



Topic #5

Managing Through Emergency and Disaster

Scope— The topic of managing through emergency and disaster encompasses the issues in developing a plan for organizations to respond to and function effectively during times of emergency or disaster. Whether a natural disaster, such as a severe weather condition or health crisis, or a disaster caused by human actions, such as terrorism or war, it is critical that organizations have plans in place to manage operations during such times with minimal losses and disruptions in normal business flow. Human resource professionals play a major role in preparing for and implementing an organization's emergency disaster plan that addresses these challenges.

Overview

While many organizational officials view emergency and disaster planning as purely a function of risk management and safety professionals, human resource management plays a key role in planning for any disaster or emergency, whether for staffing and workforce planning, training, reorganization or revising plans and policies to accommodate changing needs and priorities.

This article addresses HR's role in planning for and responding to emergency and disaster, reviews basic steps in emergency planning, and briefly highlights specific functions within the HR discipline and issues involved in the disaster management process. The article closes with a brief discussion of specific types of disaster and special circumstances.

HR's Role as Leader in Disaster and Operations Continuity Planning

While community leaders may be involved in dealing with emergencies and disasters that have widespread impact, these leaders will be primarily concerned with public safety and not with the assets of a business or its ongoing operation. Thus, organizations must be prepared by creating and updating plans for the organization's sustainability during disasters. Top organizational officials should drive the plan, with human resource leaders playing a key role in the personnel interface elements of the plan. For businesses with multiple locations, operational leaders who will ensure compliance with the disaster plan may be designated at each location. HR planning is integral to strategic disaster management plans. To the degree that the organization has invested in workforce planning to anticipate the numbers of workers with the appropriate skill sets and competencies, it should also anticipate how changes due to emergencies will affect those plans. Part of the planning process should outline resource allocations, including information on how employees may be deployed into other areas of the workforce should certain workgroups not have the adequate staffing due to illness, death or travel restrictions. The workforce planning component should also identify training needs so that the staff is adequately prepared to take on additional duties in emergencies.

Because organizations grow and change over time, they should periodically review and update their emergency plan to ensure that it is still operational. Also, given that the plan may contain contacts for disaster resources, company personnel and other data that tend to change over time, this information will need to be reviewed so that all information is current. See *HR Pros Weather the Storm* (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/hr-pros-weather-the-storm.aspx).

Basic Steps in Emergency Planning

Ready: Business (<https://www.ready.gov/business>) is a partnership between the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to help owners and managers of small to midsize businesses prepare their employees, operations and assets in the event of an emergency. According to Ready, the five steps in developing a preparedness program are program management, planning, implementation, testing and exercises, and program improvement.

Program management

A preparedness program should outline the goals and objectives of the program, define roles and responsibilities and identify individuals to develop and

update the program. The organization's legal department or legal counsel should review all emergency plans to ensure that risks are minimized.

Planning

A systematic plan for approaching emergencies involves an understanding of the universe of hazards that may occur, followed by an assessment of the probabilities of these disasters occurring. Plans should be focused on those elements with the highest degree of probability. See SBA Emergency Preparedness (<https://www.sba.gov/managing-business/running-business/emergency-preparedness>).

Implementation

Organizations should then develop a preparedness plan that addresses the following:

- Resource management.
- Emergency response.
- Crisis communications.
- Business continuity.
- Information technology.
- Employee assistance.
- Incident management.
- Training.

Operational and closed worksite contingencies. Plans should include contingencies for both operational and closed worksite contingencies. Worksites that remain open during emergencies will need to consider a wide range of issues, including lodging for displaced employees and staff, food and water, and transportation issues.

Alternative business operation sites. To prepare for the possibility that organizations will be able to maintain their operations, they should develop plans for identifying potential alternative worksite arrangements and staffing options, as well as the technology structures required to support business operations if worksites are inaccessible.

Categorization of employees by degree of impact. It is likely that employers will have three employee groups based on the nature and magnitude of the emergency: employees who are severely affected (including those who have lost family members or homes and those who are personally affected by severe illness); employees who have experienced issues such as energy or transportation losses as a result of the disaster; and employees not directly affected. The organization should create policies for each employee group with consideration for their needs and issues.

