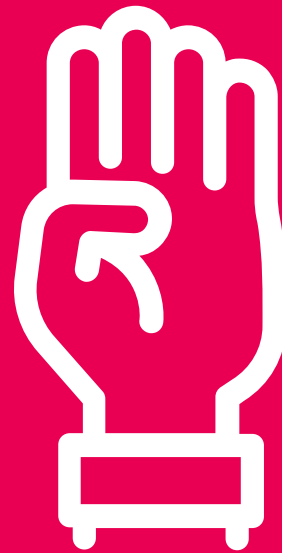


A Guide to Capability Management in Volunteer Disaster and Emergency Response



The value of capability management

To be successful, volunteer disaster and emergency response depends on effective resource management. Materials, supplies, technologies, and especially responders must be deployed to the disaster zone as efficiently as possible.

But as veteran managers and dispatchers can attest, getting those resources to the right place at the right time, an enormous challenge in and of itself, is still only half the battle. The other half is no less trying. That is the task of ensuring the maximal productivity of resources once they do reach the disaster zone. Here, we quickly enter the realm of capability management.

The main purpose of a capability—a set of differentiated skills, complementary assets, and routines—is to maximize and improve the productivity of other resourcesⁱ. In the emergency response context specifically, capabilities do something quite important: they bolster an organization's capacity to effectively deploy resources within *preexisting, preapproved incident command systems, structures, and protocols*.

In this way, resources and capabilities go hand in hand: capabilities link resources and strategies to effective actions in the field. Managing one without considering the other dramatically reduces the effectiveness of the response effort. Because when done well, capability modelling facilitates operational efficiency above and beyond a strictly resource-based approach, helping organizations to achieve the following:



Highlight training and credentialing gaps



Reaffirm processes



Alert teams to cost overruns



Suggest areas for improvementⁱⁱ

In volunteer disaster and emergency response, those very values can prove the difference between success and failure. The latter, as you well know, often entails the loss of life or property. Consider, in an actual response, managers can't dispatch just anybody. They have to identify the best people for the job: someone with CPR certification for a fire rescue, a certified diver for coastal response, trained counselors for trauma survivors, the list goes on.




But capabilities can be distributed in and enhanced from so many sources. That is what makes accurately observing capabilities one of the most significant, structural management challenges around.

Having to keep consistent track of capabilities, be they certifications, competencies, or trainings, puts a ton of pressure on managers. Doubly so when managers have to deal with spontaneous volunteers converging on a disaster zone in addition to formal, or fulltime, responders and longtime volunteers. According to the data, those pressures are only getting worse, as the volunteer base shifts in kind, even in societies which formerly enjoyed fairly predictable volunteer populations.

Key challenges to effective capability management

Australia, for one, has historically had a “large, highly-trained volunteer workforce that [formed] the backbone of much of its emergency and disaster response capacity”ⁱⁱⁱ. But that workforce is in the midst of pretty profound changes.

Specifically, experts point to a sharp decline in “traditional, long-term, high commitment volunteering and a [corresponding] rise in more diverse, fluid and episodic styles of volunteering.” On the whole, the effect of that trend for emergency response agencies has been mixed:


-  Shorter volunteering terms
-  Stronger desire for autonomy when executing tasks in the field
-  Heavier reliance on existing skills


Unfortunately, those qualities do more to undermine positive capability management outcomes than promote them. Managers already have to observe the capabilities of fulltime staff and long-term volunteers. Add to that a new base of shorter-term volunteers, often with limited capabilities for the task at hand.


