

High tech battles the flu

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Eyeing business opportunities while protecting productivity

The word "pandemic" seems to be on everybody's tongue these days.

But despite the negative economic impact a swine flu (or H1N1 influenza) pandemic in Canada and around the world would likely cause, certain sectors won't hurt as much, says Gary Hannah.

As chief executive of Vocantas – a telephone service already implemented at Algonquin College to track flu-like symptoms in students – Mr. Hannah has been receiving a lot of phone calls this past week about his system.

"Do we see an uptake in business? We do," he says.

"There is a silver lining in most of the stuff that we end up doing. If we do it from a business point of view, (we think about) how can we use our technology to better our life circumstances ... That's not a bad thing."

But that's hoping things don't get as bad as the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, in which at least 21 million people died across the world in an age before air travel and intense globalization. The World Bank estimates a similar outbreak would cost the world economy US\$3 trillion globally.

Then there's also the problem of ensuring worker productivity in the face of an outbreak, says Heenan Blaikie's Dan Palayew.

From his 15 years in labour law, he says he's seen companies come up with ideas such as working in off-peak hours and telecommuting to reduce exposure during illness. He says HR policies such as these are areas pandemic planning often neglects.

"We're a little less focused on one of the most important (sources of) capital – the human capital in the workplace," he says.

"Even tomorrow, someone (could be) up late watching CNN

... and they're scared. So they think, 'I don't think it's safe to go into my workplace. I'm best staying in my house until it settles down, so I'm not going into work tomorrow.'

"That's how it starts, frankly."

The Canadian government has made movements for worker protection, though. Mr. Palayew points to improvements in the Employment Standards Act – implemented following the SARS crisis – allowing

people to take unpaid leave when the provincial government declares an emergency.

But in the view of Caroline Alfieri – although she says it is hard to be absolutely certain, given the early stages that swine flu is in – "It doesn't look like it's going to be all that dramatic in terms of mortality."

The Montreal-based research virologist and health ethics member of the Canadian Pandemic Influenza Committee has been closely monitoring reports of health from tourists, as well as periodic updates on the pandemic level from the World Health Organization. As of press time, the pandemic level stood at five out of a possible six, indicating person-to-person transmission in at least two countries.

In the meantime, local firms such as Amika Mobile are eyeing expansion opportunities to help keep the public informed as the pandemic spreads.

That company already has the capability to broadcast alerts in Wi-fi "hotspots" without requiring people to provide e-mail addresses, points out chief executive Sue Abu-Hakima.

"So what you can do is, in the case of a hotspot in an airport, you can alert people (saying) if they had they recently come off a flight to Mexico, you can essentially let them know that it's important to check in with a health official or customs official or agent if they have a health problem," she says.

But the problem is getting people to pay attention to the message, cautions Ted Schrecker, an associate professor at the University of Ottawa's Institute of Population Health.

"I worked in a hospital in London ... (and) during SARS, everybody knew that there were supposed to be very strict controls on hospital visitors, for example. Those were largely ignored for about 10 days," Mr. Schrecker recalls.

"Once you get information out to people, how do you get people to act on it? Everybody knows that smoking is bad for you, right?"

If a pandemic hits right now – just when companies are struggling to make it to their next quarter – Mr. Schrecker adds he's scared of the potential result.

"This is coming at a period where the economy is already weak, governments are already deeply into deficit," he says.

"I don't even like to think about the long-term fiscal implications of a situation in which you have 20 to 30 per cent of the population infected with a virulent strain of influenza virus."