A Swine Flu Vaccine for Business

Ensuring Operational Continuity
Amid a Global Pandemic

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Introduction

For companies around the world, the annual flu season typically brings employee illnesses and absences—along with their associated impact on productivity. The 2009 and 2010 flu season, however, is anything but typical, thanks to the pandemic outbreak of H1N1 influenza, or the swine flu virus.

Since its outbreak in Mexico in April 2009, swine flu has swept the world, confounding medical professionals and spreading concern among disease control experts in nearly every country on the planet. But for businesses, the impact of the virus could mean potentially dramatic drops in productivity and substantial losses in income.

To minimize the impact of swine flu illnesses, organizations must prepare now to maintain operations in the face of a viral outbreak whose reach and severity may be unprecedented in modern times.

This white paper outlines how visual communication can serve as a powerful and effective tool in helping businesses maintain effectiveness, improve efficiency and protect at-risk employees during H1N1 outbreaks.

A Pandemic Awakes

Nearly every country on the planet has recorded infections and a small number of deaths from swine flu. As of mid-September 2009, more than 316,000 laboratory-confirmed cases of H1N1 virus had been reported, with at least 3,400 deaths, according to FluCount.org. Those figures likely do not measure the true extent of the pandemic, because countries are no longer required to test and report individual cases. The World Health Organization (WHO), which in June labelled the outbreak a global pandemic, reported that swine flu had become the most prevalent form of influenza worldwide, overtaking all other flu strains.

"The bottom line is it is here, and it is coming, and it is coming fast," said University of Minnesota public health expert Dr. Michael Osterholm in a recent address to public and private health officials at a swine flu summit in the United States.

Experts are unsure whether the impact of swine flu will lessen as the hemisphere warms during the southern summer. A second wave of infections is strongly predicted in northern hemisphere countries this fall and winter, as children return to school from the summer break and as temperatures begin to drop.

Meanwhile, the nature of modern business—where travellers can cross oceans in a matter of hours— makes the notion of a lasting outbreak all but inevitable.

The Impact on Business

Most trading nations have already experienced some economic disruption as a result of the pandemic. According to the World Bank, costs relating to deaths, illness and absenteeism, along with efforts to avoid infection, could "shave off more than one percentage point of GDP in countries affected." The same source adds that economies that rely heavily on tourism will suffer even more.

In Mexico, the food services sector experienced losses of $4.5 million (£2.7m, €3.2m) a day and pig meat prices fell by 30%. Football clubs recorded direct losses of nearly $1 million (£0.6m, €0.7m) per game due to the government prohibition of all mass gatherings. The Mexican Grande Prix for 2009 was cancelled, forcing the country to lose untold millions of dollars in revenue.

In South America's affected countries, estimates of economic losses range from 0.5% to 1.5% of GDP. For instance, Altura Management, a private healthcare consulting firm, has projected a worst-case scenario for Chile of 100,000 infections in 2009, 2% of which would require hospitalization. If such a scenario is realized, the overall cost to Chile's businesses and government would reach Ps7.8bn (US$13.7m, £8.4m, €9.6m).

Travel worldwide has also been impacted. In August 2009, the travel company Thomas Cook reported the swine flu outbreak had cost its business approximately $20.6 million (£12.6m, €14.4m).

Though experts debate how severe the impact of H1N1 will be on countries in the northern hemisphere— where healthcare and emergency response is generally better— many countries are imposing travel restrictions that impact business operations. China, for instance, has mandated seven-day quarantine for all passengers on flights when just one passenger has been discovered to have a fever. Similar incidents have been reported in Moscow. The detrimental effects on businesses are clear.

The Business Case for a Business Continuity Plan

Any illness that requires bed rest and isolation can negatively impact a workforce and, with it, the overall productivity of the employer.

That's why emergency preparedness experts recommend organisations prepare now in anticipation of a northern hemisphere explosion of swine flu. Kevin Nixon, an emergency planning expert who has testified before the US Congress and served on the Disaster Recovery Workgroup for the US Office of Homeland Security and the US Federal Trade Commission, has stated that private companies "should be hammering out a game plan for who should do what and where if the government decided to restrict our movements to contain an outbreak."

Nixon urges employers to "establish a business continuity plan should the (federal) government direct state and local governments to immediately enforce their community containment plans,"

Adjusting to a New Reality: The Home-Based Workforce

Experts like Nixon recognize that widespread infections from the H1N1 virus portend a potential new reality. Businesses, then, must consider procedures designed to reduce the impact of the inability of employees to go into the office. And they must assess how their obligation to isolate potentially infected staff members could diminish productivity.

