

Outplacement

All businesses undergo reorganisation from time to time but, as we weather the current economic downturn, the threat of redundancies has become a reality for an increasing number of organisations. Take, for example, construction businesses - particularly those involved in building new homes. The slowing down of the housing market has had a severely effect on this sector and they are faced with having to make significant job cuts at a time when skills shortages continue to impact upon the industry.

If the dramatic downsizing of the 1980's taught us anything, it was about the importance of protecting employee commitment and goodwill towards the company. It is for this reason that many employers are now choosing to embark on an outplacement programme to ensure that those employees facing redundancy are supported with the skills and tools they need to find new positions. This approach will help the team feel valued; both those being made redundant and those remaining. It will help to lessen any negative feelings towards the company and ensure continued motivation during the transition to a new look organisation.

Organisations faced with these choices often employ an outplacement consultant to provide an independent perspective. There are real advantages to adopting this approach and outsourcing the needs of your redundant workers can allow managers to focus on the urgent needs of the continuing business at a crucial time.

Most organisations believe that the more proactive and tailored the support, the better the outcome will be for all concerned. The objectives of the outplacement programme should include minimising staff turnover (amongst remaining staff), improving productivity and providing adequate support and advice to leavers.

An area that is often overlooked is the 'survivor syndrome'. This refers to the group of people who, together, will determine whether or not the organisation is a success after the cuts have

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been made. These people are key to the organisation's future, yet they are also likely to be seen as very attractive to competitors seeking fresh talent. It is quite common for this group of staff to feel they need to work harder and longer hours to accommodate the loss of their former colleagues. They may also need to adapt to a new reporting structure, have additional workloads and have to deal with new ways of working.

Additionally, if the 'survivors' are not happy with the outplacement process, there can be lingering resentment which can manifest itself in a number of ways. Employers may find that absenteeism increases, levels of employee engagement may fall, productivity may decline, customer service may suffer and the employer's reputation consequently damaged. What may have been an employer of choice can quickly become an employer of last resort.

To be effective, an outplacement programme should be tailor-made to suit the organisation's needs, as well as the needs of individual employees.

For employees leaving this will cover:

- Career counselling, skills assessment and development
- Job search techniques, advice and support on CVs, applications, and interviews
- Information and support on managing finances
- Enjoying retirement seminars

For the organisation this will include:

- Communicating the new structure and vision
- Managing the survivors
- Clarifying roles and defining new working relationships
- Succession planning

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- Job analysis and reward

It is undeniably important for organisations to take a positive approach to outplacement and it often helps to establish some precise measures that can be quantified so that people do not focus solely on the negative aspect of the process. This could be, for example, the number of employees that find new positions within a set timescale. Employers need to take advantage of every opportunity to communicate good outcomes, such as people obtaining more senior positions than they previously held or setting up a new business.

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