Compliance with government reporting requirements. Emergency planning should take into consideration government reporting requirements with regard to the Occupational Safety and Health Act, COBRA, state laws requiring delivery of paychecks and Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act (WARN Act) notifications, among many others.

Safety and security practices. Business continuity and recovery and emergency response are important elements of a safety and security program. Emergency evacuation plans must be developed and practiced, and key employees should be identified to make decisions regarding safe working conditions. See General Business Preparedness for General, Construction and Maritime Industries (<http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/emergencypreparedness/general.html>) and OSHA: Exit Routes Are Mandatory (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/risk-management/pages/osha-exit-routes-mandatory.aspx).

Communications plan. Communicating with employees, customers and other stakeholders during emergencies is a critical role. Through effective communications, customers may remain loyal, employees will know not only what is expected but also what resources they can turn to for support during the crisis, and others can know about their role in the emergency. See How to Communicate with Employees When a Crisis Hits (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/book-blog/pages/how-to-communicate-with-employees-when-a-crisis-hits.aspx).

Testing and exercises

Performing testing and exercises to practice the emergency plans are necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of a preparedness program, to make sure employees know what to do and to find any missing parts that employers need to address before an actual emergency situation occurs. See Are You Prepared to Evacuate Your Workers with Disabilities? (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/risk-management/pages/evacuate-workers-with-disabilities.aspx) and When Simulation Means Survival (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/risk-management/pages/when-simulation-means-survival.aspx).

Program improvement

Employers should review and update all plans periodically to determine that they cover the possibility of organizational changes (e.g., new facilities, additional departments, changed organizational structure). Further, the plans should include the latest emergency information, such as updates on epidemics and workplace considerations or changes in protocols for responding to global disasters. In addition, updates on plan resources and contact information should be periodically checked to ensure accuracy.

Staffing Management Practices

The HR function will have the primary responsibility for managing staffing needs during an emergency and should include contingency staffing plans as part of the disaster and emergency planning process.

Essential personnel. Employees should understand who or which positions are considered essential during an emergency or disaster. Essential personnel are typically those individuals required to report to work regardless of conditions, such as health care and public safety workers. Inclement Weather Policy Should Factor In Safety, Pay (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/employment-law/pages/inclement-weather-safety-pay.aspx).

Alternative work schedules. In times of emergencies, organizations may need to consider alternative work schedules, including part-time, job-sharing or new schedules that will permit nontraditional work hours (such as 24/7 operations). See *Managing Flexible Work Arrangements* (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/Pages/managingflexibleworkarrangements.aspx).

Alternative worksites and telecommuting arrangements. Establishing temporary worksites or virtual office environments through telecommuting may be viable options when worksites have to be closed, relocated or staffed in innovative ways due to emergencies.

Transportation services. When operating during disasters, employers may need to provide unique transportation services so that employees can reach the worksite.

New-hire and recruitment pipeline issues. Human resource professionals may need to modify their staffing procedures during emergencies. In some cases, new employee hiring will need to be placed on hold, yet in other situations, new staff may be required immediately so that new locations may become operational or staff may be replaced.

Temporary staffing issues. In some emergencies, temporary staff will be necessary for the business to operate in new locations or with many full-time employees unable to get to work. Human resource professionals should consider myriad temporary staffing options, including using a pool of temporary employees, using temporary staffing services or deploying consultants or contract workers, depending on the numbers, skill sets and credentials needed.

Emergency responders. Some employees may be members of the National Guard or volunteer responders that may be called up for duty by the state governor or president of the United States. Job protections are in place for these employees, and some state laws may be implicated to address unique situations.

Employee Compensation

Payroll. A major issue for employers during disasters is providing for employees' pay. Employers will need to consider ways to deliver paychecks to employees and should consider state laws for timelines in doing so. See *Do we have to pay employees when we close our business due to inclement weather?* (www.shrm.orgfile:///S:/Departments/Editorial/HR%20Resources/HR%20Resources%20Content%20Files/Toolkits/Do%20we%20have%20to%20pay%20employees%20when%20we%20close%20our%20business%20due%20to%20inclement%20weather?) and *When Disasters Strike: Pay, Leave and Related Issues* (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/compensation/pages/disasters.aspx).

