

Ready or Not: Disaster Preparedness in the Workplace



By [Leo Wrobel](#), [Sharon Wrobel](#)

Date: May 5, 2010

[Return to the article](#)

Disasters happen to small organizations as well as large ones. Because even a small emergency can have big consequences if your staff isn't prepared, Leo A. Wrobel and Sharon M. Wrobel discuss the basic steps that every organization needs to take to get ready for the unthinkable.

Disaster recovery planning for the workplace isn't always about rebuilding from the ground up after an earthquake, hurricane, or some other catastrophe. It's also about planning for myriad other lesser incidents, such as gas leaks, fires, telephone and electric cable cuts, and so on. The main thing, as we constantly preach, is to create a well-rounded plan capable of responding to any incident, regardless of size, breadth, or complexity.

After the basic plan is in place, you should test it frequently, and then improve the plan based on how it worked (or didn't). Arguably, a test is not valid unless the plan fails during the test; that's how you learn.

Above all else, safety should be first in your mind when crafting a plan. Having proper procedures, equipment, and supplies in your workplace will ensure that your response orchestrates flawlessly during a disaster or other, lesser disruption in your place of employment.

We realize that there are many different types of businesses. For this brief narrative, let's establish some ground rules:

- This article is written for a "typical" environment, if such a thing exists. Instead of an office building or suite, you might be working in a factory, daycare center, pet store, senior center, but these suggestions can still be applied in those situations. Schools and hospitals also should have a plan in place.
- Plenty of material on disaster recovery is available for very large businesses. This article concentrates on smaller enterprises, where budget and expertise may be an issue. (Medium-sized firms often have no plan at all.)

Whether you work in a small law or CPA practice, one of the tens of thousands of city and county offices, a local department store, or one of the millions of leased office facilities across the country, you can apply most of these tips, placing yourself ahead of the game when the unexpected happens. Simply adjust the suggestions according to your type of enterprise and the specific needs of your business.

Create the Plan

Begin your plan by creating a checklist of possible hazards in your workplace. Walk through the building, creating a "keel to crow's nest" analysis from the bottom of the floor to the top of the ceiling. Use questions like these to get started:

- Do you see several electrical plugs sharing one outlet?
- Are all electrical cords in good shape, with no bare wires showing?
- Is your building's wiring up to code?
- Do boxes and reams of paper clutter the workspace?
- How many fire extinguishers do you have? Are any of them near the kitchen area?
- Are shelves stacked properly, so that books or equipment won't fall on people?
- Are hazardous chemicals stored in the kitchen or supply areas?

Be thoughtful, thorough, and creative with your list. After all, you know your office environment better than anyone else does!

TIP

Draw a map to scale (or have one made) of your office building, showing escape routes, exit doors, fire extinguishers etc. Post copies of the map at various exits.

Wiring

Many offices have data centers or other spaces that house computer servers, telephone equipment, and other electronics. Be especially mindful in these rooms, looking in three specific areas

- Work area
- Above suspended ceilings
- Under raised floors

Most under-floor spaces quickly turn into rats' nests of wires of all types. If the wiring is made of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic, that could be a significant fire hazard, because many plastics emit noxious fumes when they burn. This is a particular problem if the space under the raised floor is used for return air conditioning, as is often the case. Other materials are preferable, such as Kevlar and other fire-resistant cable coatings; in fact, these coatings often are required by local building codes.

Hallways, Stairwells, Etc.

When considering safety issues, it's easy to forget about passageways that people use to travel from one room to another. Be sure to check out these issues

- Is lighting adequate in stairways and hallways
- Are walkways clear of boxes and debris?
- If you're in an area that's prone to tornadoes or earthquakes, do you have a safe room where no glass can fall or blow in?
- Do you have a generator onsite, in case the power goes down for awhile

Evacuation Plan

Whether at home or work, an evacuation plan should include two escape routes for every room. Make sure that your plan also addresses the following issues:

- How and when will you practice evacuation drills
- Where is your meeting place? (Your plan should specify a place near your building across the street.)
- Who will train workers on safety procedures, and when/how will training take place?

TIP

For example, when feeling a door for fire, *do not* place your palm against the door! Burning your palm will render your hand useless, so use the *back* of your hand instead

- Do you have the correct fire extinguishers for the types of fires you could have? Has your staff been trained in the use of your fire extinguishers?

Ask your local fire department to demonstrate how to use your fire extinguishers for various types of small fires. Make sure that every staff member understands how to use your specific extinguishers

CAUTION

Any fire that's larger than a square of linoleum is too big for you to handle yourself, and you should immediately evacuate the building

Addressing the Needs of the Physically Challenged

Preparing physically challenged workers for a disaster event will ensure their safety. Make sure that workers have

emergency contact numbers and a list of medications nearby. Provide flashlights that plug into the wall; in a power outage, they'll last longer than battery-operated versions. Make sure that desks (tables) are positioned to allow workers to get under them in the event of an earthquake or tornado. Keep an emergency kit with extra medication near workers who need them. Store a spare wheelchair, walker, or cane in the workplace. Hang a whistle on the wall so that workers trapped inside by debris can be found easily. These tips are good for everyone to incorporate, not just handicapped workers.

Communications

Are emergency numbers posted clearly, and are they up to date? Do you know your coworkers' cell phone numbers? In case of a large-scale disaster, do you have a point of contact that's not in the area, so that you can alert people that you're okay? (This isn't difficult, thanks to the array of smartphones available these days. Even the most humble models allow hundreds of numbers to be stored in advance, to keep you from having to look them up in times of trial.)

Take a moment *right now* to flip through the list of names and numbers in your phone, with a mind toward the numbers you would need in a disaster. How does what you're carrying in your pocket, purse, or belt at this moment compare with what you would need if all other means of communications were out?

TIP

For a detailed discussion of potential communications issues and how to handle them see our previous article "[Managing Computer Room Disasters with 'First Alert' Procedures and '4Cs'](#)"

Shelter Supplies

If necessary, could workers stay inside your building for a while? Do you have sufficient supplies to accommodate a group of people, even if there's no running water, electricity, etc.? For example, you would need items like these:

- Bottled water
- Snacks
- First aid kit
- Flashlights and extra batteries

At the very least, you should have the following:

- Three days' worth of water for drinking and sanitation (one gallon per person per day)
- Nonperishable food
- Canned food
- Manual can opener
- First aid kit
- Whistle to signal for help
- Dust masks
- Blankets
- Medications
- Flashlights and extra batteries
- Trash bags
- Moist wipes
- Battery-powered radio and extra batteries

NOTE

Make sure that used supplies are replenished as soon as possible.

Practice the Plan

Whatever disaster plan you eventually use for your workplace should be practiced at least quarterly. Implement it or the fly, making notes of what went well and what still needs to be improved in the plan.

Summary

It's not always large-scale disasters that are an organization's undoing, and even small organizations need an emergency response plan. By following these guidelines, you can create a safe environment for employees and peace of mind for your organization. Best of luck in this endeavor.

TIP

We've covered some of these topics in detail in previous InformIT articles. To learn more, begin by reading "[Business Resumption Planning in Small and Medium-Sized Office](#)," and continue through our two-part series "[Selecting the Right Outbound Notification and Emergency Communications System](#)."
