

## Disaster recovery: keeping employees safe

How prepared are UK companies for when disaster strikes? Jessica Twentyman investigates

Most disaster recovery plans focus on technology some take into account corporate assets, such as premises and vehicles but very few consider the people issues involved when a company is knocked sideways by an unforeseen event.

It's a worrying oversight, because the skills and commitment of staff are essential to the survival of any company that finds itself hit by a fire, flood or similar calamity, says Ron Miller, managing consultant at disaster recovery specialist SunGard Availability Services.

"In periods of disruption, the fastest way for an organisation to get back on its feet is to ensure that its staff are safe, understand exactly what is expected of them and are able to resume their duties in as short a timeframe as possible," he says.

### Survey results

In a recent survey of 750 UK employees commissioned by BT Global Services, 73% of respondents agreed that their employer would rely on their 'personal dedication' in dealing with a disaster. More than three-quarters said they would be back at their desks as soon as possible, while 61% admitted that they felt that the smooth running of the firm was their responsibility.

But the survey also found that respondents had little or no clue about the roles they would be expected to play in the event of a disaster. Over a third were unaware of any disaster recovery plans, while 41% either did not understand those plans or had not studied them at all.

Ragnar Lofstedt, professor of risk management at King's College London, who worked with BT on the study, says: "The spirit of resilience is clearly alive and well, showing that employees of UK firms are prepared to battle on in adversity." But companies need to do a better job of communicating threats and response plans to employees. "They must realise that this resilient spirit is not enough and ensure that all the checks and fail-safes of risk management are firmly in place," he adds.

There is, says Miller, a clear role for HR professionals in ensuring that people issues are factored into their organisation's disaster recovery plan from the earliest stages and that this plan is communicated to employees on a regular basis.

But in his experience, it's not uncommon to find that HR professionals have been "left out of the loop" when risk managers come to draw up plans to deal with catastrophic disruptions to business.

That situation urgently needs to change, according to Peter Thompson, director of the Future Work Forum at Henley Management College.

"Business continuity is not only about IT. There needs to be a human recovery plan and it must involve human resources and facilities managers," he says.

According to Doug Barnett, risk control strategy manager at insurance provider AXA, at the most fundamental level, responding to a disaster means ensuring that rock-solid emergency procedures are in place and are regularly communicated and rehearsed, in keeping with current health and safety legislation.

## **Employee awareness**

"The key to a sound emergency procedure is clear process, roles and responsibilities and employee awareness," he says. "For example, a clear evacuation plan should be in place, with team members from each department given responsibility for ensuring a smooth and orderly process. All employees must receive training on defined processes, with regular updates and refresher courses."

Other tasks that typically fall to HR include the maintenance of emergency contact lists and the provision of training in first aid and the allocation of fire monitor responsibilities.

But effective disaster recovery goes way beyond removing employees from immediate danger - it also needs to consider how they will be able to resume work if company premises or equipment are badly damaged.

Take, for example, business consultant Watson Wyatt. On 12 June last year, work at the company's central London offices ground to a sudden halt at 4pm when the building was rocked by the sound of a loud explosion nearby.

Fortunately, the company was well-prepared to deal with the situation. Its crisis management team swung into action, quickly establishing that the cause of the explosion was not a terrorist attack, as many employees feared, but the collapse of a five-storey building undergoing renovation work in a neighbouring street.

## **Crisis situations**

Once clearance was given by the emergency services, all 475 employees were successfully evacuated from Watson Wyatt's Tothill Street premises - but that was not the end of the story. Employees were given access to updates via a dedicated telephone service and a website, while managers received regular e-mail updates on their BlackBerrys.

In the aftermath of the incident, access to Watson Wyatt's premises was severely restricted. But the following day, 220 staff were able to continue work at SunGard's South Bank disaster recovery campus, little more than a mile away. Others were given leave to work from home.

Keeping employees safe takes on a whole new level of complexity when staff are working in offshore locations, says David Hill, security expert at risk management company Red24.

His company frequently works with companies sending employees into some of the world's most hostile and politically unstable territories - but it's not just these high-risk individuals that HR needs to consider.

## **Increasing globalisation**

"Legally, employers have a clear duty of care for workers who travel overseas. If it can be shown that an employer did not do enough to warn someone of the risks they might be exposed to, and something befalls them, a civil case could arise," he warns.

From an HR perspective, he says, that means equipping all staff travelling abroad with information on the risks they might face and advice on how to mitigate them.

For many organisations, the first port of call for information about travel risk is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), which provides information and advice on travel safety and security, accessible via its website ([www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)), telephone, fax and Ceefax.

But the FCO's audience for this advice is intended to be for the whole of the UK travelling public and for corporate risk assessment purposes, says Hill, this information falls well short of their needs.

In response, his company publishes a website (<http://srvb.red24.info>), where subscribing members can view country pages updating them on issues including terrorism, civil unrest, crime, travel logistics and corruption levels in that area. Security advice pages, give tips on avoiding and coping with certain situations, such as mugging, kidnap, and natural disasters.

## **Complex business**

It's a complex business, but the good news is that compliance with existing health and safety legislation can go a long way to protecting employers from the risk of prosecution under the Corporate Manslaughter Act, which came into effect in April this year, says Nasar Farooq, health and safety technical expert at employment consultancy Croner.

"The Act puts health and safety back on the boardroom agenda. It may seem onerous, but if companies are complying with existing health and safety regulations, training and risk assessment, they should be OK," he says.