

Working with redundancy

Graham Whitehead discusses implications for practice and research

The current global economic climate, worsening by the week as the drama unfolds, is a regular reminder to counselling professionals of the significant impact that the recession is having on organisations and their employees and that many of these concerns are surfacing with predictable regularity in client work. Many organisations, including major household names, are making significant announcements about current or predicted future job losses, and in this heightened state of frenzy where economic and financial indicators dominate, it is easy to overlook the impact of such developments on the employee in the workplace. Just as anxiety and panic spread across the trading centres of the world with those regular images of computer screens flashing, indicating falling prices, so the fear, anxiety and panic impacts the employee, but in a way that is much more difficult to measure and quantify. Images of city workers carrying their belongings, hurriedly cleared from their desks and thrown into a cardboard box, have struck me as particularly symbolic of the current climate and such images will have resonated far and wide with those in paid employment. For self-employed individuals the situation is no less severe as organisations move to cut budgets and find alternative ways to save money, although for this group the bad news usually arrives by email and does not necessitate an immediate desk clearance. The financial climate is being discussed from many angles but for counselling professionals and those involved in supporting employees facing redundancy, the immediate concern has to be the impact on psychological health and wellbeing. Frank Atherton, President of the Association of Directors of Public Health has recently commented in the *Health Service Journal* online that: 'the most immediate and pressing problems are likely to relate to increasing redundancies and a rise in unemployment. Being in work has a protective effect on physical and mental health. As the number of people out of work rises inexorably past the two million mark, we can expect to see increased mental health problems'¹.

The impact of redundancy on the employee is again very difficult to quantify as the responses vary so widely. For some, this may be the welcome end to a sorry chapter, for others the news may mean other projects can be pursued. For most, however,

the impact is one of distinct resignation, a culmination of weeks, possibly months of low-level fear, anxiety and disappointment. Reactions can again vary widely, from the initial shock to acute anxiety and in the longer term possible reactive depression. There is no single reaction as such that can easily be assumed, apart from perhaps the initial shock and disappointment. For some individuals, however, the psychological impact of redundancy can be so great that it will take the person considerable time to come to terms with the news. Reactions can follow similar patterns to the standard models of grieving, although of course distinctly different, but likely to involve shock, denial, anger, resentment and anxiety before moving onto the healthier stages of acceptance and integration. Once the news is out, there is also the issue of telling people, 'what do I say to people when they ask what I do?' 'Shall I mention this to future employers?' are quite common reactions and evidence of the levels of shame that can be associated with redundancy. There may be a change in familial relationships, a change in status and a need to allow time to come to terms with such news. Other factors affecting the response may include age, gender, sector, financial worries, levels of familial and social support, psychological history and the propensity to seek support when facing a stressful situation.

Responding to such pressing psychological needs, as is invariably the case with redundancy, is clearly the mainstay of counselling professionals, although working with redundancy does require the need to be sensitive to the potential impact of redundancy on the employee. If it has not happened to you, you will have no idea of the possible impact. Most organisations, but by no means all, offer some form of outplacement support to exiting employees. The quality of such provision varies widely and will depend on the organisations commitment to their workforce and any sense of corporate social responsibility. For most organisations, the outplacement strategy is a singularly financial concern which limits their legal liability, and the current climate will do little to improve the quality of such provision given the predicted figures involved. The employee is normally offered a structured, brief consultation/s which may allow some time for some personal response to the crisis, but in the main will focus on the more immediate

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task of CV preparation, highlighting transferable skills, and developing strategies for finding future employment. The process is essentially task oriented and as such will respond to immediate concerns although does not normally allow time for the employee to deal with the shock of the news. There are those employees who will respond with the 'face it head on' philosophy, and those who are a tad more reflective about the process. Referral to psychological support, where necessary, is usually to in-house counselling services (where these exist) or more likely to employee assistance and wellbeing providers (either telephone or email contact initially followed by face-to-face intervention if necessary). Some employees will prefer no further involvement with their former employer so may seek support from primary healthcare services, or in many cases, no support at all.

