

NEWS

A flood lesson: 'There is no such thing as a small disaster'

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SINGAPORE — The key to success for any business is to plan ahead — be it in the course of work or dealing with disasters.

When it comes to the latter, companies need to get out of the mindset that when trouble strikes, it is up to the public sector to deal with the mess.

The recent floods here are a good example, said Dr Thomas Phelan, an author and founding member of the United States Department of Homeland Security.

He said: "There is no such thing as a small disaster ... When your feet are deep in the water you know you're in trouble. Look at how some businesses suffered when floods hit Singapore."

Dr Phelan, who spoke to MediaCorp on the sidelines of the 3P Public Private Partnership seminar jointly organised by the Business Continuity Management Institute and the Singapore Business Federation last Friday, is no stranger to dealing with disasters.

He was one of the many who helped in the aftermath of the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, running the morgue operations. Five years ago, he also lent his expertise to rescue workers after hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Hurricane rescue efforts were crippled by the smallest of things.



Colonel Anwar Abdullah (left) and Dr Thomas Phelan. PHOTO COURTESY OF BCM INSTITUTE

"Communication failed because we had no batteries," Dr Phelan told an audience of 150, comprising managers and business people. Radio sets in police cars became useless when floods damaged the vehicles, he added.

"The best thing to learn from this sort of situation: Stockpile on batteries or have (communication devices) linked to generators".

Business continuity is another oft-overlooked by many firms, said the Singapore Civil Defence Force's (SCDF) director of operations Colonel Anwar Abdullah, another speaker at the seminar.

"The majority of businesses ... are always bedevilled by the 'it won't happen to me' mentality," he said. "But from the SCDF perspective, these plans are important ... Just having plans is not enough; what is more important is to engage and partner the various stakeholders so that we can execute our plan more effectively".

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Fewer schools but stricter rules won't rock Global Schoolhouse target

SINGAPORE — Last month, the Council for Private Education (CPE) said tougher rules regulating private education could see the number of schools operating here plunge from 1,000 to 600.

Could this affect the Global Schoolhouse target of 150,000 international students by 2015?

When contacted, a spokesperson from the Economic Development Board (EDB) said that while the new regulations may affect international student numbers in the short run, "quality brand name schools will continue to attract students to Singapore seeking quality education".

EDB estimates that there are close to 100,000 international students studying here at the moment.

"As the Global Schoolhouse initiative continues to further enrich the educational landscape with institutions that represent the best in their respective fields, we believe the new regulations are aligned with our target," said the spokesperson.

But apart from building an education hub, EDB's ambitious target is also aimed at generating 22,000 jobs and furthering the education sector's gross domestic product contribution from about 3 per cent now to 5 per cent.

The number of schools may now dwindle, but industry players told MediaCorp that they were sure the new rules were aimed at raising the standards of private education here and would also have no impact on the Global Schoolhouse target.

Professor Andrew Chua, president of the Association of Private Schools and Colleges, said EDB's target can be achieved — although it would also depend "on the level of the international competitiveness and the expansion plans to reach out to overseas students by the private education institutions".

However, Singapore Institute of

Management chief executive Adjunct Professor Lee Kwok Cheong felt it is also important to focus on the type of student rather than just the numbers.

He said: "What Singapore needs to focus on more is the quality of students that we want to attract because ultimately, we want to attract quality people to our work force."

Schools told MediaCorp that the new rules have raised the challenge for them.

"There is competition on every front and of course the education sector has not been spared," said a spokesperson from the Management Development Institute of Singapore.

What Singapore needs to focus on more is the quality of students that we want to attract because ultimately, we want to attract quality people to our work force.

SIM chief executive Lee Kwok Cheong

Things were different just three years ago: The local private education sector had been one of the fastest rising industries, growing from 150 schools in 1997 to more than 1,200 in 2007.

Stricter control came into play after several institutes closed — 11 private schools in 2008 alone — leaving students stranded.

As a result, the number of international students dipped from 97,000 at the end of 2008 to 95,500 last year. ZUL OTHMAN

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