Further exacerbating the challenge is the fact that organizational problems and priorities shift depending on emergency management phases, as depicted in the graph below^{iv}:

Key capability management challenges by emergency management stage	
Emergency Management stage	Capability management challenge
Mitigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of awareness • Lack of stakeholder buy-in • Ineffective leadership and organization
Preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No or poor early warning systems • Budget constraints
Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inefficient communication, usually poor inter-agency information flows • Difficulty in coordination • Public information proves to be inadequate, e.g. initial media reports overstate the extent of the disaster, increasing the volume of inquiries about the well-being of local residents
Recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget constraints • Lack of expertise

As is the case with most facets of emergency response, digital logistics and information management systems can help solve some of those capability management challenges. But using digital systems won't cure everything. Even the most technologically advanced volunteer disaster and emergency response agencies face some stubborn capability management challenges:

 **Getting and updating data.** A logistical challenge for emergency managers is getting the right resource and capability data input into their systems and contact directories. Once they do, keeping track and updating that data, especially in a spontaneous volunteer convergence situation, also proves enormously difficult.

 **Data is siloed.** Of course, the data is sometimes there already-just not in the emergency management and resource allocation tools you use. That can be due to the nature of capability data itself, which is often in HR databases, which don't sync with an emergency response solution set. When that happens, dispatchers don't get the information they need to send the right resources into the disaster zone.

 **Privacy matters.** Like employee information more generally, responder and volunteer capability data can fall under the rubric of personally identifiable information (PII), the storing and sharing of which is heavily regulated^v. As such, the information needs to be treated with strict privacy protocols, both for reasons of security and legal compliance.



Unreliable and unavailable resources don't get filtered out. You can have the right resource-capable and credentialed. But that means little if the person is unreliable or unavailable for deployment into the disaster zone. As FEMA notes, in the case of spontaneous volunteers, one of the greatest challenges is bridging the gap between a person's willingness to volunteer and a management system's capacity to use that person effectively^{vi}. Simply put, capability management requires a heavy dose of reliability, availability, and proximity management to be effective.

Time outlays and cost overruns also need to be factored in, particularly in the context of a large-scale event, when masses of resources simply can't get to the disaster site in time, or agencies don't have the means to pay the cost of those resources.



Volunteers don't get commands to the field. In the U.S. context, at least, "vast majorities" of volunteer firefighters bring their own devices into the disaster zone, according to AT&T Vice President, Chris Sambar^{vii}. And though the BYOD scenario helps bring costs down for responder agencies, it can create logistical problems when disaster volunteers aren't able to receive commands in the field, either because they lose internet access or don't have the right emergency management app downloaded on their device.

Success factors and best practices for effective capability management

Despite the hurdles, effective capability management is achievable. It all starts with advanced capability planning, reinforced by delegation, communication, decision making, and inter-agency coordination.

Remember though, capability planning isn't just box ticking. When modeling capabilities at your organization (and in coordination with partner agencies), you should consider all planning scenarios and logistical demands^{viii}. Specifically, managers need to take an emergency management lifecycle approach to capability planning. Experts in the field make the following lifecycle recommendations:



Mitigation stage. Here, capabilities should address evaluation, monitoring, and dissemination with the goal of mitigating emergencies from happening in the first place. Capabilities should be marshaled towards detecting and assessing risks and vulnerabilities. The final output will be timely and effective early warnings.



Preparedness stage. At this stage, capabilities need to address planning, training, and logistic (and/or information) management with the goal of providing accurate early warnings, as well as increasing public awareness and survival education. The output will be early warnings and disaster education programming.



Response stage. In the midst of a disaster, capabilities will be marshaled according to specific needs, but with the goal of achieving increased coordination and efficient information exchange. The outputs in this phase are virtually indistinguishable from the goals of disaster response more broadly, i.e. search and rescue, evacuation systems and procedures, shelters, disaster impact reports, medical care, etc.



Recovery stage. Post-crisis, capabilities should be marshaled to deal with specific damages. Outputs will also resemble recovery stage outcomes more broadly, i.e. temporary accommodation, capital injections, measures to strengthen existing economic enterprises, etc^{ix}.

Capability management success factors: a check list

- ✓ Institutional, human, financial, and technical resources
- ✓ Policies, rules, and regulations for effective implementation
- ✓ Effective leadership and decision making
- ✓ Ease of mobilizing resources
- ✓ Engagement with relevant stakeholders

Technology can drastically improve capability management outcomes

Without sound leadership, processes, and planning, capability management won't go anywhere. That much is true.

