



PROTECTING STAFF

Don Cameron reports on the importance of preparing for the unexpected and keeping employees safe in times of danger

In the current global climate, we have seen an increased frequency of large-scale natural disasters and criminal activity. Such events usually come without warning and have the potential to cause harm to the safety and wellbeing of large numbers of the population. As an increasing number of businesses turn to remote, lone and field-based ways of working, many employees are being caught up in such incidents while working and travelling.

While it has become common practice to plan and prepare for the practical side of disaster management, such as contingencies for IT systems and emergency office relocation, locating staff and managing their safety during an incident is much more complicated and challenging to address. Yet with your workforce forming the foundation of any business, accounting for employees and protecting them from harm is arguably the most important step to take.

In order to understand how best to respond in times

Members of the public are treated by emergency services near Westminster Bridge and the Houses of Parliament in March 2017

of crisis, it is imperative to identify the potential threats that employees face, and the challenges businesses need to overcome to best protect their staff.

A disaster refers to any large-scale event that harms your employees, business environment or property. The nature of incidents that your business faces will vary greatly depending on several factors; from geography and the work environment to individual ways of working and the job roles performed. Yet it is indisputable that such risks are impacting more people each year as populations grow and the built environment expands to once uninhabited regions of the world.

Natural disasters often strike without warning and have the potential to destroy thousands of properties including homes and businesses. According to *The Economist*, there were approximately 700 natural disasters including storms, floods, landslides, avalanches, extreme temperatures, droughts and forest fires in 2016 alone. This compares with just over 200 in 1986. Climate change experts predict a continuing increase in natural disasters over coming years, with warmer temperatures and high tides resulting in more flooding, droughts, wildfires and hurricanes. If we look at the last few months alone, we can see several significant examples.

In July, heavy rains in South-Western Japan led to devastating floods and mudslides, which destroyed buildings, covered the land with mud and left thousands of people stranded and displaced. Approximately 2 million people had to abandon their homes and the death toll reached over 100.

In California, wildfires have been destroying over a million acres of land since 23 July. Hundreds of buildings and homes have been destroyed as a result and the death count continues to rise.

INCREASE IN ATTACKS

The number of terrorist attacks has also risen in recent years. In 2016, 77 countries were affected by terrorism, while Europe experienced the greatest increase. Data revealed that there were 30 attacks in Western Europe in 2016 compared with 23 in 2015, two in 2014 and five in 2013.

Many European countries such as the UK may not be concerned by the risk of natural disasters, but the threat of terrorism is much more prevalent. The current threat level in the United Kingdom from international terrorism is currently set as severe, meaning that an attack is highly likely.

While it remains statistically unlikely that you or your staff will be affected by terrorism – statistics put the chances of being killed in a terror attack at around one in 20 million – the perceived risk by individuals in the current climate is high.

Recent terror activity such as the London Bridge vehicle ramming and stabbing attack in 2017 which left eight people dead and 48 injured, or the Manchester arena bombing also in 2017 that left 23 dead and 139 injured, have created new fears as people are being targeted at any time and in busy locations such as streets, restaurants and entertainment venues.

Other criminal activity such as shootings and riots can also cause harm to large numbers of unsuspecting members of the public. As recent as 26 August, a mass shooting at the Madden video game conference in

Jacksonville, Florida, resulted in two deaths and 10 injuries. The incident marked the 234th mass shooting in America in 2018, claiming a total of 337 lives.

In Germany, 6,000 right-wing protestors and around 1,000 counter-protestors took to the streets over 27-28 August this year. Police struggled to stop the thousands of far-right sympathisers as they chased immigrants through the city of Chemnitz hurling bottles and fireworks while giving Hitler salutes and chanting “foreigners out”. Officially, police said two officers, nine far-right protesters and nine counter-protestors were injured in the clashes.

