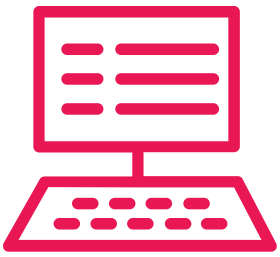
noggin

Emergency

5 Reasons to Upgrade Your Emergency Management Software Platform Today

Not all software platforms are suited to the age of COVID-19

The digitisation of emergency and incident management tools, practices, and processes has delivered efficiency gains to the community at large. But individual digital deployments taken up by emergency service organisations, government agencies, private businesses, critical infrastructure owners and operators, educational institutions, non-profit organisations, and others have been uneven, often reflecting the limited feature-set of the emergency management software platforms they've procured. Now, the staggering increase in the number of emergencies organisations face today – weather-related disasters alone have quadrupled in the last decades[i] – has dramatically upped the ante on the need for not just any digital capabilities but the *right* digital capabilities.



Physical EOCs went virtual after employees began exhibiting symptoms of the virus[iii]

Weather-related disasters alone have quadrupled in the last decades[i]

The pandemic has only exacerbated that stark reality. The risk of COVID-19 transmission has forced many Emergency Operations Centres (EOCs) to go mostly or fully remote, often for the first time[ii]. Other physical EOCs went virtual after employees began exhibiting symptoms of the virus[iii].

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For practitioners, these forced transitions have been anything but ideal. The so-marketed virtual EOCs their organisations had procured served, at best, as places to collect data from the field. Important, to be sure. However, the solutions themselves often lacked the necessary capabilities to make that information actionable, much less to adjust processes and procedures to meet the needs of a major incident response.

Of course, the public health crisis continues to make it risky to congregate in physical EOCs. And so, for the immediate future, virtual EOCs must give incident commanders the ability to manage all emergency information, communications, plans, and tasks in a single flexible platform rather than a suite of ineffective or incompatible tools.

For organisations, these same virtual EOC capabilities will continue to provide a net-benefit beyond the pandemic moment, as well. Mobile users will no longer need to overcome barriers of physical distance to access systems. And incident commanders will be able to activate best-practice plans sooner, so as to get information and supplies to publics faster.

What's there to be done, in order to ensure you have the right software platform capabilities to meet the challenges of this increasingly complex threat environment? We suggest, start by looking at your existing platform. Ask yourself, does it give you remote access to all the information and tools you need to effectively manage all emergencies through the entire lifecycle of an incident, as well as scalability to direct business-as-usual operations for emergency preparedness and critical infrastructure resilience, too? If it doesn't, you can be doing better. And here are the five technology-related reasons why:

1.

Built with responsive design.

It used to be that platforms only had to deliver a mobile-friendly experience – one that works for mobile users out in the field. But not anymore. Sure, mobile-friendly works on mobile devices. But they are designed with desktop users in mind. So, while the platform is functional on mobile, it's not actually optimised to mobile users.

This point is key. The less user-friendly any aspect of your emergency management platform is the more time, effort, and procurement dollars your organisation has to spend on training and administrative overhead to get mobile users up to speed.

The solution, here, is a platform built with responsive design. A responsively-designed experience does exactly what it sounds like – delivers an experience that responds intuitively to the screen size of the device being used. It goes beyond mobile optimisation, which merely reformats websites for mobile users, to reformat and restructure for any device, regardless of screen size. With responsive design, the layout of the site just scales from smaller screens (on mobiles, tablets, and small laptops) to standard desktop screens, and even to the larger, widescreen monitors popular in physical EOCs.

The value of this approach is the greater flexibility and improved usability that it gives to your mobile users. It's the only guarantee that a given platform will look good and have optimised usability on any device. And only that level of optimisation will give you the assurance that your mobile users are logging all activities, updates, and decisions in the field – which will, in turn, save you valuable hours reconstructing events for an after-action review and increase the likelihood of government reimbursement during the recovery.

How could you get that level of optimisation with what you have? Well, equipping newly mobile users often requires IT to build a separate mobile interface, so that those users don't experience friction transitioning to mobile. Or, mobile-enabled apps come available with less functionality than the browser. You're either losing time and money or sacrificing critical functionality out in the field.

2.

Improved usability.

