

### **For Immediate Release**

### **Poor crisis planning for infectious diseases puts South Africa at risk**

With the death of four people from an as yet unknown (at the time of writing) viral haemorrhagic fever, accompanied by wide-ranging speculation about a possible outbreak of the disease, companies need to ensure they monitor their employees and update their crisis communications management plans with immediate effect.

South Africa is a country that faces a huge risk from pandemics and dreaded diseases. The country has porous borders where thousands of illegal and undocumented border jumpers evade officials from the Department of Home Affairs on a daily basis. And it is almost impossible to track down illegal immigrants as their movements are not known to authorities. Countries to the north of us have poor public health services and they do not have the infrastructure and resources to rapidly deal with a contagious disease outbreak.

Internally there is a massive amount of migrant labour using public transport such as buses, trains and mini-bus taxis on a daily basis. There are also tens of thousands of people living in informal settlements or in communal dwellings such as hostels and apartment blocks in the inner cities across the country.

“In light of this, it is very unfortunate that many companies operating in South Africa still have no crisis communications and crisis management plan and will find it almost impossible to manage pandemic communications should there be an outbreak of a dread disease,” says Evan Bloom, managing director of the Crisis Communications Consultancy.

As far back as 13 March 2006, Crisis Communications Consultancy warned companies operating in South Africa to prepare crisis plans and strategies for the H5N1 strain of Avian Flu.

In line with this, Bloom advises that the same principles should be used in planning for any infectious disease and should include:

- The implementation of an early warning system that monitors staff health and levels of absenteeism.
- The implementation of business continuity and resumption plans.
- The creation of a rapid communications plan that will help companies and organisations communicate with their staff, the media, clients, suppliers, health and safety authorities as well as the communities that surround their offices/organisations/manufacturing facilities.

Most companies do not know how to go about creating a comprehensive crisis communications management plan. According to Bloom, the basics that companies should be initiating to get crisis ready include:

1. Doing a vulnerability audit to analyse what areas in a company would be vulnerable to an infectious disease. This must include the HR department, staff, production and manufacturing lines, supply chains, transportation into and out of the company and formal and informal residential areas situated around the company's plant and offices
2. Initiating a scenario planning exercise to identify the various scenarios that the company could face both internally and externally.
3. Rapidly implement measures to secure vulnerable areas of the business.
4. Meet with police, fire and ambulance services, establish communications channels with the Department of Health and external medical support structures, such as private laboratories, state and private hospitals.
5. Identify areas, both on and offsite for a crisis command centre.
6. Establish a crisis management team with a company spokesperson and backup person. Ensure both are media trained.
7. Create the crisis plan that incorporates strategies and tactics to manage the various scenarios identified, including everything mentioned above.
8. Speak to all clients, suppliers, partners and service providers and explain to them what you are doing.

Companies should also formulate a mass communications policy in which they can communicate with all employees across the country. "Most importantly, companies must ensure that they integrate the crisis communications plan into the company's business continuity and disaster recovery plan. They then need to hold a mock exercise to test the crisis communications and management plan. All identified errors must be corrected immediately," stresses Bloom.

Those companies who have established crisis plans will find it relatively simple to update their plans by including a section on infectious diseases. If the crisis plan already has a section on Avian Flu then a sub-section on infectious diseases can easily be integrated into it.

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