

Turning redundancy into opportunity

If you talk to people who have been through redundancy, many of them describe it as the 'best thing that could have happened to them'. However, if you had asked them their opinion while they were going through it, they would probably have been less positive. Any enforced change is likely to be traumatic. The depth of the trauma will depend on a number of factors, such as how happy you are in your current role, how prepared you are for change and how well the process is handled by those in charge.

Luck will always play a part in how successful and smoothly you negotiate the transition, but there are actions you can take to increase the likelihood of a happy outcome. The most appropriate action to take will depend on what stage you are at, whether you have already been made redundant, are about to be made redundant or are just facing a possible threat.

Preparing for the threat of redundancy

When vague rumours of redundancies start to surface there are two common reactions that are generally unhelpful: blind panic and burying your head in the sand. Both of them tend to lead to you doing nothing.

Some of the basic, practical things you can do to prepare yourself are:

- Check your employment contract and other information from the Human Resources department to see if it says anything about redundancy procedures.
- Know your rights. The resources at the end of this document provide information and advice on your statutory employment rights.
- Join a union. If your workplace has a recognised union, now might be a good time to speak to the rep. If you are not sure, you could try to find the appropriate union for your work area from the TUC workSMART website (www.worksmart.org.uk/unionfinder).
- Update your CV.

What other action is appropriate will depend on you and the situation. If you are happy in your job and in the organisation, you might want to see what you can do to reduce the risk of being chosen for dismissal. Alternatively, you might take this as a warning to escape before things get too messy.

Prepare to make yourself indispensable

Many people make the mistake of thinking that if they 'keep their head down' they might get overlooked when it comes to choosing candidates for the push. In fact, the opposite strategy may be a safer bet. In order to reduce the risk of being thought unnecessary there are two things to work on:

1. Make a difference. Work hard to ensure that you are making a positive contribution to your organisation. Use your initiative. Volunteer to take on extra responsibility. Look for opportunities to add value. Look for ways of saving money. Even if this doesn't preserve your job, it will make you look attractive to future employers.
2. Make sure people know you are doing it. The more widely you can publicise your achievements, the better. Present reports to your managers. Write articles for the organisation newsletter. Get involved in committees, working parties and collaborative projects. Make sure clients, customers and other stakeholders know who you are.

Prepare to jump

Whether you are going for a similar role or wanting to consider a career change, then the sooner you start the better.

You may feel that seeking the security of a new job as soon as possible is preferable to dealing with the uncertainty of the lead up to redundancy. As well as browsing the vacancy pages, signing up with agencies and engaging in a bit of networking, you might want to consider some of the activities mentioned in the previous section. This might give you more impressive things to put on your CV and ensure that your referees have something good to say about you.

If you are thinking of a change of direction, you need to allow yourself plenty of time for research and exploration so that you avoid making an impulsive decision under pressure. It might be worth obtaining some independent career change coaching at this stage so that you have sufficient time to act on the advice. Many employers offer outplacement career coaching when redundancy has become a reality, this may come too late for you.

Responding to the reality of redundancy

As rumour transforms into reality you will face a number of different challenges. The longer it takes for management to make decisions and the worse they are at communicating those decisions, the more stressful it can be for you. Assertive action is better than passive panic or rigid resistance. Do not just wait for things to happen to you; do something and do it as soon as possible. In addition to the activities listed in the previous sections, consider the following:

- If your organisation engages in consultation, you could volunteer to get involved in the process.
- At the very least, keep asking polite questions. They may not have made definite decisions yet, but they might be able to inform you about the options they are considering.
- See what support is on offer. Many employers are willing to provide or pay for outplacement/redundancy career coaching or training as a way of keeping people quiet. Take advantage of it as early as possible. If it is not being offered, ask for it.
- Start collecting the details of potentially useful contacts while you have the chance.
- If you are hoping that you will not be made redundant, you should act on the assumption that you will be — prepare for the change and start looking for something else.
- If you are secretly hoping to be selected for redundancy, assume that you will not be — start thinking about changing jobs under your own steam.

Rising from the aftermath of redundancy

If it takes you a while to find a new position, there are a number of things that will increase your chances of success and keep you sane:

- Keep active. Consider volunteer work or undertake short training courses — anything that keeps you thinking and talking to people. Many people who have been made redundant have discovered the seeds of a satisfying new career in the activities they took on to keep themselves busy while they looked for work.
- Keep in touch. Maintain your existing contacts and attempt to grow your network. Talk regularly to ex-colleagues and other people who may be able to funnel news of opportunities in your direction — but do not make this your only topic of conversation or they will start to feel used.
- Keep your supporters around you. Do not be too proud or ashamed to ask for help from other people. Have people to hand who can build your confidence or get you out of the doldrums or nag you to get on with things. Make sure you think about what you can do for them in return.
- Keep innovating. If the methods of job hunting that you have used in the past do not seem to be working, try something different. If your existing contacts are not forthcoming, try making new contacts. Coming up with new ideas is not always easy, but good career coaching can often help you to take a different perspective on your situation.

Further information

A number of organisations offer general advice on your employment rights in relation to redundancy:

- Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) — www.berr.gov.uk/whatwedo/employment/redundancy
- Directgov — www.direct.gov.uk/en/Employment/RedundancyAndLeavingYourJob
- Citizens Advice — www.adviceguide.org.uk/index/life/employment/redundancy.htm (you can also find your local CAB office www.citizensadvice.org.uk/index/getadvice.htm)
- WorkSMART from the TUC — www.worksmart.org.uk/rights/redundancy
- Arbitration and Conciliation Advisory Service (ACAS) — www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=1611 (ACAS also have a free helpline 08457 47 47 47 8.00am–6.00pm Monday–Friday)

C2 at The Careers Group, University of London undertakes redundancy-focused career coaching for individual clients and on behalf of organisations. Please contact us for more information – c2@careers.lon.ac.uk, 02078636062