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Soothing the pain of redundancy

Job losses can affect those who are left as much as those who are departing. We look at how to heal the wounds



Karen Bartlett

Christine Yuen did not expect to be a banker for life. She went to work for a branch of HSBC in Canada as a cashier because it was better paid than working in a clothes shop. Eleven years later, Yuen, 29, was still with the company, having acquired a master's degree in finance and moved to London.

"I was working in corporate banking by then, on the team that managed retail accounts such as Coca-Cola and Tesco. They were the first to be hit by the downturn. One day I discovered that most of my team were being made redundant."

To her shock, Yuen found herself out of a job, too. "It had never occurred to me that I might be made redundant. The impact was more emotional than financial. The confidence was knocked out of me and I was full of self-doubt. I thought maybe I am bad at my job. Maybe I deserved to lose my job."

Shock, loss, denial and anger are emotions commonly associated with redundancy. A month after leaving HSBC, Yuen said she felt that she had to "get to grips with my feelings, come out of my depression and move on".

Now she has set up her own business, Zentime, which offers personal and corporate concierge services to executives. "We do everything from administrative work to walking the dog, planning travel itineraries or waiting for a technician to come and set up the television," said Yuen.

Experts fear, however, that less resourceful people find coping with redundancy much harder. In the macho culture of the City, successful men are often the least able to cope. Since the beginning of the downturn there has been a spate of suicides among high-profile international financiers, including the death of Kirk Stephenson, chief operating officer of the Olivant private-equity firm, who took his own life by jumping in front of a train last September. Stephenson's wife, Karina Robinson, said: "High achievers don't blame the recession. They tend to blame themselves. They believe they are in control of their lives and so are quick to condemn themselves."

Accurate figures on the number of recession-induced mental-health conditions have yet to be compiled but concerns about a rise in suicide and an epidemic of depression prompted last week's government announcement that more people would have access to therapy. Research has shown that redundancy has the same emotional impact as a close bereavement, with initial shock and loss of self-esteem turning into more long-term conditions. The Department of Health said the scheme would aim to train 3,600 new therapists and increase access to "talking therapies" by up to 25%. Staff on NHS phone services would also be trained to give more advice to people calling about financial or recession-related worries.

John Rose of the mental-health charity Rethink has been running a pilot project of the scheme in Stoke-on-Trent. Since the centre opened in July more than 3,000 people have sought its help. Rose said: "Feeling devastated by losing your job is a normal reaction. Some people can cope with that but for others it becomes long lasting. We offer therapy but also support workers who are there to get people back into employment and deal with financial and housing matters as well."

Quick access to help would have helped Dave Stocks, who went into hospital for a mental-health problem when he found he had lost his job and was unable to cope with mounting debts. “There are long waiting lists and I couldn’t get seen by an NHS psychiatrist. It was so bad that my partner pleaded with me not to take my own life. The bills were coming in day after day and creditors were phoning up all the time. I was stuck at home and it was more than I could live with. In the end I borrowed money from my parents and went to see a private psychiatrist. I was admitted to hospital for three months. If I had found someone to talk to earlier it would have made all the difference.”

The stress of redundancy may be unavoidable but experts warn companies not to overlook the impact on employees left behind. They often suffer from a “survivor syndrome” and feel guilty that they still have jobs. Some companies have now set up “survivors’ courses” that involve retraining remaining staff to take on new responsibilities, running staff forums on how the company is moving forward, and rearranging desks so that the absence of old colleagues is not so glaringly obvious.

Communication at every stage is essential if companies are to recover from the recession. The executive transition company Fairplace trains line managers to deal with difficult encounters. Director Michael Moran said: “It is important to treat people with dignity but also terminate their employment in a professional way. People get very upset and, while you would sympathise, it’s unprofessional for the manager to say things like ‘I know how you feel’ – or blaming the company. Dealing with people openly and fairly is the most important thing. If not, remaining staff will remember – and the company will suffer.”

Rebecca Clake was human-resources manager for a retail chain that had to close six stores, losing 40 staff in each one. “One of the most important things was to ensure everyone got the same information at the same time,” she said. Without open communication, rumour and office gossip often make a bad situation worse.

Clake said she had to cope with losing colleagues in her own department as well. Remaining professional was the only way to deal with it: “You have to take a step back, otherwise you cannot be there to support other people. You have to keep reminding them that it’s the job that is being made redundant, not the person, but that can be difficult because it feels very personal.”

Additional reporting by Amanda Blinkhorn

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