

**BUSINESS STRATEGIES** by Marcia Heroux Pounds

**Erratic storms result in some workers staying until conditions worsened**

A nurse who works for a Boca Raton plastic surgeon complains she was asked to stay at work until 4 p.m. last Thursday and had little time to get ready for Hurricane Katrina.

A Fort Lauderdale employee had an upsetting drive home through streets strewn with fallen trees; his employer wouldn't let him leave until 4:30 p.m. the day of the storm.

Workers at a Miami restaurant were forced to clean up until 7 p.m. -- when the storm was already hitting South Florida.

Those are just some dilemmas employees faced before Hurricane Katrina swept through South Florida and onto worse destruction in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

With Katrina's course unsure, South Florida managers had to decide when to let workers go home. Meanwhile, the tropical storm turned into a Category 1 hurricane and veered southwest toward Miami.

Despite the lessons supposedly learned from hurricanes Frances and Jeanne last year, many employers held workers until the last minute. Other employers took the smarter, longer view, sending employees home by noon Thursday and telling them to stay home Friday.

One problem was that forecasters underestimated the speed between the Bahamas and South Florida. On Wednesday, they thought it would arrive in the predawn hours on Friday. Instead, the hurricane arrived about 11 hours earlier than expected, at 6:20 p.m. on Thursday.

Closing Friday proved wise for businesses in Miami-Dade and Broward counties that ended up with flooding and no electricity. But in Palm Beach County and pockets of Broward that did have power, the decision resulted in a lost workday.

Still, closing was not a bad decision. Children are a critical issue for many workers when a hurricane threatens: Schools and day cares are closed. There also is damage to contend with the next day: Residents need to be off the roads to allow utility crews and emergency workers to perform their miracles.

Business owners need to consider "what is mission critical and what is not," advises Suzanne Hodes, a principal in the Pembroke Pines staffing company CareerXchange, which shuts down when there is a hurricane warning -- about 18 to 24 hours before a storm is expected to hit.

But what about services like a hotel that is housing stranded travelers and residents? Hodes says one idea is to have workers take different shifts to prepare for the storm. "You have to have flexibility," she says.

Tim Schiavone, co-owner of the Parrot Lounge on Fort Lauderdale beach, shut down his bar Thursday afternoon. He sent employees home immediately, without counting cash or cleaning up, when he saw a chair floating down the street. "I don't know what I'd do if one of my employees was driving home and got hit by a pole," he says.

Customer responsiveness is one reason businesses say they kept employees late. "Everyone was surprised by the rapid movement and directional changes of the storm," said a spokeswoman for the Fort Lauderdale employer that confirmed it kept workers until 4:30 p.m. "The managers ... clearly made the decision not intending to put anyone in harm's way."

Dr. Cornelia Dilley, a Miami clinical psychologist and physician, said if employees are not given time to prepare homes and families, the effect could be more severe in the workplace.

"A storm that is unpredictable is a real stress for employees. Whatever they do is wrong," she says. "If they don't show up for work, they jeopardize employment. If they don't take care of their family, they run the risk of not having time to get water or batteries or to board up the house."

Even when employees are asked to stay at work when a major storm is approaching, their ability to work is usually diminished, Dilley says. "You will never have the full focus on the workplace in a time like that. They'll be on the phone, be worried, and spend time tracking the storm on the Internet or on the radio," she says.

When workers are given time to make sure their loved ones are safe, they will reward their employer with loyalty, Dilley says. "It binds people to the company when they feel the company is with them in a time of need."