



**Client Crisis Plan: Interform**

**MSC Sequence One, Team Project 1.3**

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# Introduction

In 2020, there was an earthquake in Utah which affected many businesses in the State (The Salt Lake Tribune, March 18, 2020). This incident exposed Interform's lack of preparedness for emergencies, and the situation was exacerbated by absence of effective communication strategy in times of crisis. Ulmer, Robert R., et al (2018) in the book, *Effective Crisis Communication* define crisis in the following words "Crises are unique moments in the history of organization." The incident that causes the crisis must be a surprise, threaten the survival of the organization, and there must be only a short response time (page 5). Although no one was injured, it became obvious that had Interform's office been close to the epicenter of the earthquake, or had the disaster resulted in a fire outbreak in the building, the outcome could have been much more drastic. Many employees disregarded the order to evacuate the building for various reasons including questioning the authority of the source of the order, according to Krista Morgan, the HR for Interform. The communication breakdown was life threatening, and Interform failed its employees in regard to safety.

Crisis planning goes beyond marketing and public relations. It is integral to preserving the safety of its employees and the company's overall success. Communicating swiftly and effectively in emergencies can mean the difference between life and death. According to Yonatan (2020). "One of the most important aspects of safely navigating a disaster scenario is communication. Unfortunately, the standard communication channels are some of the first things to fail once catastrophe hits. There are a variety of reasons communication could be compromised, including:

- Strong winds or flooding damages cables between cellular towers.
- Seismic activity damages underground fiber-optic cables.
- Heavy rain or snow cuts off wavelength signals to important wireless links.
- Solar storms destroy cellular satellites.
- Networks become congested and jammed.
- Hackers disrupt or overload networks.

Any of these situations can make communication difficult" (Reuben Yanatan 2020).

In reaching out to Interform, they asked us to create a crisis plan to avoid repeating the communication crisis experienced when the earthquake hit.

Human resources' main goal is to implement a system that will quickly reach all employees in times of crisis, and for the employees to promptly and appropriately respond accordingly.

Our crisis plan explains how to handle a natural disaster and/or weather crisis effectively via various communication channels. We provide the results of our research methods and summarize in detail the recommendations in handling a crisis, should something similar happen in the future.

## **Background**

Interform is a U.S. owned and operated printing company located in Centerville, Utah. It offers printing services in wide format printing, banners, signage, graphic design, promotional product and corporate apparel. Customers of Interform services include brands such as: Carhartt, Oakley, Antigue, Ogio, Sharpie, SanMar, Paper Mate, S&S Activewear, Victorinox Swiss Army, Stormtech, Under Armour, Waterman Paris, Ray Ban and others.

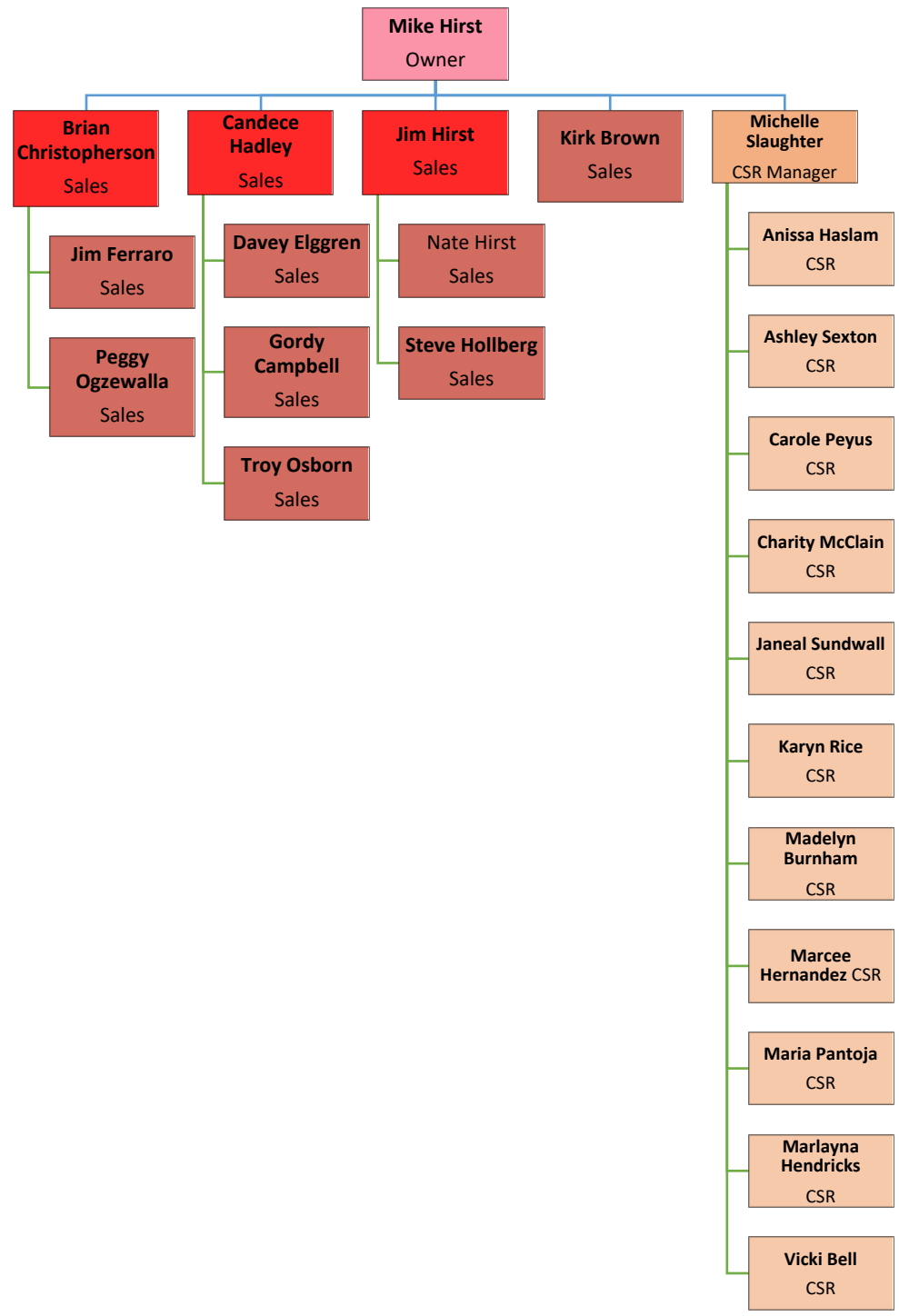
The company is organized under twelve departments: Accounting, Wide format, Art, Print, CSR, Embroidery, Sales, Screen-print, Human Resources, Heat-seal, Shipping and Web. The company is housed under two separate buildings located on the same lot.

