

Disaster preparedness and response: an experienced employer's checklist

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When it comes to disaster preparedness and response, your editors write with experience. While reviewing our article titled "Weathering the storm: Katrina's lessons on crisis management for employers" from our September 2005 issue, we were reminded of the ways in which our disaster recovery and response plan worked, and we have since considered ways in which it can be improved. During the past year, we have studied our own experience, the experiences of our clients, and the resources made available by the multitude of private and public organizations prepared to help employers and employees when disaster strikes.

In this article, we have compiled a checklist for you to use when preparing for and responding to a disaster of any kind. June 1 marked the beginning of hurricane season, so the time is right to establish plans if you don't already have them and review existing plans to determine how they can be improved. When it comes to disaster preparedness, an ounce of prevention really is worth a pound of cure.

Before the disaster: Make a list and check it twice

- Put your plan in writing and disseminate it to all employees. A limited distribution list may be OK for certain parts of the plan — like the steps to be followed by your IT department to protect and operate technology systems during an evacuation — but all employees should be told what to do when a disaster strikes.
- When warning systems are in place for a potential disaster like a hurricane or tornado, include a timeline in your plan for certain preparatory tasks to be completed. Ensure that the person responsible for each task understands what is to be done and when. Conduct drills regularly to prepare employees for the real thing.
- When you establish your timeline for workplace preparation and closure, consider that employees will need to prepare their families and take care of personal matters as well. Allow enough time for them to execute their personal preparedness plans.
- Communication following a disaster is critical. In advance, establish a communication plan that will work regardless of the nature of the disaster. For example, consider setting up a toll-free number or website, make sure they're operated out of areas that aren't disaster-prone and are located away from your workplace, and give employees instructions about when, how, and what to communicate through your system following a disaster.

- Identify critical employees and make sure they understand what's expected of them during a disaster. For example, you may need certain IT employees to work during a disaster to protect and reestablish your technology systems. If you need any employees to work remotely, make travel, hotel, and meal arrangements in advance, and ensure they know what equipment and support they'll need to perform their duties.
- Develop a plan to allow your payroll, benefits, and HR functions to continue during and after a disaster or during any period in which access to your workplace is restricted. Establish a website that will be operable if your workplace sustains damage or is inaccessible, provide employees with remote access capability from any computer, and post information about group health plans, retirement plans, employee assistance programs (EAPs), and other services they may need. Contact your EAP provider before a disaster or as soon as possible afterward to arrange for group sessions at work sites that employees can attend voluntarily.
- If employees will have to return to your workplace to assist in the recovery process before all services are restored, obtain an adequate supply of water, nonperishable food, first-aid supplies, generators, cleaning supplies, batteries, flashlights, and other necessities.
- Update your employee contact information regularly and at the beginning of any season during which natural disasters are more likely. If you're in southern Louisiana, that means now.
- Consult with your labor attorney about pay practices that are applicable during and after a disaster. Know which and how many employees will be working during any evacuation or recovery period, what they'll be doing if it's different from their regular activities, and what schedules they will be working. Attempt to schedule employees so they have a reasonable opportunity to tend to personal affairs and avoid burnout.
- If you have a large number of employees or multiple work sites, consider establishing a recovery team or core group of employees responsible for specific work sites or specific tasks like communicating important information to your workforce, gathering information from employees, making and monitoring travel, hotel, and meal arrangements for workers, handling payroll and benefits, and similar issues.
- Arrange a meeting or conference with executives, department heads, and key managers in advance to review your plan and identify any areas that need adjustment or improvement.

After the disaster: Stay in charge

- It's worth repeating: Communication following a disaster is critical. Designate one or more employees as soon as possible to be responsible for receiving calls, e-mails, and messages from employees and collecting information about their whereabouts and plans

and to communicate important information and updates about your business to your workers.

- Keep your company's leadership visible and stay firmly in charge. Let employees know who's responsible for certain aspects of the business' recovery and how they can be reached. Any disaster can throw you a curve ball, something you didn't consider when developing your plan. Don't panic or react rashly. Consider all your options and think them through carefully. You can show compassion and sympathy for employees while letting them know that your leadership has a plan and will execute it so everyone can get back to their lives and to the business of the company.
- Give your employees the tools and time they need to tend to their personal affairs after a disaster. The sooner they get their personal lives in order, the sooner they can get back to business as usual. That doesn't mean you have to forget about your workplace policies and procedures, but you should consider how you can help employees recover professionally and personally as quickly as possible. For example, set aside a private office with a phone and Internet access so workers can take care of personal business like insurance claims during breaks. Consider scheduling meetings for employees with consultants, EAP providers, bank and insurance representatives, aid organizations, and other people they'll need to consult to help sort out their personal affairs. That will go a long way toward fostering employee morale and loyalty as well.
- Organize community relief or other charitable efforts and allow your employees to participate. That will not only take some of the focus off their personal challenges and offer a rewarding experience, but it also will help build their confidence in the reestablishment of their community and the recovery efforts of others around them.
- Arrange a meeting with one or more groups of employees, from the highest-ranking executives to entry-level employees, to review your plan following a disaster. Identify its successes and failures, and work together to build a better plan for the future. Take advantage of your experiences by learning from them. ■