Clearly, organizations committed to ensuring business continuity are likely to see more employees working from home than ever before.

At the very least, a home-based workforce would consist of the infected and the at-risk. Infected employees must be quarantined and stay home for at least seven days, and possibly longer (see sidebar). At-risk employees, such as pregnant women, asthmatics, diabetics and those with a heart condition, will also require isolation at home. Another category of employees requiring immediate isolation and, therefore, home working capabilities, are key knowledge workers.

Most countries recommend high-risk employees—including pregnant women, asthmatics, diabetics and those with a heart condition—to avoid mass gatherings and to isolate themselves as much as possible. All local governments have put in place plans to prevent the spread of the virus. If necessary, those measures may include:

- Closing of public transportation
- Cancelling of public entertainment (sports events, cinema, theatres)
- Closing of schools (this has started in France, where over 10 schools have closed since September 4, 2009)
- Closed-door court houses

Obviously, such measures would have a significant impact on how all employees work, and would impose radical changes in the way companies do business.

To accommodate this new reality with minimal disruption to operations, it's imperative that organizations develop continuity plans that include an integrated communication solution that overcomes the limitations of working from home.

Why swine flu is bad for business

Flu season is never good for business, but swine flu poses a particular problem—one complicated by the fact that H1N1 isn't like most influenzas. Swine flu seems to present more serious health risks to working-age people than seasonal flu, which usually is hardest on the very old and very young. And studies released in September 2009 found that H1N1-infected patients remain contagious longer (one in 10 patients was still shedding virus after 10 days of illness), which delays their safe return to the office.

The Business Case for Visual Communication

Commerce today is built around the ability to communicate—with customers, colleagues, suppliers, partners and information sources. Communication is especially vital in times of crisis, when companies must keep disparate knowledge workers informed and up to date.

As organizations face the prospect of extending their workplace to employees' homes, the need for a collaborative communication solution becomes obvious

Polycom, the global leader in telepresence, video and voice communication solutions, has witnessed how visual communication technologies such as desktop video conferencing and telepresence can play a key role in achieving business continuity in any emergency situation.

Polycom® Converged Management Application (CMA™)

Using visual communication to replace in-person meetings, reduce dependency on travel and to empower workers is a proven practice embraced by thousands of organizations across the globe. The ability to interact face-to-face and collaborate through shared content makes video a key component of continuity plans. It was used successfully by leading businesses to adapt to travel disruptions following 9/11 and during previous pandemics such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003.

Visual communication also helped stem the spread of the initial outbreak of the H1N1 virus. When the virus was first identified in April 2009, Mexican officials immediately recognized the need for clear, streamlined communication and collaboration to help contain the outbreak. Experts at Mexico's Secretariat of Health used Polycom video conferencing systems to communicate with some 1,500 health officials to help determine the source of the flu, where and how it was spreading, and effective treatments.

In the race by the Mexican government to contain the swine flu virus, interactive and visual communication solutions have saved time—and likely, lives.

While it became evident that these emergency steps were too late to stop the infection spreading, both the WHO and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) praised Mexico's swift and effective response as "a model of aggressive control measures."

Mexico's success demonstrates that, in the face of the swine flu outbreak, communication and collaboration tools can perform reliably and effectively as staff work from home and overall business travel is restricted.

Replacing In-Person Meetings with Video, Voice and Data

The most important objective of any business continuity plan is to anticipate the affect on business of a static workforce deprived of the means to conduct business in a typical environment. It therefore follows that businesses must look to replace in-person meetings with a scalable, integrated communication model that overcomes the restrictions imposed by the swine flu outbreak. Such a model requires reliance not just on telephony, but also on video, data and Internet communication.

Fortunately, remote communication has advanced in recent years, and today's leading solutions offer the most natural substitute for real, face-to-face meetings. The pressures of an increasingly globalised economy, cost-reduction, increased competition and environmental considerations have all conspired to making this objective a business imperative. As a result, with every new generation of technology, visual communication has become progressively realistic and interactive. In fact, the technology has now evolved to a stage where it can deliver a genuinely lifelike, natural communication experience that is so effective that many participants forget they are in different locations.

Across the northern hemisphere, organizations are preparing for the impending winter flu season by deploying these systems, testing their use, and training their workers to be comfortable with the efficient culture of remote collaboration. If governments do enact local plans to prevent swine flu infection, these companies will be ready, and their employees will still be able to maintain productivity, despite restricting their movements and in-person interactions.

Polycom's Own Proven Business Continuity Plan

In June 2009, swine flu struck Polycom's UK office in Slough. By the end of July, 10% of employees had been affected. Polycom swung into action with its own business continuity plan that involved immediately sending home employees known to be infected, along with all knowledge workers in those departments.

