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Workplace Safety Guidelines During Civil Unrest



During times of political or civil unrest, peaceful protests have the potential to turn into violent riots and looting.

In response to the recent civil unrest that took place in South Africa, many businesses have had to close operations out of fear of attacks and to ensure the safety of their employees. It is commonly assumed that workplace security is a job for management, security personnel, the security service providers, and the police. And, to some extent, it is. But to maintain a safe and secure workplace, everyone needs to become involved.

Businesses are at risk of robberies, theft, break-ins and looting. It is important to have an action plan in place for your employees, a plan describing what to do if the worst scenario should unfold and rioters besiege your business.

In this blog, we will look at ways for business owners and employers to prepare for civil unrest and how to get your Emergency Preparedness Plan in place.

How to prepare for civil unrest

Fortunately, there are several pre-emptive steps you can take to prepare for and protect yourself against civil unrest. Having an emergency preparedness plan, which includes civil unrest as a contingency, is crucial to keep yourself safe. Organisations need to act, be prepared and ready to respond timeously and appropriately.

Action steps to take during civil unrest

Preparedness is key. This must be considered when conducting a risk assessment to determine whether your business might be exposed to riots now or in the future. Thus, the steps are simple:

- Compile a comprehensive Emergency Preparedness Plan;
- Train staff on the Emergency Preparedness Plan and any contingencies;
- *Implement an employee assistance programme for managing stress and fear;*
- *Be smart about travelling;*
- Share emergency contact details with staff;
- Avoid rioters and looters;
- Stay calm and move away;
- Keep valuables out of sight;
- *Maintain communication with the entire workforce;*
- Adjust your operational hours.

Emergency preparedness plan

When compiling your emergency preparedness plan and considering civil unrest, and what to do if the worst should happen and rioters attack your businesses, the first thing to do is to complete a risk assessment. Identifying all risks employees and your business might be exposed to, is a legal requirement in terms of section 8(2) of the Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993. Your risk assessment needs to consider the following:

- Geographical locations of the business and its employees;
- Previous unrest and its effect on the business location;
- Different access and egress methods;
- Security measures that are available;
- Staff readiness,
- Communication methods.

When you use the information gathered during the risk assessment and process it into your written plan, bear the following questions in mind: What should your employees do to protect themselves? How should they respond if looters are on the premises?

The Emergency Preparedness Plan should be developed well in advance, and employees trained on the proper course of action.

Safety remains your top priority

Across the world, we have witnessed a surge in rioting, looting and civil unrest. Riots and looting can break out anytime and anywhere – a frightening reality for all. In such an event, it is important that *safety remains a top priority* for yourself and those around you. Additionally, if a large crowd is near or inside your workplace, it is vital that you take every possible measure to ensure the safety of everyone physically present on your property.

Communication

The safety of your staff is paramount and will ultimately determine how you communicate critical information during incidents of civil unrest. Consider how you will communicate with key stakeholders, including employees, customers, service providers and law enforcement agencies. Ensure that you have updated contact information for employees working at impacted locations and for law enforcement agencies and that you have the tools to communicate with them in a timely manner.

Business continuity

Business operations may be disrupted if a specific geographic location is affected by riots and looting and becomes temporarily inaccessible. Plan for the possibility of suspending business operations, redirecting or delaying consignments, services and deliveries, and assigning employees or business functions to other work locations.

Conclusion

Living through these unprecedented times can feel frightening, especially when events can easily turn violent, risking harm to businesses and employees. Having an emergency preparedness contingency plan has never been more important. Now is the time to get your plan of action in place.

In the next blog we will be looking at Workplace Security for Employees.

The demand on businesses in our current economic climate is significant and increases the strain on business owners to be able to stay operational. Besides the current economic climate, businesses are faced with regular changes as new legislation and standards are published more frequently.

SERR Synergy can assist your business with regard to OHS compliance through the development of the necessary policies, documentation training and support relating to information specific to Working from Home. Our team of OHS Professionals can relieve the stress and concerns that might affect your business' capability to remain operational.

About the Author: Leon Visser started his career in the Security and Safety Industry in 1998, where he also served in the SAPS. He currently holds a diploma in Risk Management from the University of South Africa and has completed various certificates in emergency preparedness. During 2019, he joined the OHS team at SERR Synergy for a change of pace, moving from security to health and safety, and is currently studying towards an International Certificate in Occupational Health and Safety with NEBOSH. As a professional Health and Safety Practitioner he is registered with SAIOSH.

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