



A KCA Construction Industry Article of Interest:

The Human Side of Disasters

By Ed Krow, Partner, [Turbo Execs \(https://www.turboexecs.com/\)](https://www.turboexecs.com/)

There has been no shortage of devastating news in the past few weeks: hurricanes, shootings, earthquakes, fires, and more. The reality is, natural disasters are a question of *when not if*.

We know how horrible these events are for communities, but sometimes we forget that they have huge business impacts for those communities as well. That's why I want to talk about human capital resilience today. When I think about human capital resilience, I think about an organization's ability to adapt to the threats posed to the workforce.

If a hurricane devastated your city tomorrow, would you be prepared?

From a business planning standpoint, you need to think about what you'll do with your workforce while attempting to maintain business operations when disaster strikes.

The Society of HR Management Disaster Preparedness survey found that 60% of surveyed companies didn't have adequate disaster plans in these areas:

1. Having a disaster preparation plan.
2. Training employees in the disaster preparation plan.
3. Coordinating drills beyond the typical fire drill to respond to the plan.
4. Deciding on a starting point for all communications.
5. Maintaining and updating the plan (for those that had one).

These aren't little things. These are *make-or-break-my-business* things.

When it comes to disaster, HR can assist the business in 3 main ways:

1. Assessing the ability of workers to actually get to and attend work.

2. Determining the ability of the company to deliver internal services including payroll and communication with employees.
3. Evaluating the ability to maintain business operations.

The ability of employees to work is a big one. It's about health and safety concerns as a result of the disaster, the safety of the workplace, and the ability of folks to even get to work. A less obvious but incredibly important concern is the trauma they may be facing. Depending on the disaster, they could have lost homes and family members. As a business, you can't brush over these concerns.

A business continuity or disaster plan can help with this. Of course, you can't foresee every possible disaster. But you ask yourself:

- What would we do if a third of our workforce couldn't get to work?
- What if the workplace wasn't safe for everyday tasks?
- How can we coordinate efforts to maintain business operations?

When I work with clients to help them develop disaster plans, we look at these 5 areas:

1. Policies and communication. Most companies do a good job with having policies in place and creating a chain of command. HR can help by looking at the current policies and evaluating their relevance to a crisis situation.

These policies could be as simple as working hours or dress codes. Are there certain policies that should be put on hold until you get through the situation? What is your plan for effective dissemination of information? Make sure you plan for multiple avenues of communication in the event of one or more communication outlets being down.

2. Employee education and support. Do your employees know what the disaster plan is? Do you have systems in place for employees in the wake of the disaster? What can you do in advance to support employees and families? Do you have an employee assistance program (EAP) in place?

Many companies have these EAPs, but they're often thought of as just a place to get help with quitting smoking or drinking. EAPs are also there for these traumatic situations and have resources to help employees get through them.

3. Virtual infrastructure. If employees can't be physically present, what kind of remote capabilities do you have in place to provide your service in some shape or form? Can any of the work be done virtually? To what level?

4. Job training. Companies often miss the boat on this one. What if significant numbers of employees can't get to work? Having employees cross-trained enough to continue to provide goods and services until you get the whole workforce back is invaluable.

Consider this: how quickly would you be able to get someone up to speed in a job that isn't their primary area of responsibility? Having cross-trained employees helps you utilize the people you do have in the office in the wake of a disaster.

5. Talent management. This is another bucket that companies rarely address. After a disaster, what are you doing with people on-site to manage them appropriately? What is the chain of command for managing the talent you have on-site in case key managers aren't in place? How do you manage people who likely have huge distractions in their personal lives because they've been affected by the disaster?

This may seem like a huge topic, and it is. But the biggest thing to plan for is the identification of critical roles. Look at your staffing model and identify what positions you cannot do without. In the event that one of the people in those positions is compromised, how can you provide for as much of a seamless transition as possible? This all comes back to job training and leadership. Who will fill your key leadership roles if needed?

I recommend looking at these disaster management plans through a variety of scenarios. Lately, of course, hurricanes have been in the news. But think outside the box in terms of health disasters like a flu outbreak, workplace violence like a mass shooting, and a workplace disaster such as a gas leak/explosion.

Each of these scenarios is very different and you'll need to have plans in place to address each one differently.

Unfortunately, disaster plans are not one-size-fits-all.

Think about what will really help determine how successful you are at managing through the crisis. Qualities like trust and teamwork may come to mind.

This is where organizational culture comes in.

Does your culture support your disaster plan? If your organization normally has teamwork issues and a lack of trust, you're not going to magically see amazing teamwork and trust appear during a disaster.

I won't go into all the different concerns with culture here, but you can learn more about creating a solid, positive culture [here](http://www.turboexecs.com/how-to-avoid-creating-a-toxic-culture/) (<http://www.turboexecs.com/how-to-avoid-creating-a-toxic-culture/>).

How can HR prepare for all of this?

It all starts with communication, the first bucket I listed above. Here are a few questions you should ask yourself:

- How will we communicate with employees about what's happening in the business?
- How will employees communicate with each other?
- What can our virtual infrastructure handle?

- How will we support the employees who are trying to keep the business up and running?
- When key people in the chain of command can't work, either permanently or temporarily, can we institute our succession plan temporarily by putting people in the positions they've been groomed for?
- Have we put plans in place to provide our critical services like payroll and benefits?
- What are the key things HR must continue to do to support the business through a disaster?
- Based on our culture, are there things happening that would be a great support for people during a crisis? Are there things that might hinder us in a crisis, and are we taking steps to address those issues?
- What will we do if we are able to maintain the business, but our people are unable to get there? Do we have relationships with staffing agencies who could help?

Businesses often address continuity planning with regard to facilities, equipment, and internal systems.

The reality is that we also need to focus on the people who will operate those facilities, systems, and equipment, and how they can be made resilient.

If we don't do this, all the other efforts are for naught.

The recent disasters we've had have really shown how a business doesn't have to have something like an explosion occur that would require implementation of a business continuity plan. Mother Nature can and often does dictate these things.

HR has to be heavily involved in these continuity plans.

Typically, someone from IT, PR or marketing, and operations will all be involved. HR isn't necessarily involved in the plans in many businesses, but it comes down to this: *people* have to implement and respond to all these plans.

And who is the keeper of people?

You guessed it: HR.

If you looked at the questions above and know that your business would be in bad shape if disaster were to strike your city, call me and let's talk about how I can help you create a strategic, effective business continuity plan.

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