The owner, Mike Hurst, oversees Sales and CSR. Hirst has four Sales Managers with seven employees in the lower level, and one CSR Manager with eleven CSR department employees. Interform's second building is run by the CFO, Jason Traveller. Traveller's oversight departments include HR, Accounting, Print, Web, Embroidery, Heat Seal, Shipping, Art, and Screen Print. All departments have their respective manager overseeing the department staff, with the exception of HR who reports directly to Jason, and the Accounting Department. Accounting, rather than managers, has two supervisors overseeing three Accounting Clerks and one Accounting AR, with a fourth Accounting Clerk who reports directly to Mr. Traveller rather than an Accounting Supervisor.

Interform's organizational structure is such that all but two departments have a single authority figure, the exceptions being Accounting as described above, and HR which stands independent as also previously explained. The decentralized structure of the organization makes for effective administration, it however proved to be highly ineffective because per the definition of a crisis, there was no time for a stratification or layered form of message dissemination. Noting this structure, it makes sense that the communication crisis happened. With each department having one manger and its own office, and accounting lacking one direct head, it is understandable that most employees were confused and even reluctant to listen to managers of different departments during an emergency.

**Figure 1:** This figure is the layout of the owner (Mike Hurst) and the two departments he oversees. In this figure you can see Hurst manages both the Sales and CSR Departments. He has 5 managers that work under him with a total of 23 employees. The organizational chart for Interform. (Figures 1-5 give insight to the management system that is in place at interform currently.)

The original chart given to us by Morgan included every department and every employee that works at interform. We re-created the organizational structure chart in order to increase reader usability in our report.



**Figure 2:** This figure shows the CFO, Jason Traveller and his oversight of both the Print Management and Wide format Departments. Traveller oversees 43 employees in total via 10 departments.

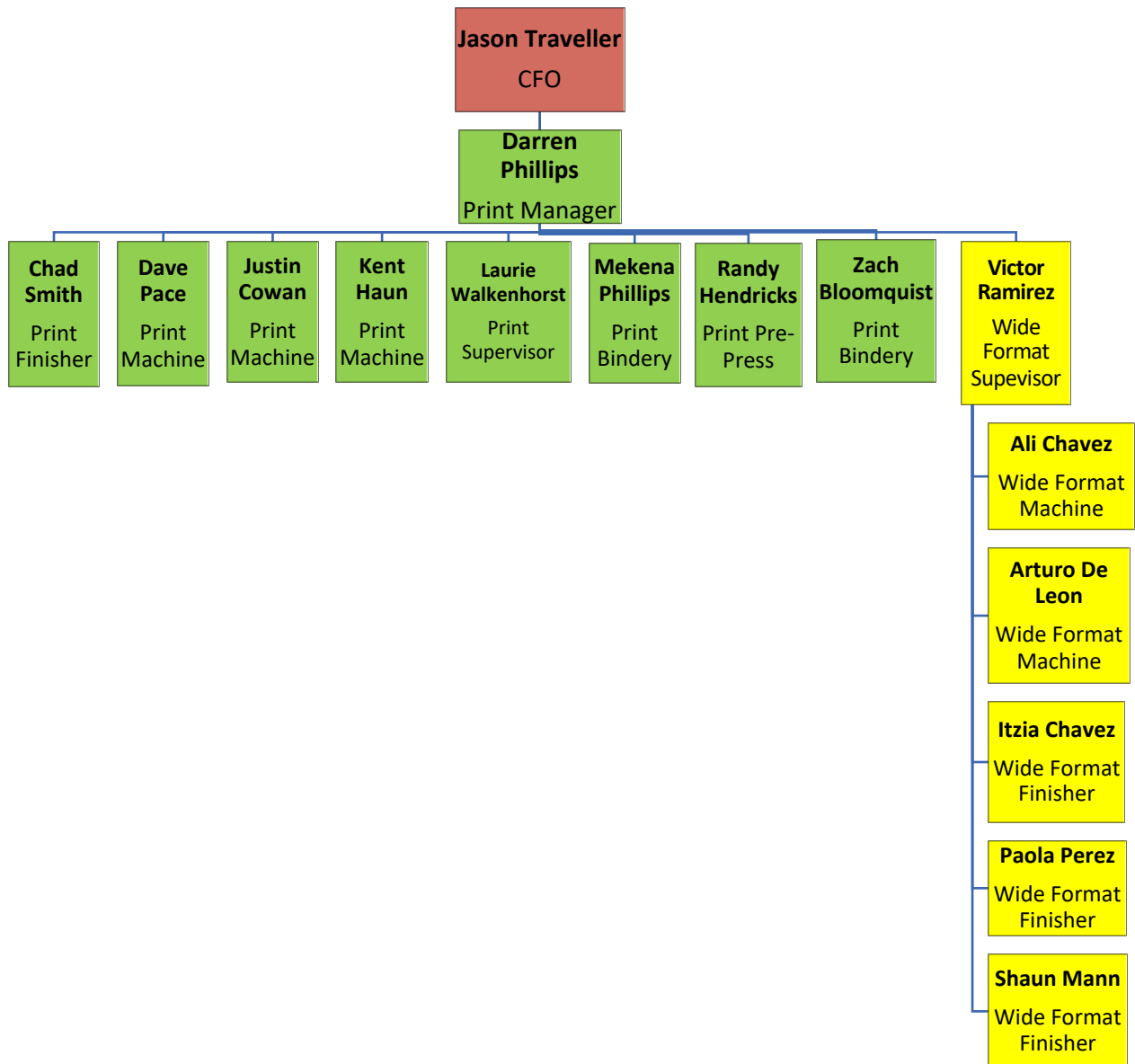


Figure 3: Accounting and Web Management departmental structures.

