

Pandemic planning in the workplace

The threat of an influenza pandemic is real; have you thought how it could affect your business? How would your business function if half your staff did not turn up to work for a week? What if this trend continued for an entire year? What if this trend affected not only your business, but all of your suppliers, contractors and customers as well?

While nobody can predict when an influenza pandemic could occur, planning ahead could minimise the impact of a pandemic on your business, help protect your staff and contribute to national recovery.

“ The threat is real, and we need to be prepared... ”

Peter Beattie MP, Premier and Minister for Trade

To help your business prepare, this guide explains what an influenza pandemic would mean for your business, how to plan for such an event and where to find more detailed resources to help with this task.

What is an influenza pandemic?

An influenza pandemic is a worldwide outbreak of disease that can occur when a new strain of influenza, to which people are not immune, emerges and spreads. It could spread through droplets (coughs and sneezes), by touching contaminated surfaces and through particles in the air in crowded spaces. During the 20th Century, there were three influenza pandemics, which caused millions of deaths, large scale social disruption and worldwide economic downturns. Experts agree that the current strain of bird flu has the potential to trigger another human influenza pandemic.

What would an influenza pandemic mean for my business?

An influenza pandemic would affect many of Queensland's essential industries, including energy, utilities, transport, health, food supply, finance and communications. During a pandemic, it is essential that infrastructure owners and operators keep their businesses going, as they are responsible for the critical services that keep our society running. Guides to assist businesses in other sectors are also being provided.

Unlike many other risks, an influenza pandemic could occur over a prolonged period and in several waves. Its effects could be catastrophic, causing geographically widespread death and illness (nationally and internationally) and temporary changes in many areas of society. It is likely that people would be under extreme stress and financial hardship, given the possibility of a broader economic downturn.

“ In response to an influenza pandemic, governments may take actions such as suspending public transport, closing schools and childcare centres, cancelling flights, postponing public events and advising people to stock up on food and household supplies in case they need to go into home quarantine. This will have a major impact on business operations (see *Glossary: Fact sheet 4*). ”

While an influenza pandemic would have no direct effect on physical infrastructure and assets, it would have a wide range of impacts on all organisations including disruptions to business operations, increased staff absenteeism and changed workplace dynamics.



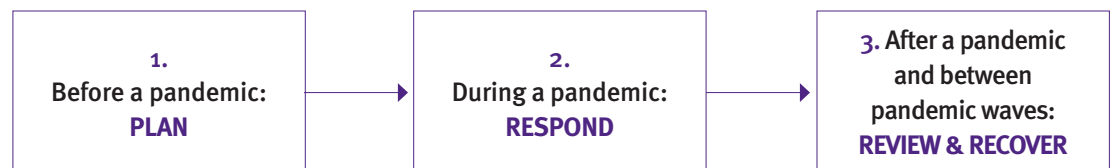
Internal Business Impacts

Increased absenteeism due to illness, quarantine, closure of schools/ childcare, fear and anxiety and caring commitments	→	How an influenza pandemic could impact my business
Changed workplace dynamics eg. changed work roles and interactions		
Internal cash flows		

External Business Impacts

←	Large scale social disruption
←	Delays in supply of goods and materials
←	Reduced availability of sub-contractors
←	Increased/decreased demand for goods or services
←	Government response to pandemic (see Glossary: Fact sheet 4)
←	Contractual arrangements
←	Legislation and regulations

How should I prepare my business for an influenza pandemic?



1. Before a pandemic: plan

- Understand and monitor the risk
- Plan to protect your business and maintain essential services
- Plan to protect your staff
- Plan to communicate with staff, stakeholders, customers and suppliers

■ Understand and monitor the risk

To plan for any disaster, you need to understand the risk and the potential impact on your business. To research the potential risk and impact to your industry, use the information available through our *Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*.

■ Plan to protect your business and maintain essential services

Planning now will influence how your business will manage during a pandemic and how quickly your business can get back to normal operations after such an event. Consider developing an influenza pandemic plan or including pandemic influenza in your existing business continuity plan (see *Fact sheet 5*). Identify the triggers that would activate the plan. Your plan should consider both internal and external factors.

Key areas to consider:

- **staff** – what core staff and skills are needed to maintain critical services? Plan for staff absences by considering volunteers, retired staff and sharing staff with similar organisations. Consider succession planning and training, and options for staff to work from home.
- **key contractors and suppliers** - what would happen if you were unable to source supplies? Are there alternative suppliers? Is it feasible to stockpile critical resources? Consider contractual requirements and service level agreements, and whether these might need to be revised before a pandemic (eg. to set a minimum level of service/supply from third parties during the pandemic).
- **business operations** - would the business (or parts of it) need to be reduced or closed? How would this be decided? How would the business cope with demand fluctuations (up or down)? Customers may prefer to use self-service, call centre or online options to reduce personal contact during a pandemic.
- **business profitability** - how would a downturn in business affect cashflow? Are there cash reserves if credit facilities are limited? Would insurance policies cover the effects of a pandemic?
- **government response** - how would government action in response to a pandemic affect your business (eg. border control, home quarantine, social distancing, changes to public transport)?