FIRES AND EXPLOSIONS

For those working in certain industries, industrial fires and explosions are a particularly prevalent risk that can affect business premises and anyone working within them. On 19 May, a pressure safety valve failed at the Kuraray America chemical facility in Texas, US causing a flash fire. At the time of the incident, 266 employees and contractors were on site. 21 workers were injured by burns from the fire or falls caused by jumping from scaffolding in an attempt to escape. In the UK, a fire broke out on the 22 August at a Shell Higher Olefins chemical plant. Fire engines were sent from five different locations

STRONG COMMUNICATION CAN PREVENT FURTHER HARM AND REDUCE BUSINESS DOWNTIME

to battle the fire and fortunately all staff were evacuated before any injuries were caused.

All employers hold a legal duty of care towards the safety of their staff. As part of this, “duty-holders are required to establish appropriate organisation and arrangements to deal with emergencies in the workplace” (the Health & Safety Executive). This means that every company is required to have emergency procedures in place with the aim of protecting employees from harm. The failure to answer important questions following an incident, such as who was affected and if they are safe, could leave individuals within the company liable for any harm caused.

Arguably the greatest challenge businesses face as part of their duty of care, is accounting for their employees following an incident. Whether a disaster occurs in a single building, a remote site or an entire region, determining how many staff have been affected quickly and efficiently can prove incredibly difficult. It is unlikely that a business knows where all staff are at all times and it can take hours or even days to account for everyone.

Conveying crucial information and guidance to a large number of employees poses a second challenge. Communication is key during an emergency as it allows the business to warn nearby employees to stay away from the danger zone or instruct those involved on how to behave to minimise their risk of harm. Strong communication has the potential to prevent further harm and allow the business to continue running as quickly as possible so to reduce down time.

Traditionally, businesses used methods such as phone chains or simple messaging to account for and to communicate with staff. However, these methods are not only time consuming, but can be unreliable in certain situations. If an employee is injured in an incident or is unaware and preoccupied and so fails to answer a message or phone call, how does the business know where they are and if they are affected?

Fortunately, developments in technology and the widespread use of mobile devices today are providing solutions to many of our incident management challenges. Whether it be warning individuals of a nearby incident, providing peace of mind or communicating practical advice necessary to keep safe, technology is able to offer a solution.

Social media initiatives such as Facebook Crisis Response provide a way of reassuring friends and family if located nearby an incident, while SAIP, an app developed by the French Government, alerts

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phone users of an emergency along with official advice on keeping safe.

In addition, an incident management solution called IncidentEye was recently developed in response to a growing need from businesses to locate and protect staff quickly and efficiently. The solution comprises a mobile app and a monitoring hub that allows an employer to instantly locate staff within an incident zone, determine their safety status and send ongoing communications.

While platforms such as Facebook Crisis Response and SAIP are great for personal use,

solutions developed for businesses are able to harness technology to overcome the challenges discussed.

Suitable software systems should be able to communicate with mobile phones to instantly locate employees within an incident zone. By identifying who is in the area of danger, anyone away from harm can be immediately eliminated, allowing response to focus in on those that may need it.

IMMINENT DANGER

The next step following an incident is to determine whether anyone within the incident zone is in danger. Incident management apps allow a push notification to be sent to employees prompting them to specify whether they are safe or in danger. This allows anyone responding to the incident to focus entirely on those that need assistance.

Communicating from an online hub to an app offers a reliable and efficient way of providing information during an incident. If the hub is available online, communication can be maintained even in situations where internal systems have failed.

A good system will allow the business to tailor communications to specific groups or individuals, so that the right advice can reach the correct people. The types of communications being sent will depend on the situation but could include instructing those in the affected area to evacuate, warning those nearby to avoid the affected area, providing official government advice on how to deal with the situation and updating employees as the incident progresses and once it is resolved.

Following an incident, those involved during the management of employees will likely be expected to report back to the heads of the business with information on how many people were affected and what was done to ensure their safety. A software solution that allows you to locate employees, should offer a simple way to present a final report to the business and answer any concerns they may have had ●

Don Cameron, CEO for StaySafe, has over 25 years of experience in developing successful businesses in the IT, Telecoms and service industries. Don has worked for blue-chip organisations such as ICL, Fujitsu and Intergraph in both general management and sales and marketing roles.

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