

Emergency Preparedness - Overview

HEALTH AND SAFETY

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Summary:

The following provides general information and additional resources to help employers who want to establish an Emergency Preparedness Plan. Employers should determine how this information meshes with their business realities and risks they might face to develop an Emergency Preparedness Plan unique to their needs.

Important Notice:

The information provided herein is general in nature and designed to serve as a guide to understanding. These materials are not to be construed as the rendering of legal or management advice. If the reader has a specific need or problem, the services of a competent professional should be sought to address the particular situation.

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Introduction

With worldwide threats of terrorism, extreme weather conditions, and an increase in contagious diseases, emergency preparedness may never be more important than it is today. Many employers with a global presence already have risk assessment, liability, and security practices in place, especially employers who have operations or employees in unstable countries, or where the spread of diseases such as life-threatening flu or tuberculosis has been reported. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Department of Homeland Security, the American Red Cross, and similar organizations recommend that all employers examine and plan what they will do in the event of a crisis.

However, many employers are still in the psychological state of “distancing,” a mental phenomenon to avoid thinking of crisis as a possibility. Some of the reasons for this attitude include:

- Believing that “It can’t happen here.”
- Letting competing priorities subvert efforts to prepare for a disaster
- Depending upon written, out-of-date emergency plans
- Lacking education about the risks to business operations

Prudent employers will conduct risk assessments ahead of time. They will identify the types of emergencies, both internal and external, that might affect their worksite, community, and other locations where they have employees working.

Types of Disasters

For purposes of this discussion, crises fall into three main categories:

1. Terrorism and world unrest
2. Weather-related
3. Disease

TERRORISM AND WORLD UNREST

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Americans face threats posed by hostile governments or extremist groups, which include acts of terrorism or war. Threats of terrorism include bomb scares and the use of chemical, nuclear, radiological, and biological weapons. High-risk targets include military and civilian government facilities, industry sites related to military efforts, international airports, large cities, and high-profile landmarks. Terrorists might also target large public gatherings, water and food supplies, utilities, and corporate centers. Further, they are capable of spreading fear by sending explosives or chemical and biological agents through the mail.

The National Terrorism Advisory System (NTAS) is designed to provide warnings in the form of a set of graduated “Threat Conditions” that increase as the risk of the threat increases. At each threat condition, federal departments and agencies would implement a corresponding set of “Protective Measures” to further reduce vulnerability or increase response capability during a period of heightened alert.

Employers can develop Emergency Preparedness Plans that address proper response in the event of a terrorist attack. Creating a “shelter-in-place” at the worksite in the event employees need to stay inside for some time, is an example of what would be in such a plan.

WEATHER-RELATED

Natural disasters such as snowstorms, hurricanes, earthquakes, tornados, and floods each have their unique implications. Fires, water interruption, and natural gas leaks may also occur. Sometimes there are warning signs of an impending crisis. At other times, there is no warning. Employers are advised to prepare appropriate emergency procedures for each type of crisis.

For example, take what we have learned from recent hurricanes: the telecommunication infrastructure, which most businesses depend on, could collapse. In such a situation, employers and employees may need to utilize numerous methods for maintaining two-way communications, e.g., telephone tree, company intranet, password-protected Internet site, email, voice mail, local radio or TV station. Battery-operated radios, in addition to cell phones, may be necessary in the event of an electrical outage. Employers may need to access up-to-date employee emergency contact information. These are all areas where employers could have contingency plans.

DISEASE

A viral pandemic has the potential to cause more death and illness than any other public health threat. . A virus can cause a pandemic if it mutates, and most people have no immunity to it; it causes serious illness or death, and it is easily transmitted from person-to-person.

The World Health Organization monitors viruses and educates the public using six different pandemic alert phases. However, the warning period before a pandemic is likely to be short, and it will typically take several months for both the development and manufacture of an appropriate vaccine. Therefore, it is likely that there will not be enough vaccine for everyone in the U.S. at the beginning of a pandemic.

Employers, especially those with employees traveling internationally, can establish policies and educate employees about steps to take to maximize infection control. They can provide employees additional paid leave if they reasonably suspect the employee has been exposed to a contagious disease such as avian flu or tuberculosis.

Develop an Emergency Preparedness Plan

Developing an Emergency Preparedness Plan is increasingly being viewed as an imperative by employers who want to be able to react flexibly and promptly, to make the necessary decisions if and when a crisis happens. Appropriate preparation focuses on three major areas:

EMPLOYEE SAFETY

Anticipate what employees will need in terms of information and support. Whether it is preparing employees for possible crises or communicating with them throughout a disaster, make all communications clear, factual, specific, and flexible. Tell employees ahead of time where to go in the event a building is unsafe. Ensure that both management and employees have numerous methods of staying in contact, in the event an emergency occurs while employees are at home or away on business. Provide employees with as much information as possible ahead of time. Assess the need to assist employees' families.

