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## Swine Flu: What Should You Do?

Swine flu has reached the UK, and no-one is sure how severely it will strike. Whether or not the situation worsens, all businesses can benefit from forward planning. Flu planning needs to take account of changed ways of working that may last for months. A pandemic could escalate quickly and last for many months infecting more than 25% of the world's population.

Some employers may not recognise the need to prepare for an epidemic but they could be in for a nasty shock – once employees are being diagnosed with pandemic flu it will be too late to work out what to do. The impact on businesses could be catastrophic. The following points are steps that you can take to prepare your business:

1. Consider the basic requirements of the business without which it will not be able to function. You should think about the minimum number of employees required to run the business.
2. It is likely that a pandemic may lead to the depletion of your workforce so it is important to ensure that appropriate training is given to any remaining workers who may be required to carry out unfamiliar tasks.
3. Advise staff to stay at home if they are sick. You should also prepare for the possibility of employees not being able to get into work, for example if public transport is suspended.
4. Flexible hours may allow employees to care for sick relatives or children whose schools have closed, without having to stop work completely. Employees should be encouraged to work from home where possible.
5. An emergency communications plan should be put in place, which may be vital for keeping the business running smoothly. It should identify key contacts and set up chains of communication so that information can be circulated quickly.
6. Where possible video-conferencing and teleconferencing could be used instead of holding meetings.

All these suggestions will require careful implementation so employers should consider whether it might be necessary to put further employment policies in place to deal with them.

**Action Point:** Consider reviewing your sickness policies to ensure they deal with all the relevant issues, including the amount of sick pay applicable in such a situation.

Don't panic – plan ahead.

## **Managing the Use of Social Networking Sites**

In order for employers to prevent or minimise problems occurring from the use of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Bebo and Friendster, they should have an Internet and communications policy which specifies the web use that is, and is not, acceptable.

The positive aspects of social networking sites involve creating and developing work-related relationships. The sites can be a fast and effective method of helping employees to keep in touch with clients. It is important to get the right balance with policies including guidance on what behaviour is not acceptable. Negative aspects of social networking sites include employees time-wasting, loss of productivity, employers using information from sites to make discriminatory decisions about vetting new employees, employees breaching the employer's confidentiality and many more.

There are many legal issues surrounding the use of social networking sites. For example:

- Breach of Contract
- Data Protection
- Defamation
- Discrimination.

Many employers have adopted a ban on social networking sites at work because of the time wasting concerns. As use of the sites increase and in times of economic difficulty it is likely that more organisations will choose to block or limit social networking sites whilst at work. Employers therefore have a number of options when creating or updating their Internet and communications policy:

- Unlimited access to social networking sites (this may suit employers in marketing)
- Restricted access for work purposes only
- Restricted personal use for example during lunch break and after work
- Completely block from using certain sites from the organisation's computer network.

**Action Point:** Review your Internet and communications policy to ensure that potential problems are prevented or minimised.

## **Unacceptable Expense Claims**

The headline story of MP expenses raises several points. Firstly, it shows how important it is to have an expenses policy in place which sets out exactly what employees can claim for. For example, where overnight stays are concerned you may decide to reimburse the cost of meals but not alcoholic drinks.

It also highlights the importance of checking all claims carefully, not just to see what type of expense is being claimed for but to ensure there is evidence that the claim is genuine. Managers who authorise expense payments need to be trained so they know when to challenge a claim. This is important as research has found that £1 billion of expenses are wrongly claimed by employees each year.

**Action Point:** Make sure you check expenses claims carefully and insist that receipts are presented to back up claims. Set out what staff can claim for in an expenses policy.

## **National Minimum Wage Increase**

The government has announced that the UK minimum wage will rise by 7p to £5.80 an hour from October.

## **Statutory Redundancy Pay**

The government has announced that the maximum amount of statutory redundancy pay will rise to £380 per week from £350. The increase will be effective on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2009.

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