

Emergency Response (Fire) guidance

The speed and effectiveness of response to an emergency situation have an enormous bearing on its impact and consequences. Being prepared and practiced can greatly help in ensuring you are best placed to deal with a situation should the need arise.

Are you confident that your emergency response procedures give you the best possibility of a positive outcome?

What constitutes an emergency condition is extremely dependent on the specific circumstances, but needless to say it is generally a time of high stress and uncertainty. It is not the time to be making snap decisions and judgements. Whatever the situation, having a clearly defined and proven course of action with allocated roles and responsibilities ensures that the first steps taken are in the right direction.



Response to fire or a fire alarm is the most common emergency procedure in the workplace and there are some basic rules to follow:

- Be clear about who will call the fire brigade and when. It is often the case that this important task is left unassigned and the worst case outcome is that no one makes the call because everyone thinks someone else will do it. If you choose to investigate the fire alarm before making the call, set a time limit on this investigation and stick to it. If the time limit passes without any confirmation that it is a false alarm then call the fire brigade. Even if the fire alarm is relayed to an alarm receiving centre you should always call the fire brigade as well.
- Are there processes or equipment that need to be shut down or made safe? There may be equipment or processes that cannot be left safely unattended. Appropriate shut down or make safe procedures should be in place and operators trained in these prior to evacuation. Note that these procedures should be realistic in their timescales and not expose the operator to danger from the emergency.
- Clearly assign the 'incident coordinator' role. There will be various tasks that need to be done if the fire alarm operates (evacuation / roll call / fire warden activities etc.). Whilst most of these should be pre-allocated, a central incident coordinator should be appointed to ensure they are happening. Note that this is not necessarily the most senior person in the business but should be someone who is fully familiar with the operations and site layout.
- Allocate the role of meeting and directing the fire brigade. If the site is large or complex, or difficult to find off the roadway, someone should meet the fire brigade on the street and direct them to the fire area. Ensure they have keys to open the gates, including emergency vehicle access gates which might be rarely used.
- Ensure your protection systems are operating. If safe to do so, appropriately trained personnel should check that any fire pumps are operating properly (enough fuel, valves open, engine cooling water flowing, pump room ventilation okay) and that any sprinkler control valves are open.

- Help the emergency services to help you. The actions the fire brigade take on arrival will be dependent on the conditions and hazards they see and any potential risks they perceive to their own and public safety. Whilst there are no guarantees that the fire brigade will intervene to protect your assets, the better their understanding of your site and operations the more likely it is that they will. And having a pre-prepared information pack can only help. This should contain;
- A site emergency hazard plan showing the site / building layout and annotated with the site hazards and control points
- Details of the building construction, particularly where insulated panels are used and the type / fire rating of the panel insulation,
- The location of the main fire alarm panel and a diagram of the fire alarm zones
- Isolation points for site services (gas, electricity, water)
- Details of fire systems (sprinklers / other suppression systems)
- Location of fire hydrants and other fire fighting water sources
- Location type and quantity of hazardous materials (eg gas cylinders, flammable liquids, fuel stores)
- COSHH data sheets for any hazardous materials used or stored.
- Details of site drainage and where this can be isolated, particularly when in close proximity to water courses.
- Any contaminated fire water management plans

If there are no hazardous processes or materials, be explicit about this to indicate that you have made this assessment. e.g. 'There are no acetylene or other flammable gas cylinders in use at the site'.

Consider a lockable 'fire-box' outside the site or at your site security gatehouse to keep your site emergency plans secure and dry. Or use a sealed tube if you have large site plans that are better rolled up.

- Define your protection / salvage priorities. Have a pre-defined list of business critical areas or equipment and share this with the fire brigade. They may be able to take this into consideration with their fire fighting activities and may also assist in initial salvage once the incident is controlled. This may be your computer server, key documentation, sensitive or high value equipment etc.
- Reinstate your protection. There have been numerous cases where small, controlled fires have become big losses due to complacency. Once the immediate emergency has been addressed, one of your priorities should be to reinstate your fire protection and detection systems as soon as possible. Whilst these are out of service, your premises are vulnerable to further loss

Document / Test / Review

Your emergency response plan should be a documented company procedure, agreed and signed off by senior management. Whilst not all employees will have an active role in it, they should all be aware of it and be familiar with its content.

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5845CC/PropertyRiskEmergencyResponse(Fire)/August2015

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Practice brings the plan to life. Hopefully you will never need to use it in anger but you should routinely practice the emergency plan and this can be easily done as part of your fire evacuation drills. It is not at all unusual to initially find that the plan didn't work as you expected either due to people's unfamiliarity with what is expected from them or simply because of circumstances you didn't foresee. Similarly, changes to the site and / or operations can render a proven plan ineffective and this may only come to light during a drill. Plans should be reviewed following each drill to ensure they are updated as necessary.

Invite the fire brigade to visit and familiarise themselves with your site and operations. Share your information pack with them and ask for their views on this.

Other Scenarios

There may be other emergency scenarios that you need to plan for depending on your operations or location and some of these may be as a result of off site incidents. Examples include toxic gas release, environmental incidents, flooding, bomb threat, power outage, security breach etc. Contact QBE's Risk Solutions team if you need any advice on these or see <http://www.qbeeurope.com/risk-solutions/document-library/technical-guides.asp> for guidance documentation.

Useful Links

www.firesafe.org.uk/
www.firesafe.org.uk/fire-emergency-evacuation-plan-or-fire-procedure/
www.fireandsafetycentre.co.uk/Products/799/Emergency_Plans_Box.html

