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Many companies likely aren't prepared to function if large numbers of employees are infected.

Lucas Mearian

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Though the H1N1 flu has been declared a national emergency by President Barack Obama, experts say that many companies remain ill-prepared for its potential consequences, which could include employee absentee rates of 40% or more.

While last month's emergency declaration is targeted mostly at helping health care providers and government agencies bypass regulatory requirements to provide critical care, experts say it should also be a red flag for the IT and business communities.

"Organizations probably have not allocated enough resources for virtual private networks nor tested VPNs for the fact that 80% of their staff could be working from home," said Al Berman, executive director of DRI International, a training institute that focuses on helping businesses prepare for emergencies. "We ran some tests with companies, and they ran out of TCP/IP addresses in five minutes."

Berman said that many businesses are probably delaying VPN upgrades because of increasing bandwidth costs. For example, he said, DRI recently met with officials of a large insurance provider and found that it would cost the company \$1 million to boost bandwidth enough to support 40% of its staff working from home.

The federal government's Flu.gov Web site, managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, offers guidance to businesses about what to do in the event of a pandemic. Its suggestions range from making sure sick employees stay home to appointing a [pandemic coordinator](#) or team to oversee the preparation and implementation of a disaster plan.

Employers should "send a very strong message to employees to stay home if they're sick. No one is that essential," said Kim Elliott, deputy director of Trust for America's Health, a public health advocacy group. "You don't want employees coming in and infecting others to the point where your business shuts down."

The pandemic coordinator or team should monitor employees to ensure that they follow basic rules of hygiene, such as washing their hands, and make sure that face masks are available, according to the Flu.gov Web site.

Elliott said that the planning process should also include an assessment of how the absence of a large number of employees would affect operations, with recommendations on how to keep things running under such circumstances.

"That may mean cross-training employees in some key business functions," Elliott said, citing IT infrastructure maintenance, bookkeeping and accounting duties, and some customer-facing activities.

Businesses should also develop a plan to communicate with municipal agencies, which determine whether bus routes, schools or even businesses need to be shut down, Berman said.

The national emergency declaration came after a weekly U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report called FluView noted that 43 states are now reporting widespread influenza activity and that H1N1 has caused 1,000 deaths in the U.S.

[The World Health Organization had declared the H1N1 flu outbreak a pandemic in June](#), elevating its health emergency alert status to Phase 6 -- its highest level. At that time, the number of influenza cases was close to 30,000 worldwide. The WHO now says there are 414,000 confirmed cases of H1N1 and that there have been nearly 5,000 H1N1-related deaths.

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