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## Same Planning, Different Disasters

*Large, man-made disasters are best addressed with a combination of providing the information via communication links and some level of on-site support.*

By Vivian Marinelli, Rod McWilliams • May 01, 2013

Whether you work in a factory, a bank, at a construction site, or for an airline, the process of planning for a disaster is virtually the same. Having a solid disaster plan with an Emergency Response Manual (ERM) is key to determining how a business survives and recovers.

No matter the type of workplace, disaster planning should take an "all-hazards" approach that demonstrates the flexibility to respond to any disruption in business continuity. When preparing and training for a workplace accident or disaster, some key elements to include are:

- Risk assessment specific to the work facility
- A robust emergency/disaster plan that addresses how to mitigate, prepare for, respond to, and recover from hazards and risks specific to the facility, including procedures for reporting emergencies
- Shelter-in-place and evacuation plans, especially for health care facilities
- Off-site workplace/telework plans
- Data backup management
- Internal and external communication plans
- Identification of facility/community resources
- An employee-wide training program on practical aspects of the disaster response plan
- Drills and exercises to test the disaster plan

### Plan, Prepare, and Practice

The best-laid plan will be ineffective if it has not been practiced over and over until it becomes automatic. Think back to those days when you were in grade school. When the fire alarm went off, you knew what to do because of the monthly fire drills. Your emergency plan should evoke the same response. Preparation for a disaster should begin long before an event occurs. Crisis or safety managers should place a strong emphasis on planning and preparation. Preparing your Emergency Response Plan and conducting regular drills and exercises will allow you to fine-tune your response so that, should an incident occur, you can quickly respond in a way that best fits the needs of your workers.

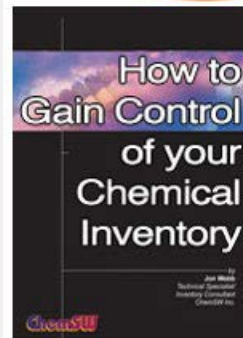
### Types of Disasters

There are three major disaster categories: natural, man-made, and



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one critical task is to be able to quickly determine the status and location of those who might be affected and in need of support. A good plan will utilize an effective map or layout of the facility and a communication model in order to link the people directly affected with their family and friends. Call centers, Internet inquiries, and email are ways for people to provide information on where they are and whether they need help. Texting, Twitter, and Facebook are also good backup plans in the event phone lines and email go down.

Man-made and technological disasters have as wide a range as natural disasters in terms of the number of people who can be affected. Many technological disasters are actually hybrids that include some degree of man-made elements in them. These can include structural collapses, power outages, and hazardous material exposures. Man-made disasters also include workplace accidents, as well as robberies, shootings, bombings, and transportation disasters.

When a large-scale, man-made disaster occurs, the support needed is similar to that of a major natural disaster in terms of assessing the needs of those who are affected. However, with many of these situations, a combination of providing the information via the communication links and some level of on-site support is needed.

#### Workplace Violence

The latter half of 2012 was an unfortunate period for workplace violence. Just as you would plan for a plant explosion or chemical burn, planning for violence in the workplace has become the new norm. When it comes to workplace violence, consider including some type of "situational awareness" training that addresses increasing personal awareness of safety issues in various surroundings. Knowing the person in the cubical next to you or sitting at the next table in the company lunch room helps to increase personal awareness at work.

From the start, hiring the right employees helps eliminate some of the threat of workplace violence. It would be wise to review your company's hiring policy to confirm background checks are conducted. This review will help HR take the necessary steps to ensure that a well-qualified hire has been made. In the event of a workplace violence event, it's good to take an integrated behavioral health approach. This would combine a network of experienced crisis responders with call center services to identify and respond to people affected by the incident. The employees would be provided information regarding the multiple ways that a trauma can affect them so they begin to understand their responses at the time of the event, as well as over the next several days. For larger scale events, the on-site support for those impacted by it also may include a central community location for providing access to resources.

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technological. A company's disaster plan should take into account the type of disaster and tweak the plan where necessary, but the same basic principles (listed above) will apply to any disaster.

With regard to the nature-based disasters -- tornadoes, wildfires, flooding, earthquakes, hurricanes --

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## Same Planning, Different Disasters

May 01, 2013

### Managing Communication

Once news of a workplace disaster hits the media -- and with social media, that means almost instantly -- employees, friends, and family members of those employed at the disaster site will want information. A call center is one way to disseminate information and provide a sympathetic ear to those seeking information.

Managing social media is also crucial. Having a dedicated communication officer to handle the chatter on social media helps clear up rumors and gets out the correct messages.

### Working with an Off-Site Crisis Team

When using a crisis management company to help with developing your disaster plan, it's important to know what its procedure is in the event an incident occurs. The company should provide you with some type of emergency notification/activation line that is answered 24/7 by a person. How soon can they come on site? Where will the response headquarters be located? Who will manage communications?

When disaster occurs, your work site crisis coordinator will make a call to the crisis team. The off-site agent should request the caller's name, phone number, and organization, confirm the nature of the emergency or crisis, and place the caller on hold briefly while a member of the crisis management team is contacted. The caller should then be put in touch with a member of the crisis team who will further assess the level and types of support needed.

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An outside crisis expert will use the experience and knowledge gleaned from responding to dozens of large and small incidents to determine the scope of the incident, identify the groups of individuals most likely affected by it, and suggest a response strategy that would best support the employees impacted by the incident. Activation and deployment could include call center services to manage the high call volume generated by a

large-scale incident -- such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks or, more recently, Hurricane Sandy -- as well as on-site responders to assist victims, families, and employees and

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counselors on site at your headquarters and other locations to assist the front-line people responding to the incident.

Developing and practicing a comprehensive disaster plan takes time and won't initially make your company money. But in the long run, should you need to activate your disaster plan, your company will be more resilient and the efforts of planning, preparing, and practicing will begin to pay off.

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**A** **about the Authors**

Vivian Marinelli, Psy.D, is the senior director of Crisis Management Services for FEI Behavioral Health ([www.feinet.com](http://www.feinet.com)). She holds a doctorate in clinical psychology and is a Licensed Psychologist in Wisconsin. She brings more than 15 years of work in direct clinical services specializing in trauma and grief counseling to her position, which focuses on assisting individuals involved in critical incidents.

Rod McWilliams is the director of Crisis Management Services for FEI Behavioral Health. He has an extensive background in crisis communication and media relations with government and non-profit organizations, including the American Red Cross, in addition to working as a police officer and police department public information officer, a firefighter, an EMT, and a dive rescue specialist. He also was a special agent for the Wisconsin Department of Narcotics Enforcement. He holds a master's degree in emergency management.

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