

# Real Estate Journal

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## Tips on hiring an emergency preparedness planner

### Just what exactly are you looking for?

Before you begin the process of hiring a planner, you may need to revisit the specific products and services you require. Are you looking for a risk assessment? A physical security plan? Development of a corporate emergency preparedness strategy? Validation of emergency response protocols? Business continuity planning? Horizontal and/or vertical plan coordination? Plan integration with external agencies? There is, indeed, a difference between a security program and a comprehensive emergency preparedness program: the former is generally associated with risk assessment, site security and life safety, access control and regulatory compliance while the latter is a much broader, integrated effort involving mitigation, preparation, response and recovery.

Whatever your requirements, a critical difference between many planning consultancies lies in their methodology. Many companies use a "cookie-cutter" approach: they gather an organization's information and regurgitate it in the form of a "plan." This is common methodology for developing documents designed to meet regulatory guidance. The finished document, in all its glory, sits in a three-ring binder on a shelf. While your company is compliant with the law, too few organizational members understand the plan and many don't even know it exists. The product is likely ineffective during an emergency. A superior method is an inclusive program where key staff participate in planning. Your hired consultant facilitates the process, based on your direction and guidance. This method is more time consuming but, in the end, much more effective; your staff "owns" its plan and is much more likely to implement it competently during an emergency.

### A "highly-qualified expert" does not always make a good planner

Beware of companies that tout themselves as being better than the rest. Phrases like, "no one in the industry can match our qualifications" or "our products are the best in the field" are rather silly. According to who? There are certainly many qualified firms from which to choose.

Often, the first screening criterion used in selecting a preparedness planner is technical qualifications; corporate security officials tend to be comfortable with consultants that share common experiences. For example, a retired police

detective now working as a security director may be more comfortable with a former local law enforcement official. A building's fire safety director may be more likely to hire a retired battalion fire chief. While it seems to make sense to select a consultant that understands your background, an effective emergency preparedness planner must provide a harmonizing view to effectively manage all of the challenges associated with planning for complex and diverse organizations. Has the person you are considering had a broad range of planning experiences? Has he ever developed operational plans that he had to implement? How often has he developed and delivered exercises and have these exercises addressed tactical-level compliance training or management-level decision-making? Has he ever managed resources in a diverse organization? A sound planner will complement your organization's skill set and assist you in ensuring each part of your organization fits into the preparedness solution.

A second mistake made in hiring a firm is assigning a disproportionate importance to its "contacts." It is no secret that businesses award work based on who knows who; locals like to hire locals and it seems to make good sense to hire someone who is familiar with the operating environment. However, don't immediately dismiss other consultants who have no specific affiliation with organizations (public or private) from the local area; often, they are able to look at your security challenges thru a more objective set of lenses and, in doing so, offer additional points of view you may have not otherwise considered. A competent planner will quickly establish necessary contacts in the area and gain knowledge of local issues. Contacts are important but objectivity and process integrity are non-negotiable.

### Characteristics

Finally, a list of characteristics you may want to consider:

**Perspective.** Many previously successful tactical-level technical experts who assume roles as planning consultants are, unfortunately, unsuccessful: they are unable to think outside the scope of their very specific technical expertise. Your planner must have the wherewithal to stretch the thought processes of your planning team. The final plan is not his but belongs to those who must implement it should the need arise.

**Objectivity.** A competent planner has no agenda, other than optimizing emergency

preparedness for the client. He maintains a neutral point of view. How many emergency preparedness programs have been stymied by agendas, politics, and turf battles?

**Inclusion.** The planner must demand organizational staff inclusion and ensure all necessary viewpoints are represented during the process from within the organization and, in some cases, from outside the organization. Inclusion and clearly defined roles, responsibilities and authority are the bases for a "unified command" emergency response structure.

**Program Management.** A seasoned planner has had extensive experience as a program manager. Your staff's time is valuable. After about two postponed meetings or exercises, program momentum can slow to an unrecoverable degree. Your consultant must keep the program on track.

**Nuance.** How quickly is your planner able to understand the organization's personality? Is he able to grasp broad guidance and turn it into realistic, sufficiently detailed and workable plans? Is he able to act as a conduit, bringing concerns and information from lower levels in the organization to upper levels without losing confidence of employees or management?

**Currency.** The best planners are incessant researchers and spend unnoticed hours researching current laws and regulations, keeping abreast of best practices, and analyzing lessons learned. Planners with affiliations across a broad spectrum of disciplines may provide better services.

**Role.** A planner must be a skilled decision facilitator with the role of capturing possible options and eliciting policy decisions from senior management. Consultants are often asked to make decisions or recommendations regarding a particular emergency preparedness protocol or policy. A good planner will present realistic options and provide an objective discussion of pros and cons for each option, but will ultimately expect the organization to make the final decision on its emergency preparedness policies and procedures.

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2007 is no different from 2006 regarding emergency preparedness challenges. Corporate security and operations officials will face the recurring dilemma of growing emergency preparedness requirements arising from local, state and federal directives, combined with increasing client inquiries regarding specific preparedness policies and procedures in their companies. Requirements to "shore up" emergency preparedness will continue, yet sufficient time to organize, coordinate, integrate and validate emergency preparedness plans will remain scarce. Many firms will continue to outsource the important function of preparedness planning.

Today there is a particularly robust field of firms offering emergency preparedness planning services. At one end of this spectrum reside former first-response technical experts who have had experience with immediate incident response and have specialized experience in technical and/or tactical level training, individual facility risk analysis and, in some cases, local incident command and control. Consultants from this category are generally proficient in site-specific physical security assessment (cameras, access control systems, etc.) and individual skills training (weapons, self-defense, behavior recognition, etc.). However, few have had experience coordinating resources, finances, or departments and have limited (if any) strategic or operational-level planning proficiency and expertise in facilitating planning processes in complex organizations. At the other end of the spectrum lie firms that tout top-level officials who bring name recognition to their services. While these "name-brand" firms are in demand, often the senior-level consultants' involvement with the actual planning is limited and junior consultants with varying levels of expertise are sent to perform the work. Somewhere in the middle of this spectrum lies the firm you seek.

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