



This section is set up to provide a ready-made Brown Bag Session for you to use with employees and/or managers. Use as is, or adapt this information for a general employee group. You may reproduce as many copies as needed.

Every Employer Needs an Emergency Plan

Ten Years Since 9/11, Too Many Businesses Remain Unprepared for a Disaster

“Whether it’s the threat of hurricane, earthquake or other natural disaster, or a terrorist attack, any organization – government agencies and the private sector alike – need to prepare for possible disasters by creating emergency preparedness plans.”

Americans enjoy relative security in their everyday lives. Yet, the threat of emergency situations caused by natural disasters, terrorism, and others always looms as a possibility. This threat has been especially true for federal government employees. Consider the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001; and the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal regional building on April 19, 1995.

This is not to say that the private sector is immune from a potential attack. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth, according to terrorism expert Bill Sewell.

“Remember, on Sept. 11 (2001), two separate targets were successfully attacked: one that represented the military and one that represented American capitalism,” notes Sewell, referring to the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, respectively. “On Sept. 12, the New York Stock Exchange and a major credit card company were, for all intents and purposes, out of business because their business continuity measures were not sufficient.”

Everyone Needs a Plan

Therefore, it is vital for government agencies and the private sector alike to prepare for possible disasters by establishing emergency preparedness plans. This requires thoughtful planning, collaboration – *such as HR and EA professionals working together* – and steadfast commitment.

These plans are even more important for people with disabilities. Research and experience in the last decade demonstrate that the needs of federal and

private sector employees with disabilities are often omitted during emergency preparedness planning.

However, since the tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001, the specific needs of people with disabilities have been of keen interest, stimulated by accounts of people in wheelchairs being trapped and left to die in the smoke-filled stairwells of the World Trade Center in New York City.

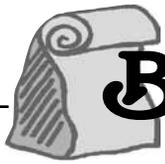
Unfortunately, many businesses and other organizations remain reluctant to discuss the threat of a natural disaster or terrorist attack. Many incorrectly believe that planning for an attack would fuel worries among already jittery workers. However, the reality is just the opposite. Workplace experts believe that a clear strategy for dealing with emergencies allows employees to focus on their work and reduces panic if the unthinkable should happen.

The first step for a business, agency, or other organization is to realize that, rather than adding to worries, a well thought out and coordinated emergency plan will actually *reduce* fear and panic, which in turn can save lives. Such plans may also address potential liability issues. Another important step is to evaluate all scenarios to ensure that the needs of people with disabilities are taken into account.

With the Help of HR, Develop a Plan

Not only does every organization need a plan, but employees also need to know what the plan involves. Training – with the help of HR and EA professionals – is vital because the best disaster preparation plan is useless if workers haven’t been trained. The following are some ideas to get started.

❖ *Never overlook local resources.* Talk to and be aware of the emergency responders in your area. Every county in the nation has an emergency management agency that will have numerous ideas on what to do in case of a disaster.



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❖ *Ask for employees' input.* Have them complete a safety and security survey. It needn't be long, but it will give insight into their perception of the company and their level of security awareness. Rather than relying on one idea, be sure to try a variety of strategies to increase awareness of the importance of safety and security.

❖ *Make sure that people with disabilities are an important part of the planning process.* The individual with the disability knows best what is required in an emergency. In addition, people without disabilities should not make assumptions about what a person with a disability can or cannot do.

❖ *Personalize your plan.* Bear in mind there is no standard "formula" when it comes to implementing and maintaining an emergency preparedness plan. Companies and agencies vary in size, organization, and location. The number of employees with disabilities at a particular company will also vary widely. The key is to create a plan that works for your specific business.

❖ *Practice emergency plans through a variety of drills.* Planned and impromptu drills unveil weaknesses in emergency planning. It is crucial that all workers participate and provide feedback regarding the successes and failures of a drill. While impromptu drills are an excellent way to solidify employees' grasp of the plan, it is also helpful to "actually appoint key people that know when the next surprise drill happens, as to be able to evaluate everything that happens, and develop action steps accordingly."

❖ *Communicate, communicate, and communicate.* Make sure that training and disaster preparedness efforts are coordinated between departments. In a large company, security may involve different components: technical, such as Information Technology (IT); physical/property; and company and employee legal liability. Collaborate with each other. Sharing information makes it easier to duplicate what works and drop what doesn't. This also keeps everyone on the "same page," so to speak.

❖ *Train people to perform specific tasks.* An individual should be assigned to call the police or fire department, someone should monitor stairwells, and someone should be familiar with the specific needs of employees with disabilities, while others should be trained to handle fire extinguishers or contain chemical spills. Make sure some employees are trained in CPR and first aid. Employers should keep a fully stocked first-aid kit in a clearly designated area.

❖ *If an emergency occurs, a primary exit may be blocked.* As a result, make sure all exits are clearly marked and that employees are aware of other ways out of the building.

❖ *Inform the local fire department about any disability-related issues* that have been identified. Even more important, make sure the fire department is aware where employees with disabilities are located within the building.

❖ *Don't rely on a buddy system.* This can lead to a "not my job" syndrome. Or, the "buddy" may not be in the office that particular day. A better idea is to have volunteers or other "buddies" convene with employees with disabilities in a pre-determined area and wait for further instructions.

❖ *Build in enough time for last-minute preparations.* For example, a crucial plan for Proskauer, a national law firm, involved moving ALL of the content on the file servers of its downtown New Orleans office, to the firm's national headquarters in New York City. The data transfer was barely completed in time (in 2005) – just 90 minutes before Hurricane Katrina made landfall 100 miles to the south! Therefore, make realistic, not overly optimistic time projections, and keep in mind that such plans are particularly crucial in cities vulnerable to instant disasters like earthquakes and hurricanes.

