



## Small businesses deal again with swine flu issues

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NEW YORK – Small business owners who weathered the first wave of swine flu last spring are dealing with the illness all over again, including issues like employee absences and staffers who are afraid of getting sick.

**"Outside of the Obama health care plan, it's the topic of the day" in conversations that Rob Wilson has with his small business clients. Wilson, president of Employco, a Chicago-based resources outsourcing company, said that with schools and colleges back in session and the disease spreading, "we're seeing it start to hit businesses now."**

Even if owners don't already have staffers staying home because they or their children are sick, they need to figure out how the work will get done despite the flu. Owners should also think about prevention, whether that means making it easy for workers to get flu shots or keeping the workplace more sanitary. And they also need to be sure they keep employees' health matters private even if co-workers want to know who's got the flu.

The federal government, which this week warned small companies to be prepared to work with fewer staffers this fall, has published "Planning for 2009 H1N1 Influenza: A Preparedness Guide for Small Business." The guide is available online at <http://www.flu.gov/professional/business/smallbiz.html>.

There is also information for businesses from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/business/toolkit/>.

The government and HR consultants say owners can take steps to help limit the spread of flu in the workplace. Keeping a supply of strategically placed hand sanitizers and tissues can help. Frequent cleaning of surfaces that many people come into contact with is also a good idea.

Owners might want to take some cues from managers in the health care business. Jamie Anderson, vice president of health care for Constant Care Management, a Dallas-based operator of Alzheimer's assisted living facilities, said surfaces like handrails are being disinfected several times a day instead of once a day before the flu outbreak last spring.

Companies should also give staffers time off to get flu shots, and pay for shots even if they don't provide health insurance. But employers should be aware that they generally cannot require an employee to get a shot.

It is critical for companies to plan now for multiple employee absences. HR consultants recommend that owners be sure that staffers are able to substitute for one another when someone is out sick.

**"If you don't have employees cross-trained, you need to do so as quickly as possible" Wilson said.**

The spread of swine flu should also make owners think about allowing employees to telecommute. That's particularly important when an employee needs to stay home to care for a sick child. But an owner should not be asking someone who's sick to log in to work from home.

Small businesses such as manufacturers and retailers can be hard hit because employees can't do the work from home. Owners may want to consider hiring temporary staffers to pitch in, and maybe hiring them for training days in advance so they'll be ready to work when called in.

As a preventative measure, owners might want to consider staggering shifts if possible to limit the amount of contact employees have with each other, said Debra S. Squyres, a director at Trinet Group Inc., which also provides human resources outsourcing.

Along that line, when there have been outbreaks of flu near Constant Care facilities, non-essential visitors such as marketing agency representatives have not been allowed in, Anderson said.

Once they're sick, it's important for staffers to feel it's OK to stay home. A boss needs to be sure he or she doesn't do anything to pressure someone with the swine flu—or any illness for that matter—to come to work. To do so can be a violation of federal and state laws, and it's also a bad health practice. Even if the weak economy makes employees feel compelled to come in because of job insecurity or because fellow staffers are already stretched to the limit, an owner should be emphasizing: Stay home if you're sick.

Another concern for many staffers is using up sick time. A worker with a week of sick leave annually and who already took time for the seasonal flu this year might be tempted to come in rather than lose pay. Under these circumstances, the answer might be for owners to be a little more liberal with sick time.

"Traditional sick day policies might not address this scenario," Squyres said.

Companies that don't have written sick leave policies should be formulating them now. It's easy enough to do with a little research. Owners can talk to other employers in the

area, see how much time off they grant workers and then formulate a policy of their own. Human resources consultants can also help.

When a worker comes down with what appears to be the swine flu, other staffers may want to know whether the sick employee is indeed suffering from the disease. Owners need to know it's against federal laws, including the Americans with Disability Act, to reveal health information about any employee. They'll have to tell other staffers that they cannot discuss the matter.

If you have managers, be sure they don't divulge any information either. "I would make sure that managers are trained to respond to these kinds of inquiries," Squyres said.