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### **Letting staff go with graceful exit**

**Badly handled exits can make it harder for companies to later recruit and retain talent**

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PARTING is such sweet sorrow, wrote Shakespeare, yet leaving a company can be anything but - especially if you're painfully retrenched.

The emotional and psychological trauma of retrenchment can be aggravated by the inconsiderate or even harsh policies of some companies.

Imagine this: As an employee of a foreign company here, you turn up for work one morning, only to log into your e-mail account to find a message from headquarters overnight informing you that the day is your last day of work.

If that sounds grim, what about this? You arrive at the office one morning to find that you have been locked out. The security guards who stopped you gruffly hand over your personal belongings and tell you that you have been fired.

Sounds unbelievable? Both are real-life examples, say recruitment firm GMP's assistant director of corporate services Josh Goh and managing director of NeXT Career Consulting Group Paul Heng.

A badly handled exit can seriously injure a company's brand, making it harder for employers to recruit and retain talent.

"Given enough impetus, disgruntled employees can sue the employer for unmerited dismissal, launch smear campaigns or leak confidential company information," says Mr Goh.

"With the proliferation of online social networking, news can spread quickly, far and wide."

Human resource (HR) experts say that badly handled exits can come back to bite employers with a vengeance.

"When employees leave an organisation, they don't just become ex-employees but customers, referral sources, competitors, and perhaps even future returning employees," notes Mr Robert Gasparini, chairman of HR firm DBM.

The cardinal rule for HR personnel handling an exit exercise, Mr Heng believes, is to treat departing colleagues the way they would like to be treated, if they were in the same shoes.

A company's future recruitment needs may be jeopardised if it acquires an adverse reputation for laying off staff, he says.

"It's hard to go wrong if they follow this rule: Treat each individual as an individual and avoid group announcements at all costs. Face-to-face, one-on-one meetings are the way to go."

Says Mr Goh: "The message should be delivered in a direct but sensitive fashion to avoid any misconception while showing compassion for the employee. Staying professional is important, especially since it is easy to be derailed by employee reaction to the news."

Employers who are not competent in handling the exit process should engage agencies for the task, while managers should be prepared and trained on how to break the news to staff.

Also recommended: companies should give retrenched staff the chance to talk with professional counsellors and outplacement consultants.

Beyond breaking the grim news, the manner in which an employee is permitted to depart is also important.

Allow employees to leave the company premises with grace and dignity, such as holding farewell lunches and giving them time to say their goodbyes, says Mr Heng.

Companies can let employees return in the evenings or over the weekends, so as to spare them the awkwardness of packing up their belongings in the presence of colleagues. Having security guards look over their shoulders when they pack is also a no-no.

"Never treat these employees as untrustworthy. Of course, do all that is necessary to protect the company's interests from possible sabotage, but choose a way that is a win-win for both the company and the departing employee," he says.

Reassuring the remaining employees is just as important as they are the ones who will take the company forward.

That is because employees who see their colleagues being axed will naturally be anxious to find out if they could be next. Opening up channels of internal communication will be useful after a round of retrenchment, says Mr Heng, citing an example of a company he knew.

In that particular company, each departmental manager held team meetings to reassign jobs and take questions, such as whether there would be another round of cuts.

As for employees who are axed from their jobs, it is normal to feel angry or shocked, says Mr Goh. But it is crucial not to burn any bridges with their ex-employers.

"While it is easier said than done, terminated employees should use this as an opportunity to re-evaluate their career paths and how they could have done things differently," he says. "This would give them greater understanding of their strengths and weaknesses."

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