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

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 source the information for SMBs. Most people said they would rely on electronic communications (Internet, e-mail) and courier companies for business continuity.

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 asking phones, handling infection, etc."

On Internet reliance

"We could use the internet a lot more than we do now, in ways that we probably don’t even use it now, and we’d probably try and get our work in that way. So I would try and get clients to [use a] scanner, scan stuff in, and you get from the fax office, stuff through the mail, then they would just have to send it to us through the Internet."..."

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 PI was presented with the scenario of high absenteeism due to an infectious disease such as pandemic influenza

Results

On work attendance and absenteeism

"One of the significant risks is that the pandemic winds up very quickly. People will be fearful to come into 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..."...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 counselling, whatever..."..."

On transmission risk

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

On business continuity

"...whether or not I get flu myself, I think that business is very vulnerable, just simply because that the younger population is not servicing what I need, or my client base has fallen away, but over Christmas... we have the work lacks 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.

On information sources

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

Conclusions

- 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

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.
- SMBs 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 to continue operations during a pandemic influenza scenario.

Study Aim

Identify key issues concerning SMB in the event of Pandemic Influenza

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