Disaster Planning: HR’s Role

Based on a number of unforeseen disasters since the year 2000, including terror attacks in New York and Boston, hurricanes and major industrial accidents in West Virginia, Texas and the Gulf of Mexico, it is clear that businesses must be ready for the worst. The best way to prepare is with a business contingency plan. In addition to the major disasters, contingency planning is also useful for managing the risk of violence in the work place, cyber crimes, computer viruses, fires, product tampering and union strikes. The Human Resource team plays a pivotal role in the planning and execution of events, policies and protocol for an organization, especially in the event of a major disaster.

One of the most important HR responsibilities is to prepare for a disaster. This includes streamlining safety initiatives, communicating with employees and headlining crisis management efforts. Beyond this, organizations also have a duty to protect their workers’ safety while on the job. The Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSH Act) requires that companies provide an environment free from hazards that can cause death or physical harm. HR’s role should hopefully ensure that, in the event of a disaster, the organization can overcome the challenges and prevail.

HR’s Duties and Roles

- Orchestrate a successful crisis management strategy, including emergency responses, disaster recovery, risk management, communications and business continuity. If HR prepares for the worst case scenario, all situations should be manageable.
- Engage in scenario planning by developing defenses against identified potential hazards, and implement a crisis management team.

Businesses need to be prepared for catastrophes such as natural disasters, cyber crimes, violence, fires and union strikes. The best way to prepare is to craft a business contingency plan, an activity in which HR should play a major role.

- During a crisis, HR serves to preserve the credibility and trust in the company among stakeholders, including management staff, employees, customers, suppliers, partners, investors, the media, the government and the community at large. Depending on the specific situation, HR will assist the organization in returning to its normal productivity, while also ensuring that the reputation of the organization is preserved.
- Gather information about the organization’s risks through the identification of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and potential threats. Consider these queries when gathering information:
  - How will this event affect people?
  - How realistic is this event to occur?
  - Can the actions of corporate management stop or lessen the crisis in any way?
  - Does the organization have the resources to act accordingly in a crisis?
  - Is the will to act present within the organization?
  - What would be the effects on the organization, if HR did not act?
- Develop a contingency recovery plan with the crisis management team. This is a current document outlining the organization’s chain of command, worst-case scenarios, etc. The crisis management team should reconvene every six months to keep this plan updated.
• Once a plan has been created, simulate a crisis to test its effectiveness and reveal potential weaknesses.
• Establish relationships with assistance providers, such as the local fire and police departments, utility companies, community assistance organizations and government agencies. Many times, these organizations can also provide assistance in crisis management planning in addition to aid during the actual event.
• Develop recovery plans addressing the safety, welfare and health of all employees before, during and after a disaster.
• Analyze current plans after disasters or emergencies to reveal possible emergency prevention opportunities.
• Anchor heavy office equipment.
• To the best extent possible, replace combustible or flood prone systems and equipment with fireproof and flood resistant materials.
• Consider installing a generator for emergency power.
• Link the need for crisis management with the organization’s mission and core values. HR can also connect business contingency to the organization’s bottom line and overall success.
• Identify post-emergency assistance.
• Develop evacuation plans for employees, visitors, customers, subcontractors and vendors who work or operate onsite.
• Provide assistance directly to employees by highlighting the company’s emergency action plan (EAP), moving employees to alternate locations and matching employee donations for relief efforts.
• Partner with safety and security professionals to train employees on surviving emergencies.

• Ensure the safety of employees who work internationally at times. This includes being aware of the potential dangers that may affect employees overseas, knowing where employees are located, keeping the lines of communication open between the company and the employees and having an evacuation plan in place for those employees in case of danger.
  – Provide orientations for employees who are traveling overseas for business and highlight the dangers that they may encounter.
  – Contact organizations that provide assistance internationally for medical emergencies, such as the International SOS or Worldwide Assistance.
  – Contact the U.S. Department of State prior to the employee’s departure to inform them of who will be traveling overseas to potentially dangerous areas.

HR professionals play an integral role in the survival of an organization in the event of a disaster. They provide invaluable sustainability tools, can successfully protect employees and can ensure that business continuity occurs in a timely fashion.