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Workplace resilience when a disaster strikes—Strategic questions to keep the workplace productive

Aligning your workplace strategy with your business resilience plan; a checklist in the event your site must be shut down

by Diane Coles Levine

Historically horrific hurricanes, tornados, storms, heat waves, drought and forest fires have devastated large areas of the U.S. and the Caribbean in 2017 leaving many businesses with the realization that “risk” will be one of their biggest future challenges. Yet, studies show that 48% of business owners have no business resilience plan in place. And, 75% of companies without a plan fail within three years after facing a disaster. Companies that can’t resume business operations within 10 days after a disaster’s first impact are not likely to survive.

Those organizations *with* a business resilience plan that is tested on a regular basis recover faster than those *without*. Why? Because they are least likely to develop communication problems amongst their employees, customers, business partners and regulators. They communicate their plans and practice their response with mock exercises to help prepare employees to better understand their roles, responsibilities, protocols and procedures in a crisis. Companies *without* a plan take longer to respond to an emergency and make poor decisions in the early-stages of a disaster that can negatively affect their public image, reputation and revenue. By the time they figure it out, it’s often too late to recover the damage done.

Workplace strategy plays a vital role in business resilience as people, place and technology are critical to resuming operations after a disaster. Here are some questions to consider when determining how you, as a workplace strategist or facility manager, can support your organizations business resilience planning efforts.

1. How is your workplace strategy aligned with the company business resilience or continuity plans?

Your workplace resilience plan must be aligned with and part of the company business resilience or continuity plan. The plan should summarize where your employees will work and how your company will support staff with the tools and resources they need to continue operations when a crisis occurs. Workplace strategy should be part of the business resilience or continuity planning team or steering committee. Do you have a seat at this table? Have you crafted alliances with the right departments (e.g., Business Resilience, Risk Management, Real Estate, Facilities, HR, IT, Finance, Operations) to co-create this plan, outlining governance, roles and responsibilities, processes and procedures. When you make changes to your work spaces and/or workplace strategy, do you have a process to then update your workplace resilience plans?

2. Do you know which business-critical functions need to be up and running first, second and third during a crisis and when?

It should be clear in your workplace resilience plan which departments are business critical to the company and must continue their roles or face severe consequences if the function is lost or delayed. And, if regulatory, financial, or customer commitments will be impacted. Do you know which departments are important to the company operations and which are non-critical and can be delayed or understaffed over the short-term (e.g., hours, days, weeks after the disaster)? Do you have a plan showing which departments need to be up and running first and when (e.g., day 1, day 3, week 1, week 3)? Is this information integrated into your workplace resilience strategy?

3. What is your strategy if your headquarters or office buildings are red tagged?

When a building is red-tagged by city or county government, this means that the property has a notable problem and is uninhabitable. Resolving this problem could be easy, difficult, expensive or impossible to remedy. And, depending on the issue, could take days, weeks, months or more than a year to repair. People cannot work if they have no infrastructure, work space, laptop, network access or phone. Does your plan outline where people will work and how you will provision and ramp up staffing if your building is red-tagged?

Do you know

- Where employees will work? (e.g., alternate site, home, satellite office)
- Who can work from home?
- Who can be on call?
- Who can work in shifts?
- Who can work at alternate sites?
- Who you are going to move out of their work spaces (e.g., non-critical business units) to make room for critical operations?
- How many seats will you need?
 - ✓ First day
 - ✓ First Week
 - ✓ First 3 weeks
 - ✓ Beyond 3 weeks
- How will you provision employees during a crisis to ensure engagement and productivity and provide the following?
 - ✓ Connectivity
 - ✓ Technology
 - ✓ Furniture
 - ✓ Collaboration tools
 - ✓ Security access
 - ✓ Transportation

- ✓ Mail service
- ✓ Food service
- If you are using an IWMS system or other facilities technology tool, are your workplace resilience scenario contingency plans programmed into your system for easy access when a disaster occurs?

4. Do you have adequate contingency plans for alternate sites?

It's best to think ahead and have a plan for alternate or temporary workplaces in the event your headquarters or major facility is uninhabitable. In addition to working from home, have you explored other options for face-to-face interactions including?

- ✓ Hot, cold, warm sites?
- ✓ Satellite offices
- ✓ Pre-negotiated temporary space
- ✓ Co-working spaces
- ✓ Using space at a primary business partner or supplier location
- ✓ Local hotel
- ✓ Higher education facility with mainly nighttime courses
- ✓ Portable mobile or manufactured offices

It's not easy to accomplish a quick turn-around of temporary work space, hire and coordinate contractors, architects, furniture and other vendors while at the same time repair your existing site. Having a strategy in place is important to keeping your workplace productive during a crisis. Fundamental to your success is inclusion of the information technology department in co-creating the strategy. Additional questions to consider on this topic are:

- Do you have more than one restoration or emergency services company contracts already in place with the necessary insurance papers filed so that you can move quickly to re-construction?
- How will you use your IWMS or other facility technology systems to help speed up the process?
- Have you asked for input on your workplace resilience strategy from your broker, architect, furniture and other workplace vendors to pre-determine best ways to create temporary workspaces while you rebuild your existing offices?

5. Are you considering business resilience in your real estate site selection process?

With new realities in climate change and political unrest, it is more important now than ever to understand the hazards and mitigate risk in your site selection process. When looking to move, lease, purchase a building, or develop a new site, careful consideration should be given to business resilience factors.

In your site selection process, do you review:

- ✓ Weather patterns
- ✓ Flood zones
- ✓ Earthquake maps
- ✓ Infrastructure
- ✓ Political climate
- ✓ City emergency resources
- ✓ Health care systems
- ✓ Who's in the neighborhood (e.g., toxic chemical company upstream of a flood zone)

6. Do you regularly communicate, train and test your resilience plans?

Mock exercises for companies of all sizes are an excellent way to validate your crisis management team's ability to effectively respond to and recovery from a potential or actual crisis. It's also a terrific way to test your workplace resilience plan assumptions to find and fix any gaps. Mock exercises normally include senior management, business unit leaders and a professional facilitator guiding your company from the start of a crisis event to a successful recovery.

Creating a culture of awareness through change management and communications crafted on topics tailored to your workplace resilience plan will ease employee concerns about your organizations preparedness and increase their engagement. How often do you communicate your workplace resilience plan to employees? Is your training tailored to different audiences and does it cover the strategic and tactical aspects of your plan? Do your senior executives and crisis management team have a clear understanding of where their employees will work, what technology and collaboration tools will be available and when?

Summary

If you haven't answered all or some of these questions, now is the time to start. The new reality is that business disruption is becoming the norm and risk mitigation is essential in workplace resilience. Your organization must quickly adapt to a disruption while maintaining continuous business operations and safeguarding people, assets and overall brand equity. Rebuilding your workplace, restoring and relocating staff, furniture and equipment after a disaster can be a daunting task. Never mind keeping operations productive. Preparation is the key to success. Workplace Strategists and Facility Managers should consider business resilience when developing their workplace and real estate strategies to create a 'workplace resilience strategy.' Take the lead to plan, train, test and craft alliances with the necessary senior executives and departments to prepare your organization for an uncertain future.



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