But once you've modeled out your capabilities based on specific scenarios and emergency management phases, you still stand to gain a lot out from a good information, emergency, and volunteer management system. There are, however, specific vendor considerations to note when you're procuring that system:



Integrates information from diverse sources.

Since a lot of detailed credentialing and capabilities information already exists in HR and people management systems, you need to find a solution that plays well with those enterprise tools. That way managers get access to relevant information, improving their ability to make sound deployment decisions.



Enables inter-agency coordination. The same holds for external systems in the event of multi-agency response to large-scale emergencies. Your system needs to work well with those of your partner agencies; otherwise, the response effort fragments and work gets duplicated.



Detailed and up to date. Don't settle for static (personnel) contact directories, or even slightly more advanced systems that enable you to supplement directories with basic credentialing and capabilities information. If you're looking to maximize time, effort, and productivity through capability management, your system needs to be able to carry in-depth, up-to-date data on how much training your resources have received, whether credentials have expired, and who has specialized capabilities.

Noggin's emergency management platform provides comprehensive people, capability, and credential management functionality

Clearly, your emergency management solution has to have a rich feature set in order to get the benefits of effective capability management. That being said, the system still needs to be flexible, user friendly, and easy-to-integrate. Quite the laundry list.

But all-hazards incident management platform, Noggin OCA, checks all those boxes. Noggin OCA offers a unified way to manage the selection, assignment, dispatch, and rostering of people and assets, which is ideal for coordinating formal responders, pre-trained volunteers, as well as large numbers of spontaneous volunteers. The system lets you define roles for each resource you need, specify requirements to fulfill those roles, easily find and rank candidates, communicate with and confirm those candidates, as well as create and manage rosters.

What's more, the capability management feature in Noggin OCA lets you manage contact and asset competencies, trainings, qualifications, and experiences, as well as easily track levels and expiries before, during, and after an incident to make sure they're always up to date. Efficiently capture even the most granular capability information via a repeatable "sub-form" with custom fields for levels, dates, or other important details.

Further Noggin OCA capability management benefits include:

- Ensures that roles are only ever filled by people who have the capability to act in them
- Accelerates the process of filling these roles
- Flags the capabilities that are essential or desirable for each role, then use the intelligence to automatically find and rank the best matching candidates
- Schedules trainings to build and maintain capabilities
- Automatically reminds people when capability renewal dates are near or passed

A final word: resources, especially volunteer resources, are only valuable to the extent that they're adequately trained and efficiently deployed within your preset emergency management protocols. But as we've laid out, managing capabilities takes work and requires sophisticated technology.

The benefits, however, speak for themselves: fewer duplications, reaffirmed structures, and overall response efficiencies, leading to more lives saved. So when all is said and done, capability management is the only means of transforming resources into effective, strategic assets in the field.

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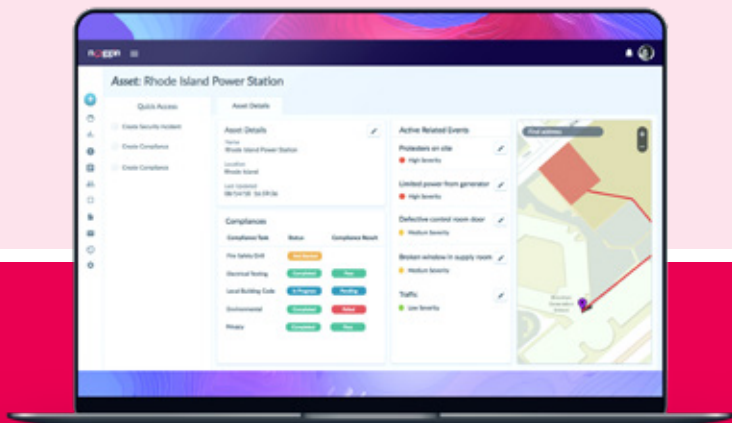
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