Unemployment compensation. Some employees may be terminated or be unable to work because of a facility closing, and in those situations, employees will need to adhere to unemployment compensation guidelines.

Hazard pay. Employers may consider offering essential personnel differential pay when working conditions are extreme due to emergencies or disasters. See *What are some common types of differential/premium pay, and in what instances would an employer consider offering this type of pay to its employees?* (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-qa/pages/commondifferentialpremiumpayandwhenofferedbyemployers.aspx)

Nonexempt employees. Nonexempt employees are paid for work performed. They may earn overtime compensation as increased demands are placed on them to cover for other employees during a crisis. If employees work from home or do other work away from the business premises, they must be compensated.

Exempt employees. Exempt employees must be paid their salary for an entire week if they work any portion of a workweek, even if the location is closed for part of the week because of an emergency or natural disaster. If the facility is closed for a full workweek and the exempt employee performs no work that week, the employer has no obligation to pay the employee.

Employee Benefits

Leave policies. A common benefits issue during emergencies is providing leave to employees. Allowing for flexibility in paid time off use is common. Some employers consider leave donation programs to assist employees who must be off of work during calamities yet have exhausted their paid leave. See [How to Create a Leave Donation Program \(www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/how-to-guides/Pages/howtocreataleavedonationprogram.aspx\)](https://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/how-to-guides/Pages/howtocreataleavedonationprogram.aspx) and [California Employers Must Comply with Leave Laws During Wildfires \(www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/state-and-local-updates/pages/california-leave-laws-wildfires.aspx\)](https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/state-and-local-updates/pages/california-leave-laws-wildfires.aspx).

Insurance benefits. When business operations are suspended due to facility closings, employers will need to determine if benefits plans are to be continued. Human resource professionals should contact insurance companies to determine which benefits will continue, which will be discontinued and how employees will be notified of these changes. Insurance companies and administrators often have specific hotlines for their customers to contact during a disaster since life, health and disability coverages will be affected.

Family and medical leave. Employers covered under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) may encounter employees who need time off from work due to health conditions related to emergency and disaster situations. Organizations must ensure that their employees are aware of their FMLA rights and have access to employer policies and related forms for using FMLA-protected leave. [Employee Leave Eligibility and Natural Disasters \(www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/benefits/Pages/Employee-Leave-Natural-Disasters.aspx\)](https://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/benefits/Pages/Employee-Leave-Natural-Disasters.aspx).

Global HR Issues

Emergencies can be global in nature or have global impact for international companies. Crises of this magnitude will require HR to anticipate and implement disaster planning across borders and take account of varying international standards and protocols. Decisions such as evacuation of expatriates or emergency medical services must be identified at the onset of international assignments. See [How can an organization ensure the safety and security of expatriates and other employees in high-risk areas? \(www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-qa/pages/howcananorganizationensurethesafetyandsecurityofexpatsemployeesinhighriskareas.aspx\)](https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-qa/pages/howcananorganizationensurethesafetyandsecurityofexpatsemployeesinhighriskareas.aspx)

Technology Issues

How will a business maintain its financial and other critical data during emergencies? Will technology be accessible during emergency situations? What should happen if the facility is destroyed and with it the data needed for business operations? These are some of the critical technology issues that must be addressed for emergency planning as well as business continuity and recovery. See [IT Disaster Recovery Plan \(https://www.ready.gov/business/implementation/IT\)](https://www.ready.gov/business/implementation/IT).

Types of Disasters and Special Circumstances

Different types of disasters and emergencies will require differing responses by organizations.

Terrorism

Since the tragedy of Sept. 11, employers are well aware of the potential dangers for employees on U.S. soil, as well as when employees of U.S. employers are at work or on business travel abroad. See [Terror Attack Allegedly Planned on Work Computer \(www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/employment-law/pages/terror-attack-allegedly-planned-on-work-computer.aspx\)](https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/employment-law/pages/terror-attack-allegedly-planned-on-work-computer.aspx).

