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## Web sites speed up safety training

### Cal-EPA workers go online to check out exits and evacuation plans.

**By Clint Swett -- Bee Staff Writer**

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When any of the 3,000 folks who work in the Cal-EPA high-rise in downtown Sacramento take their mandatory building safety class, they no longer trudge to a conference room for a 90-minute group session.

Instead they log onto a Web site where they can see 3-D diagrams and interior building photos, view emergency exits and evacuation plans, and even take an online quiz on what they've viewed.

The online training at the California Environmental Protection Agency building is aimed at more efficiently preparing employees to react to fires, earthquakes, bomb threats, medical emergencies and even stalled elevators.

Amid heightened concerns over high-rise safety and security in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, building managers and security experts say online technology is becoming a major advantage, eliminating the need to hold time-consuming training classes while enabling customized training materials for individual buildings.

There's also the convenience factor. "It's great because it lets tenants do the training at their desks, on their own timetable," said Heidi Frieser, a manager with Thomas Properties Group, which manages the 25-story Joe Serna Jr. Cal-EPA headquarters at 10th and I streets.

"It's a growing field, and more buildings will be moving in this direction," said Geoff Craighead, vice president of high-rise and real estate services for security consulting firm Securitas USA.

The software program used at the building was developed by Pasadena-based Building Safety Solutions Inc., which specializes in evaluating large buildings for commercial real estate investors.

BBS President and CEO Hector Gomez said that building safety training in general is inconsistent, with some trainers presenting material one way and others doing it another way. And not all building tenants react well during annual fire-drill evacuations, which he said are mandatory in California for all buildings higher than 75 feet.

"We saw buildings where only 10 to 15 percent of the (tenants) were getting trained. When they had fire drills, it was just chaotic," Gomez said.

He said the convenience of online training encourages people to take it, resulting in a safer workplace.

David Koch agrees. Manager of 101 California, a 48-story high-rise office building in San Francisco, Koch said fewer than 100 of the building's 4,000 tenants would show up for twice-yearly safety courses that featured a small brochure and a 20-minute video presentation.

But within the first three days of installing the BSS Online course three years ago, some 700 tenants had logged on.

Koch said he doesn't know how many people in his building have taken the training, but said he's seen a significant improvement during annual fire drills.

"It makes us feel better to know we have tenants who know what they are doing," he said.

At the Cal-EPA building, only new workers are required to take the course, but Theresa Parsley, Cal-EPA's assistant director for facilities, said the department is considering requiring a refresher course every two years.

While only about 30 percent of the building's workers have so far taken the online training, Parsley said reaction has been positive. "I hear a lot of good comments about how interesting it is," she said. "And we also used our own employees as models so that's kind of fun."

Gomez said it takes about two days for his staff to survey a building, take photographs and talk with building engineers and security personnel.

Then working from building plans and other material, they fashion an online safety training course that's customized for each building's layout.

Options include narration in other languages, including Spanish and Polish, as well as closed-captions for hearing-impaired individuals.

Gomez said his company typically charges from 2.5 cents to 3.5 cents per square foot, meaning the package produced for the 950,000-square-foot Cal-EPA building cost about \$25,000. BSS also charges an annual licensing fee ranging from \$1,500 to \$5,000, depending on the building.

The 101 California building was BSS' first client, and other high-profile buildings have followed, including the Transamerica Pyramid in San Francisco and the John Hancock Center in Chicago. The company now has systems operating in about 100 buildings nationwide, Gomez said.

The system may be a time-saver. Parsley, the Cal-EPA facilities manager, said previous drills requiring a full building evacuation took nearly an hour to complete.

In the most recent drill, just a few weeks after the BSS system went online, workers vacated the building in 26 minutes.

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