

**Many businesses in Canada developed plans following the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2002 and the emergence and spread of the avian flu, and those have been pulled from the shelves and dusted off since the swine flu outbreak started in late April.**

**Photograph by: C.S. Goldsmith and A. Balish/Handout, Centers for Disease Control/Reuters**

OTTAWA — Canadian companies and organizations are being urged in a new report to consider the swine flu pandemic as a "business continuity crisis" and to put response plans in place now, before the fall flu season arrives.

The Conference Board of Canada report released Monday examines the actions some organizations have already taken and provides advice on what should be included in pandemic response plans.

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Those plans are now being tested and companies are determining how they can be applied to the swine flu pandemic that has made more than 10,000 Canadians sick. The swine flu, also known as the H1N1 virus, is expected to hit more Canadians in the fall months which will mean many employees missing work.

Organizations have to be flexible and responsive to the latest information about the new flu illness, the report said, in order to protect their employees from getting sick and to react accordingly when and if they do fall ill.

Bell Canada, for example, a company that has had two employees confirmed with swine flu, started developing a pandemic plan about three years ago and activated it in the spring when swine flu began to emerge. Adjustments, however, had to be made.

"We had actually been doing tests to make sure that the plans weren't just good on paper, that they could actually be activated," spokeswoman Jacqueline Michelis said in an interview. "We tweaked them and modified them when the H1N1 broke out."

Communication with employees is central to all the plans, said Michelis, and to that end Bell has been keeping staff up-to-date through internal e-mails and a pandemic website. It has also put up posters in company washrooms about proper hygiene and provided hand sanitizer. The company plans to host flu shot clinics in the fall for its 42,000 employees.

Bell's business is designated by the government as part of the country's critical infrastructure and, as such, the company must have an emergency management plan, under which its pandemic plan falls.

"We have to be able to maintain service when something like this happens, so we have a team in place always," said Michelis.

The Conference Board report also emphasized the importance of communication and recommended that companies be careful in striking a balance between too many and too few messages to employees and to external stakeholders.

Other actions that should be taken, according to the report, include getting senior management involved in the response plans and identifying which employees can fill in for each other when people fall ill.

The report recognized that implementing pandemic response plans during a recession is an added challenge for organizations, but the report said there are "no excuses" to avoid preparations.

"While many organizations are struggling to stay in business, they must now also find the resources, attention, and capability to respond to this additional serious pressure," the report said. "While some organizations may argue that the costs of preparation are simply too high — particularly in a difficult economic environment — the risks they are taking may prove to be too great."

Companies that are lagging on their pandemic plans should keep their legal responsibilities in mind, the report notes, because if they fail to provide due diligence they could be held liable.

Reputations will also be on the line, especially for organizations that are part of a supply chain. If one organization isn't adequately prepared for the effect the pandemic could have, it could easily disrupt the whole chain.

The Conference Board report urges organizations to shift their thinking, if they haven't already, in preparation for the fall.

"Organizations would do well to begin shifting their thinking that this is a medical crisis and, therefore, belongs to the medical profession, and recognize that a pandemic is also an economic and business continuity crisis. As such, it needs as much leadership from the business community as it does from pandemic specialists," the report said.

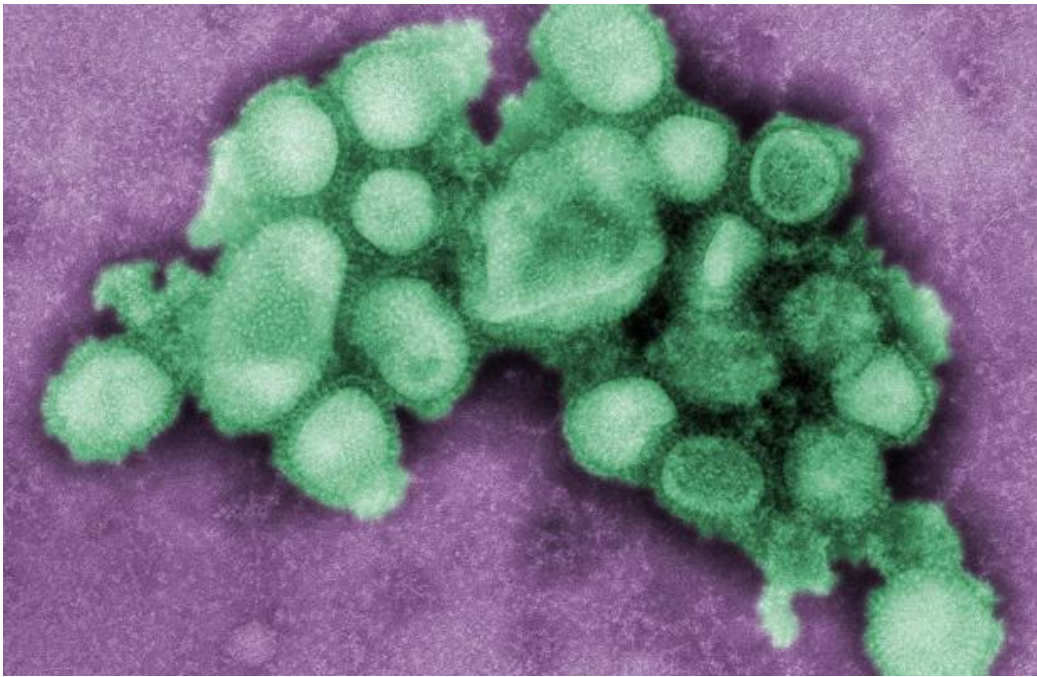
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