

Survivor: Outbreak

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PICTURE the chaos that would be wrought with over a million Singaporeans down with the flu, and four in 10 workers absent from work for six weeks.

Then, imagine a second wave of the pandemic, even more virulent than the first.

If all goes according to what the authorities hope would be the plan, businesses would break out their stockpiles of masks, disinfectants and Tamiflu medication. Staff would switch to working through telecommuting and videoconferencing, or split into teams working from other locations, with minimal fuss.

Even as businesses are caught up with immediate concerns about costs and the global downturn, Singapore authorities are reminding them of a threat that continues to hang over the region — one that could blindside the unwary at any time and, according to the World Bank, could cost the world economy US\$3 trillion (\$4.4 trillion).

A new guide, *Preparing for a Human Influenza Pandemic in Singapore*, published by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), suggests response measures and prepares businesses for the likely scenarios in a pandemic. These include how each wave of infections could last six weeks, and how, on average, an infected person would spread the virus to two more — culminating in about a quarter of the population being infected.

“While the Government will do all it can to mitigate the impact of a pandemic, we will need the cooperation of the private sector to sustain the economy and the population,” said Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng yesterday, at the opening of a pandemic conference hosted by the **S Rajaratnam School of International Studies**.

Since the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (Sars) outbreak killed more than 30 people here in 2003, Government agencies have been preparing for a pandemic — such as one involving the H5N1 or Avian flu virus — and urged firms to factor pandemics in their business continuity planning. Last August, for example, 140 financial institutions underwent pandemic response drills over two weeks.

But, according to a 2006 survey of 193 companies by the Singapore National Employers Federation (Snef), only 42 per cent had business continuity plans that addressed such a threat. Just one in five firms with such plans had actually tested them out.

One is tour agency Global Travel, with over 100 staff. During Sars, the firm worked for about six weeks with just half its staff strength, said managing director Peter Choo. Measures in place include voluntary home quarantine for employees with travel history until the virus' incubation period is over.

But most other businesses have yet to take the pandemic threat seriously, "merely taking temperature of staff in (times of) crisis", said Snef executive director Koh Juan Kiat.

Tech solutions and market intelligence company Access Markets International (AMI) Partners noted that more SMEs are getting their IT systems pandemic-ready — investment in Internet access and telecom services was US\$1.5 billion last year, up 3 per cent from 2007.

But "there is little being done" beyond that. "Few companies have plans to quickly move physical assets or critical staff to another pre-planned location ... That's more because such a need has never arisen before," said Mr Raju Chellam, vice-president of AMI Partners Asia-Pacific.

For small companies already stretched thin by the economic crisis, it might be unaffordable. Food manufacturer JR Foodstuff Industries' general manager Michael Wong estimates that a comprehensive contingency plan and staff training would incur costs of up to \$15,000.

But MHA's guide will come in handy for businesses needing pointers. Asia PR Werkz, for example, is well-tasked to handle staff absenteeism, but lacks antiviral drugs and face masks. "We'll take the cue from authorities, and if there's a need to get those measures, we'll do it," said its director Cho Pei Lin.