Epidemic

Many businesses are not prepared for the possibilities of a widespread epidemic, such as pandemic influenza, yet experts insist that the possibility for such a disaster is high. See [Managing Through Flu and Other Epidemics in the Workplace \(www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/Pages/managingfluandepidemics.aspx\)](https://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/Pages/managingfluandepidemics.aspx).

Natural disasters

Natural disasters include emergencies caused by flood, hurricane, earthquake or other weather disasters. See [Express Request: Hurricane Preparedness \(www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/exreq/pages/details.aspx?erid=453\)](https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/exreq/pages/details.aspx?erid=453) and [How to Protect Against Winter Weather Hazards, Extreme Cold \(www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/risk-management/pages/winter-weather-hazards-storm-threats.aspx\)](https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/risk-management/pages/winter-weather-hazards-storm-threats.aspx).

Workplace violence

An increasing issue of importance to human resource professionals is how to deal with workplace violence. Whether it is a disgruntled employee or a case of domestic violence that has entered the workplace, these are issues with potentially grave consequences. See [Understanding Workplace Violence Prevention and Response \(www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/workplace-violence-prevention-and-response.aspx\)](https://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/workplace-violence-prevention-and-response.aspx) and [Safeguarding Employees from Workplace Violence \(www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/Pages/safeguarding-employees-from-workplace-violence.aspx\)](https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/Pages/safeguarding-employees-from-workplace-violence.aspx).

Templates and Tools**Policies**

Adverse Weather Conditions Policy (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/policies/pages/cms_020373.aspx)

Emergency Evacuation Program Policy (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/policies/pages/cms_000587.aspx)

Social Distancing Guidelines (for workplace communicable disease outbreaks) (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/policies/pages/cms_016204.aspx)

Inclement Weather Policy (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/policies/pages/cms_000633.aspx)

Leave Sharing/Donation Policy (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/policies/Pages/cms_016303.aspx)

Critical Personal Leave of Absence Policy (Non-FMLA and Non-Military) (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/policies/pages/criticalpersonalleavesofabsence.aspx)

Disaster Preparedness: Medical Emergency Procedures Policy (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/policies/pages/cms_016306.aspx)

Safety Policy: General (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/policies/pages/cms_000589.aspx)

Security: Visitors Policy & Procedures (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/policies/pages/cms_000639.aspx)

Workplace Violence Policy (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/policies/pages/cms_000590.aspx)

Workplace Violence Prevention Policy (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/policies/pages/cms_007623.aspx)

Weapon-Free Workplace Policy (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/policies/pages/cms_010362.aspx)

Sample forms

Disaster Preparedness Checklist (HR Dept.) (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/Pages/emergency_preparedness_checklist_HR.aspx)

Leave: Donation Request Form (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/Pages/1cms_016293.aspx)

Leave: Donation Application (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/Pages/cms_010490.aspx)

Leave: Donation Authorization Form (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/Pages/1cms_019326.aspx)

Recordkeeping: Emergency Contact Form (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/pages/recordkeeping_emergencycontactform.aspx)

Additional resources

Fact Sheet on Obtaining and Using Employee Medical Information as Part of Emergency Evacuation Procedures (<http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/evacuation.html>)

HIPAA Disclosures for Emergency Preparedness - A Decision Tool (<http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/privacy/hipaa/understanding/special/emergency/decisiontoolintro.html>)

How to Plan for Workplace Emergencies and Evacuations (OSHA Publication) (<http://www.osha.gov/Publications/osha3088.pdf>)

OSHA's Evacuation Plans and Procedures eTool: Emergency Standards (<https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/evacuation/evaluate.html>)

HR DAILY NEWSLETTER

News, trends and analysis, as well as breaking news alerts, to help HR professionals do their jobs better each business day.

CONTACT US (WWW.SHRM.ORG/ABOUT-SHRM/PAGES/CONTACT-US.ASPX) | 800.283.SHRM (7476)

© 2020 SHRM. All Rights Reserved

SHRM provides content as a service to its readers and members. It does not offer legal advice, and cannot guarantee the accuracy or suitability of its content for a particular purpose.

Disclaimer (www.shrm.org/about-shrm/Pages/Terms-of-Use.aspx#Disclaimer)

Feedback