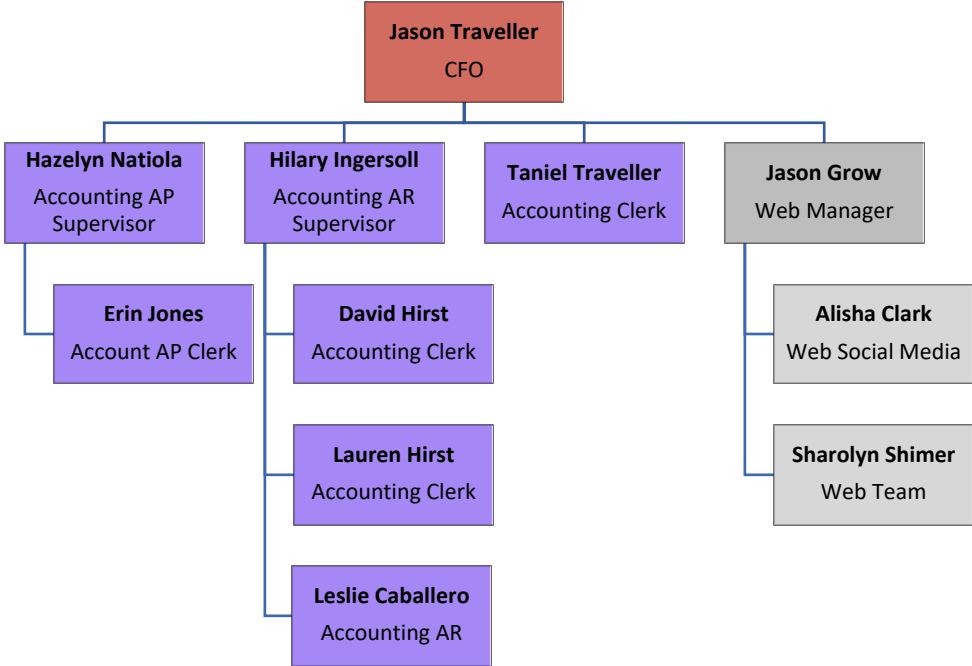
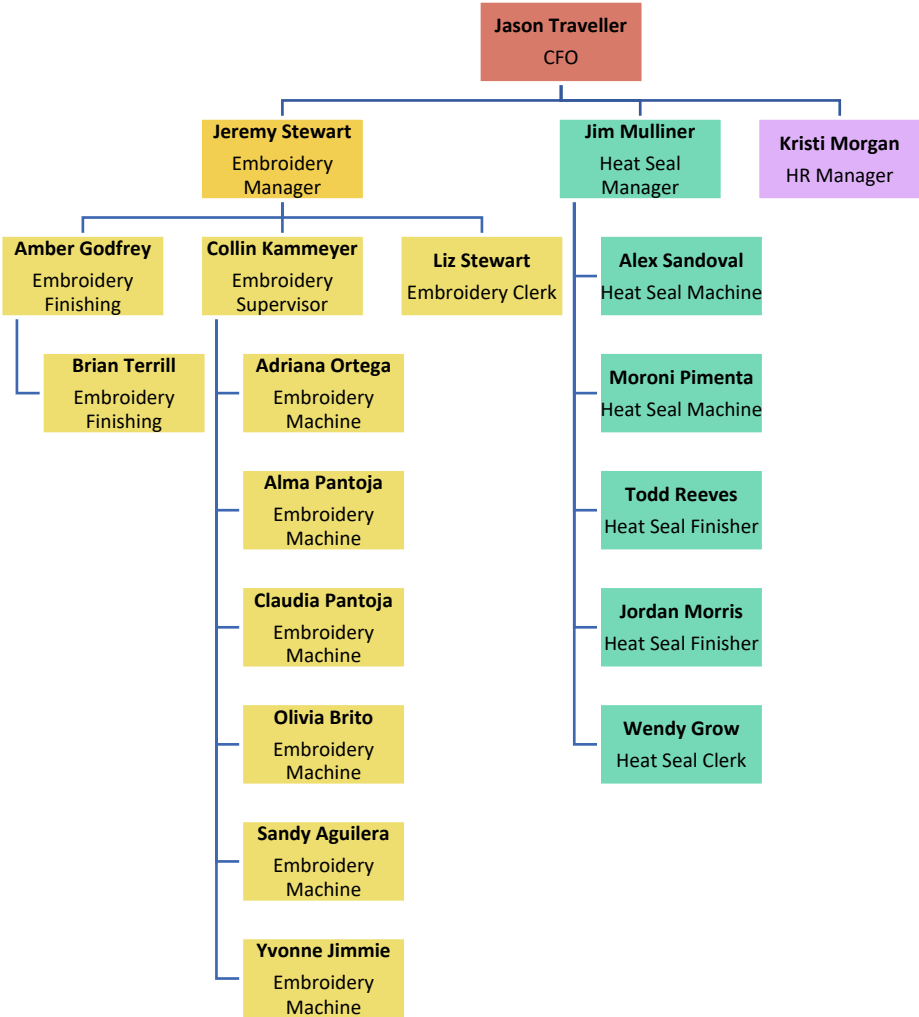
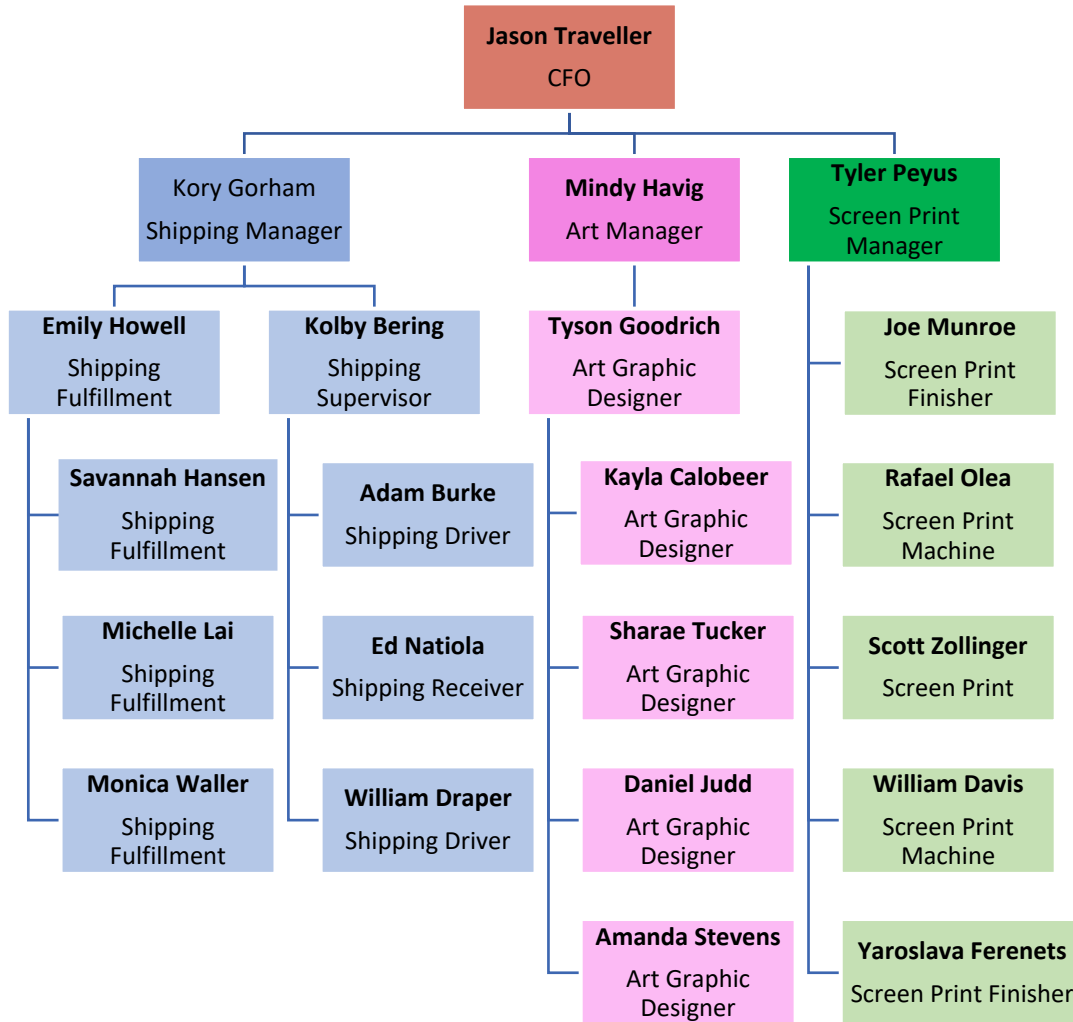


