For years, a leading practice for businesses has been to have an effective crisis and disaster recovery plan in case of natural or man-made catastrophe. These plans typically address facilities, information systems, and equipment following an event.

But what about the company’s workforce? Does the plan predict the potential toll the disaster might take on individuals who work in the affected location? Does it provide options for helping them? And does it consider whether displaced workers might not be able to return to work for extended periods—if ever—and the possible impact that could have on the business?

The 2017 Hurricane season FEMA after-action report highlights the importance of the human aspect of disaster recovery planning. “Following the 2017 hurricane season, FEMA conducted an After-action Review of the Agency’s preparations for, immediate response to, and initial recovery operations for hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria.” The report, released in July 2018, emphasizes the need for a well-thought-out workforce management plan.

A decade removed from Hurricane Katrina, the report again highlights the challenges associated with disasters that affect a large population base and the importance of providing housing to help people return to a sense of normalcy. Yet large scale disasters aren’t the only concern. The 2017 and 2018 wildfires in California serve as notable examples of smaller groups of people losing their homes and having their lives significantly disrupted.

The implications for businesses are clear: When an event impacts employee homes and housing alternatives, the workforce can suffer both immediate and long-term effects. For example, as individuals struggle to find shelter and the necessities for maintaining a family unit, returning to work may not be top of mind for them. This is a consequence that may not be contemplated in a company’s disaster recovery plan. Yet it’s critical to building resilience.

A Deloitte survey report Willing and Able: Building a crisis resilient workforce explores this insight. One survey participant commented, “Work would be the last thing on my list. I wouldn’t log on, I wouldn’t check to see what they are asking for, I probably wouldn’t even care, because it is a job at the end of the day, my life is at risk.”

— A survey participant
Increasingly, leaders are developing workforce resilience plans as an extension of their crisis and disaster recovery plans and embodiment of their organizational values.

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Availability of temporary housing can be a major factor in resolving that issue. But individual assistance through FEMA is essentially limited to emergency sheltering and transitional housing, as well as emergency housing repair. Both are governed by eligibility requirements. Repairing a damaged home or finding suitable alternative housing is a personal responsibility, of course, and it’s one in which the homeowner’s insurer plays an important role. But that process can take a considerable amount of time and effort, further disrupting families and delaying workers’ return to their jobs—if they return at all.

The 2017 fires in California’s Sonoma and Napa counties illustrate the point. Both counties had tight residential markets with little affordable housing available. The fires destroyed more than 5,000 homes, so families began leaving the area to find more affordable alternatives. Businesses there faced the very real threat of losing valued employees and not being able to conduct business as usual. Many of those companies decided to provide ad hoc assistance to employees, including supplies for repairing homes, money to help defray costs, advice to help navigate FEMA’s programs, and services to help people understand insurance requirements and processes for rebuilding.

On a broader scale, companies are beginning to anticipate the possibility of such disruptions by contracting in advance for support services for potentially impacted employees. At a time of low unemployment and in the face of highly skilled workforce shortages, this may be a logical consideration. Not only does it provide a valuable service to employees, but it can also be more cost-effective than recruiting and training new employees if a disaster displaces workers or they choose to leave the area in the aftermath of a disaster.

Other actions can also be beneficial for employees and help employers develop greater workforce resilience, including:

- **Gauging employee concerns and behaviors** about disaster recovery and building appropriate responses into crisis planning
- **Taking an inclusive approach** that acknowledges and communicates employees' vital role in the company’s recovery plans
- **Communicating timely, accurate, and authoritative information** during a crisis to encourage employees' return to work
- **Providing practical support and appropriate psychological care** for all workers in the aftermath of an event
- **Identifying additional logistical support** for the most essential staff
The workforce is the foundation on which organizations build resilience. Increasingly, leaders are developing workforce resilience plans as an extension of their crisis and disaster recovery plans and embodiment of their organizational values. As population centers expand, especially where natural disasters are likely to occur, the need for such plans increases—as does their value, both to employees and the organizations they work for.

Let's talk
Learn more about building your disaster resilience plan.

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