

Column: Telecommuting Can Be Flu Antidote

By JOYCE M. ROSENBERG, AP Business Writer Wed Jan 11, 3:35 PM ET

NEW YORK - The arrival of flu season can decimate the ranks of already thinly staffed small companies. But some advance planning and taking advantage of technology can help lessen the impact when several employees are out at once.

High-tech innovations such as virtual private networks make it possible for employees to do at least some of their work at home when they're not feeling well. And knowing in advance how your company will run when it's short-staffed will also make a hard situation easier.

To Michael McCann, president of McCann Protective Services in New York, preparing for flu season is no different from preparing for any other problem that might disrupt business. Technology has enabled his core staff of five to work from home, and he maintains a network of people willing to fill in for his employees on a per-diem basis.

"If there's one particular crisis you're planning for, and reviewing your plan and updating it ... when another issue comes up, you just pull it off the shelf," McCann said.

Along that line, McCann said, it's also important that no one in the company be indispensable — the rest of the staff should be able to step in and do absent workers' tasks.

Of course, there's a human side to the flu season, one that presents a dilemma to business owners. They want to get the work done, but they also need to be concerned about everyone else on the premises catching the same bug if an employee shows up sneezing and coughing.

Pressuring them to come to work is a mistake.

"If a person is really sick, you don't want them in the office because you don't want the whole staff to go down," said Reed Baker, owner of Sophist Productions, a New York-based music label and production company.

Moreover, someone with a fever probably can't concentrate on what he or she is doing. And leaning on staffers to come to work when they really don't feel may well generate a morale problem — not only will sick workers be resentful, but so will all the other employees they complain to.

One reason why workers in some companies might want to come in sick is because they're afraid of using up their sick days. That's a particular concern this early in the year. Small businesses with restrictive sick time policies may see more people showing up when they don't feel well.

Some business owners worry that a too-liberal sick time policy will encourage some workers to abuse the system. To Baker, the solution is to be sure from the get-go that you have a solid team of workers behind you.

Baker said he looks for workers who have the same entrepreneurial spirit that he does, who aren't going to take advantage of sick time. Also, he said, with a highly qualified and motivated staff, employees are more willing to step in and do a co-worker's job.

Other workers might come in because they're so dedicated to their work, or find it hard to give themselves permission to take their sick time. That's another reason why equipping employees to work at home is a good idea.

At Circle of Friends, a Santa Monica, Calif.-based maker of children's bath products, owner Eleanor Keare encourages employees to stay home even if they just have a cold and are taking over-the-counter medication. Mindful that many of her 11 employees have long commutes by car, she'd rather they stayed home and logged into work using the company's Web-based system.

"Every aspect of our company's operations is in that system," Keare said. She said of the flu season, "it is certainly a challenge," but said the ability for workers to stay in touch from home has made staff illnesses less of a disruption.

Some companies try to cut down on sick time by encouraging workers to lead a more healthy lifestyle.

At Arment Dietrich, a Chicago-based public relations firm, "exercise counts toward part of the billable hours each of us works," account executive Amanda Peterson said.

Arment Dietrich has five employees, all of whom are able to work from home using the Internet. So they're able to check e-mail and do work for clients when they're out with an illness.

Next week: Sick time policies and the employees who abuse them.