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Crisis Management
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Accounting for People in the Aftermath of a Crisis

Four Lessons that Transform the Accounting for People Process

EMPATHIA

As mobile technology continues to evolve and social media platforms become more integrated into emergency response, organizations may need to re-evaluate their accounting for people process after a crisis event.

What was once primarily a function of safely herding people to specific assembly areas outside and away from impacted buildings, has now transformed into a complex series of actions designed to collect and deliver detailed information – in real-time – on the location and status of employees and visitors.

Has your organization kept up with these changes? In this white paper, we will explore:

- How to account for people in a crisis event;
- Methods for accounting for people;
- How to assess your organization's ability to respond to a crisis; and
- The broad impact a crisis can have on your organization.

The Old Way

Let's start with a scenario.

It's 11 a.m. and you are with 19 of your colleagues in a conference room. Your office is in a high-rise building in a busy part of the city. Suddenly, you hear a loud explosion outside and within seconds the building fire alarm goes off. Everyone in the room stops talking and looks at one another in stunned silence. You look through the conference room window in the hallway and see other colleagues running passed. You then look outside and see chaos. You know that you have 1,000 employees in the building on any given day, plus approximately 500 visitors and stakeholders. What do you do?

Doing things the old way might involve a team of safety wardens armed with bullhorns, employee checklists, notepads and pencils, attempting to corral everyone in their respective assembly areas.

Consider the following:

- **Will safety wardens really have time to safely collect their bullhorns and other emergency supplies?**
- **Even if they have their employee lists, you may still be left wondering:**
    - Is this information current? How often is the list updated?
    - How do you know if someone on the list is out of the office for the day or still in the building?
- **How will you know if everyone got out safely or if anyone was hurt and transported to area hospitals?**
- **Does everyone remember their correct meeting place (e.g., the NW corner of the parking lot)?**
- **What if one or more of the safety wardens are out of the office the day of the emergency?**
    - Are there back-ups? If so, do they know the nuances of the role?
    - How will they have quick access to employee data to account for people on their lists?
- **People behave differently in emergencies than they might during a drill. They may not follow established protocols – some employees may flee the area in fear, or rush to find loved ones. They may be in a different area of the building at the time of the event and unable to get to their assigned assembly areas. How will you know if they are out of the building safely?**
- **What if there is a telecommunications outage due to high volume (not uncommon in an event that impacts a large number of people)? How will you communicate with your employees and other affected persons?**

The New Way

Accounting for People.

To overcome the challenges associated with doing things “the old way”, organizations can incorporate available technology and resources into familiar processes to radically improve the accounting for people process.

1. Mobile Technology Using Two-way Texting

Ensure your organization takes advantage of two-way texting capabilities offered within an emergency notification system. This will allow your organization to collect information from individuals in distress and can also help with managing a prolonged crisis event.

Alerts can be structured to collect information, such as an individual's status, or provide information, such as alerting individuals to shelter-in-place or evacuate the building. It can even help you determine if displaced persons are in need of food, water or shelter in the event of a prolonged disaster (e.g., earthquake or flood) and help you make arrangements to provide basic needs to these individuals.

Assess the following for your organization and integrate as needed:

- What follow-up process is in place for your organization to reach out to employees, if needed, especially those who have been impacted and need assistance?
- Do you have an online mechanism for employees to check-in and provide information?
- Can you use social media to communicate with employees? If so, do you have a plan in place that determines what information is appropriate to communicate via social media (and by whom), as well as what should be shared one-on-one (e.g., emotionally charged or confidential information).
- If an alert is sent out in error, do you have a mechanism in place to recall or correct it (e.g., failure to note it is a system test or associated with a drill)?

Alerts can be structured to provide information to individuals such as shelter-in-place or evacuate the building.

2. Self-report & Check-in, with Text & Online Capability

There is no need to rely on pen-and-paper roll calls following a crisis event. Through the use of mobile push notifications or texts, organizations can now reach out to impacted individuals and receive updates from those individuals with their status and location. Employees can also go online and submit status information on themselves.

