

How to Communicate Layoffs to Remote Employees

Avoid delivering the news over e-mail

By Katie Navarra

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Fans of the television show "Sex and the City" may remember the "Post-it Breakup," when Carrie's boyfriend leaves a sticky note telling her their relationship is over. The episode shows the emotions the note triggers, analyzes how cold the message was and lists many other gentler ways the bad news could have been communicated.

"That episode was the first thing I thought of when I heard people were learning about being laid off or furloughed through an e-mail," said Trillium Fox, co-founder of Grilled Cheese Coaching. "Having empathy is one of the most important things to do during this difficult time."

Layoffs may have been the farthest thing from leaders' minds early this year, but COVID-19 has forced the unexpected. As more people work remotely, and furloughs and job losses are announced daily, some individuals are learning their fate through e-mail.

"Using e-mail to deliver that type of message is like breaking up with someone over text message," said Trisha Cuzdey, SHRM-CP, of Integra HR. "I can see why employers think it's a good idea. It's quicker and simpler. But the long-term message it sends to the employee is not beneficial."

When the pandemic abates and companies bring employees back or recruit new staff, people will remember how they were treated. Sending an e-mail may be a quick way to communicate and avoid the discomfort of bad news, but it's also the fastest way to tarnish a company's reputation. Before hitting send, consider these alternatives.

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Have a Personal Conversation

In late July, Angelo Apollos, head of HR, North America, for Travelzoo, had to inform 88 employees they no longer had jobs. His HR team was cut in half, leaving just three people to deliver the message. Over the course of three days, back-to-back video calls were scheduled from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

"I'm a little bit old-fashioned and a big believer that bad news should be delivered in person," he said. "The reality is it can't be in person right now, so videoconferencing is the best thing you can do in a bad situation."

But the volume of calls may feel overwhelming. Dividing the responsibility between organization leaders allows for personal outreach without expecting one person to carry the burden alone. Cuzdey recommended, "Put a script together and have the leader closest to the employee call."

Fox cautioned that scripts can be robotic, and he encouraged delivering a personal and heartfelt message when possible. Despite the news, employees want to know they were valued.

"Just because it's difficult doesn't mean you should turn into a robot with no feelings," Fox said. "Keep it short, to the point, and recognize the emotions you're seeing."

Ask for Help

Apollos allotted 20 minutes per conversation to allow employees to process what they are going through and to ask questions. He acknowledges that companies reduced to one HR person may not be able to have the remaining HR staffer make all the calls to the laid-off or furloughed employees.

"There are professionals you can contract with," Apollos said. "There's a cost, but in the grand scheme of things, think about how much you're already spending on the layoffs. The cost of hiring an HR person for the day gives people the respect they deserve."

Reaching out to other Society for Human Resource Management members and your professional network are other options. Apollos said that if someone came to him asking for a few hours' help with termination notices, he'd likely lend a hand.

Track Communication

Cuzdey anticipates an increase in lawsuits following layoffs and furloughs. She encourages HR staff and managers to log the communication methods used to notify employees of changes in job status and the dates the notifications were made.

"Track who made the call, the date and time," she said. "If it comes to it, you can go back and say, 'This employee's supervisor, Joe Smith, called on this day at this time.' "

In some cases, it may be impossible to reach an employee, so be sure to note the dates and times attempts were made to do so. When someone can't be reached by phone, a mailed letter may be necessary.

"At some point enough is enough, but keeping a log can show that you made the effort," Cuzdey said.

Are E-Mailed Layoff Notifications Ever Appropriate?

Announcing layoffs to remaining staff via e-mail can reduce redundancy. For example, informing remaining employees that layoffs occurred or an entire department was let go may fit some situations.

"The better way to address this is a message from the CEO, like an all-hands meeting, and explain the decision-making behind it," said Chase Adams, M.S., SHRM-CP, a manager of organizational development at Hanna Resource Group. "It's a difficult conversation at any time, and even more difficult given what's going on in the world right now."

It takes courage to have any of these conversations.

"Those who can have those conversations will be the ones to take the businesses into the new chapter, the new normal, and continue to attract, develop and retain top talent," Fox said.

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