

Employers Should Educate Workforce About Ebola to Quell Fear, Panic and Bias

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By Genevieve Douglas

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As Ebola panic in the U.S. outpaces actual infection, employers would be well served to disseminate clear and accurate information on the disease to ensure business productivity and reduce employee anxiety, global risk management professionals told Bloomberg BNA Oct. 21.

“It is easy to get caught up, temporarily, in the rage of the unknown fear,” Trevor Hughes, director of risk management and global security for Arlington, Va.-based International Relief & Development, said. Employers should disseminate legitimate, medical, professional sources of information to their workforce, Hughes advised.

These resources should be contextually relevant to the geography and to the situation an employer is dealing with, he added.

According to Dan Richards, chief executive officer of Global Rescue in Boston, one of the current problems about information on Ebola is a missing “frame of reference” in the media. “What has been lost here is the context of the disease,” he said. While thousands of people have died from the virus in West Africa, Richards said, “and it is a horrible tragedy,” compared to other rates of fatality and other illnesses, those numbers are small.

“There are diseases out there that we all need to be concerned about, and Ebola is one of them, but not at the level of consternation that the country is feeling,” Richards said.

‘Good Information’ for Peace of Mind

HR departments need to make sure that information shared about Ebola keeps pace with the ever-changing landscape of the pandemic, Hughes said. “There has to be good information that keeps people informed and making smart decisions.”

For example, he said, when using words like “symptomatic,” there should be explicit definitions for individuals that may not have the basic knowledge of health, medicine or disease.

Richards recommended employers invest in a hotline that employees can call for information and guidelines. This will not only allow questions to be answered in a timely manner, but also will help companies that may have employees dispersed across the globe, he said.

Head Off Discrimination

Appropriate information sharing and messaging will also help employers to quell any discriminatory actions against West African employees or workers who have recently traveled to that area, according to Hughes and Richards.

Fear is what causes this discrimination, and “that can't feel good for anybody,” Hughes said.

The way to deal with this psychology of powerlessness and fear, Richards said, is to provide information, but also to give individuals tools to take action. Using the hotline, having experts available and addressing misinformation will quell this fear, he said.

Acting proactively to address workforce concerns “dramatically improves morale,” Richards added.