Figure 4: Embroidery, Heat Seal, and Human Resource departmental structures.



**Figure 5:** Shipping, Art, and Screen Print departmental structures.



## Methods of Research

### Secondary Methods

#### Literary Review

We conducted a literary review of crisis communication primarily utilized from online research databases and peer-reviewed journal articles and other trade publications. We researched similar situations in similar sized companies and how they handled such crisis. We took the approach by asking the questions; what worked? What didn't work? We then dove deeper into the review by researching what natural disasters are most likely to effect Interform in the future and find ways to combat communicational shortcomings. The book on crisis communication listed in the reference section, "Crisis Communication" was also a heavy resource.



We performed research over the impacts of snow, wind, earthquakes and fire for both the state of Utah and the region Interform is located in. Literary research was also focused on crisis and response communications from similar companies that included around 50 employees and multiple departments each with its own manager to create baseline comparison values for Interform's human resources department.

In addition, a content analysis and review of the Interform Group Chart and their Organizational Chart was conducted. Both charts helped us understand the layout of the company with regards to the number of employees in each of the twelve departments. We also gained insight into the hierarchy of the company to identify the top-level personnel responsible for each department members' safety in emergency situations.

### ***Primary Method***

#### **Human Resources Interview**

Kristi Morgan, the Human Resources Manager at Interform, was interviewed as she is in charge of the employees' safety and had the information necessary to research the company and its layout. In order to learn more about how the company is run and who works in which department under which manager, several questions were discussed.

To summarize the interviews key themes, we found that the communication issue was based on a lack of specified direction for employees when onboarding and a lasting effect of only interacting within their department. There wasn't a blowback from the clientele aspect, but Morgan said, "It was scary to see that we are unprepared when emergencies are out of our control." She also added, "We need a system in place to ensure our employees are safe. Although they may not have noticed how scary the reactions could result in, it was obvious to managers and senior level staff that the earthquake could have been worse, and we were lucky that this time the earthquake was all that happened.

The main people affected were the employees. Both buildings lost power, some chaos and confusion ensued, and the company was shut down for two days. There are two separate buildings with a total of twelve sectors. Lacking an established order of operations in an emergency, employees were not vacated from the building quickly enough. Each department's sales representative was determined to oversee emailing their clients and consumers, letting them know that production was "slowed down" but representatives were available to contact.

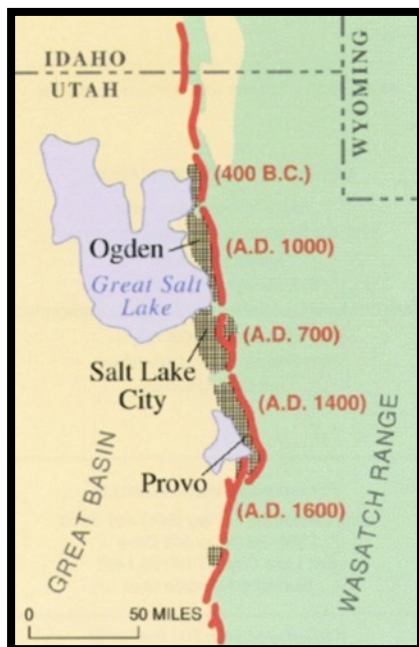
Kristi's goal for Interform is to efficiently handle natural disasters/weather crises effectively. The previously experienced earthquake crisis led to the finding of a communication issue. The core issue is that in having departments with individual managers or supervisors, the chain of command is non-linear. Specific employees listen to their direct managers. As a result, there is a disconnect between each department and a lack of chain of command when an emergency exists. Most employees only see and know their own department co-workers and manager. Interdepartmental awareness and familiarity is missing and counter-productive to a positive company culture.

## Findings

### Secondary Results

### Earthquakes

The Wasatch Fault Line is where the earthquakes originated from in 2020. The fault line runs through Centerville, where Interform is located. This means that the Company is at a higher risk than most that don't live along the fault line. As a result, we determined a plan for earthquake safety and crisis communication is imperative for Interform to implement to ensure company staff safety.



Risk assessment:

Seismic risk mitigation is based on:

1. Reducing the exposure to limit the impacts of an event.
2. Improve the emergency response that entails a preventive planning for evacuation patterns and access of emergency services.

It is impossible to predict the timing and impacts of a shock resulting from an earthquake, so preparation is crucial to reduce casualties and minimize unnecessary hazards.

Figure 1: Wasatch Fault Line

## Wind

Strong winds are common in Utah during the spring and fall. Utah's 2020 fall windstorm was the strongest storm in 15 years. A 113-mph gust was recorded in Brigham City, and the police estimated the damage of the state from this windstorm to be more than \$750,000 dollars (The Associated Press). Evacuations took place at many institutions and companies, including the Ogden Municipal building. Fourteen schools called off class because of the power outages and minor damage. Similar occurrence of emergency in the Centerville area could cause Interform to lose power and create disruption in its operations. Fallen trees and power lines could block roads and create hazardous situation for employees of the company, whether on their way to or from work, or they may be at work when a disaster strikes. A prompt relay of information about such a situation will be urgently needed to avoid casualties or inconveniences.

