

# Implications of a Pandemic

ERC Survey Briefing - August 2009

## Overview

The recent H1N1 flu virus has illuminated the practices of local employers in terms of how they would handle the workplace implications of a pandemic. In August of 2009, ERC conducted a survey on organizations in Northeast Ohio to determine how employers would handle a variety of issues associated with a pandemic. The survey sought to explore issues such as general preparedness for a pandemic, pandemic/emergency response plans, sick and paid time off issues, and education/training.

### Key findings in the survey:

- Approximately 70% of employers reveal that they are slightly or not at all prepared for a pandemic, particularly in terms of policy development.
- While employers do not typically have a pandemic response plan, many do have emergency response plans in place.
- The majority of organizations have not modified any of their policies to comply with the unique implications that a pandemic brings.
- Nearly three-quarters (74%) of employers have or plan to make workplace modifications (offering vaccines, providing hand-sanitizer, etc.) as a result of a pandemic.
- Most employers would encourage employees to stay at home if they were experiencing symptoms associated with the pandemic, but would not necessarily pay them for the time missed.

## Preparedness for a Pandemic

The majority of employers are not adequately prepared for a pandemic. In fact, 70% of employers report that they are slightly or not at all prepared for a pandemic, meaning that most if not all of their policies need to be revised. Only 2% of employers said they were very prepared for a pandemic.

Figure 1 | How would you rate your organization's preparedness for a pandemic?

	Percent
Very prepared (all policies are revised)	2%
Moderately prepared (some policies need to be revised)	28%
Slightly prepared (most policies need to be revised)	34%
Not at all prepared (all policies need to be revised)	36%

The majority of employers do not have a pandemic response plan in place; however 62% have an emergency response plan in place. Also, about a quarter of employers have a communicable illness policy. While organizations appear to be prepared for emergencies, they may not be prepared for pandemics in particular.

Figure 2 | Does your organization have any of the following plans or policies?

	Percent
Pandemic response plan	19%
Emergency response plan	62%
Communicable illness policy	23%

Few organizations have revised their policies to comply with circumstances associated with a pandemic, however among those that have made changes, revisions have been made to enhance policies associated with major events and illnesses, create a policy entitled "Business Pandemic Influenza Policy," and implement workforce guidelines for an influenza pandemic.

Figure 3 | Has your organization revised any of its policies to comply with the unique circumstances that a pandemic causes?

	Percent
Yes	9%
No	91%

## Workplace Modifications

The majority of organizations have or plan to educate their employees about information related to the H1N1 flu pandemic including what it is, how it is spread, and how to protect themselves. This suggests that employers are committed to providing education to their employees regarding this issue.

Figure 4 | Has your organization or does it plan to educate your employees about any information related to the H1N1 flu pandemic (what it is, how it is spread, how to protect themselves)?

	Percent
Yes	75%
No	25%

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of employers have or plan to make workplace modifications as a result of a pandemic. Such modifications may include offering vaccines, providing hand sanitizer, and others. This implies that employers are willing to modify their workplace in support of their employees' well-being and health, should a pandemic impact their organization.

Figure 5 | Has your organization or does it plan to make any workplace modifications (offering vaccines, providing hand sanitizer, etc.) as a result of a pandemic?

	Percent
Yes	74%
No	26%

Fewer organizations have cross trained their employees in the event of a serious illness or pandemic. Approximately 43% of employers have conducted this practice.

Figure 6 | Have your organization's employees been cross trained in the event of serious illness or pandemic?

	Percent
Yes	43%
No	57%

Sixty-nine percent of employers would offer alternative work arrangements such as telecommuting to employees in the event of serious illness or pandemic, suggesting that organizations are willing to make flexible accommodations for employees during such emergency situations.

Figure 7 | Would your organization offer alternative work arrangements such as telecommuting to employees in the event of serious illness or pandemic?

	Percent
Yes	69%
No	31%

## Absence & Paid Time Implications

An overwhelming majority of employers would encourage their employees to not report to work if they are experiencing symptoms of the pandemic or have been in contact with infected individuals.

Figure 8 | Would your organization encourage your employees to not report to work if they are experiencing symptoms of the pandemic or have been in contact with infected people, including members of their own household?

	Percent
Yes	90%
No	10%

Although 90% of organizations would encourage employees to not report to work, only 57% would pay the employee for time missed. While, this is still the majority of employers, 43% would not pay the employee for time missed if they were sent home from work.

Figure 9 | If an employee is sent home from work due to a serious illness or pandemic, would your organization pay the employee for the time missed?

	Percent
Yes	57%
No	43%

Most employers' sick time policies do not define if and when an employee may be sent home. Only 12% of organizations claim that their sick time policies set definitions on when an employee can be sent home.

Figure 10 | Does your organization's sick time policy define if and when an employee can be sent home?

	Percent
Yes	12%
No	88%

Employers appear to be split on whether or not they limit the number of paid sick days employees may take. Half do not limit the number of sick days, while half of employers do impose limits. No definitive trend was noted in terms of limitations on sick days.

Figure 11 | Does your organization's paid time off policy limit the number of sick days employees may take?

	Percent
Yes	50%
No	50%

The majority of employers would not provide additional time off if employees exhausted their sick time during a serious illness or pandemic. Organizations generally specify that employees must use other paid time off such as vacation or personal time or forgo pay or employees receive unpaid time off if paid time is exhausted. Other ways of handling this situation cited by respondents include short term disability, using donated time from other employees, or considering reevaluating their paid time off policies.

Figure 12 | If employees exhaust their sick time during a serious illness or pandemic, how would your organization handle pay?

	Percent
Employees must use other paid time off (vacation, personal, etc.) or forgo pay	45%
Employees receive unpaid time off if paid time off is exhausted	24%
Employees are provided with additional time off	4%
Other	28%

## Respondent Demographics

Figure 13 | Respondent demographics by industry and organizational size

Demographic Group	Percent
Number of Organizations	54
Manufacturing	45%
Non-Manufacturing	43%
Non-Profit	12%
1-50	28%
51-200	49%
201-500	8%
501+	16%