

Pandemic Influenza: Sydney Business Leaders discuss the possible Impact in a Focus Group



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Background

- In the event of Pandemic Influenza (PI) an unprepared Australian economy could suffer significant losses through a reduced workforce and a downturn in aggregate demand.
- Small and Medium sized Businesses (SMBs) form almost half of the Australian economy.
- SMB are integral to the supply and value chain with unknown consequences to the economy.
- SMBs play a role maintaining the welfare of employees and the economy as a whole.
- It is therefore important that SMBs are prepared in order to continue operations during a pandemic influenza scenario.

Study Aim

Identify key issues concerning SMB in the event of Pandemic Influenza

Methods

- The study was part of a larger study regarding SMB preparedness in Australia to meet the need for better resources and marketing strategies to withstand the impact of PI
- We recruited business leaders of SMBs, defined as CEOs and owners, in Sydney by personal written invitation.
- We held a Focus Group with six owners and leading managers of SMBs from finance, legal, production, logistics, council, and retail communities.
- The FG was prompted with the scenario of high absenteeism due to an infectious disease such as pandemic influenza

Methods (cont)

The lead questions were:

1. What do you know about bird flu?
2. If bird flu becomes pandemic influenza do you think it will be a risk to your business
3. If pandemic influenza was to affect the community, what would be your needs as a small business, to give you the best opportunity to respond effectively

- Discussion was recorded and transcribed
- Key issues were identified for qualitative analysis using direct quotes from the transcription

Results

There were many uncertainties and doubts about PI. There was a general lack of knowledge and understanding about the difference between avian influenza and a human pandemic. Some people felt the media reports were sensationalised, but most took the threat of PI seriously.

Most people expressed an expectation that government would help out in some way in the event of a pandemic. There was also an expectation that government would be the source of information for SMBs. Most said they would rely on electronic communications (Internet, e-mail) and courier companies for business continuity.

One of the focus group participants was the owner of a courier company, and made us aware that mask use might adversely affect his business, which employs many males of middle-eastern background (see quotes below).

Key topics raised by SMBs include:

On mask-use (owner of a courier company)

"...but if you think that people are paranoid about people who are a threat offshore, immediately people start to worry [upon seeing my middle eastern-looking couriers enter a building with a brown paper package]..... and so we have taken a lead in having....security passes to identify our staff, so that they know that they are [legitimate couriers] and that brown box they are carrying with their middle eastern background isreally are for a purpose... – so now [if] you have the mask on, and my staff are [suspected of being terrorists]...you get a lot of paranoid people."

On media

"...I think when the first concern is raised then we will be worried about it..

So at this time , I think it's a news story, 55 secs in the press and then gone. So it's on a need to know basis..."

On survival of one-man companies

"...if I get sick its 100% and all I can do is go to bed and business will have to wait."

On office hygiene

"... You mention face masks, I have 15 people in a call centre ,and they are really concerned about change, and whole routine about cleaning phones, transferring infection, etc"

On Internet reliance

"So I would probably try and get clients to [use a] scanner, scan stuff in, and like you get from the tax office, stuff through the mail, then they would just have to send it to us through the internet....."

Results

On work attendance and absenteeism

"One of the significant risks is that if the pandemic winds up very quickly, people will be fearful to come to work where they are going to be asked to congregate in relatively close offices, ...and will think it will be safer at work than it is at home, but that's a significant challenge.."

On Air-conditioning

"...you need to know how things are transferred. In organisations you react to the Legionnaires concern, its sucked out of one thing and pushed back into the organisation somewhere else..."

On transmission risk

"I have over 150 men running around Sydney with something close to 250-, 300,000 contacts a week..."

"...worked in a very close environment, the lady developed meningococcal, and ...she was pretty bad. Everyone panicked, and as soon as we heard the diagnosis and she was in hospital, on life support and so on, went to the doctor, wanted medication, wanted counseling, whatever..."

"It just sent people into panic."

On business continuity

"...whether or not I get flu myself, I think that business ..is very vulnerable, just simply because half the younger population is not servicing what I need, or my client base has fallen away, but over Christmas [...] we have the work falls right off, [...], and this would be worse I imagine, so you could easily imagine that you could be out of business for two months and you might be perfectly healthy, but no money coming in at all.

"So I think that perhaps we are attacking this on too simplistic a level and not thinking broadly enough, but if I have a small business it would be particularly vulnerable to getting business, whether or not you are sick or not.

I don't know if you could insure against lack of business, it would be good if you could..."

On information sources

"The most reliable information to me comes from government and filters through our business."

Conclusions

- SMBs have limited knowledge about PI, and concerns about a range of issues such as business continuity, mask use, transmission of infection, and reliance on communication technology.
- SMBs have specific expectations from governmental bodies in general and health authorities in particular regarding timely and sufficient information on PI-related topics such as upkeep of alerts and hygiene advice.
- There is an assumption that critical infrastructure such as telephone and Internet will be functioning, and this is a key back-up strategy for business continuity.
- Optimal channels and procedures for ongoing communication during a pandemic need to be identified and propagated.
- The results of this focus group contributed to a larger survey of SMBs

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