

8th May 2009

Pandemics and how to sneeze!

The world in crisis!!!

The thought of a Pandemic fills us it seems, with wide ranging emotions, from momentary panic to complete nonchalance. We seem to fall apart when we realise the full potential impact, but the ability to make progress also seems to require us to dismiss our human fragility and move forward with confidence (which for me feels like a dignified explanation for nonchalance).

History teaches us that Pandemics, particularly of the Flu variety, have been a feature of our lives since the dawn of human civilisation.

In the past, even for the (currently) more affluent Western nations unhealthy living conditions helped to breed and spread infection like wildfire. Lack of proper hygiene, dreadful sanitation, poor healthcare, and more, helped to propel and spread infections. Today, poorer countries around the world have similar difficulties; with the spread of illness, infection and disease a constant threat.

Whilst we should 'count our blessings' for residing in a wealthier and healthier nation (the UK), if you look carefully at the way we live, we too can be heavily exposed to a rampant spread of infection. Living in wealthier countries we face different threats from modern living conditions. We don't open windows anymore – we just let the air conditioning systems take the strain, harbouring and distributing some interesting bugs in the process. We fly everywhere in pressurised tubes, and when we don't fly we go by train, bus or a different kind of tube! Pressed together in confined spaces we generate delightful conditions for the spread of bugs and germs. Perhaps, more than ever before, the ability for pandemics to develop now includes the richer 'commuting' nations alongside the hard pressed poorer populations.

So in response we find our government has to release public information telling us how to sneeze and specifically to sneeze into a tissue and to dispose of same in an appropriate manner. It appears sneezing into the open air or wiping your nose down with your sleeve is no longer deemed acceptable practice. Of course, in reality, it never was and perhaps it is a sad indictment on our recent progress that the government needs to tell us this in writing.

We don't of course always realise the dangers. In this case that sneezes can travel up to five feet away and reach speeds of up to 100 miles per hour.

And from a commercial perspective, what would happen if we actually suffered a loss of staff who caught a pandemic virus or who were distracted looking after those at home with a virus (which is often forgotten but just as damaging – family will always usurp work in a real crisis).

At what point does a minor staff sickness issue become a major problem? When should you shut the office down or ask staff to stay at home? How much paid-for sick leave can your business tolerate in reality (this is a big issue right now)? When should you reopen for business if you do close down for a period? Who should take the decisions in a crisis and who can take those decisions for them if they are incapacitated? And so on.....

The reality is that despite all the advice in the world, the decisions will be particularly difficult when involving people so directly and the illnesses that affect them. At the very least it's worth thinking about it carefully and having some form of pandemic plan to help protect your organisation should this be necessary. As a starting point put 'Pandemic Planning' into Google – there is quite a lot of material out there already.

8.5.09