

H.J. Cummins

H.J. Cummins has covered workplace, work-family and personal finance issues for 15 years. This Work & Life column appears every Thursday in the business section.



Seeking to keep the continuity in event of avian flu

H.J. Cummins, Star Tribune

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One security analyst is a little upset with our president, because he chose to announce the U.S. government's response to the avian flu at the National Institutes of Health.

"It sends the message that there's going to be a medical solution to this problem, that we can all line up and get a shot and then get back to work," said Robert Armstrong, a senior research fellow at the government's Center for Technology and National Security Policy.

In fact, people can't stop working while they wait months or years for a vaccine against whatever pandemic ultimately hits -- be it the avian flu or something else. One of Armstrong's assignments is to figure out how we can pull that off.

"It's going to be difficult. There are going to be economic losses," said Armstrong, whose center is part of the U.S. Department of Defense in Washington. "But if we maintain continuity, the society is not going to collapse."

The implication being, of course, that if we don't, it could.

That's why some big Minnesota companies already are organizing to share help, said Chris Terzich, incident manager for Wells Fargo in Minneapolis.

In the case of a pandemic, those companies' Minnesota Information Sharing and Analysis Center will collect advice on how to prepare, provide updates during the frantic, infectious time, and then help send out recovery instructions when it has passed. All the information will be available to the public.

Eighty-five percent of what the federal government has declared "critical infrastructure" is in private industry -- including health care, transportation, finance, food, agriculture and energy -- Terzich said.

"So we're discussing, from the standpoint of continuity, what do we need to do as businesses?" he said.

Armstrong has some ideas. Broadly, his model fights contagion with hyper-use of technology and the principles of infectious disease -- to get the most work done with the least human contact.

"People need to understand that while this on the surface is a medical problem, the response is going to be in large measure non-medical," he said.

First of all, that means the standard arsenal against contagion: face masks, clean workstations and a lot of handwashing. Then comes what Armstrong calls "social distancing." That means more people working at home. Or possibly spreading the standard work day across three eight-hour shifts. That will allow the one-third of the staff at work at any one time to keep some distance from one another.

In stores, that one-third of retail clerks on duty around the clock could serve customers who need to start shopping around the clock. And isn't there some way to complete a sale without handing bills and receipts and credit cards back and forth? Armstrong asked.

Employers have to think of everyone, he said.

"I say that the Typhoid Marys this time will be the contract cleaners who come in at night," he said. "I can hear companies say, 'Oh, we forgot about the cleaners.' "

Remember Y2K in 2000, when people worried that computers couldn't cross into a new millennium? Armstrong asked. Companies started adding "Y2K compatible" clauses to all their contracts, he said.

Now they'll start requiring "pandemic-prepared" clauses, he said.

There still are plenty of unanswered questions: How much liability does an employer have if workers get sick on the job? How much right do workers have to refuse to report for work out of fear?

And with this virus you're most contagious when you feel fine, Armstrong said.

"Imagine a boss calls and says, 'How do you feel?' and you say, 'I feel great,' and he says, 'Well you better stay home today, then,' " he said.

Still, what develops, he believes, ultimately will make U.S. business better, just as all the Y2K attention persuaded businesses to back up their computer systems and add off-site databases.

So, to people who say a pandemic is nonsense, Armstrong says: "Let's pray to God it doesn't happen. And when it doesn't, we'll still be better off if we spend our time identifying new efficiencies at work."

What are your workplace issues? You can reach H.J. Cummins at workandlife @startribune.com. Please sign your e-mails; no names will appear in print without prior approval.

A FLU BY ANY NAME ...

The one the world is watching now has been called avian influenza, chicken flu, bird flu, H5N1, chicken ebola, fowl plague

AND A 'PANDEMIC' MEANS ...

A vast -- even worldwide -- epidemic. In Greek, "pan" means "all" and "demos" is "people."

THIS PANDEMIC COULD LAST ...

It probably would come in waves, and about a fourth of the population could be infected in each wave. People who get sick in the first wave can get sick again in later waves. Each wave probably would last eight to 12 weeks, with the time between each eight to 20 weeks. Most likely an H5N1 pandemic would have at least three waves and last more than a year.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Minnesota Information Sharing and Analysis Center: www.mnisac.org

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov

The World Health Organization: www.who.int