Though important, responsive design only covers one aspect of the overall user experience. And too many vendors haven't considered the others. Users often complain that their full-featured emergency management platforms lack basic usability. They feel stiff, even painful.

Why does it matter? Well, research suggests that it's not a specific feature set but great user experience that drives software adoption. Conversely, poor user experience lowers adoption. Where there is adoption, it's unwilling: use is grudging, users less willing to engage. And that's when you get users coming up with more effortful workarounds (enter Shadow IT,) which ultimately mitigate against the positive KPIs organisations were hoping to gain by digitising in the first place.

Then, there's the training component we've spoken about. New users are always cycling into emergency operations; many who have never been involved in an emergency response before. They have to interface with emergency management platforms. Poor user experience makes the training lift for those new users that much harder, which takes away from the time that they could be contributing to the response.

What improves user experience? Lots of things. Besides pleasurable user interface (UI), having a multilingual app helps. But we think the biggest driver of improved user experience is frontend workflows that support key emergency response tasks, and keep staff focused on the response, instead of paperwork. Those workflows include:

- Escalating emergency warning to incidents, and tracking those incidents through their entire lifecycle
- Automatically alerting situationally-appropriate stakeholders through helpful message templates
- Creating Incident Action Plans
- Requesting and tracking resources, as well as assigning tasks
- Capturing relevant information through forms tailored to specific roles
- Mapping incidents, resources, assets, critical infrastructure, etc. to gain a bird's-eye view of a situation
- Assessing Community Lifelines to ensure stability of lifesaving public services

3.

Ensure configurability.

A traditional frustration with deploying emergency management software is the lengthy implementation cycle. It's not unheard of that cycles take upwards of a year before users can finally deploy. Those systems already come with hefty price tags, when organisational budgets are scant and getting scanter. Add to that, the development resources they pull from overburdened IT, and the ROI starts to point in the wrong direction.

What's more, developers of those platforms often take a "take it or leave it" approach to product development, which doesn't allow customers to make necessary customisations to tailor the platform to their unique needs and risk patterns. This type of development presents a frustrating usability and administrative challenge, particularly during incidents, when agencies often need to change processes, following new facts on the ground.

Fortunately, no-code emergency management platforms ensure that the system fits your processes, not the other way around. Easy-to-use, drag-and-drop capabilities, in particular, enable organisations to make mid-incident configurations, quickly creating new data models for any kind of information desired, by just dragging and dropping fields into a new object. That same "designer" feature-set allows agencies to create forms to present the new data in a friendly way for users. Then, workflow builders tie everything together – helping organisations plan out new business processes for what should happen when different triggers occur, then using automation to accelerate the response.

Nor is the benefit, here, just agility and the ability for organisations to better adapt and respond to changes. Low-code development also makes software development itself as much as 10 times faster than traditional methods[iv].

In addition, no-code platforms come with easy-to-implement APIs and connectors, to integrate with third-party tools (like mapping to help you visualise the locations of incidents, risks, people, and assets) that organisations already use. As such, users enjoy a frictionless experience through multiple touchpoints. And organisations don't suffer through time-consuming deployments and convoluted processes, that only steepen the user learning curve.

4.

Get best practices out of the box.

Not only should the age of COVID-19 cause organisations to rethink the experience of their emergency management platforms but also their basic roles. Many organisations procure software platforms as part of a larger push to meet compliance requirements, whether adherence with global ISO standards (22320:2018) or compliance with federal or national statutes, mandating emergency management practices, such as planning, updated testing, and risk assessments.

However, we've seen the limits of that compliance-driven approach on all-hazards preparedness. Best-practice plans get developed but not tested. Even when tested regularly, plans remain overwhelmingly paper-based, so difficult to engage with during a major incident, impossible without physical access.

How, then, to square the divide between bringing best practices to the fore and having those best practices on paper when emergencies are a busy time to read lengthy manuals? The solution is a software platform that operationalises those best practices in digital form, so that practitioners logging into an EOC (physical or virtual) get a clear understanding of what's going on and what they need to do in their role, as well as have the tools in front of them to undertake their role immediately. That platform will also be designed to support a variety of EOC structures, whether best-practice Incident Command System (ICS) or Australasian Inter-Service Incident Management System (AIIMS), departments operating in the context of normal relationships, or customised structures that don't follow ICS or AIIMS at all.