While the exact characteristics of an influenza pandemic virus can not be predicted, health experts suggest a pandemic is likely to last for up to 12 months with outbreaks occurring in waves.

Waves may be about eight weeks each. During each wave, up to 35% of the community may become ill, with workplace absenteeism up to around 50% at the peak of the pandemic.



■ Plan to protect your staff

With workplace absenteeism as high as 50% during a pandemic, protecting and managing your staff is a key issue. To protect staff in the workplace, plan to:

- provide information on how to minimise the spread of the virus, including advice to stay home if sick (*see Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*)
- provide hygiene facilities and personal protective equipment as advised by health authorities at the time eg. masks for sick people, handwash, tissues and paper towels
- ensure staff work one metre or more apart where possible ('social distancing') and avoid face-to-face socialising and meetings
- review workplace ventilation and cleaning practices (*see Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*)
- develop policies regarding staff travel to or from affected areas.

You should also consider flexible workplace practices that could be implemented during a pandemic. Involve staff in finding solutions and consult them on any changes made (existing Industrial Relations and Workplace Health and Safety frameworks will continue to apply). These practices could include:

- extending working hours so fewer people are working in the same place at the same time
- enabling staff to work remotely from home
- providing more car parks in case public transport is cancelled
- providing flexible leave options where possible, for people who are ill, have had contact with ill people, or who have ill family members.

■ Plan to communicate with staff, stakeholders, customers and suppliers

Develop procedures for keeping staff, stakeholders, customers and suppliers informed of any changes to your workplace during the pandemic. This could include developing procedures for communicating with government about risks to critical services, managing the media and hygiene requirements for visitors. Consider establishing hotlines and dedicated websites to communicate important information.

2. During a pandemic: respond

- Monitor the pandemic threat**
- Implement appropriate response actions**

While you will not be able to prevent an influenza pandemic occurring, you can take action to prevent more severe impacts.

- **Monitor the pandemic threat** by listening to government and World Health Organisation advice, and visiting relevant websites (*see Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*). Keep track of the government response as this may impact your business (eg. if schools and childcare centres are closed, staff may need to stay home to look after children).
- **Implement appropriate response actions.** Depending on current information about the risk, decide whether to implement response actions to protect your business and maintain essential services, protect your staff and communicate to your staff, stakeholders, customers and suppliers.

Review your business response to the pandemic threat regularly as the situation changes. Consider staff based in offices, as well as staff travelling to or from affected areas (overseas travel is likely to be restricted). Use the pre-prepared resources contained in business continuity planning guides (*see Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*) such as posters on correct hand-washing techniques, cough etiquette and respiratory hygiene. Information on appropriate workplace cleaning methods is also provided.



3. After a pandemic and between pandemic waves: review and recover

- ☑ Monitor the pandemic threat
- ☑ Be supportive and flexible with staff
- ☑ Help your business get back to normal

- **Monitor the pandemic threat** by listening to government and World Health Organisation advice, and visiting relevant websites (*see Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*). Keep track of the government response as this may impact your business (eg. if schools and childcare centres are re-opened, staff may be able to return to work).
- **Be supportive and flexible with staff** as a pandemic may result in people losing family and friends, feeling disenchanted and/or suffering financially. It will be important for employers to help staff restore their emotional and psychological wellbeing, and encourage them to return to work and re-establish routines. Staff may also need flexibility to assist family members.
- **Help your business get back to normal faster by:**
 - returning to normal routines as much as possible
 - assessing the impacts of the pandemic on your business
 - assisting your supply chains to recover
 - debriefing and updating pandemic and business continuity plans to help you prepare for the possibility of future pandemic waves
 - sharing good business practices with others in your industry.

What now?

To help your business prepare for a pandemic, you need to:

- understand and monitor the risk
- plan to protect your business and maintain essential services
- plan to protect your staff and customers
- plan to communicate to your staff, stakeholders, customers and suppliers.

Make sure your business is not caught out. A *Planning Checklist: Fact sheet 2* and comprehensive *Resources Guide: Fact sheet 3* that provide more detail on pandemic planning are available at www.qld.gov.au

Take action to protect your business and pass this information to your security or risk manager today.

Security planning and coordination

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