

Breaking up is hard to do

By Stuart White
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What happens when you join a company straight from school or university, work for 30 years gradually climbing the career ladder and then out of the blue, wham bam, you are told you are no longer relevant? A sick gut-wrenching feeling in the stomach, that's what, and the urgent critical need to re-examine where to from here.

Survivors of layoffs, terminations and the like will tell you that it can be as crushing and emotionally devastating as any divorce - a career tsunami that is difficult to recover from. I had a conversation not so long ago with such a candidate who had been with his international company for over 40 years, a company which had been like a family till it had no more use for him and now all of a sudden he feels like an outcast.

What is it about growing older that makes us more empathetic to people and their causes? As a young HR practitioner, I was immune to such situations I was clinically logical and balanced in my thinking (or so I thought). I would argue the facts when it came to human resources and that usually went something like "hey - either you are adding value or not." I was that new breed of HR Yuppie who was bottom-line focussed and saw people as human capital to be invested wisely for the good of the business with the unwritten rule that it was a commercial transaction - if the share price starts falling, we'll drop our stock option. The reality is that lots of employees do not think like this. Year after year they work for the company, see senior managers come and go and through time 'attach' to the company, seeing the relationship in a paternal fashion. And this is what makes the break up so hard to comprehend or accept.

Now I find myself feeling a little sorry for people who get thrown out when they reach a certain age or when new, yuppie managers decide that the people they have got in their department with years of experience are just not relevant anymore. My mother worked for the same large retail company for most of her life. She was, in her mind, a key player in the operation and I remember her many weekends catching up work for the company, working into the wee small hours of the morning because she cared so much. She loved her job, the company, and would have done anything for them. And then some new bright spark managers decided she was no longer relevant. It was devastating. My family never shopped at that retailer for ages after that – I still don't!

It's a cruel term isn't it – 'not relevant'? And use any other synonym you want: pertinent, applicable, germane, related, appropriate, significant, important, the fact is whatever way you look at it you aren't needed, wanted or useful and it's a bitter pill to swallow.

So how does this happen? You are no longer relevant when you haven't kept learning, when you are not up to date with technology, when you basically fall asleep mid-career, when you stop asking yourself if you are continuing to add value, and if you have climbed too high up the ladder and haven't moved with the times. I blame the companies most of the time. In interviews where your irrelevance is uncovered (usually when you are re-applying for your job which has transmuted into something else), most times it's because the company has continually promoted you until you really aren't that good anymore. I have written about this a number of times i.e. when people rise above their ability and the once-competent workers are out of their depths and struggling to perform. This practice does no-one a favour: not the individual, not the organisation, certainly not the other staff who have to pick up the slack, and not the subordinates who have to somehow survive under poor management. So you might want to ask why we do it? There a number of reasons – laziness – can't be bothered to find the right candidate so we will take who is there. Popularity – we will promote our mates regardless of their lack of competence, not thinking of the long-term consequence of putting the wrong people on the job. The list is endless.

But as employees we also have a role to play to. If we are to manage our careers correctly we will not take jobs that we can't do, or put ourselves in positions where we will become outsmarted by technology or the demands of the job. We will protect ourselves so that the term 'no longer relevant' cannot be applied to us.

It all comes down to balance - the needs of people against those of the business, youth and innovation against age and experience – alongside managing the exit of long-term employees with care, integrity and a whole lot of dignity. After all, when families split up, an amicable parting of the ways is always preferable to an acrimonious divorce.

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