Why does it matter? As mentioned, the threat environment is getting more complex by the year. In turn, communities of best practice, be they intergovernmental organisations, government agencies, or non-for-profit associations, continue to update their best-practice guidance. Your emergency management platform needs to give you updated access to those best practices as part of the subscription. Not only is this capability important for responding to fast-moving emergencies, like the pandemic, but building resilience going forward.

5.

Comes from a vendor you can trust.

A commitment to giving customers access to constantly updated best practices suggests the vendor seeks to be a trusted partner, not just a software provider.

How else to tell if your platform comes from a vendor you can trust? Procurers do vendor due diligence as a matter of course – as an aside, the rising number of cyberattacks on public and private-sector targets means organisations should carefully consider the data security and integrity credentials of their emergency management vendors, with ISO 27001 certification and Information Security Registered Assessors Program-auditing, in particular, being auspicious markers. But can procuring organisations really be certain that vendors are in it for the long haul, and that their steep investment will keep paying off years down the line? Given the rapidly decaying threat climate, organisations need absolute confidence that their vendors will continue to adapt and improve.

How to get that assurance? Well, a good place to look is research and development. Vendors who are committed to improvement put the R&D dollars behind continuous product development, with customers reaping the gains well beyond the present pandemic moment.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed emergency operations forever, with many emergency management systems not able to make the transition to a new age of mobile. Fortunately, there are emergency management systems, like Noggin Emergency, built to be as modern as the apps you use every day.

Those easy-to-configure systems give organisations the long-awaited efficiency benefits they hoped to garner from digitising emergency management processes in the first place, by getting practitioners up to date on a situation as soon as it happens, empowering field staff to share in and instantly contribute to the common operating picture, as well as saving emergency managers from information overload by intelligently filtering information into a central place.

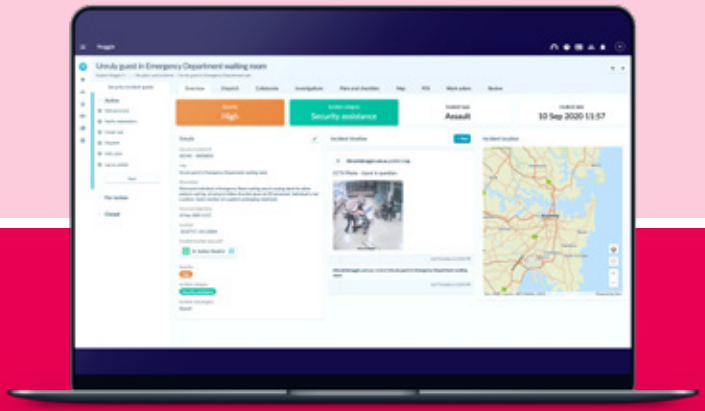
Citations

i *The Economist: Weather-related disasters are increasing. Available at https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2017/08/29/weather-related-disasters-are-increasing.*

ii *Emily Hamer, Wisconsin State Journal: Madison running virtual emergency operations for first time ever during COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Available https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/govt-and-politics/madison-running-virtual-emergency-operations-for-first-time-ever-during-covid-19-pandemic-crisis/article_200d8e17-8d33-583c-b588-5ee18363f3cd.html.*

iii *Maine Government News: MEMA, Maine CDC Announce State's Shift to Virtual Emergency Operations Center After Seven Employees at August Facility Exhibit COVID-19 Symptoms. Available at https://www.maine.gov/tools/whatsnew/index.php?topic=Portal+News&id=2590847&v=article-2017.*

iv *Forsyth Alexander, Outsystems: Top 5 Benefits of Low-Code. Available at https://www.outsystems.com/blog/posts/benefits-of-low-code-platforms/.*



noggin for Emergency

Meet the next-generation tool for corporate crisis and business continuity management teams to collaborate, plan, track their response, and share information. Built on the Noggin Core platform, Noggin Emergency gives response teams and decision makers the tools to know what's happening, collaborate quickly and effectively, make better decisions, and enact the right plans to take action when it counts the most.

The Noggin Emergency solution pack is backed by the Noggin Library with hundreds of plans and best-practice workflows, out of the box, and installed in minutes.

To learn more,
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