## Fire

Fire outbreak has been one of the top disaster phenomena in the United States. Thousands of acres of wildfire burn across the country every year. Industrial fires have accounted for many lives and millions of dollars in damages. According to the Firemarshal.utah.gov, a typical house fire doubles in size every 30 seconds to 1 minute. This makes the spread very swift and unpredictable, causing damage to lives and property.

March 25, 2021, marks the 110-year anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire which swept through a New York City sweatshop killing 146 workers (Fact Statistics). The fire that destroyed the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, killed 2,666 people. Others include the Ohio State Penitentiary with 320 dead on April 21, 1930, the May 15, 1929, Cleveland Clinic Hospital which claimed 125 people and lastly, the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas with 85 casualties on November 21, 1980 (Insurance Information Institute).

There were 7 fatalities due to fire outbreak in various homes in Utah from January 2020 to December 2020 (US Fire Administration). Fire at offices and industrial buildings have not been a huge problem in Utah compared to the national figures, however, strong preventive measures should be employed to avoid the slightest chance of a fire incidence in the office. Conversely, an outbreak from any other building in the neighborhood could create a crisis for Interform. Lastly, the risk of earthquake-induced fire, and the fact Interform is situated on a fault line, is another reason fire preparation is critical.

## Snow

Snowstorm is among some of the severe weather conditions that might create a crisis for Interform. Snowfall is reported in liquid-equivalent terms, "The actual depth of new snowfall is typically between 5 and 10 times the liquid-equivalent amount, assuming the ground is frozen. Colder, drier snow tends to be on the higher end of that range and warmer, wetter snow on the lower end.

As with rainfall, we consider the snowfall accumulated over a sliding 31-day period centered around each day of the year. Centerville experiences *some* seasonal variation in monthly liquid-equivalent snowfall.

The *snowy* period of the year lasts for *4.5 months*, from *November 8* to *March 23*, with a sliding 31-day liquid-equivalent snowfall of at least *0.1 inches*. The *most snow* falls during the 31 days centered around *January 6*, with an average total liquid-equivalent accumulation of *0.4 inches*.

The snowless period of the year lasts for 7.5 months, from March 23 to November 8. The least snow falls around July 26, with an average total liquid-equivalent accumulation of 0.0 inches” (Weather Spark).

It may appear that only the Southern States which do not have frequent winter months, struggle occasionally when they get snow storms as did Texas earlier this year. Utah, however has had its share of devastation as a result of severe weather condition including winter storms, excessive cold, high winds and hail storms.

For instance, between January 6<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>, 1993 according to the Western Regional Climate Center, “A major snow event hit Salt Lake County with a ‘once-in-a-100-year event.’ Heavy snow fell nearly continuously for a six-day period. Salt Lake International reported a record "storm" total of 23.3 inches/26 inches on the ground. Upwards of 3 feet of snow was measured on the east side of the valley. Governor Leavitt declared a state of emergency in Salt Lake County the morning of the 11th due to massive amounts of snow. This action activated the Utah National Guard who assisted in snow removal.”

The Center describes another event that happened ten years prior to this in the following words, “The most severe and extensive snow melt flooding in the history of Utah occurred during the spring and early summer. The widespread flood and mud damage along the Wasatch Front impacted a major population area of the state. In April ... a massive mudslide blocked the Spanish Fork River just below Thistle. U.S. Highway 6 ...the main access to Price was destroyed as well as the mainline of the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad. The town of Thistle was inundated and buried by the newly created dam. Later in May into early June ... record flows were measured on five of the six creeks in the Salt Lake Valley. City Creek carried over twice the peak snow melt flow ever recorded and had to be rerouted along some of the major streets in downtown Salt Lake. In Addition, Chalk Creek near Coalville ... the Sevier River at Hatch ... and both Ashley and Dry Creeks near Vernal registered record flows. Numerous other creeks and rivers in the state were near record or well above record levels. Later in June ... the Dmad Dam near Delta failed completely inundating the town of Deseret. At least seven persons drowned in the high waters. Damage estimates were around \$300 million” (Western Regional Climate Center).

A repetition of such a storm and its attendant devastation could result in a crisis situation for Interform. It is therefore imperative that management and employees become aware of this possibility, and follow a plan to deal with it whenever it happens. Management needs to determine what level of precipitation that will be considered too dangerous for employees to commute to and from work, and for offices to continue to stay opened. KSL's Colby Walker reported in February 17 2021 that up to 10 schools closed and an additional 3 schools had late start with three more taking classes remotely (Walker 2021). Such a level of snowfall should be enough to call it an emergency.

**Figure 6:** *File (Getty Images) A school bus on the day schools were closed due to heavy snowstorm in Utah.*



## Recommendations

### Emergency Specific

#### Earthquakes

1. According to the United States Department of Labor guidelines on earthquake emergencies, “the primary dangers to workers result from: being struck by structural components or furnishings, inadequately secured stored materials, burns resulting from building fires resulting from gas leaks or electrical shorts, or exposure to chemicals released from stored or process chemicals. Many of the hazards to workers both during and following an earthquake are predictable and may be reduced through hazard identification, planning, and mitigation.” The following are some of their recommendations in dealing with earthquake emergencies:
  - Pick "safe places." A safe place could be under a sturdy table or desk or against an interior wall away from windows, bookcases or tall furniture that could fall on you. The shorter the distance to move to safety, the less likely that you will be injured. Injury statistics show that people moving as little as ten feet during an earthquake's shaking are most likely to be injured.
  - Practice [drop, cover, and hold-on](#) in each safe place. Drop under a sturdy desk or table and hold on to one leg of the table or desk. Protect your eyes by keeping your head down. Practice these actions so that they become an automatic response.
  - Practice these safe earthquake procedures (i.e., drop, cover, and hold-on) at least twice a year. Frequent practice will help reinforce safe behavior. When an earthquake or other disaster occurs, many people hesitate, trying to remember what they are supposed to do. Responding quickly and automatically may help protect you from injury.
  - Make a plan for workers to follow in the event of an earthquake and be sure that it includes the following precautions:
    - Wait in your safe place until the shaking stops, then check to see if you are hurt. You will be better able to help others if you take care of yourself first, and then check the people around you. Move carefully and watch out for things that have fallen or broken, creating hazards. Be ready for aftershocks.
    - Be on the lookout for fires. Fire is the most common earthquake-related hazard, due to broken gas lines, damaged electrical lines or appliances, and previously contained fires or sparks being released.

