

The Role of the Human Resources Business Function in Business Continuity and Emergency Planning

People, not bricks and mortar, technology or machinery, are the key to an organization's success!

Organizational readiness for emergencies is not an intuitive business practice unless it is the crux of existence such as for civil emergency response agencies. That being understood, we can then approach emergency planning as a project followed by a process and governed by the organizational risk decision function, typically the executive leader.

Emergency management requires the participation of every business function to varying degrees. The Human Resources business function plays a key role in developing and supporting all emergency plans as well as the overall capability of the organization to respond and recover.

There are four key elements to any emergency situation that we may face. They are: People, Information, Technology and Facilities with the technology aspect encompassing the ability to communicate. There is no organization capable of facing and managing an emergency event without access to key people with the right skill and knowledge. While we may be able to work in a limited fashion without Information, Technology and Facilities, we cannot do anything without people in designated roles. In order for our people to be available for emergency work assignments they must first and foremost be protected from workplace hazards that might arise during predictable events such as; gas or chemical leaks, fire and building structure failure. But workplace safety is not sufficient to ensure the health of the organization; we need our people to be available for the response and recovery activities that will establish our ability to ensure continued customer service and financial viability. In the event of a widespread regional disaster not only will the organization be impacted but our employees, their families and their homes may also be affected to such a degree that the employee is unwilling to work in a designated emergency role. Successful organizations must be prepared to support employees in a manner that permits them to work under all conditions and circumstances, including the provision of specific support for family members as well as temporary housing. Family support that goes beyond EAP should not be entrenched in procedure but be a part of emergency management policy and implemented through the facilitation of the corporate Human Resource function.

An emergency management perspective on Human Resources provides for a plan that is generic in its main body and specific in its appendices. The main sections of an HR emergency plan document contain

the corporate HR policies, standard procedures and actions, general response and recovery guidelines as well as the interface with the overall corporate emergency plan. All other specific information is organized in an unlimited number of appendices each addressing a specific issue or procedure.

The following elements are a good starting point for the development of an HR emergency plan. Customization and application of this information is mandatory to account for workplace culture and policies.

1. Ensure employees will be protected in the workplace.
2. Implement a corporate wide program to encourage employees to adopt a 72 Hour home emergency preparedness arrangement. <http://www.getprepared.gc.ca/sm/index-eng.aspx>
 - a. Provide appropriate information and sources for supplies.
 - b. Organize annual 'lunch & learn' seminars or other appropriate means of creating awareness.
 - c. Conduct draws or contests to win a 72 Hour preparedness kit.
3. Provide employees access to support systems such as EAP, critical incident stress debriefing and grief counselling.
4. Don't assume that employees will be available for work assignments at the onset of emergency conditions.
 - a. Establish and test telework plans
 - b. Determine what could be done for family support and prepare a checklist of possibilities and potential resources. Policies are not recommended; rather guidelines regarding what might be done.
 - c. Prepare to appeal to all employees to help each other. Facilitate employee and family mutual aid through a mini call centre.
5. Response checklists must address people issues first. The agenda template for the various crisis team meetings up to and including the executive team must always have people issues as the first item.
6. Openly demonstrate leadership through active participation in response and recovery activities.
7. Communicate the essential plan to all employees and appeal to managers to conduct plan review sessions.
 - a. Continue communications to all employees throughout all the phases of the event including restoration and return to normal.
 - b. Provide an opportunity for employees to make a contribution to the overall effort as well as the potential lessons.
 - c. Engage and communicate with the union leadership at the senior management level.
8. Prepare to communicate with employees using a variety of channels. Don't expect the usual means of communications to be available.
9. Prepare to perform employee well-being checks.
10. Conduct plan exercises to help internalise the procedures.

11. Use lessons from other organizations to assess plan updates.
12. Post-incident assessment of issues applied to the Human Resource function

Also available on our web site: **Will Your Employees Return to Work Following The Next Disaster?**