

CRISIS PREPARATIONS LACK 9/11 URGENCY

By JOHN M. MORAN / COURANT STAFF WRITER

The 9/11 terrorist attacks showed the devastation that can occur when disaster strikes a workplace.

But on the third anniversary of those attacks, security experts say many U.S. businesses may be better prepared to recover damaged computer data than to evacuate employees in a crisis.

While American business has spent

billions in recent years to safeguard mission-critical computer systems, a study due to be released next week by the American Management Association found that only 44 percent of businesses surveyed had even conducted a crisis drill or simulation.

That's a mix-up of priorities that could have terrible consequences in

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THREE YEARS LATER: WORKPLACE PREPAREDNESS

Preparedness Momentum Falters

In the years since 9/11, business has lost its momentum in the drive to provide crisis plans for workers.

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the event of a workplace catastrophe, said Bo Mitchell, president of Wilton-based 911 Consulting, a security and emergency preparedness consultant.

"If we lose all the data and save all the people, we've had a very good day in a disaster," Mitchell said. "But if we save all the data and lose even one person, that's a tragedy."

Emergency plans are not required by law in all workplaces, and there appears to have been no comprehensive study of workplace evacuation readiness. But findings in a variety of surveys point to deficiencies.

Only 36 percent of Americans said they were familiar with their workplace's emergency plans, according to a May report issued by the Council for Excellence in Gov-

ernment, a non-profit group.

A separate survey, released in July by the American Red Cross, found that two out of every five workers had received no specific information or training from their employers regarding workplace disaster or emergency plans.

Evacuation plans are useful not only for 9/11-style terrorist incidents, but for far more common emergencies like fires, bomb threats, workplace violence incidents, toxic materials spills, tornadoes and other hazards.

It's not that businesses lack such plans altogether. Indeed, a survey last year by The Hartford Financial Services Group Inc. found the overwhelming majority of businesses had some kind of emergency plan. The problem, experts say, is that these existing plans are often incomplete, out-of-date and poorly communicated to employees.

"People think of an evacuation plan as simply let's move out of the facility. But there are things that have to be taken into account," said Radford Jones, a former U.S. Secret Service agent and corporate security officer now

could stand improvement. "The majority of businesses need to do more than what they're doing," said Deputy State Fire Marshal John Blaschik.

And by the end of next year, they will be, Blaschik added. New fire prevention regulations will mandate more specific plans and training for businesses with more than 500 employees or more than 100 working above the ground-floor level.

But for now, businesses are generally on their own when it comes to deciding how much time and effort to put into evacuation planning and training.

Gil Maffeo, who heads the school of business administration at St. Joseph College in West Hartford, said it often becomes a question of how to allocate scarce resources. "There's a tremendous value in human capital, but I think when it comes down to prioritizing, the priority is in the other areas. The feeling is that people will be able to get out on their own," he said.

John Miska, safety team leader at The WireMold Co. in West Hartford, said he realized how much work needs to be done

teaching at Michigan State University.

"What happens if several of those evacuation routes are blocked?" he asked. "How are you going to communicate that to the people? How are you going to account for the fact that everyone's been located?"

Beyond planning, Jones said, many businesses fail to train workers on exactly how to react in an emergency. "What you'll find is that a lot of companies have an evacuation plan but they never practice it," he said.

That contrasts with a strong corporate focus on data security and protection since 9/11. IDC, a technology research and consulting firm based in Framingham, Mass., estimated that businesses worldwide spent \$70 billion on security and business continuity products for their data systems in 2003, a figure the company expects to rise to \$116 billion by 2007. It said 40 percent of computer managers surveyed named security as their top priority.

Connecticut-specific data isn't available, but emergency and safety officials here say they believe business emergency plans

while advising other companies as part of a preparedness program sponsored by the Connecticut Business & Industry Association.

"Most people thought an evacuation plan was just the diagram on the wall that shows you what door you should use," he said.

Bonnie Stewart, who helped organize the preparedness seminars for CBIA, said about 600 businesses — about twice the expected number — participated in formulating new emergency plans or improving existing plans.

"It's been a lot of hard work for a lot of companies. But I would tell you a lot more companies are ready now than were six months ago," she said.

Experts said a lack of resources, especially in smaller businesses, and the crush of other responsibilities partly explained why up-to-date and well-drilled emergency plans are not more prevalent.

Len Biegel, president of The Biegel Group, a Washington D.C.-based consulting firm that helps businesses prepare emergency plans, said large corporations are

often better prepared because they have more resources to devote to planning.

"It's an issue, particularly for medium-sized companies. They think it's going to be disruptive to plan. They think it's going to be expensive," Biegel said. "But think of the consequences if you don't."

Cecil Ursprung, chief executive of Reflexite Corp. in Avon, said his company stepped up its emergency planning in the wake of the terrorist attacks. The company began coordinating its planning with other businesses in its office park and with town safety officials. It even built a gravel road-way to improve access for emergency vehicles, he said.

"We used 9/11 as a kind of wake-up call," Ursprung said. "We feel like we're better prepared now because we took 9/11 seriously."

Still, Ursprung said interest in preparedness has waned in the business community over the years since the terror attacks of 2001. "Some things were done by businesses after 9/11. Most of those have faded. The preparedness, the extra security, just the talking about what we'd do, has faded. It's just gone into the woodwork," he said.

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