SAFEGUARD KEY ASSETS

Conduct regular inspections of the worksite, implement safety/security practices, and eliminate hazardous conditions. Ensure appropriate security systems are in place such as fire extinguishers, smoke detectors, emergency supply kits, automatic fire sprinklers, and alarm systems. Develop necessary procedures for maintaining, controlling, or shutting off the worksite's air intake systems, water, electricity, and gas. Protect data and information technology systems through the use of up-to-date security software and implementation of appropriate procedures. Educate employees in the appropriate use of communication systems.

BUSINESS CONTINUITY

Ensure adequate insurance coverage to restore business operations if the worksite is damaged, destroyed, or interrupted for some time. Plan how to pay employees and creditors in the event of an emergency. Keep employee and customer data in a safe place, duplicating appropriate records for offsite storage. Maintain extra supplies, materials, and equipment for use in an emergency. Develop a contingency plan in the event the worksite is not usable, such as identifying an offsite location for setting up a call center.

Level of Preparedness

Although most contingency plans focus on actions to take in the event the employer's worksite suffers a crisis, employers should consider what to do if the crisis occurs in the outside world. As we have learned from the hurricane disasters, the commitment to emergency preparedness is key to supporting employees, customers, and the community in the local, regional, and national economy. To assess the appropriate level of preparedness, and make the plan come to life, employers can look at it from the "back door" and answer these questions:

In the event of a crisis:

- What will employees want from their employers?
- What will customers, shareholders, and other constituents want from the organization?
- What will the community at large want from the organization?

There are other considerations in determining the appropriate level of preparedness, such as the following:

- Any plan would logically tie into the existing standards of corporate behavior found in the mission, vision, and values of the organization.
- Factors critical to the success of the organization would be considered, such as the achievement of the organization's balanced scorecard.
- Certain laws, such as the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA), are factors. Employers are required to furnish employees with a place of employment free from recognized hazards likely to cause death or serious physical harm.
- The Board of Directors has a governance obligation to ensure the employers adhere to solid management principles.

TO THESE CONSIDERATIONS, ADD THE EMPLOYER'S REPUTATION IN THE COMMUNITY: A VALUABLE ASSET, WHICH COULD BE THREATENED BY THE POOR HANDLING OF A CRISIS. HOW TO GET STARTED?

But where does one begin? It seems so daunting. If an employer prepares for the "worst-case" scenario, then it can handle other situations as well.

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) <http://www.ready.gov> website "Ready Business" has good advice on what to do before, during, and after an emergency. The DHS offers a variety of recommendations, which include involving workers in the planning process, training employees on company procedures, and setting up effective means of communication.

The Small Business Association provides a Small Business Disaster Planning Toolkit: <https://www.sba.gov/business-guide/manage-your-business/prepare-emergencies#section-header-0> This enables small businesses to identify hazards, as well as plan for and reduce the impact of disasters.

The Institute for Business & Home Safety has a separate toolkit for Business Continuity Planning called OFB-EZ (Open for Business-EZ): <http://disastersafety.org/ibhs-business-protection/ofb-ez-business-continuity/>

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), now part of the DHS, offers a step-by-step approach to emergency planning, response, and recovery for companies of all sizes. Their website is <https://www.fema.gov/preparedness-checklists-toolkits>

1. ESTABLISH A PLANNING TEAM

- Appointed by upper management
- Represented by all functional areas of the business
- Give authority and resources needed to develop and implement a plan

2. ANALYZE CAPABILITIES AND HAZARDS

- Review existing policies and applicable laws, e.g., OSHA, fire codes
- Identify and evaluate backup plans for vital products, services, and operations
- Assess available internal resources, e.g., fire protection equipment, alternative information management systems
- Establish meaningful contacts with first responders, e.g., police, fire and emergency medical response organizations
- Review insurance policies to ensure appropriate coverage
- Use local emergency management agencies, e.g., the local Division of Emergency Management to identify potential hazards
- Estimate probability and potential impact

3. DEVELOP THE PLAN

- Identify challenges and prioritize activities
- List by whom and when tasks will be completed
- Determine how to address problem areas and resource shortfalls
- Write the plan, developing emergency response procedures
- Establish a training schedule
- Coordinate with local government and community organizations
- Coordinate with other corporate offices
- Test the plan through tabletop exercises with those who have key emergency management responsibilities
- Obtain top management approval
- Distribute the plan

4. IMPLEMENT THE PLAN

- Act on recommendations made during the vulnerability analysis
- Integrate the plan into company operations
- Train employees

- Evaluate and modify the plan at least annually

HR's Role in Emergency Preparedness

The level of top management commitment would typically dictate the sophistication of the organization's emergency preparedness plan. Senior management generally controls the dedication of existing resources (people, time, and money) needed to develop and implement a plan.

