H1N1 Virus Awareness:

Swine flu is a respiratory illness found in pigs resulting from a subtype of influenza A virus, H1N1. There are many types of swine flu, all of which occur naturally in pigs and result in a high incidence but few deaths. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has confirmed that this strain of swine flu is contagious and can spread from human to human. While the disease appears to be moderate among those countries having readily available, advanced medical care, the disease has been more virulent among those countries with limited access to medical care. The symptoms of swine flu are very similar to those of seasonal influenza, including fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, chills, and overall fatigue.

In general, influenza viruses spread easily from person to person through infected respiratory droplets, which can be exhaled through general breathing, coughed, or sneezed into the air. The droplets remain airborne for a time and settle on surfaces. People become infected by inhaling these droplets or by touching a contaminated surface and then touching their mouth or nose. As with seasonal influenza, infected persons are able to transmit the virus before they have exhibited any flu-like symptoms. Health officials estimate swine flu can be transmitted from one day before exhibiting. While flu vaccines are available and a swine flu vaccine is being developed, there are no vaccines available at this time to prevent swine flu. With the recent declaration of swine flu as a pandemic influenza, it is important for businesses to prepare for the potential impact of this event.

Resorts should proactively educate employees on protecting themselves and their families from influenza and other viruses. The CDC recommends flu shots for all persons able to receive them. Although a seasonal flu vaccine will not protect against the H1N1 virus, it does protect against the seasonal virus and can prevent additional illnesses and complications. Resorts should consider coordinating with their health benefit providers to identify clinics offering flu shots and consider subsidizing all or part of the cost. Primary protection includes frequent hand washing and avoiding (when possible) crowded areas where people are coughing and sneezing. In extreme cases a protective biohazard mask would not be out of the question.

Business Continuity:

Some ski resorts have developed a Business Continuity Plan that addresses such things as road closures due to avalanche or ice storms, forest fires and floods. One of the primary differentiators between Business Continuity Planning and Pandemic Planning is the length of time needed to recover. Recovery from environmental events such as avalanche or floods can be measured in days, and in the worst case in a week or so. Pandemic consequences on the other hand could take months to get back to normal business operations.

Resorts should categorize their operational functions in three groups: those that must be performed on-site, those that can be performed remotely, and those that are not really critical. Due to the nature of ski resorts almost all functions must be performed on-site. Very few functions such as marketing and sales can be performed remotely. In analyzing what functions are not really critical to the operations, first look at what things are duplicated; for example if there are three food and beverage operations it may be possible to consolidate them into one F&B operation.

Cross training is very normal in smaller resorts but larger resorts are more likely to be compartmentalized where there is very limited opportunity for cross training. Cross training is a vital part of being able to survive a pandemic. Resorts that do not have a vehicle for cross training need to rethink their operations and how they can incorporate cross training into their resort's operating system. Certain levels of reasonableness must be considered in cross training; for example it would not be reasonable or likely to cross train a lift operator or food and beverage employee to become a ski instructor or ski patroller, but it would be reasonable and likely to cross train a ski patroller or ski instructor to serve as a lift operator or food and beverage worker.

Human Resources:

Resort HR Directors need to take a hard look at legal issues and at their employment policies, such as those relating to salary and benefits (especially medical) continuation and paid time off (PTO). If a pandemic brings potential quarantine or departments of public health are suggesting that nonessential employees remain at home to prevent spread of disease, how will the resort handle nonworking employees? What benefits will continue and for how long?

Human Resources policies in general may not adequately address many of the employment issues stemming from a pandemic. Employees, even critical staff, may be absent for extended periods to care for families or school-age children; the absence may extend beyond their paid time off periods or even time off mandated under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).

Resorts may need to consider adding a pandemic clause to their human resources plans to address long-term salary and benefits continuation as well as the seniority and job-status criteria. Policies should clearly define how key year-round employees who are both not ill and not working will be paid and for how long.

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