Preparing for an Emergency with Mobile Technology

Mobile technology can put critical information in the hands of stakeholders almost instantly.

By Nick Mirisis

Emergency situations occur regularly at educational institutions. The good news is that most schools are prepared to deal with them. They have plans in place that address a variety of critical events, from weather-related emergencies to acts of violence.

For most schools, emergency plans live on paper. In fact, 8 out of 10 schools use paper and binders to communicate crisis-response information, and 7 out of 10 rely on maps, diagrams, and other paper-based visual aids.

Paper, however, is an outdated medium for emergency plans. By the time emergency documents are printed, much of that information is obsolete. Printing costs are also on the rise, making frequent updates and reprints an expensive line item for school budgets.

There is a better way. Mobil technology facilitates emergency plans and preparation and empowers school stakeholders.

The Problem with Paper

Paper plans are good for training purposes, but paper doesn't aid real-time response. In a crisis, no one has the time to find the right binder on the shelf or the poster on the wall. Limiting access to crisis-response information can create a bottleneck during a crucial response time.

The solution is mobile technology. Mobile applications make information easily accessible to those who need it when they need it most. Mobile technology allows an element of control during an out-of-control situation. It puts the school safety plan in the hands of essential personnel on the one device they are never without: their smartphone.

Between April and June 2014, 300 million smartphones were sold—that's 1 million smartphones per month, according to the information technology research and advisory firm Gartner (www.gartner.com/newsroom/id/2944819). Several research studies have shown that of those millions of smartphone users, the vast majority carry their phone with them 22 hours per day, check their phones every six minutes, and opt to use mobile apps exclusively to communicate with family, friends, and colleagues.

Although we respond to phone alerts more quickly than to email notifications, only 22% of schools currently use text messaging to notify parents of emergency situations. One-third use email to communicate with parents and other external stakeholders, according to a 2014 survey by SchoolDude, a provider of online facility management software tools for schools (www.schooldude.com/Portals/0/Public%20Content/White%20Papers/wp-school-crisis-response.pdf).

Alerts are great for notifying stakeholders of an emergency situation, but they don't provide information or guidance about next steps. That's when an emergency plan comes into play. Leveraging mobile technology takes the emergency plan beyond the alert to action.

Going Mobile

From students and staff to parents and community members, keeping everyone safe and informed during an emergency is a priority. Being prepared and having the right tools in place are key. Mobile technology provides the tools to put those plans into action quickly and to empower personnel effectively.

Mobile technology has several advantages:

- The technology is readily available across both iOS and Android platforms.
- Mobile apps are equipped with GPS capabilities, allowing for geotracking and other location-based services.
- There's no limit to the number of downloads, updates, users, and notifications the apps can receive and send.
- With a mobile crisis-management app, it's easy to upload emergency-response plans to the cloud and establish two-way communication—a relationship that does not exist with a static, hard-copy plan.
- School officials can publish safety plans that staff can easily access in an emergency. Plans can be created from a library of templates, customized by type of emergency, and updated as needed without incurring additional costs, as with printing binders, diagrams, and other visual aids.

In SchoolDude's survey, 64% of schools noted that improved team efficiency was the top advantage of using mobile applications for emergency situations; better communication was cited as the second-best advantage. Mobile apps can do just that. They are efficient, secure, and compliant with privacy laws; only authorized users can access the information stored in the app.

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Mobile crisis-management apps are simple to set up and easy to use; publishing an emergency plan is as easy as composing and sending an email. Plans can be updated as needed, and push notifications can be sent to inform personnel of any changes. Plans can be read off-line, just like a document, making them accessible even during Internet or cellular data outages. A hard copy can also be generated if needed.

Incident reports can be created and updated within the app and emailed automatically to the necessary personnel. Those reports also provide a checklist of steps required in an emergency.

Integrating Mobile Technology into an Existing Plan

Mobile applications are designed to complement existing procedures, not replace them. There are no additional requirements; there's no need to reinvent the wheel. Plans that already exist in another format, like a Word document, can be uploaded easily straight into the app. Those plans can then be updated when circumstances change or when new emergency situations arise.

For example, if emergency exits are relocated to accommodate school construction, an updated map can be uploaded to the app instead of printing a new one and incurring additional costs for a temporary change.

Another example is when a school experiences a new emergency. In 2011, a 5.8-magnitude earthquake hit just 80 miles south of Washington, D.C., far from the more earthquake-prone West Coast. Earthquake-response planning may not have been on the radar of East Coast emergency planners until that time. After all, a similar event last occurred in the eastern United States in the 1940s. Previously, it might have taken a relevantly significant amount of time to add a plan for earthquakes to the school district emergency plan. But with mobile technology, it can be created from a template in the app and be readily available in the event of such an occurrence.

Mobile technology centralizes important information and makes it easy to update. It takes a static document and turns it into a living, breathing plan of action. Crisis plans are already in place. Essential personnel already carry a mobile device with them at all times. Mobile technology is the bridge that connects those two elements to improve emergency response.

Best Practices for Preparation

Collaboration and consensus are imperative to a successful emergency plan. It's important to work in partnership with emergency responders to lay out and implement procedures before an emergency situation arises.

When creating an emergency plan, first establish who the plan is for: faculty, staff, administration, the community. Who are the stakeholders in each scenario? Mobile plans can and should be customized according to those stakeholders. For example, front-office personnel may require information that is different from that for teachers or custodial staff.

It's also important to customize emergency plans accordingly. That objective can be accomplished easily on a mobile platform by assigning users to specific plans and by putting security measures in place, like password

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protection and email identification. It's also important to establish a hierarchy for disseminating information by scenario and security level, all of which can be easily managed within a mobile app.

Once the stakeholders are identified, it's then essential to identify the topics relevant to those stakeholders and to create an electronic guidebook for each emergency situation. Plans can be created for different scenarios. For example, the response required for an active shooting is much different from what's required for a weather event. Plans can be labeled as such within the app as well as branded with school colors and logos to make the interface more familiar and recognizable to stakeholders.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency recommends training stakeholders through annual meetings and visits to evacuation sites, and by familiarizing students, staff, and community partners with the action steps included in the emergency plan. That approach includes informing staff members of the mobile apps available to them and providing training on how to use them.

Users should know how to access the technology in an emergency, how to set up alerts and notifications, and how to find emergency information when it's needed. Just as it's important to practice emergency evacuation procedures, it's important to practice using mobile technology in case of an emergency, to ensure that the technology is

operational and that everyone knows how to use it.

Preparedness Is Priceless

In a survey conducted by SchoolDude, nearly 90% of schools reported an emergency incident to school stakeholders; 31% were situations that required a lockdown. Of the schools surveyed, more than half expect to spend more on improved crisis-management solutions in the coming years, noting that mobile apps are of top priority for improving communication and updating emergency-response plans.

Mobile technology is affordable, especially compared with rising printing costs and the speed at which information changes. With mobile applications, business officers can select the price point that suits the school's budget. Existing emergency plans can then be uploaded, updated, and shared easily.

Emergencies are a reality. Safety plans are a requirement. With the prevalence of smartphones, mobile technology can put those safety plans in the hands of those who need it at the exact moment the information is needed. Mobile crisis-management apps go beyond the alert, providing actionable instructions in a crisis and empowering faculty and staff with the tools they need to stay safe, regardless of accessibility. Mobile technology is an investment in safety.

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