

Employee safety and business continuity

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Following the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan, many businesses operating in the region have concerns over the stability of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, the availability of fuel and basic supplies, power failures and damage to public infrastructure and communications systems. Organisations continue to face difficult decisions about whether or not to evacuate their employees and operations to other locations.

Japan plays a central role in the global technology, banking and finance industries and many foreign companies have significant operations in the country. Some organisations have already activated their emergency response plan (ERP) and business continuity plan (BCP) and relocated expatriate employees and their families from directly affected areas and the greater Tokyo region, to Osaka in southern Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Australia. With the recent floods in Australia and civil unrest across the Middle East, organisations should now take the opportunity to look at their own practices, understand their risk exposure and review their plans to protect people and critical processes.

An ERP is essential to minimise employees' exposure to harm and disruption to business operations. The safety of employees must be paramount in the development and implementation of an ERP. Organisations should document a comprehensive plan that provides for a timely and flexible response to crisis events. An effective ERP should identify how to get employees to and from safe locations or evacuation points. Strategies to communicate with employees are essential and should include both paper and online access to the ERP. Central reporting and management of events and alternative methods of communication such as satellite technology or public announcements should also be provided for in the ERP.

Continued operations will be impossible without a strong BCP and a solid technology platform to communicate with employees and support remote operations. The situation in Japan has caused major damage to communications systems— highlighting the importance of having a BCP that includes a contingency for remote IT access. Once employees have been relocated, access to IT resources will allow business operations to continue.

Japan lives under the constant threat of earthquakes. Businesses operating in the region should have considered the possibility of a seismic event in their ERP/BCP and employee safety training. However, some might not have considered the possibility that employees could be exposed to airborne radiation from damaged nuclear reactors following an earthquake.

The recent events in Japan highlight the need for organisations to conduct a comprehensive risk and vulnerability analysis in the development of their ERP and BCP. Employees working in areas prone to serious events must receive adequate safety training and clearly understand, and have confidence in, the organisation's response strategy. Response plans should be regularly reviewed, monitored and tested to ensure they are current.

An ineffective response to a crisis event can lead to employee health issues, health and safety liabilities, increased insurance premiums, loss of reputation, disruption to business, and the closure of operations. Careful planning and communication, and a flexible response can minimise risks to employee safety and interruption to business operations.

For more information please visit the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency's website at <http://www.arpansa.gov.au/News/MediaReleases/JapanAdvisory.cfm>