Disaster preparedness: No organization is immune

Natural and man-made disasters can befall any region, state, city or individual organization. A disaster does not just mean a hurricane or a 9/11; a fire contained to your building could spell disaster for your business. Don't make the mistake of thinking that the unthinkable won't happen to your company. It is precisely that type of thinking that will make an emergency situation even more dire.

Sound the alarm for your company if it does not already have a plan in place for dealing with a disaster. Prepare your people, your facilities, your policies and procedures, and your data and resources now for potential crises that could occur later.

Emergency management guidelines

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) supplies extensive information for preparing your business for a disaster via its Ready.gov site and the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Here are some of the highlights.

Establish a planning team

The size of the planning team will depend on your facility's operations, requirements, and resources. Obtain input from the following departments or responsible staff members:

- upper management;
- line management;
- labor;
- human resources;
- engineering and maintenance;
- safety, health, and environmental affairs;
- public information officer;
- security;
- community relations;
- sales and marketing;
- legal; and
- finance and purchasing.

Consider a broad cross-section of people from throughout your organization, but focus on those with expertise vital to daily business functions. These will likely include people with technical skills, as well as managers and executives.

Include co-workers from all levels in planning and as active members of the emergency management team. The team should be led by an upper-level executive.

Analyze capabilities and vulnerabilities

1. Review existing plans and policies, including:
    1. evacuation plan;
    2. lockdown plan;
    3. fire protection plan;
    4. safety and health program;
    5. environmental policies;
    6. security procedures;
    7. insurance programs;
    8. finance and purchasing procedures;
    9. plant closing policy;
    10. employee manuals;
    11. hazardous materials plan;
    12. process safety assessment;
    13. risk management plan;
    14. capital improvement program; and
    15. mutual aid agreements.
2. Identify critical products, services, and operations. You'll need this information to assess the impact of potential emergencies and to determine the need for backup systems. Areas to review include:
    1. company products and services and the facilities and equipment needed to produce them;
    2. products and services provided by suppliers, especially sole source vendors;
    3. lifeline services, such as electrical power, water, sewer, gas, telecommunications, and transportation;
    4. operations, equipment, and personnel vital to the continued functioning of the facility
3. Identify internal resources and capabilities.
    1. Personnel: Fire brigade, hazardous materials response team, emergency medical services, security, emergency management group, evacuation team, public information officer. Also, identify employee skills (medical, engineering, communications, foreign language) that might be needed in an emergency.
    2. Equipment: Fire protection and suppression equipment, communications equipment, first-aid supplies, emergency supplies, warning systems, emergency power equipment, decontamination equipment.
    3. Facilities: Emergency operating center, media briefing area, shelter areas, first-aid stations, sanitation facilities.
    4. Organizational capabilities: Training, evacuation plan, employee support system.
    5. Backup systems: For payroll, communications, production, customer services, shipping and receiving, information systems support, emergency power, recovery support.
4. Identify external resources, which could be needed in an emergency, such as:
    1. local emergency management office;
    2. fire department;
    3. hazardous materials response organization;
    4. emergency medical services;
    5. hospitals;
    6. local and state police;
    7. community service organizations;
    8. utilities;
    9. contractors;
    10. suppliers of emergency equipment;
    11. insurance carriers.
5. Determine the potential emergencies that could affect your organization. Some are obvious, some are

not. Consider the following factors.

1. Historical: What types of emergencies have occurred in the community, at this facility, and at other facilities in the area?
2. Geographic: What can happen as a result of the facility's location?
3. Technological: What could result from a process or system failure?
4. Human error: What emergencies can be caused by employee error? Are employees trained to work safely? Do they know what to do in an emergency? Human error is the single largest cause of workplace emergencies.
5. Physical: What types of emergencies could result from the design or construction of the facility? Does the physical facility enhance safety?
6. Regulatory: What emergencies or hazards are you regulated to deal with?

Develop the disaster plan

1. Determine what actions would be necessary to: assess the situation; protect employees, customers, visitors, equipment, vital records, and other assets; and get the business back up and running.
2. Specify procedures for: warning employees and customers; communicating with personnel and community responders; conducting an evacuation and accounting for all individuals in the facility; managing response activities; activating and operating an emergency operations center; fighting fires; shutting down operations.
3. Create support documents, including: emergency call lists; building/site maps; resource lists.
4. Coordinate with outside organizations. Meet with other businesses in your building or industrial complex. Talk with first responders, emergency managers, community organizations, and utility providers. Plan with your suppliers, shippers, and others you regularly do business with. Share your plans and encourage other businesses to set in motion their own continuity planning and offer to help others.
5. Write and distribute the plan. Make sure those involved know what they are supposed to do. Train others in case you need backup help.
6. Establish a training schedule. Employee training should address: individual roles and responsibilities; information about threats, hazards, and protective actions; notification, warning, and communications procedures; means for locating family members in an emergency; emergency response procedures; evacuation, shelter, and accountability procedures; location and use of common emergency equipment; emergency shutdown procedures.
7. Review your emergency plans annually. Just as your business changes over time, so do your preparedness needs. When you hire new employees or when there are changes in how your company functions, you should update your plans and inform your people.