These capabilities allow organizations to capture real-time information that is invaluable to first responders in rescuing those trapped or injured within the facility. It can also help formulate an accurate status list based on the responses received. Appropriate strategies can then be initiated to determine the welfare and whereabouts of those that do not respond to the notifications or check-in on the website.

The status list developed from these responses can also be used to provide real-time updates, if known, to people calling the organization (or a contracted crisis call center, see below for more information) to inquire about the status of their loved ones.

3. Crisis Calls

Organizations in the midst of a crisis event can be flooded with phone calls, even as it continues to unfold. Depending on the type of event and the number of people impacted, an organization can receive thousands of calls per hour. Callers may include those who believe a loved one was impacted, members of the media, curiosity seekers, etc. For those that have a loved one potentially impacted, they will often be scared, in distress and anxious for information.

Many organizations fail to plan for handling the high volume of calls that can follow a crisis. As a result:

- Employees calling to self-report their status may be unable to do so, leaving their status unknown to the organization.
- People seeking information may not be able to get through to your organization. They may panic and show up at the scene of the crisis event, potentially causing security issues or hampering rescue and recovery efforts.
- People may begin looking for information from unverified and/or unofficial sources, including social media. This could fuel the exchange (and spread) of rumors, as well as false or outdated information.

- **Calls may overwhelm your organization's reception or other staff who may also be:**

    - Experiencing trauma themselves from the event.
    - Not trained in handling people in crisis.
    - Unable to answer questions knowledgeably or compassionately, escalating frustration and anger that callers may feel toward your organization.

4. Social Media

Social media platforms can serve as a timely way for organizations to share official updates with a large group of affected individuals, including employees. Prior to a crisis event, staff should be identified that have the authority to post updates and reply to inquiries on the organization's social media accounts.

Care should also be taken to determine what is appropriate to share publicly via social media. Consult your organization's legal team for specific guidance. Typically, it is best to share general updates and avoid references to the status of specific individuals.

Tying It All Together

To determine if your organization's accounting for people process incorporates current best practices:

Assess your current accounting for people system and address gaps at all of your locations.

Ensure your current emergency notification system has two-way communication capabilities that:

- Allows employees to report their status.
- Filters the list so that secondary messages can be sent to those who did not initially respond.
- Allows you to send a follow-up message to those that did respond to provide instructions to or obtain additional information from them.

Ensure that all employees know:

- The evacuation procedures and escape routes, as well as alternative routes out of their location(s).
- Procedures to self-report their status via text, voice or email.
- Actions to take and where to meet in the event of a facility evacuation.

Secure a pre-established, dedicated toll-free number for use during a crisis, specifically for:

- Staff to report on their status or provide information on resources needed.
- Your organization to collect information on the crisis.
- Family and loved ones to inquire on an individual's status.

This number can also be utilized after the initial crisis for employees to receive updates and information on returning to work, benefits, pay, etc. A crisis call center can be created and/or managed in-house using existing staff; however, many organizations find it more cost effective to outsource this function.

Ensure that redundancy in key roles is at least three people deep and that everyone is aware of their responsibilities during a crisis event.

Establish protocols that determine the following in the event that your facility is inaccessible or not functional for a period of time after an incident:

- Is there an alternate facility where employees can report to work?
- If so, where?
- Which employees will need to report?
- Will employees continue to receive pay?
- If only certain positions, which ones?
- Will employees continue to receive benefits?
- If only certain positions, which roles?

Designate a communications person(s) who can provide official organizational updates in a timely manner to stave off rumors and ensure accurate information is provided to the media and stakeholders.

- Determine how and when your organization's legal team needs to be involved.
- Be prepared to issue periodic, regular announcements with updated information throughout the response.
- Ensure that whomever you designate for this role is comfortable carrying out its functions and trained in appropriately responding to information requests, particularly from the media.

If your organization has a social media presence, designate staff who will have authority to post updates and reply to inquiries on the organization's social media accounts.

- Determine how and when your organization's legal team needs to be involved.
- Ensure that whomever you designate for this role is comfortable performing its functions and trained in the types of updates to provide and how to appropriately respond to inquiries.
- Monitor major social media platforms for references to the event and, as needed, keep your organization's leadership apprised of any negative themes or inaccurate information being widely shared.

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