

Pandemic planning in the workplace

A guide for Queensland's small and medium businesses

According to scientists and health experts, a new threat is looming – a human influenza pandemic. National and international governments, communities and industries are preparing now to manage the potential impacts of such a disaster.

While nobody can predict when an influenza pandemic could occur, the Queensland Government encourages all businesses to be prepared. Planning ahead could minimise the impact of a pandemic on your business, help protect your staff and contribute to national recovery.

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 influenza pandemic affected not only your business, but all of your suppliers and customers as well?

“ The threat is real, businesses should prepare now... ”

Dr Jeannette Young, Chief Health Officer, Queensland Health

This guide has been developed to help you consider what impact an influenza pandemic may have on your business and to provide access to information to help you plan ahead.

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/or 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 small and medium businesses. During a pandemic, it is important that businesses providing key services to the community or key infrastructure make every effort to continue operations. Other businesses may wish to plan for how to cope during a pandemic, perhaps by scaling down operations or closing (this would be a worst case scenario, and governments would anticipate that businesses would continue to operate). Businesses that consider temporary closure should consult with insurers and check their insurance policies (especially Loss of Profit Insurance) before making a decision to close during a pandemic.

Unlike many other risks, an influenza pandemic could occur in several waves, each lasting for several months. Its effects could be catastrophic – many people would be very ill and many would likely die. It would generate unprecedented levels of fear and panic 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 to and from affected areas, and recommending people minimise physical contact and stay a metre or more apart.

This will have a major impact on business operations. ”

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

Internal impacts

- Increased absenteeism due to illness, quarantine, closure of schools/childcare, fear and anxiety and caring commitments
- Changed workplace dynamics e.g. changed work roles and interactions
- Internal cash flows



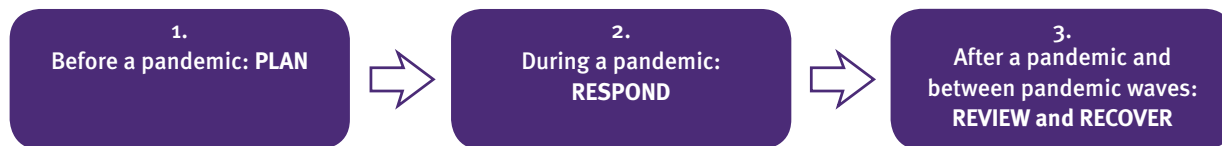
How an influenza pandemic could impact my business



External impacts

- Large scale social disruption
- Increased/decreased demand for goods or services
- Delays in supply of goods and services
- Government responses to pandemic
- Contractual arrangements
- Reduced availability of sub-contractors
- Legislation and regulation

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
- Plan to protect your staff
- Plan to communicate with staff, 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 read more about the potential risk and possible impacts on small and medium businesses, refer to the *Resources Guide: Fact sheet 3*.

“ While the exact characteristics of an influenza pandemic virus cannot be predicted, health experts suggest a pandemic is likely to last for many months with outbreaks occurring in waves. ”

Plan to protect your business

Planning will influence how your business will manage during an influenza pandemic and how quickly your business can resume normal operations after such an event. You might need to develop or revise your existing business continuity plan to consider the implications of an influenza pandemic (refer to *Resources guide: Fact sheet 3* and *Business continuity planning considerations: Fact sheet 4*). Consider scheduling regular reviews of the plan to make sure it is always up-to-date and relevant.

This section provides some good risk planning practices (refer to *Business continuity planning considerations: Fact sheet 4*).

- Business operations – would your business (or parts of it) need to be scaled down or closed? How would this be decided? How would your business cope with changes in demand (up or down)? Could you continue providing essential services to your customers? Could you provide self-service, call centre or internet options to customers during an influenza pandemic to reduce personal contact and help people feel safer when interacting with your business?
- Staff – what staff and skills are essential to maintain core activities? Plan for staff absences by considering retired staff and sharing staff with similar organisations. Consider succession planning and cross-training and options for staff to work from home, if possible.
- Key suppliers – what other services and businesses do you rely on? What would happen if your suppliers could not provide product? Are there alternative suppliers? Is it possible to stockpile critical resources? Consider your contractual requirements and service level agreements and whether these might need to be changed before a pandemic.
- Business profitability – according to the Australian Government Treasury, a pandemic could have a significant impact on the economy. Suppliers may be unwilling to provide goods or services without early up-front payment and prices may increase. Financial institutions may limit credit availability. Customers might seek deferred payment options. Businesses should consider their cash reserves, lines of credit and insurance policies.
- Government response – how would government responses to a pandemic affect your business (e.g. border control, home quarantine, social distancing or changes to public transport)?