Communicate with employees ... before, during and after

- Include emergency preparedness information in newsletters, on the company intranet, in periodic employee e-mails, and in other internal communication tools.
- Plan a place to meet for a headcount in the event of a facilities evacuation. Use electronic means for a larger-scale evacuation.
- Set up a telephone calling tree, a password-protected page on the company website, an e-mail alert, or a call-in voice recording to communicate with employees.
- Designate an out-of-town phone number where employees can leave a message in a catastrophic disaster that let's you know they're okay and where/how you can reach them.
- Have a section created on your company's website or intranet site that only employees can access, on which you can post pertinent information. Normally, the prevalence of cell phones makes it easy to keep in touch when landlines go down. But when cell phones don't work either, you'll need another way to communicate with employees.
- Provide employees with wallet cards detailing instructions on how to get company information in an emergency situation. Include telephone numbers or Internet passwords for easy reference.

- Maintain open communications where workers are free to bring questions and concerns to company leadership.
- Ensure you have appointed staff members who are responsible for communicating regularly to employees.

Communicating with individuals with disabilities

It is important that you take into consideration the special needs of individuals with disabilities and other medical conditions. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the EEOC published a fact sheet on how employers can obtain such information without violating the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or Rehabilitation Act.

The EEOC suggests giving all employees a memo with an attached form requesting information regarding what assistance is needed and what issues need to be addressed, such as communication difficulties, physical limitations, equipment instructions, and medication procedures. You may have a follow-up conversation with an individual when necessary to obtain more detailed information. For example, it would be important for an employer to know whether someone who uses a wheelchair because of mobility limitations is able to walk independently, with or without the use of crutches, a cane, or a colleague, in an emergency situation. It would also be important for an employer to know if an individual will need any special medication, equipment, or device (e.g., an assisted wheelchair carrier strap or a mask because of a respiratory condition) in the event of an emergency.

You are entitled only to the information necessary to be prepared to provide assistance. This means that, in most instances, it will be unnecessary for you to know the details of an individual's medical condition. It is important that employees understand that providing any information is completely voluntary.

You may share this information only with individuals who need it to fulfill their responsibilities under the company's emergency evacuation plan, such as medical professionals, emergency coordinators, floor captains, colleagues who have volunteered to act as "buddies," building security officers who need to confirm that everyone has been evacuated, and other non-medical personnel who are responsible for ensuring safe evacuation.

Practice, practice, practice

Once you have a disaster plan in place and communicate it to the staff, it is important to practice it before a crisis occurs. Drills and exercises will help you work out the kinks in the plan and reduce confusion and panic during a time of crisis. These are tips from the DHS.

1. If you rent, lease, or share office space, coordinate and practice evacuation and other emergency plans with other businesses in your building or facility.
2. Conduct regularly scheduled education and training seminars to provide employees with information, identify needs, and develop preparedness skills.
3. Include preparedness training in new employee orientation programs.
4. Do tabletop exercises with members of the emergency management team. Meet in a conference room setting to discuss individual responsibilities and how each would react to emergency scenarios.
5. Schedule walk-through drills where the emergency management team and response teams actually perform their designated emergency functions. This activity generally involves more people and is more thorough than a tabletop exercise.
6. Practice evacuating and sheltering. Have all personnel walk the evacuation route to a designated area where procedures for accounting for all personnel are tested. Practice your "shelter-in-place" plan.
7. Evaluate and revise processes and procedures based on lessons learned in training and exercise.
8. Keep training records.

Business Continuity Plan, Part I

- Review your business process flow chart, if one exists.
- Include emergency payroll, expedited financial decision-making, and accounting systems to track and document costs in the event of a disaster.
- Establish procedures for succession of management. Include at least one person who is not at the company headquarters, if applicable.
- Develop professional relationships with more than one company, in case your primary contractor cannot service your needs. Create a contact list for existing critical business contractors and others you plan to use in an emergency. Keep this list with other important documents on file, in your emergency supply kit and at an off-site location.

Business Continuity Plan, Part II

Plan what you will do if your building, plant, or store is not accessible.

- Consider whether the business can be run from a different location or from staff members' homes.
- Develop relationships with other companies to use their facilities in case a disaster makes your location unusable.

Case study: Morgan Stanley

When terrorists first attacked the World Trade Center in 1993, it took four hours for Morgan Stanley to evacuate its employees. After that, the company developed a multi-faceted disaster plan and practiced it frequently.

It paid off on September 11, 2001. This time, the evacuation process took just 45 minutes. Although 13 employees were killed, the toll could have been much higher for the firm if it did not have a plan in place that included frequent practice runs.