

Organisational resilience: Protecting your people and business from fire

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Gary Villeneuve, Director of Education at **DRI International**, outlines how an all-hazards approach is crucial for protecting an organisation and the people that make it valuable

There is a saying in business continuity and emergency management: "People are number one." And that's no platitude. People are every organisation's most valuable resource. Protecting those people – and their families – from the threat of fire is an important part of any business continuity management and emergency preparedness programme.



Organisations must plan and conduct exercises to prepare for fire and other harmful events that may harm personnel and affect their operations (photo: 123RF)

The effectiveness of an organisation's response to fire emergencies depends on planning, training, and exercises. Using the all-hazards approach is important in that planning. However, if developed plans have deficiencies and the organisation does not conduct exercises, no one will know those weaknesses are there.

A first step in building a fire preparedness plan is identifying key elements. Awareness and training increase the expertise and knowledge needed to prepare an organisation for a fire-based event. Fire extinguishers, detection, and suppression systems, a good relationship with local fire departments, and hazard insurance also are important.

The Disaster Recovery Institute (DRI) International Professional Practices for Business Continuity Management define the requirements to develop and implement the organisation's plan for response to emergency situations that may impact safety of the entity's employees, visitors or other assets. The organisation's emergency response plan should document how it will respond to emergencies, including fire events, in a co-ordinated, timely, and effective manner to address life safety and stabilisation of emergency situations until the arrival of trained or external first responders.

The Professional Practices also provide the framework to identify, develop, communicate, and exercise a crisis communications plan to address how communications will be handled by an organisation before, during and after an event. The crisis communications plan is developed collaboratively with the organisation's public information and internal information resources – where they exist – to ensure consistency of the entity's communications. The plan should address the need for effective and timely communication between the organisation and all the stakeholders impacted by an event or involved during the response and recovery efforts.

So, what are the right prevention messages and delivery vehicles in case of a fire emergency?

Organisations should develop and exercise their emergency response plans, such as evacuation procedures to help protect personnel from harm. Emergency response plans should contain:

- Contact information for personnel, response teams, and external organisations
- Clearly marked evacuation routes to at least two assembly areas;
- Provisions for individuals with special needs and disabilities;
- Procedures to help ensure all personnel, employees and visitors, are accounted for;
- Inventory lists for supplies and materials needed to respond to a fire event; and
- Preparations for communicating with individuals and external organisations

Organisations should also employ the Incident Command System (ICS) as their emergency management structure and approach for directing and controlling their response to overseeing catastrophic and disaster events. The ICS is a standardised methodology to command, control, and co-ordinate emergency response within which responders from multiple agencies can effectively handle serious events such as fires. The ICS is an integral part of the US Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) National Incident Management System (NIMS).

Additionally, private and public sector organisations alike should build awareness and training programmes. Such programmes make relevant information available and increase the level of education among employees.

Organisations also should establish a relationship with the local fire department prior to the occurrence of a fire event. An excellent way to establish such a relationship is to participate in exercises with the fire department. Be aware of local ordinances regarding fire safety.

Last but not least, private sector organisations should obtain fire protection or hazard insurance to help cover losses to personnel, property, and financial assets.

How can organisations like DRI, encourage the public to pay attention to and act upon those messages?

Standards provide the best practices for responding to and managing fire incidents. Education also is key to encouraging the public to focus on fire safety, prevention, and mitigation. Organisations such as DRI and the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) in the US, or the Fire Protection Association in the UK, develop standards and offer training pertinent to fire safety.

Additionally, the National Volunteer Fire Council, or NVFC, developed a resource to provide a place for volunteer firefighters to come and share information. The VolunteerFD.org was built to address the unique issues all volunteer departments share. And government agencies develop regulations for public sector organisations.

How can fire departments secure the funding and expertise for fire prevention when municipal budgets are being cut?

With funding for training becoming more and more difficult to obtain, the optimum use of existing resources is a must. The DRI Professional Practices, which are embedded in NFPA 1600, are broad based, and the concepts for emergency response plans can be applied in any scenario. DRI's Professional Practices for Business Continuity Management are available for free and in multiple languages [here](#).

DRI also offers discounted training to emergency management organisations, and training is available through the GSA Schedule or directly through DRI.

Organisations must plan and conduct exercises to prepare for fire and other harmful events that may harm personnel and impact their operations. Using the All-hazards approach is important in that planning. However, if developed plans have deficiencies and the organisation does not conduct exercises, no one will know those weaknesses are there. For this reason, regular, consistent plan exercise and evaluation – including strong partnerships with local fire departments and continuing education using multiple resources – is crucial for protecting the organisation and the people that make it valuable.