“ On the basis of past pandemics and without mitigation strategies, waves may last approximately 12 weeks each. Up to 40 per cent of the community may become ill, with workplace absenteeism between 30 to 50 per cent at the peak of the pandemic. ”

Plan to protect your staff

With workplace absenteeism as high as 50 per cent during a pandemic, protecting and managing your staff is essential. To protect your staff in the workplace, you should plan to:

- provide information on how to minimise the spread of the virus, including advice to stay home if sick. You do not need to wait for an influenza pandemic to practise good hygiene that could reduce the spread of infection (*refer to Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*)
- provide hygiene facilities and personal protective equipment as advised by health authorities at the time, which might include handwash, tissues, paper towels, no-touch waste receptacles and masks
- make arrangements so that staff can work one metre or more apart ('social distancing') and avoid face-to-face socialising and meetings. Where face-to-face contact with customers is necessary, consider the use of barriers or screens to reduce the spread of infection
- review workplace ventilation and cleaning practices (*refer to Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*)
- maintain up-to-date contact lists for all staff members, including next of kin, and plan what you will do if an employee becomes ill at work
- develop policies regarding staff travel to or from affected areas.

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

- extending business hours so fewer people are working and visiting your business in the same place at the same time
- enabling staff to work remotely from home or trade online if possible
- providing more car parks in city areas 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, customers and suppliers

Before a pandemic, your business should develop procedures for keeping staff, customers and suppliers informed of any changes to your workplace during the pandemic. Staff and customers will be reassured by your pandemic planning activities and will be pleased to know that you are thinking ahead and preparing as best you can. It is also important that your customers are aware of changes in your business operations.

2. During a pandemic: RESPOND

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

Monitor the pandemic threat by listening to government and World Health Organisation advice, and visiting relevant websites (*refer to Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*). Keep track of the government response as this may impact your business (e.g. 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, maintain essential services, scale down your operations or close. Also decide what actions you will take to protect your staff and communicate with your staff, 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 (*refer to 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 available.

“ While you will not be able to prevent an influenza pandemic from happening, you can take action to prevent more severe impacts. In the event of an influenza pandemic, governments will make every effort to provide timely and reliable advice to the public and businesses through all available means, including television, radio, newspapers, internet sites and public information hotlines. ”

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 (*refer to Resources guide: Fact sheet 3*). Keep track of the government response as this may impact your business (e.g. 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 disenchanting and 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
- reviewing and updating your pandemic and business continuity plans to help you prepare for possible future pandemic waves
- sharing good business practices with others in your industry.

What now?

- Understand and monitor the risk
- Plan to protect your business
- Plan to protect your staff
- Communicate with your staff, customers and suppliers

Make sure your business is not caught out. Refer to the following fact sheets at www.premiers.qld.gov.au/Qkit for more information.

- Checklist: Fact sheet 2
- Resources guide: Fact sheet 3
- Business continuity planning considerations: Fact sheet 4
- Masks and antivirals: Fact sheet 5

Take action to protect your business and be prepared.

Security planning and coordination

Phone: 07 3405 6552

Email: security@premiers.qld.gov.au

Website: www.premiers.qld.gov.au/Qkit

Acknowledgements

The information contained in this guide has been informed by work completed by the Queensland Pandemic Influenza Taskforce, the Australian Government, and plans developed in other countries including New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom.

© The State of Queensland (Department of the Premier and Cabinet) 2008.

Published by the Queensland Government, May 2008, 100 George Street, Brisbane Qld 4000.

The Queensland Government supports and encourages the dissemination and exchange of information. However, copyright protects this document. The State of Queensland has no objection to this material being reproduced, made available online or electronically but only if it is recognised as the owner of the copyright and this material remains unaltered. Copyright enquiries about this publication should be directed to the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, by email to copyright@premiers.qld.gov.au or in writing to PO Box 15185, City East Qld 4002.