So as professionals involved in responding to such concerns, whether employed as staff counsellors, welfare support officers, outplacement support consultants, human resource professionals, managers

involved in delivering the news, occupational psychologists, trade union representatives or employee assistance and wellbeing providers, the need is to really understand the impact of redundancy on the individual and develop systems to respond sensitively to the impact of redundancy on the individual, and particularly so in the current climate where there is such uncertainty in the employment market. The possibility of the phenomenon of mass redundancy does offer those professionals involved directly in the field the opportunity to reflect on the relevance and quality of their organisational response and to develop good practice which is inclusive of and able to transgress professional roles. This debate also offers the opportunity for inter-professional dialogue between different professional groups and bodies, for example BACP, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the British Psychological Society (BPS), the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) and the Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA).

There is also a need to develop specific research initiatives that begin to measure the quality and effectiveness of organisational responses to redundancy (and redeployment). There are limited studies to date in the UK of the impact of unemployment on the employee – most studies and academic texts look at the organisational perspectives of redundancy especially from a human resource perspective (see Foot and Hook² for a useful discussion on outplacement). McLeod's³ systematic review of counselling in the workplace is one with which most professionals in the field are familiar, and this review outlines the wide range of academic sources that support the intervention of counselling in the workplace, and he outlines the need for greater research into workplace themes. There are several US-led studies which discuss outplacement strategies. Broderick⁴ discusses civilian outplacement strategy, and Westaby⁵ explores the impact of outplacement programmes on reemployment patterns for displaced managers and executives. One of the main difficulties in researching the impact of redundancy on the exiting employee is that this population is hard to reach, there is usually some organisational resistance, and from an ethical point of view the research enquiry is required at a time when the employee is facing such uncertainty. Timing is pertinent because otherwise research outcomes can be distorted. Participation levels tend to be low and many organisations are more focused on dealing with the immediate crisis rather than thinking of the need to support the research process.

The prospect of developing levels of support for the employee facing redundancy is one that could include a greater focus on therapeutic intervention at the time of the bad news, and some organisations do support such an argument, but in the main the opportunity for the employee to discuss his/her experience of redundancy in an organisational context is limited. The current climate hence offers the counselling profession, and those more widely involved in responding to issues of redundancy, the opportunity to develop provision in an area where the need for psychological intervention could be increasingly relevant. There are of course distinct ethical and legal considerations, some of which have been addressed above, but these should not stand in the way of developing a provision that takes into account the varying needs of those facing redundancy and redeployment at the present time and which would subsequently contribute to the development of organisational processes necessary in this scenario.

There are interesting demographic aspects to the current climate. For many people, this will be

their first experience of redundancy and an uncertain employment market, particularly so for younger generations, and hence there is an opportunity to develop provision which attracts such client groups. There is a strong argument for the further development of online resources, so as to enable those less likely to seek face-to-face support the opportunity to access services in different ways, for example, ecounselling and real-time online support which is offered by some employee assistance providers. The debate should ideally be far-reaching and allow the opportunity to incorporate innovative methods of delivery.

This discussion has questioned the extent of current support levels for employees facing redundancy and called for a greater focus on therapeutic intervention in supporting those experiencing redundancy. Given current predictions, it is highly likely that those professionals involved in responding to this client group will be faced with an unprecedented demand. The UK government, it has been widely reported, are looking at possible strategies for dealing with mass unemployment, a figure that is predicted to reach the three million mark before the recession passes. There is hence an opportunity for those professions associated with this aspect of employee support to review and evaluate their current strategy and provision. Finally, this article is a call for informed debate and further research by professionals working in this sector in order to develop outplacement provision and practice that can respond appropriately to those employees affected by the current economic downturn. ■

The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not represent the views or position of any organisation or institution.

References

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Further resources

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. *Code of practice for career management and outplacement consultants*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development; 2003.