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Flexibility is key to the job loss blues

There are ways to prepare workers so that redundancy isn't so traumatic, writes Nigel Rosser

REDUNDANCY, though people often know it is coming, is still a shock. We all know someone who has recently lost their job or someone who has just retired. In both cases it is a big change but the ways people react to their new circumstances is markedly different.

If you have just retired, it's a case of, "Well done, how are you going to spend your time?" If you have been made redundant, though, the reaction is more like: "Oh no - I hope he's not going to ask me for a loan."

Experts say it is important to understand the emotional baggage that goes with redundancy, because when you lose your job, you can also lose your sense of place and belonging - not to mention your home. However, research shows that there is frequently little real difference in people's circumstances between a career move or retirement and redundancy. It is the perceived differences that seem to hurt most, according to **Paul Winter**, visiting professor at Oxford Brookes University.

Winter believes we are overburdened by the trappings of power and wealth, and when we lose what we see as our necessities, we become irrational as a result.

He said: "Some of us recall business in the 1980s and 1990s when it was commonplace to judge a colleague's status by very specific details and symbols of power and success - like the size and make of your company car.

"In those days at Xerox they would joke that wherever they were in the world they could guess any executive's title and pay by looking at his office. It was: two windows - general manager on £50,000 a year; three windows and a four-person table - a senior manager; the above plus a settee - a vice-president."

According to Winter, different studies have shown that our attachment to the status symbols of employment is so powerful that it makes us institutionally inflexible when the crunch comes.

This inflexibility includes the speed at which we consider change, as well as in what detail. This is often referred to as "path dependency", when we make our decisions based on what we have done before.



Winter said: "The trouble is when we have to let go of our symbols. When change appears voluntary, we are quite willing to drop some of the less useful symbols and routines.

"However, enforced redundancy, or some new form of flexible working which means less pay is more difficult to cope with. The loss of place and routine is so very powerful we do some strange things to get us through the early stages of the loss."

Winter gives the example of David (real name changed), who has not told his wife yet he has been made redundant, despite finding out a month ago. He is trying to come to terms with it himself before he tells her. "If I can't get my head round it, how can she?" he thinks to himself, although she might be the best person to help him sort himself out. In another case, former banker Richard (name also changed) told his wife when he was made redundant that he was going to carry on wearing his suit and commuting to the City for what he called "networking assignments".

His wife, shocked at the expense of train travel and "networking", in City pubs and restaurants, instead sacked her dog walker and dispatched him daily to Richmond Park where the dog runs riot and he networks on the phone.

The key to coping with a job loss, said Winter, is flexibility. "Don't just mimic what you did before; instead, change routines actively.

"Remember, not all of those home workers running their own new businesses found it easy to settle into a new life. There is a period of awkwardness, frustration at having to do it all yourself. But eventually the new routine and a new sense of place help replace the old status symbols."

A key way of reducing our dependency on specific workplaces and working patterns, said Winter, is by ingraining flexibility into workers, so redundancy comes as less of a shock when it happens.

He said: "A big-five firm of accountants has offered staff and partners a four-day week - I presume it expects the same productivity from four days that it got in five. But it gets into their heads they don't have to be working 10 hours a day, Monday to Friday - they get flexibility ingrained in them.

"Other firms I've dealt with like BA are, however, finding it difficult to convince their workforce of the need for them to change place and routines. This is partly due to lack of trust from the unions but also because of the perception by workers there that middle and senior management never take any pain themselves - and that is a culture that should be changed.

"On the other hand, some firms like Toyota employ workers when there is work and lay them off as soon as there isn't. As long as the pay is good it's a routine some have to get used to and accept. Toyota is one of a long list of world-class companies that do this very well."



Winter points out that as our work styles change, we can more readily let go of the symbols of our power and success.

Gwyn Walsh, 46, used to work in the publishing industry where he had a company car, a parking space near the office, a company paid-for mobile phone and computer.

He spent a small fortune on good suits and, although he had begun hating the work after 15 years, found it hard to relinquish these status symbols. He said: "When I was finally made redundant, part of me felt naked without a company car or mobile phone.

"But I bought a cheaper car, a new phone and a laptop, and have flexibility to work wherever and for whoever I like. One slight downside is I don't get to wear my nice clothes anymore but I'm earning more and far happier with my ability to just set up shop wherever and work now."

Winter said: "If you find a new positive routing for getting work or starting work, it's all yours again and you still have the power that you used to associate with company cars and nice offices. That's how you cope, by taking empowerment from overcoming difficulties and adapting."

So what is the secret of coping with workplace change - particularly after redundancy? Winter said: "Well, there is not a secret fix. It is all about accepting the journey and making it all a little easier by recognising the really important things.

"Make a list of your favourite symbols in order of importance and get rid of the things at the bottom. Moreover, make a bit of a show when doing that - it will help."

Winter gives the final example of Chris (name also changed) who has recently sold his Porsche - his second car - and started cycling to work every day. "He let everyone know about that - with a good deal of confidence and humour. His peers think he is a bit of an eco-warrior but nobody questions whether he is doing well. He has empowered himself again and that's the key to coping with redundancy."

