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Disaster Planning: HR's Role

Based on the number of unforeseen disasters since the turn of the century, including terror attacks in New York and Boston, hurricanes like Harvey, Irma and Maria, and major industrial accidents in Louisiana, 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.

Contingency planning is useful for managing the risk of workplace violence, cyber crimes, natural disasters, computer viruses, fires, product tampering and union strikes. HR plays a pivotal role in the planning and execution of events, policies and protocols for an organization, especially in the event of a major disaster.

A contingency plan for a disaster includes streamlining safety initiatives, communicating with employees and headlining crisis management efforts. Beyond this, organizations 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 is to ensure that the organization could overcome the challenges of a crisis and prevail.

HR'S DUTIES AND ROLES

HR aims to 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. The following are duties that HR can perform to better prepare for disasters:

- Engage in scenario planning by developing defenses against potential hazards, and implement a crisis management team.
- During a crisis, HR serves to preserve the credibility and trust in the company among 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 questions when gathering information:
 - How will this event affect people?
 - What is the likelihood of this event occurring?
 - Can the actions of corporate management stop or lessen the crisis in any way?
 - Does the organization have the resources to act in a crisis?
 - Is the will to act present within the organization?
 - How would the organization be impacted if HR did not act?
- Develop a contingency recovery plan with the crisis management team. This is a document outlining the organization's chain of command and worst-case scenarios. 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. In addition to providing aid during the actual event, these organizations may provide assistance in crisis management planning.
- 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.

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- 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.
- Communicate regularly about what the company is doing for its employees and the community after a disaster.
- Encourage employees to use the company's employee assistance program (EAP) or provide access to an EAP, if not already available. EAPs can help with mental health or stress counseling, which are important considerations, especially following a disaster.
- Ensure that employees know when they are expected to return to work and to what degree.
- Distribute crisis response materials to employees, like information about floodwater health risks and instructions for disinfecting potentially contaminated items.
- Develop evacuation plans for employees, visitors, customers, subcontractors and vendors who work or operate on-site.
- Provide assistance directly to employees by highlighting the company's emergency action plan, moving employees to alternate locations and matching employee donations for relief efforts.
- Be flexible with employee scheduling immediately following a disaster. Depending on its severity, entire homes could be lost and families may be uprooted.
- Partner with safety and security professionals to train employees on surviving emergencies.
- Ensure the safety of employees who work internationally. 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 it 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 can provide invaluable sustainability tools, successfully protect employees and help ensure that business continuity occurs in a timely fashion. For more information on business continuity planning, contact Brady, Chapman, Holland & Associates today.