The company then ensured all home workers had the technology and communications systems they needed to maintain effective operations. This meant equipping them with broadband connectivity where it wasn't already in place, as well as a range of Polycom teleconferencing and personal video conferencing systems.

The Polycom business continuity plan is based on three simple steps:

1. Send infected employees home

2. Impose a week-long quarantine on all knowledge workers working within the same department

3. Ensure home-based workers are equipped with all necessary Polycom communications technology to continue working efficiently and productively.

The Benefit to Businesses

Developing a business continuity plan to enable efficient home-based working pays dividends that extend well beyond the duration of a flu epidemic. Implementing such a model automatically establishes a way of working that will enable organizations to maintain productivity through any unforeseen future risk event.
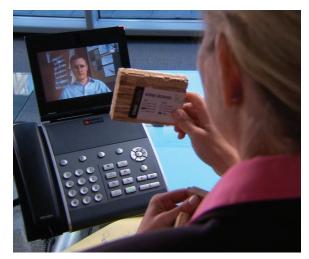
As thousands of organizations have already realized, equipping a workforce with the ability to collaborate via video communications delivers everyday benefits, including:

- Reduced real estate and utilities costs.
- The ability to hire staff for their talent, experience and suitability for the job rather than for their proximity to the office.
- Improved worker productivity and efficiency due to the ability to work anywhere, anytime.
- Immediate reductions in travel expenses—both to and from the office as well as to meetings.
- Reduction in a company's carbon footprint—a growing priority for most companies today

For example, in keeping with its policy of ratepayer accountability and cost reduction, a UK council (local authority) recently embarked on a "Smarter Working" initiative based on Polycom video conferencing systems. The council substantially reduced its work space by moving into smaller offices while successfully maintaining a "floating" population of home workers. This not only encouraged more frequent and regular meetings between geographically dispersed personnel and departments, but it made workers more productive and efficient, while reducing costs and minimizing the council's environmental impact.

Polycom Solutions

With the broadest range of voice, video and telepresence solutions in the world, Polycom has what organizations need to enable seamless home-based working that saves time and money and maximizes productivity. Polycom's standards-based solutions fit a variety of space and budget requirements and work seamlessly with the more than 2 million standards-based video conferencing systems in use today.

Polycom® VVX™ 1500

Polycom® HDX™ 4000

Polycom® RPX™ 418

Via a broadband IP connection, remote workers can access their data applications, such as email, or their company data stores via secure remote network access methods. The data connection may be augmented with Web conference applications, allowing colleagues to easily share documents or make presentations from the home office. Broadband connectivity also gives the home worker the ability to video conference from home.

This video capability can be cost-effectively deployed using a simple entry-level system such as the Polycom® CMA™ Desktop application, which requires only a webcam to be added to the PC. For a higher-quality experience, Polycom HDX™ 6000 or Polycom HDX 4000 desktop telepresence solutions provide HD Video and HD Voice, and the ability to share content and files in HD. In this way, high-quality presentations can be made to other colleagues or customers over the Internet without requiring any other data sharing application.

Summary

Today's global business environment creates challenges for all types of organizations. These include global or local competition, managing a geographically dispersed workforce, the need to reduce costs, and the desire to increase efficiency and productivity while reducing their environmental impact. In meeting these challenges, business has demanded technology solutions that deliver on all fronts. That these demands have been met is proven by the increasing adoption of visual communication solutions within the corporate, educational and research environments.

The H1N1, or swine flu, pandemic offers an opportunity for organizations to take effective action that will benefit their

bottom lines for years to come. Once a company incorporates visual communication into its business continuity plan, it improves and increases its speed of operations, improves productivity and efficiency, maintains collaboration across business units, and gives the enterprise a sustainable competitive advantage in any business environment—health and otherwise.

In addition, visual communication improves employees' life/work balance, thus increasing employee satisfaction and reducing staff turnover.

Partners of video-enabled enterprises have a strong incentive to become video-enabled as well and to connect with other video-enabled enterprises. They can then use visual communication to accelerate project execution and to build ongoing trust and rapport.

Video-enabled enterprises will also enjoy financial benefits such as reduced operational costs for greater profitability, in addition to being better able to comply with green initiatives.

With the pending swine flu pandemic and the anticipated impact on business productivity, the capabilities and benefits of visual communication are once more being proven in a real-world scenario.

For More Information

To find out how Polycom can help your organization prepare for the next emergency—and to cut costs, heighten productivity, and create a more sustainable business environment—visit www.polycom.com or call 1-800-POLYCOM.

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