

feature.

THE REAL DRILL

Monday – never the best day of the week!

By Ian Thomson



On Monday 6th July, the COSMOTE Building Emergency Controllers (BECs) and the Emergency Response Teams (ERTs) at Maroussi buildings A and C had an unexpected opportunity to put their training into practice when the sirens sounded at 10.30 in the morning. Evacuation time!



Thankfully this wasn't a real incident - although you may be surprised to learn that COSMOTE has responded to over 20 incidents since February 2009. So why did we plan and carry out an unannounced evacuation of the buildings?

Safety - the COSMOTE Business Continuity (BC) programme has provided the BECs with best practice training, equipment and desk top simulations to help them learn how to manage incidents but these have always been scheduled events and incidents don't start with everyone sitting around a table in a conference room.

COSMOTE has adopted the recognised best practice priorities when responding to an incident;

1. People
2. Assets
3. Business Priorities

These priorities are imbedded into all of the checklists and plans and I am pleased to report that the BECs and ERTs put safety first as they had done in all of the training sessions.

As we have never previously carried out any unannounced evacuations of buildings, the BC team had to hold secret meetings to gain the agreement and support of the other occupants, security staff and HR to make sure that the event was well planned and executed.

A conscious decision was made to minimise creating unnecessary panic by avoiding the use of smoke or any other trickery - the siren simply sounded without warning.

So how did things go?

Before I answer that question, I need to make you aware of some facts common to most incidents regardless of the capability of the people responding.

There is always a gap between the information required to make decisions and the information available - this is true for hours - although wrong information is freely available whenever you want it.

I experienced this during an incident in 1998 when, after 40 minutes, I was contacted by the New York HQ to confirm two "facts". Firstly that we had suffered two fatalities and secondly that our 8 floor building had burnt to the ground.

IT TAKES TIME TO GAIN REAL CONTROL OF AN INCIDENT

The real facts? We had one person taken to hospital due to an asthma attack - unpleasant but no one had died but best of all we hadn't even had a fire - it was an electrical surge.

It takes time to gain real control of an incident, so if it all looks a bit messy to start with then that is simply the way that things are. I think the best compliment I can give COSMOTE BECs and ERTs is that they were approached while at the muster area by one of the other companies asking if they could discuss fully integrating their emergency procedures with COSMOTE's - because they were so impressed with the way that things were handled - a fantastic compliment.

As you would expect, we carried out debriefings to ensure that we learn the lessons - and there were a few, but nothing unexpected or serious.

OK, so the straight answer to the "how did things go" question - as a Consultant I get the opportunity to observe many drills and the COSMOTE team performed really well and should be congratulated.

The assembly areas were well managed and the arrangements for the re-occupation were well organised for building C.

There was nervousness about how things would go, but this was unfounded with only minor problems occurring and these have already been put under management controls.

The drill was part of the COSMOTE BC programme aimed at improving preparedness and you can expect to see more events being carried out - initially in Athens aimed at helping staff become more prepared to plan their response to incidents such as Earthquakes.

Lastly, for all of the staff who were involved in the evacuation - thank you for your cooperation and understanding on the day, but can I ask you to check what impact you would have suffered if you were unable to gain access to your personal possessions, especially house and car keys - if there had been a real incident that prevented access being granted by the Emergency Services?

COSMOTE is a responsible employer and has put a lot of effort into the arrangements to try and keep you safe - but they are not responsible for your "second key strategy".

Ian Thomson is an Associate Principal Consultant for Oprel Ltd. He has over thirty years experience in business and information technology, and more than fifteen years experience in Crisis Management and Business Continuity Management. He holds a BSc Honours degree in Electronic and Electrical Engineering from the University of Surrey and has been a Member of the Business Continuity Institute (MBCI) since 1998. Previously Ian had nine years (Nov 1999 - Mar 2009) at Insight Consulting. He has worked extensively throughout Europe and the Middle East and has a practical knowledge of business continuity that enables clients to develop practical solutions - not plans that gather dust. Prior to joining Insight Ian was the Business Continuity and Crisis Management Manager for American Express Europe Ltd.