

## **How to proceed after redundancy by Gareth McNaughton**

For those who lose their jobs, redundancy can be difficult to deal with. What fewer realise is that redundancy can be equally unsettling for their colleagues who remain in their jobs with more tasks, fewer resources and a dwindling sense of workplace camaraderie.

Employers who fail to address the impact of redundancy on this group face risks such as distrust, resentment and fear. If this is handled badly, productivity can suffer, affecting sales and profits.

Since 2009 -when the recession really began to bite - more than 166,000 people in Ireland have been made redundant. The trend shows no sign of stopping, with just under 30,000 people reportedly losing their jobs in the first half of the year. The majority of workplaces around the country, large and small, have been touched in some way by this trend.

### **Grieving process**

While it is a difficult experience for those who are let go, redundancy can also present challenges for the members of staff that escape the chop.

One recent survey found that 67 per cent of redundancy survivors reported lower morale, and 53 per cent said the experience had left them demotivated.

The employers questioned in the survey by IRS Employment Review in Britain reported higher rates of absenteeism through illness - 65 per cent said stress levels among staff had increased, and 17 per cent said they had trouble retaining employees.

Jackie Prendergast, management consultant with Consulting Excellence, likened the experiences of survivors of redundancy to grieving, particularly in cases where longstanding colleagues lost their jobs.

"There is a whole lot of guilt going on. They still have a job and their friend doesn't and they are seeing them struggle," said Prendergast.

"On top of that they are worrying; 'Is this business going down the tubes? Am I going to have a job in another two months?' then they are stressed about the workload. They already have a very busy job and now they are expected to do more, probably for less money or, at best, for the same money. How are they going to manage all of that?"

Nobody thinks about any of that.

"Primarily, the thinking is about restructuring jobs and giving people more to do, which

is not necessarily addressing how that - and everything else happening - is going to impact on those people," she said.

### **Right approach**

Redundancies will always have a knock-on effect on those staff who remain with a firm, but the manner in which employers approach the process can make a big difference.

"When employees see their colleagues turfed out of their jobs with excessive force, it fosters distrust and reinforces the idea that the company does not care about its staff," said Sharon Vize, senior consultant, Career Consultants.

"Sometimes, the way redundancies are handled can be a little bit insensitive and you can only imagine what is happening to the people left behind," said Vize.

"Some organisations would be as blunt as having security arrive at your desk and remove you from the premises - and the individual has done nothing wrong. For an employee staying behind, to see that kind of behaviour is quite damaging."

The manner in which redundancies are delivered differs from company to company, but the experts advise upfront communication with staff.

Let them know there will be cuts and where the cuts will be. It is also important to talk to the people that will be affected.

"For a true redundancy to exist, it is the job that no longer exists - so it is key that you treat people losing their jobs with dignity and respect.

Of course, the decision has to be made to remove them from the building, but it is also about the support that you give those individuals," said Vize.

"That can be seen as very good by those who are left behind - although redundancies are not a nice thing to do, the company is looking after people and giving them support and encouragement to get back into the market as quickly as possible."

### **Clear communication**

It is important that employers give consideration to the impact job cuts will have on the remaining workforce throughout the redundancy process.

There can be little gained from closing the door once the horse has bolted. Survivors should be offered the same level of support as those whose jobs are cut, according to Adrienne O'Hare, managing director of To Be Training and Development.

"Don't wait until the redundancies have happened and the individuals have exited and then turn around and think, 'Oh my goodness, what are we going to do about everybody else?'" said O'Hare.

“Morale has been impacted.

Think about that right at the beginning and ensure that communication is open and continues throughout the whole process. People will know if it is an afterthought.”

It is no use taking the attitude that employees should be grateful for their jobs and get on with things - this will breed resentment and prompt them to start looking for employment elsewhere.

Communication is key.

The rumour mill can be hugely damaging, so openness and transparency about what you are doing - and the rationale behind it - is vital.

If employees feel you are making an effort to address their concerns, even if there is little you can do to alleviate the extra pressure that restructuring brings, they will respond in kind.

“You need to work with them on their career path.

Help support them in feeling more empowered around taking responsibility and managing their own careers rather than feeling that they are at the mercy of the winds of change,” said O’Hare.

“When the psychological contract with employees is damaged, so is trust. It affects employee engagement, which can affect productivity, and the high-performing individuals the ones that you want to retain in the organisation - may start to look elsewhere.”

### **Wellbeing and resilience**

With restructuring comes extra pressure on the remaining employees, who are expected to do more for less. To avoid burn-out, it is crucial that employers pay due attention to their well-being.

It is important that companies continue to look after the well-being of those employees, if they are to avoid burning them out and losing them to physical or emotional illness.

“The traditional thing when a company cuts back is that they tend to cut the softer skill areas - what they might see as training and development.

We would think that the development area actually encourages employees,” said Dublin-based occupational psychologist Dr Damian Davy.

“These days, offering employment itself is seen as a reward.

Trying to create a more cohesive, cooperative and respectful environment for people to work in is a better way of doing it when you cannot offer them promotions or extra

money.”

The focus should not be solely on stress management, but also on building resilience among staff - giving them the tools to achieve a decent work life balance and cope with the extra pressure.

“It is about that which is within us which allows us to bounce back from situations - how resilient we are. People have a lot to face in managing the new kind of pressurised workplace,” said Davy.