

# Fire Safety: Plan, Prevent, Train, Recover

Fires have the highest casualty rate of workplace accidents, but there are ways to mitigate risk.

BY VIVIAN MARINELLI

**F**ire safety is taught and practiced from the earliest days of kindergarten—we all remember “Stop, Drop, and Roll”—but preparedness training should never end. Workplace fires pose a risk across all industries, making fire safety training and policies an essential part of keeping employees, customers, and the surrounding community safe. According to OSHA,<sup>1</sup> workplace fires and explosions kill 200 and injure more than 5,000 workers each year, costing businesses more than \$2.3 billion in property damage. Explosions and fires account for 3 percent of workplace injuries and have the highest casualty rate of all probable workplace accidents. Many unexpected explosions and fires are due to faulty gas lines, poor pipefitting, improperly stored combustible materials, or open flames.

Taking preventative steps, implementing training, and drilling simulation exercises can lower risk and prepare employees in case a fire ever does break out in the workplace.

## Preventative Steps

According to Safety Services Company, only 15 percent of fires are a result of circumstances outside of human control. Most workplace fires can be prevented, and there are preventative steps every organization can take to mitigate the risk. Begin by performing a workplace hazard assessment. Walk through the work environment, document any fire hazards, and make sure there is full accessibility to things such as electrical control panels, emergency exits, firefighting equipment, and sprinklers. Test smoke alarms and check fire extinguishers for expiration dates.

Because electricity accounts for 39 percent of workplace fires, keep a close eye out for any electrical hazards, such as faulty wiring and malfunctioning electrical equipment. Make sure electrical cords are in good condition and power outlets are not overloaded. Replace anything that appears overheated, smells strange or has frayed or exposed wires.

If your organization uses chemicals or other hazardous materials, read labels to ensure you are storing and disposing of them properly in appropriate containers with adequate ventilation. Fire hazards such as oily rags should be discarded in a covered metal container and emptied on a regular basis. Chemicals should be handled with proper protective equipment and separated from flammable materials.

Walking through your building and pinpointing possible fire hazards allows you to fix issues before

they become problems. Once hazards are identified, taking action to quickly fix them and address safety processes will go a long way toward reducing the likelihood of a fire.

## Disaster Plan Development

Fires are unexpected and unpredictable. While prevention can lower risk, accidents do still happen. In order to prepare for the worst, organizations must develop an effective disaster response plan to minimize fire damage and prepare employees. Every business is different and must customize its response plan to fit the facility and its employees, but there are common elements that all plans should include.

A disaster response plan is developed to guide organizations through a crisis event and helps them resume operations afterward. The plan should include an annual review of your organization's overall fire safety procedures and best practices for addressing any hazards found. Planning also should focus on the evacuation process and method for reporting fires. Make sure emergency exits are clearly labeled and accessible; posting emergency exit routes throughout the building will help people calmly navigate an anxious situation. Likewise, educating employees on the plan will keep them well informed and prepared to evacuate if necessary. Designating a meeting area allows volunteer team leaders to take roll call, confirm everyone is accounted for, and report any missing employees to first responders. The plan also should contain personal information about your employees, including phone numbers and next of kin contacts.

Finally, the disaster response plan should be easily accessible and understood by all levels of staff. It is a living document that requires frequent review and regular updates, so ongoing training is critical. Developing a flexible plan that is easy for employees to understand helps keep everyone safe, ultimately improving the resilience of everyone within the organization.

## Train to Improve Resiliency

Assembling a disaster response team comprised of multiple departments from the organization guarantees the entire business is involved in the process of plan development and training. The response team should designate roles and responsibilities to all personnel. Make sure each employee knows his or her roles and responsibilities and understands the different aspects of the response plan.

Take time to discuss the specific hazards within

your organization, such as flammable materials, toxic chemicals, radioactive sources, or water-reactive substances, as well as the protective actions employees can take should they come in contact with said hazards. Be sure employees know who their team leaders are and clearly communicate who is in charge during an emergency to minimize confusion. Include updated response plan procedures in orientation programs to keep all employees on the same page and prepare them to remain calm during an emergency.

Depending on the size of your organization, you may want to take the time to train employees on how to use a fire extinguisher or execute first aid procedures. Once everyone is properly trained, knows their responsibilities and understands the disaster response plan, hold a practice drill involving the entire organization. After each drill, gather the teams and evaluate the effectiveness of the drill and specify any areas that need improvement. Hold regular practice drills to continuously improve the evacuation process and fix any holes in the plan. As a result, the resiliency of the whole organization will be improved.

After a fire, a business still needs to maintain operations even though the physical location may be compromised. The disaster response plan should detail actions that need to be taken after the fire to enable the company to continue maintaining critical operations. Begin by detailing the organization's functions, services, and who is being served to determine the kind of temporary space the business will need to occupy during the recovery process. If equipment is needed to carry out job functions, have a plan to access the equipment and make arrangements to set up an alternative workspace. Setting up remote access so employees can work from home is another viable option for certain industries.

## Seeking Third-Party Services

Disaster planning, training, and recovery management can be a draining process for organizational leaders. Seeking help from a third-party service provider can alleviate the stress and take the burden off your company. A third-party service provider can help design a disaster response plan to fit your organizational needs and structure training sessions that prepare the entire workforce for crises. Engaging outside ex-

pertise also helps to identify things your organization may have missed and guides the development of drills that will make fire safety second nature for employees.

Surviving a fire can be a traumatic event that leaves a lasting impact. Employers should provide the option of an employee assistance program, or EAP, to help staff adjust back to their daily routines after a life-changing event. EAP services provide access to counseling, management consultation, and local resources to ensure employees are supported after a fire or other crisis. **OHS**

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## REFERENCES

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