Come up with an Emergency Checklist

The following are a few additional ideas that could be posted in a breakroom or on a company website:

✓ Provide a list or description of any required assistance for people with disabilities.

✓ Discuss what to do about power outages and personal injuries.



- ✓ Show key employees how to turn off the water, gas, and electricity at main switches if necessary.
- ✓ Post emergency phone numbers.
- ✓ Place large, heavy objects on lower shelves.
- ✓ Check electrical outlets. Do not overload outlets.

Related information can be found in the Hand-out section on page 4.

Situations and Solutions

Just like holding planned and impromptu drills, devising realistic workplace emergency situations and potential solutions are also helpful. Examples include:

Situation 1: A secretary, who works on the 21st story of an office building, is blind and uses a service animal. The building design is a complex maze of hallways and cubicles.

Solutions:

- ✓ Provide the individual with maps and other clues so that she becomes familiar with alternate exits and can locate them on her own.
- ✓ Install an alarm system that signals where an exit is located.
- ✓ Provide the service animal with equipment that will allow it to assist the employee. For example, give a service dog booties for its feet that will allow the animal to negotiate hot surfaces or broken glass.

Situation 2: A clerical assistant with Down's Syndrome has difficulty quickly evacuating the workplace.

Solutions:

- ✓ Make emergency preparedness part of the individual's job coaching experience.
- ✓ Color code fire doors.

Situation 3: A warehouse worker, who is deaf, works in an environment where heavy pieces of machinery operate at high speeds. Because of the fast-paced environment, the worker has difficulty recognizing emergency signals.

Solutions:

- ✓ Install mirrors at all intersections within the warehouse.
- ✓ Devise a pager system that alerts the employee of an emergency.

Situation 4: A guidance counselor who has a speech impairment must communicate her needs to people during an emergency.

Solutions:

- ✓ Provide the individual with pre-written notes regarding things she may need to say.
- ✓ Utilize sign language (assuming the individual knows sign language).
- ✓ Provide the individual with battery-operated text devices.
- ✓ Provide a bullhorn or other speech amplification / enhancer device.

Situation 5: An employee has post-traumatic stress resulting from a burn injury sustained at work. This individual works on the third floor of a multi-story building. However, since sustaining the injury, he has had difficulty returning to the building due to anxiety.

Solutions:

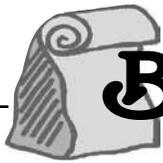
- ✓ Place the individual near an exit, so he will have comfort in knowing he won't have to go too far to evacuate the building.
- ✓ Relocate the individual to the first floor.
- ✓ *Encourage the individual to work with an EAP.*
- ✓ Connect the employee with someone whom he will feel comfortable with and who will personally escort the individual during an emergency situation.
- ✓ Allow the individual to work from home as much as possible, depending on the required job responsibilities.

Summary

Regardless of the potential emergency, be sure to talk with the employee about the available options and determine the one that works best for all involved.

In a day and age in which "when" an emergency will arise seems more likely than "what if?" scenarios, planning for potential tragedies, and taking into account the unique needs of people with disabilities, will go a long way toward helping everyone keep a cool head if a catastrophe should arise. ■

Sources: U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP); American Red Cross; Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); Crisis Communications Handbook.



Keeping Cool if a Natural Disaster or Other Crisis Occurs

❖ **Identify all exits, and determine an external meeting place.** Make sure all exits are clearly marked, especially for persons with disabilities. In addition, deciding on a place to meet outside the office building will account for each employee if workers are split up during an emergency.

❖ **Examine emergency checklists.** The American Red Cross (www.redcross.org) maintains checklists of what to do in *specific* emergencies such as tornadoes, floods, fires, hurricanes, earthquakes, and others. A local emergency management agency may have similar lists. While no one knows for sure if or when an emergency will occur, it's a good idea to focus on the disasters more likely to occur where you live. For instance, it wouldn't make sense to plan for an earthquake in Wisconsin, while this might be mandatory in California.

❖ **Compile a general readiness checklist.** This list should include information that managers and supervisors can "check off," such as:

- ✓ Our business has an emergency preparedness plan, and we have practiced it.
- ✓ Our company has an emergency preparedness kit, with items such as: water; first aid supplies; flashlights with extra batteries; battery-operated or crank-operated radio; cell phones with chargers; and family and other emergency contact information.
- ✓ Our business understands that many employee assistance professionals are trained in critical incident response – and/or they are aware of, and can refer the business to persons trained in handling the trauma associated with disasters.
- ✓ Our company has at least several employees who are trained in first aid and CPR.

- ✓ Our business has designated an out-of-area emergency contact person. (It may be easier to text or call long distance if local phone lines are overloaded or out of service.)

❖ **Regularly check equipment like smoke detectors and fire extinguishers.** Test smoke alarms at least once a month by using the alarm's "test button" if it has one, and clean it regularly according to the manufacturer's instructions. Replace batteries once a year or as soon as the alarm "chirps," warning that the battery is low. Make sure that all employees can hear and recognize the sound of the alarm and know how to react immediately. Fire extinguishers should have a minimum 2A, 10-B-C rating. It should also have an attached tag showing the date of the last inspection.

❖ **Be constantly on the lookout for unusual persons or activities** such as unsolicited deliveries; suspicious items left around the outside of the office building; and individuals "hanging around" for no apparent reason.

❖ **Enforce facility security.** Restrict visitors to public areas only. Ensure that all visitors are identified and appropriately cleared before they enter your office building. ■



Additional sources: Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency; National Fire Protection Association; and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).