



NATURAL DISASTERS AND THE WORKPLACE

Eight Steps Employers Should Take to Prepare Their Workplace for a Natural Disaster

We may think, “Natural disasters can’t happen here,” or “That couldn’t happen to us,” but they can and it does, so we need to be prepared.

In the wake of numerous large scale man-made and natural disasters, many organizations have vastly improved their disaster recovery and readiness plans. However, recent high impact incidents have provided additional valuable lessons for risk management professionals. We recommend updating your current plans in the following areas accordingly.

Lesson 1: Involvement

Studies show that emergency response planning is more effective when employees, not just leaders, are involved. Involving employees in the development of plans fosters ownership and empowers those involved to take action in a crisis. It also increases confidence in the organization and the plan itself.

A few ways to include employees in plan development are:

- Solicit feedback. What do employees think would work best in a disaster situation? Have any employees been exposed to a disaster? If so, what worked and what didn't work in their experiences?
- Organize key employees to develop and maintain preparedness programs. Not only will their work be useful to the organization but they also will serve as champions of the plan and encourage others to become involved.
- To keep the process moving and ensure your plan receives proper prioritization, consider having a third party assist with regular plan improvements and facilitate important discussions. This provides an unbiased source to refine staff feedback, resulting in a plan that reflects industry best practices. It also provides a unique learning opportunity for employees involved in the process to receive some informal training for their roles.
- Ensure that plans are in place to accommodate any special needs that employees may have. Even if your workforce does not currently include a person with disabilities, it is still necessary to develop a plan of action, as injured employees, future hires or even guests in your building may need these special accommodations.
- Active participation in evacuation drills—both “tabletop” and full-scale—is another critical element to workforce involvement. Drills are essential for building a “point of reference” regarding what to do in the event of a disaster. Without practice, many employees will panic, which will be detrimental to their own safety and others following their lead.

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Lesson 2: Backup Emergency Leadership

Emergency planning must have multiple event capacity: plans must be in place for simultaneous disasters and multiple routes of escape must be devised for the possibility that one will be blocked. Also, perhaps most importantly, there must be multiple workers in each key emergency response plan position, as a leader might be out sick, on vacation or home with family when a disaster strikes.

Each key position should be filled by at least three people. In the event that a leader is injured during the disaster, there must be another employee ready to take her/his place. Once you have multiple layers of people in emergency response positions, begin to work on a worst-case scenario. “If there’s a fire we ...” or “In the event of a hurricane we ...”

Remember that evacuation is not always the best plan. In some weather-related disasters, it might be safer to stay in a secure building rather than exposing employees to an outdoor assembly point. A plan that works for a fire does not necessarily translate to a flood. Consider all possible disasters.

Lesson 3: Communication

Communication is essential to ensuring that a plan will be executed successfully during a disaster. Again, preparation is key.

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- In the event of a natural disaster, how will employees throughout your building or buildings be notified? During the planning stage, go over communication possibilities: a public address system, texting, robo-calls, social media and others. Be sure to have redundancy in your crisis notification system to ensure that information is distributed to the entire workforce.
- If using an alarm system, a unique sound, instantly recognizable to employees as a signal to evacuate, can be most effective.
- Keep in mind that during times of emergency, when everyone is using cell phones, there may be network congestion. Make sure you have alternate communication methods.
- What if your building loses power? In addition to an auxiliary power supply, implement non-electronic methods of communication. Whatever systems you put in place, test them regularly and update them as necessary.
- Finally, have procedures in place for notifying authorities of the incident in a timely and coordinated manner.

Lesson 4: Check-In

Employees must know where to go to check in after they evacuate a building. Having a system in place and practicing the check-in procedure will ensure a more coordinated evacuation and better management of missing persons data in the event of a major crisis.

Specialized software or systems designed to assist with accounting for people can also offer a reliable and timely way to compile a missing persons list. This information can be passed along to first responders once they arrive to expedite rescue and recovery.

Lesson 5: Reach Out

Part of the planning process is reaching out to neighboring businesses. What sort of emergency response planning do they have in effect? Does it clash in any way with yours? Assembly and check-in may be complicated if multiple local businesses choose the same assembly point. With cooperation, the plans can be complementary.

- Your Emergency Response Planning committee should meet regularly with other local businesses to coordinate evacuation procedures.

- Coordinate your plans with local hospitals and police and fire departments during both the planning phase and evacuation exercises. Tell them what you expect of them and ask what they expect from you.

Lesson 6: Family First

Recognize that employees will view family as their top priority in a crisis. Having an established protocol in place to assist employees with their personal needs will make the transition back to work easier for employees and the organization alike—and it will boost employee commitment and loyalty to the organization.

- Make sure your disaster recovery/business continuity plans include modified work schedules and flexible leave.
- Crisis counseling should be offered to employees and their families as necessary to help them cope with the crisis. Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) should be alerted to the situation so it can anticipate calls from affected employees and family members.

Lesson 7: Support

The emotional toll on employees after a natural disaster cannot be overestimated. Remember that even employees not directly affected by a disaster can experience unexpected mental health consequences. For example, an employee who had the day off when the disaster happened might suffer from survivor's guilt.

A crisis debriefing should inform employees about where and how to get help. A quality Employee Assistance Program can provide this service and should be equipped to engage the workforce immediately so everyone will have professional support on a timely basis. Even if no major damage occurs, employees may still feel stressed for an extended time after the disaster. Talking to their EAP will benefit, and assist employees with adjusting to the “new normal” that follows a crisis.

Lesson 8: Staff Input

When the worst is over and things have settled into the new normal, organize a meeting of all involved.

- What are employee assessments of the planning, communication, evacuation, check-in and after-support? What can be improved? This is an excellent opportunity to get more employees involved and to strengthen the layered knowledge and backup emergency planning mentioned above.

- Undoubtedly people will have complaints about how things were handled. Encourage open debate; listen to suggestions on how to improve any weak links in the emergency response chain.

Soliciting employees' input after a disaster will make them feel listened-to and safer in the future. Utilizing a risk management vendor for post-event analysis will also help with business continuity.

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY (NGS) AND ITS WORLD-CLASS EMERGENCY RESPONSE PLAN

Over the past 10 years, the National Geographic Society has regularly fine tuned its business continuity and emergency response plan, making it the leader to follow in disaster preparation. Here's what they have learned:

- Fast-track your Emergency Response Plan now!
- Plan *with* employees, for company-wide ownership and a more effective evacuation plan.
- Conduct drills and exercises on a regular, scheduled and unscheduled basis.
- Understand that crowds can hinder check-in processes and endanger assembly points.
- Encourage employees to utilize their EAP.
- Focus on employee retention after the crisis to avoid losing workers to personal circumstances.
- Review and improve plans before and after an event.

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