- If you must leave a building after the shaking stops, use the stairs, not the elevator, and look for falling debris. Earthquakes can cause fire alarms and fire sprinklers to go off. You will not be able to rule out whether there is a real threat of fire, and the elevators may have been compromised. Always use the stairs.
- If you're outside in an earthquake, stay outside. Move away from buildings, trees, streetlights and overhead lines. Crouch down and cover your head. Many injuries occur within ten feet of the entrance to buildings. Bricks, roofing and other materials can fall from buildings, injuring persons nearby. Trees, streetlights and overhead lines may also fall, causing damage or injury.
- Inform workers of the plan and discuss earthquakes with workers. Everyone in your workplace should know what to do if an earthquake occurs. Discussing earthquakes ahead of time helps reduce fear and anxiety and lets everyone know how to respond.
- Businesses can use the Federal Emergency Management Agency [How to Series](#) for protecting people/property during emergencies. Perform a workplace survey, especially if you are in an area with a high risk of earthquakes, to identify potential hazards to workers if an earthquake occurs. Look for furniture or materials that could fall and strike workers or block means of egress, or cause a release of hazardous materials, or otherwise affect the health and safety of workers as a result of utility loss or system/structural failure. Follow mitigation techniques recommended by FEMA for [equipment](#) and furniture.

2. The Department of Labor has the following suggestion on Training and Exercising.

- Ensure that all workers know what to do in case of an earthquake.
- Practice earthquake and evacuation plans on a regular basis.
- Update plans and procedures based on lessons learned from exercises.

[ShakeOut](#) is an annual global earthquake drill supported by FEMA, the U.S. Geological Society (USGS), the National Science Foundation, and others. Businesses and other organizations can register and participate for free. ShakeOut provides an earthquake [Drill Manual for Businesses](#) with lessons for workers and employers.

3. Furthermore, the Department of Labor recommends the following tools for dealing with earthquake related crisis:

Get emergency supply kits and keep them in shelter locations.

- [Basic Disaster Supplies Kit](#). Ready.gov - Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Lists supplies needed for a disaster kit.

- [Workplace Plans](#). Ready.gov - Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Provides basic information on developing an emergency management plan for the workplace.
  - [Emergency Supplies for Earthquake Preparedness](#). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (CDC). Lists supplies needed for an earthquake preparedness kit.
4. Evaluating employees/injuries:
- Physical needs come first. Check yourself for injuries and do not move individuals injured unless they are in immediate danger (Indiana University).
  - If you suspect someone is trapped in the building call 911.
  - Post a message at the front of the building noting the time, date, number of victims and their last known location in the building (Indiana University).

## Wind

### 1. Protocol

1. Know your most stable locations in each building and have an alarm system in place that employees will hear and/or see as a signal to go to the designated location(s).

### 2. Preparations

1. Don't wait for the storm to hit before you communicate with your employees. "Having a plan to address inclement weather is one of your most important communications strategies" (Amanda Cupp 2019).
2. Create an evacuation and communication plan and strategy ahead of time. Cupp (2019) advises companies to "Such startling facts undoubtedly extend to business communications, with too many businesses waiting to create a proper crisis communications plan until they've experienced a crisis. Don't put your organization in that position. Ensure that you have a proper plan in place now."

## Fire

### 1. Accessible Equipment

Ensure all fire protection equipment (i.e. fire extinguishers, control panels, etc.) are easily accessible and in working condition. Maintain fire sprinklers and alarms and keep free of blockage such as dust, debris or paint. Don't hinder the functionality of your equipment.



## **2. Proper Disposal**

Discard any hazardous waste in a metal container with a lid. Hazardous waste can include anything from oils to chemicals. Flammable and combustible materials should be properly disposed of in order to prevent fire hazards.

## **3. Regular Maintenance**

Schedule regular maintenance services for all fire protection equipment to ensure everything is up to code. Make sure any machines in your building are properly maintained in order to prevent overheating or sparks created from friction.

## **4. Safe Storage**

Chemicals, flammable materials or other hazardous substances in your building should be stored in a safe place such as a dry, secure closet or room that has adequate ventilation. Keep fire protection equipment for flammable substances near the storage area for quick and easy access.

## **5. Clean Environment**

Keeping your building neat, tidy and free from clutter, especially flammable materials such as paper, boxes, etc., that can result in a fire spreading faster, will help reduce risk of providing more fuel to a fire. Clutter could also block exits and make it harder to escape if there is a fire. Thus, fire prevention also calls for keeping the inside of your building clean and clutter free.

## **6. Precautionary Measures**

Fire safety demonstrations can go a long way when it comes to the safety of your building. Teach building occupants how to react to a fire and how to use a fire extinguisher, along with the other fire protection devices. This can help to prevent a fire from spreading if one does occur in your building.

## **7. Building Security**

Arson is one of the leading causes of building and structure fires. That's why it's so important to invest in building security. Building occupants should know to lock up the building behind them and they should know how to report suspicious behavior or people if they see something a little off.

## **8. Designated Smoking Area**

Create a designated smoking area that's a safe distance away from the building. Provide ashtrays or other safe options for people to properly extinguish and dispose of their cigarettes, thus keeping your building safe from accidental fires caused by lit cigarettes.

## 9. Emergency Plan

Emergency and evacuation plans are important to prevent further damages or issues if there's a fire. It's important that if someone needs to call for help, they know what to do, how to easily provide the building address, and what the next steps should be. Fire prevention is just as important after a fire has already started because it can reduce the risk of it spreading, which can lead to more damages.

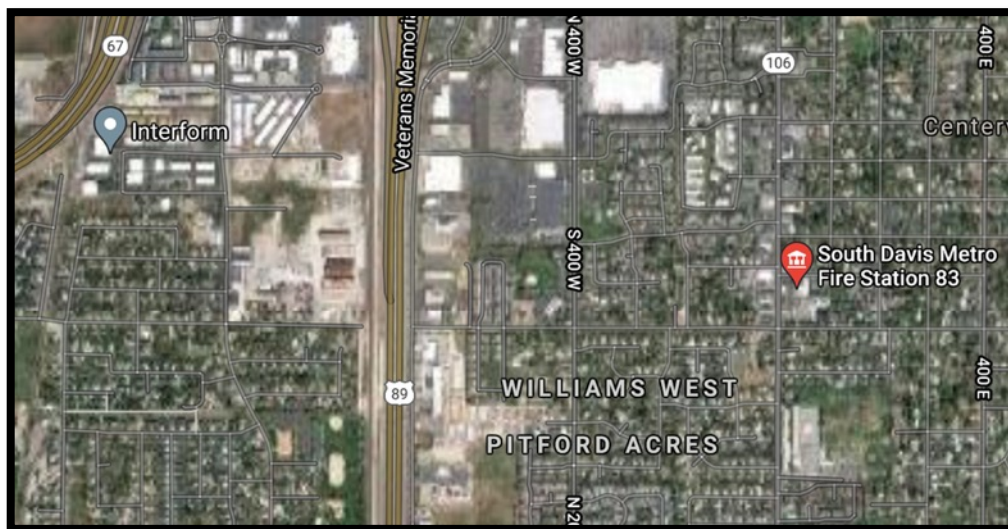
## 10. Adhere to OSHA & NFPA Guidelines

Today there are safety standards and regulations put in place to help businesses better prevent fires in the workplace. Both [OSHA](#) and [NFPA](#) provide a set of rules and guidelines to ensure fire protection and safety. You'll want to make sure that you meet all of their requirements to remain up to code and secure.

