, you should also consider a solution such as Send Word Now's Interactive Voice Response (IVR) Designer. This integrated feature allows administrators to create and customize inbound call flows using an easy drag-and-drop user interface. It adds even greater power and advantages to an organization's inbound communications capabilities.

QUESTION 5:
HOW DO WE ENSURE WE HAVE ACCURATE CONTACT INFORMATION?

During a flu outbreak, as in any critical event, it is imperative employee contact data is accurate and up to date. Further, multiple points of contact for each employee are highly desirable to ensure messages get through if one or more communication devices are unavailable. Unfortunately, some resilience managers launch notifications during a crisis, only to discover a large percentage of their employee base is unreachable due to outdated or incomplete information.

ANSWER: RECIPIENT SELF-UPDATE AND WEB SERVICES

A notification service should allow for multiple ways to manage recipient data to ensure it is complete and accurate. For example, Send Word Now provides a number of easy methods for bringing data into the service. Two particularly useful approaches include Recipient Self-Update and Send Word Now Web Services.

RECIPIENT SELF-UPDATE

This functionality allows recipients to access and update their contact record through a secure online portal. Notices can be sent to recipients reminding them to confirm the accuracy of their information.

SEND WORD NOW WEB SERVICES

With this approach, contact information resides in another application, such as a Human Resources (HR) system. Employee data is pushed to the notification service programmatically and seamlessly based on administrator preferences. Since these external databases may be tied to payroll or other important personnel functions, the information is often more likely to be updated.

Organizations may also find Send Word Now's Self-Registration Portal of special benefit during health-related contingencies. Why? Employees who are asked to not report to the office or those who may be on the move, seeking support from family members or leaving high-risk areas, might not be accessible at their usual numbers or locations. Through the portal, managers can easily keep track of contact information for personal devices, such as personal mobile phones not typically captured in HR databases.

CONCLUSION

Like other crisis scenarios, flu preparation and response calls for unique approaches, particularly in the critical area of communication. Organizations know they must expect to deal with high rates of employee absenteeism and potential revenue losses, requiring alterations to standard policies and the implementation of support technologies such as emergency notification services.

If you do not currently utilize an emergency notification service for resilience purposes, we at Send Word Now would be privileged to discuss with you its many benefits and our unique strengths. If you are already an emergency notification user, we hope you will benefit from the answers to these five key flu season questions, and will leverage the service to its full capability.