In larger organizations, often there are risk managers or contingency planners who have the primary responsibility to design, organize, and oversee the safety and security initiatives.

However, in many organizations, this is not the case. Who would assume the responsibility, then? Human Resources (HR) can play a significant role in emergency planning. HR management gurus Ulrich and Brockbank have emphasized the importance of HR acting as strategic partners in diagnosing organization problems and as change agents in creating plans for the future. With that said, there is a wide range of actions that HR can take to help the organization prepare for a crisis.

Some things HR could do:

- Determine if existing programs related to crisis management are up-to-date
- Serve on the emergency preparedness planning team
- Review HR policies regarding
 - Paid and unpaid employee leave
 - Paying employees in the event of a closure
 - Furloughs and layoffs
 - Telecommuting
- Appoint Floor Wardens, providing them with full training in Emergency Reaction Procedures
- Develop an Emergency Action Manual
- Train all employees in appropriate Emergency Reaction Procedures
- Conduct evacuation drills, with maps designating where departments should meet
- Develop a short "Quick Action" Emergency Reaction Document
- Identify a "shelter-in-place" area at the workplace, with appropriate emergency supplies
- Ensure employees handling in-coming mail are following safe procedures
- Provide a procedural checklist for employees who might receive a telephone bomb threat

- Develop and maintain a list of external resources
- Ensure safekeeping of HR records by storing backups in another geographic location
- Create a list of emergency contact information
- Have up-to-date telephone numbers for employees, including cell phone numbers
- Establish a process for communicating with or warning employees, e.g., telephone tree, company intranet, password-protected Internet site, email, voice mail, local radio or TV station
- Educate employees on keeping personal emergency kits at work
- Keep a battery-operated radio at work
- Identify offsite office space as potential places to work in the event of a crisis
- Identify critical positions needed for maintaining business continuity
- Create a succession plan to back up key managers
- Develop a contingency plan in the event of excessive employee absences caused by a contagious disease or some type of disaster
- Establish a relationship with employee assistance program (EAP) or other appropriate professional counselors
- Prepare global workforce and expatriates in advance with resources and emergency support, should evacuation be necessary

Additional Resources

EMPLOYERS COUNCIL RESOURCES

FYI	Layoffs
FYI	Wage and hour – Exemptions Salary Basis Test
FYI	Hours Worked
LINK	Colorado Overtime and Minimum Pay Standards Order (COMPS)
EHPG	Weather-Emergency Closings
EHPG	Layoffs

EHPG	Personal Leave, PTO, Personal Time, Vacation, Sick Leave
EHPG	Attendance

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS RESOURCES

After reviewing the recommendations on these sites, employers can determine how the recommendations mesh with their business realities and risks they might face.

Ready.gov by the Department of Homeland Security

www.ready.gov

Public Health Emergency Preparedness (Arizona)

<https://www.azdhs.gov/preparedness/emergency-preparedness/index.php>

Ready Colorado

<http://www.readycolorado.com>

Be Ready Utah

<https://www.utah.gov/beready/index.html>

FEMA

<http://www.fema.gov>

Red Cross

<http://www.redcross.org>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www.cdc.gov>

<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/business/>

Flu.gov by Department of Health and Human Services

<http://www.pandemicflu.gov>

World Health Organization, Epidemic and Pandemic Alert and Response (EPR)

<http://www.who.int>

U.S. Department of Labor: Occupational Safety and Health Administration

<http://www.osha.gov>

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/emergency.html>

Citizen Corps Council

<https://www.ready.gov/citizen-corps>

U.S. Department of State/Travel

<http://travel.state.gov>

Institute for Business and Home Safety

<http://www.ibhs.org>

Association of Contingency Planners – International

<http://www.acp-international.com>

Employee Assistance Professionals Association

<http://www.eapassn.org/WPD>

Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Response Association

<http://www.disasters.org>

Business Roundtable

<http://www.businessroundtable.org>

Disaster Recovery Institute (DRI) International

<http://www.drii.org>

The Business Continuity Institute

<http://www.thebci.org>

ASIS International

<http://www.asisonline.org>

International SOS

<http://www.internationalsos.com>

National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster

<http://www.nvoad.org>

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

<https://www.dol.gov>

<https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/emergencypreparedness.htm>

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/emergencypreparedness.html>

https://www.eeoc.gov/facts/pandemic_flu.html

EMERGENCY AND EVACUATION PLANNING GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS

<http://www.bepreparedcalifornia.ca.gov/BEPREPARED/BUSINESSES/Pages/EmergencyandEvacuationPlanningGuideforEmployers.aspx>