## 11. Reaching the Fire Department in an Emergency

The figure 2 below indicates Interform's office's proximity to the South Davis Metro Fire Station. It will take just a few minutes for the Department to reach Interform.

*Figure 7: Map of Interform and proximity to closest fire station*



### Emergency Contact Numbers:

- **Fire Station 83 Centerville:** 1-801-677-2400
- **Police:** 911, 1-801-292-8441

## Snow

1. Arrange for additional help of snow removal beyond the regular plan in cases of irregular precipitation.
2. Maintain adequate drainage systems in cases of flooding from snow melt off.
3. Determine the volume of snow considered to be an emergency and communicate what cases would result in business closure or reduced hours.
4. Ensure there is a backup source for power and heating equipment in case of loss of power during a storm.

## General Preparedness

In all emergencies, there are general, underlying steps that can be taken to create a foundation of preparation.

1. Building Readiness:
  1. Determine the condition of building exits/entrances and ensure they are up to standard.
  2. Have FEMA test the buildings for seismic vulnerability annually.
  3. Conduct quarterly inspection of fire systems to ensure all are in working condition (ie. fire sprinklers, alarms and extinguishers) and service any defective equipment.
2. Clearly defined emergency protocol:
  1. Display emergency exit routes.
  2. List contact information for all closest emergency departments, including your own building address.
  3. Identify marked meeting locations.
  4. Determine appropriate course of action for handling machinery and equipment during emergency evacuation.
    1. Conducting of bi-annual emergency drills by the Crisis Response Committee to include building evacuation procedures of various emergency situations which will differ in response protocol.
3. Communication:
  1. Create an immediate, mass communication system such as a common social media platform (ie. Whatsapp etc.) by which HR can reach all employees on and off-site via cell phone directing what the emergency is and actions to be taken.

4. Working relationships with local emergency services:

a. South Davis Metro Fire Station

1. Seek their expertise on type and placement of fire extinguishers.
2. All staff to receive fire extinguisher use training within 6 months of hire or 6 months of Crisis Response Committee formation, whichever comes first.

5. Create a Crisis Response Committee

a. Lead by HR, the CRC should be at the forefront in implementation of the above recommended measures. Members of this committee could be composed of Department Management considered to be most effective for the committee's purposes.

b. The CRC would be responsible to identify and train the Department Crisis Response Heads which would be the department manager by default, or a designated head in the case of departments without a singular manager.

CRISIS RESPONSE COMMITTEE (CRC)

- HR
- Identified members from Department Management

DEPARTMENT CRISIS RESPONSE HEADS

- Print Manager
- Accounting (designate 1 head)
- HR
- Web Manager
- Embroidery Manager
- Heat Seal Manager
- Shipping Manager
- Art Manager
- Screen Print Manager
- Sales (designate 1 head)
- CSR Manager

Figure 8: Recommendation for crisis management



The Crisis Response Committee should be responsible for communication in times of crisis. The following comprehensive steps recommended by Amanda Cupp on April 5, 2019 in an article titled “How to Communicate Before, During and After Inclement Weather” should be followed to avoid a crisis like what happened last year during the earthquake:

### **Use of Emergency Notification System**

- First, she recommends the use of an Emergency Notification System. “One of the most important pieces of your crisis plan is an Emergency Notification System (ENS), which provides efficient, accurate communication for organizations of every size. With an ENS, you have the ability to provide multiple, targeted messages to various employee and stakeholder groups precisely when you need to, using multiple channels. On top of that, it permits two-way communication, so you know who is safe and who may not be” (Cupp 2019). Some of these systems can send messages via five channels – SMS Text Messages, Emails, Push Alerts, Interactive Voice Response (IVR) calls (Crisis Control).
- An ENS provides reliable, accurate communication when you and your stakeholders need it most. No matter where you are, you can send text, voice, email and other emergency alerts to recipients within moments. Just as important, you can get word back to determine crucial next steps, or to assess whether people are safe and out of danger.
- Systems are versatile and can be customized, with features that include the following:
  1. Sending alerts messages to key stakeholders, including customers.
  2. Consolidation of communication list so that every stakeholder receives the same information at the same time, avoiding confusing multiple message chains.
  3. Providing time-saving predefined scenarios aligned with your emergency communications plan.
  4. Targeting groups of employees, customers or suppliers in specific geographic areas. This is especially applicable in weather-related emergencies, where the severity of warnings or expected, impact may differ depending on the area.
  5. Providing ability to have two-way communications, another critical aspect of personal safety. It can help check that people are safe; an effective system should be able to collect responses and report the results, so your emergency team can tally who still needs to be contacted.

## Plan before you must act

Cupp encourages the need for proper and robust planning for emergencies. “No matter what kind of communications system you use, here are several steps you can take to build the foundation of an effective emergency plan. Review them before inclement weather hits your business:”

- Create internal emergency-response teams, identifying the roles of everyone on the team and what their roles are during weather-related emergencies. Be sure to include IT representatives on the team.
- Train key employees on technology to mobilize crisis-response teams quickly, alert staff and suppliers, and account for personnel safety.
- Implement HR policies for employee notification, remote-work policies, information and ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities.
- Create and distribute shelter-in-place, evacuation and medical emergency procedures.
- Keep a current list of contact information for all response-team personnel, employees, utility companies, FEMA, the local Red Cross chapter and local first responder organizations.
- Build and maintain off-site support for business continuity.
- Put your cybersecurity measures in place, such as backing up records. If you are not already using cloud storage, think about it.
- Encourage all your stakeholders, including employees and residents, to register for the notifications you’ll send. You can reach only people for whom you have information.
- Regularly request that stakeholders check and update their contact information. This helps ensure reliable, speedy delivery of messages at the right time, to the right person, on the right device.
- Think about your specific needs. You know your organization and community best. For instance, the more quickly word gets out about a wildfire, the better the chance of swiftly managing it. A good disaster preparedness strategy includes actionable plans for safety and considers unique characteristics of your area, like the landscape.
- Educate employees. Train the right people on how to use your notification system, including how to respond appropriately. Organizations that educate employees get significantly greater response rates – which is what you want when checking on the safety of your employees.

- Test your plan and system. Many organizations test as often as **twice a month** to make sure that employees and stakeholders are familiar with the system – what messages look like, what information they contain, and so on — and that contact data is current. Conduct tests during normal business hours and address any glitches to be sure it will work when you need it. Also, conduct drills for different types of weather events.
- Learn from experience. If your organization has experienced a crisis, review what took place, then adapt and update your plan, based on lessons learned.

### **Create Message Templates to use before an emergency**

- Use templates to create messages that address every phase of a weather event, so that you are not spending valuable time trying to craft a message during a crisis.
- Taking the cue from Cupp, here are some examples of message templates that may be used:
  - A snow storm has been forecasted to (CITY, STATE) on (FORECASTED DATE OF STORM). Please work with your manager on alternative working arrangements.
  - We are in the path of (STORM NAME). Stay alert to emergency messages regarding evacuation, office closures and relevant instructions.
  - [NAME OF OFFICE] will remain closed until [DATE, TIME] due to the destruction caused by [NAME OF HURRICANE]. Please follow local weather safety alerts to ensure you are protected from severe weather.
  - If you are affected by [NAME OF EVENT], please contact [PERSON OF INTEREST] to find out how to receive assistance during this time of need.

“The goal is to provide information regarding business continuity. Since you are not sure about the severity of the storm, the preparatory plan should be to keep your business running while protecting your employees” (Cupp 2019).

### **What to say during an inclement weather crisis**

- Once severe weather has hit, you should switch your focus to communicating in a slightly different way. For example, you will now want to communicate with employees remotely, because many, if not all, of them will be at home. In addition, you need to have a plan to provide emergency support for affected employees.
- Remember, you cannot predict exactly what will happen, including the force and effects of the weather, so you need to have plans in place that can address what you expect, with flexibility to respond to what takes place.

- Send messages that include updates about the severity of the storm and how long your business will remain closed. In addition, remind your employees and other stakeholders to follow local weather safety alerts to ensure that they are protected from severe weather.
- Send messages that inform employees how to receive assistance during their time of need.
- Craft messages and strategies that fit your business. Perhaps your organization has remote employees worldwide. In that case, you can include special messages to them about how much of business as usual they can expect to conduct. What's vital is that you sustain communication at every stage of an incident.

### **Communication to help speed recovery**

- Even though a storm or other weather incident may have ended, and your communications plan worked, the real challenge can begin in the recovery process, as you keep an eye on getting the doors open and operations up and running again.
- Your communication plan should outline procedures not only for recovery, but also for follow-up. For example, mop-up operations after a fire have been extinguished or a hurricane has passed can take weeks.
- Some employees may not have power at their homes or may have lost their homes. Communicate about what they should do about resuming work and remind them of available services.

Cupp further advises that the company's "mission at this point is to provide services to resume productivity. However, you must remain empathetic to the needs of your employees who may have suffered serious losses both professionally and personally. Fortunately, you can do both with the use of message alerts" (Cupp 2019).

### **Message templates for post-storm recovery**

As the incidents come to an end, the company's messaging has to change to reflect the current stage of the process. "For your business, your main goal is to resume operations as quickly as possible. To help do this effectively, you can implement the following message templates into your emergency notification system:

- Due to [NAME OF HURRICANE], our office is closed. Contact [MANAGER OF DEPARTMENT] for information about working remotely and when to return to the office.
- If you are unable to travel to the office, please contact [MANAGER OR PERSONNEL] to discuss alternative working arrangements.
- If you require assistance with maintenance, repairs or tech damage in your office, please reach [MAINTENANCE DEPARTMENT] to schedule repairs" (Cupp 2019).



## **Maintain effective communication to refocus**

Effective crisis communication does not end immediately once the crisis has ended. Communication at this time should be about refocusing the team for resumption of full operations. “Once your organization has resumed normal operations and most of the incident has been resolved, your communications can shift to final updates that help refocus everyone on productivity. You should also spend time evaluating your plan’s effectiveness” (Cupp 2019).

She further suggests the following tips:

- Gather your team to review what worked and what didn’t – because odds are good that some aspects of your plan could be strengthened, while other parts functioned perfectly.
- Make plans now on what you will do differently next time, whether or not it’s the same kind of critical incident. Perhaps you experienced a hurricane, but what you learned could extend to any kind of emergency, including a cybercrime.
- Test your revised plan, incorporating any updates you made. If changes were made to policies or procedures in response to the weather incident you just navigated, be sure to communicate those changes clearly and frequently.

## **Strong crisis planning means strong recovery**

You may be familiar with the startling statistic that approximately 40 to 60 percent of small businesses never recover from a disaster. If they are to recover, those businesses need to resume operations within five days. Just five days. Think about how quickly those days pass if you are scurrying to figure out how to recover from a major weather incident.

If you have a plan in place, you will save time and give your organization the best chance of surviving a weather emergency or some other form of crisis, and your business will become operational quickly” (Cupp 2019).

## Conclusion

Interform has a great opportunity to learn from its past crisis communication experience and become a company that not only limits the risk of its employees, but prepares them individually and departmentally for emergencies. A good crisis plan will help Interform avoid being one of the 40 to 60 percent of small businesses who never recover from disasters (Cupp 2019). She states that “If they are to recover, those businesses need to resume operations within five days. Just five days. Think about how quickly those days pass if you are scurrying to figure out how to recover from a major weather incident.

If you have a plan in place, you will save time and give your organization the best chance of surviving a weather emergency or some other form of crisis, and your business will become operational quickly.” Crisis communication strategy is essential to the company’s quick resumption to normalcy after a disaster strike. In order to provide best communicative practices, there needs to be a mass communication system in place that reaches each employee's cell phone immediately, as well as sounding an alarm (auditory and visual) that the employees can recognize and associate with the directive to leave the building. In addition to this immediate release of information, there should be training held company wide or departmentally that aligns with what the employees need to do in specific emergencies.

Our recommendations are to help with overall preparedness, immediate emergency action, and training that will help crisis communication at Interform transition from being counteractive to proactive. “The strength of your crisis planning determines how quickly your organization reopens its doors and gets back to business. Don’t wait. Be sure your crisis communication plan is as strong as it can be, ready to steer you through any kind of storm” (Cupp 2019).

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