

Let's be honest about the current wave of lay-offs

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions. Provide details for your answers.

- Have you ever been laid off (fired)? How was it done? How did you feel?
- Have you ever had to fire someone? How did you do it?
- Do you know the HR procedures for lay-offs in your current company? What are they?

2 Reading for gist

a. Read the article quickly and choose the statement that best summarises the main idea.

1. Companies automate HR procedures like lay-offs to cope with high staff turnover.
2. Companies need to deliver the difficult news, such as being fired in person, not via emails or phone calls.
3. As more and more people are being laid off, the unemployment rates rise.

3 Key words

a. Read the definitions and find the key words in the article that match them. The section number is given in brackets to help you. Check your answers and understanding of the words by using them to complete the example sentences immediately after each definition. Use a capital letter where needed. Then read the complete article to see how the key words are used in context.

1. A(n) _____ is someone who provides overall direction for companies and organisations. (paragraph 1)

*The **chief executive** of our company has retired, so we all wonder who will get the top job now.*

2. A(n) _____ is a card worn to show official job title and allow access to buildings and facilities. (paragraph 4)

*After her promotion, she received a new security **badge**, which showed her new title.*

3. _____ describes something very bad or poor in quality or performance. (paragraph 5)

*The quarterly report showed **dismal** results, prompting urgent restructuring talks.*

4. If something is _____, it means it was revealed openly and clearly, especially something previously hidden. (paragraph 7)

*The audit **laid bare** _____ the serious mismanagement of hiring budgets.*

5. If something is _____, it cannot be prevented. (paragraph 8)

*With the market shrinking, lay-offs became **unavoidable** _____.*

6. The _____ refers to unofficial communication or rumours spreading within an organisation. (paragraph 10)

*I heard through the **grapevine** _____ that the department will be hiring again soon.*

7. A(n) _____ is a reduction of costs or spending, often through cutting jobs. (paragraph 12)

redundancy

*The tech firm's latest **retrenchment/layoff** _____ affected over 1,000 employees globally.*

8. _____ means aggressively pushed ahead of others, often in pursuit of advantage. (paragraph 15)

*She **sharp-elbowed** _____ her way into a top management position despite lacking the experience and knowledge.*

9. If something can _____, it is considered no longer necessary or important. (paragraph 16)

*The position of junior analyst will **be dispense with** _____ during the restructuring phase.*

10. _____ is the lack of courage to face difficult or risky situations. (paragraph 17)

*Firing someone is never easy, but avoiding it out of **cowardice** _____ only worsens the situation.*

11. A(n) _____ is a negative mark or stain on someone's reputation. (paragraph 18)

*The scandal left a lasting **blot** _____ on the company's image, despite leadership changes.*

The brutal truth about today's lay-offs

DISMISSING PEOPLE BY EMAIL OR PHONE IS STILL DISTRESSINGLY COMMON AND NEEDS TO STOP

BY PILITA CLARK

- 1 Imagine waking up one morning and lying in bed, checking your overnight emails before you have to make a work call to France, when you see a message from your company's chief executive.
- 2 It says a lot of people are going to be laid off. The next email is worse: you are going to be one of them.
- 3 You sit up in bed, heart racing and grab your laptop to log in to the company network. Your password no longer works. It's time to make the call to France but you can't remember the name of the man you're supposed to be calling, or his number. It was all in an email you can no longer access.
- 4 You text a favourite manager, whose number is thankfully in your phone. He texts back to say he has been laid off too. He found out after trying to enter the office and discovering his badge didn't work.
- 5 Eventually, you get up and contemplate the dismal weeks ahead on the path your life is about to take.
- 6 Vivek Gulati does not have to imagine any of this. It is almost exactly what happened to him when he became one of the 12,000 workers Google dismissed in early 2023 — a dismal period of tech sector lay-offs.
- 7 The 47-year-old software engineer later wrote about his experience in a Harvard Business Review article that laid bare the shock of learning you have lost your job via email.
- 8 I tracked him down this week, after new US monthly data showed lay-offs jumped by nearly 200,000 in April. Separately, a survey suggested that remote, impersonal job cuts that were an unavoidable feature of pandemic lockdowns have persisted.
- 9 As many as 57 per cent of US workers made redundant in the past two years received the news by email or phone, the Zety careers site survey found. Just 30 per cent learnt face-to-face.
- 10 The rest heard on a video call or the office grapevine, except for an unlucky 2 per cent who only realised they had been axed when they couldn't log into their work email or a messaging system such as Slack.
- 11 This doubtless happened before the pandemic, too. Either way, it did not surprise Gulati, who is now back at Google as a contractor rather than a full-time employee.
- 12 As a tech veteran, he has been through retrenchment before, and has no time for the idea that email might be the only way to mass fire thousands of people.
- 13 Everyone terminated, he pointed out, has a manager who could deliver the news and offer personalised assistance, which is both true and important.
- 14 When he lost his job at US tech group Broadcom, nearly a decade ago, a vice-president called to say an acquisition had made the move unavoidable but he wanted to help. He offered to introduce Gulati to another company he believed would happily hire him.
- 15 "To this day I have a lot of respect for that VP and the whole team I worked with," says Gulati. That is understandable, as is the impact on people who keep their jobs after mass firings but live in so much fear about the next round that they make working life more sharp-elbowed and less collaborative.
- 16 That's just one reason why it is in an employer's interest to at least make a phone call about a lay-off, though even that is not ideal. There is no way of knowing what the person to be dispensed with is doing at that moment.

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17 Even if they are not at the bedside of a dying parent or heading in to a funeral, they could easily be somewhere lacking privacy, like the hairdresser. That's where a popular Australian TV news anchor named Sharyn Ghidella was last year when she got a call to say that, after 17 years at the network, her time was up. It was, she said later, "not quite the chop I was hoping for". Her dismayed fans accused the network of cowardice and rudeness.

18 Sacking people is sometimes necessary. I have done it myself, though will hopefully never have to do it again. But there is no excuse for making a brutal moment worse by delivering the news with no personalised human contact, especially at a large, well-resourced company. The sooner this needlessly cruel blot on corporate life ends, the better.



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4 Understanding the article

a. Are these sentences True or False according to the information in the article? Tick (✓) the true sentences and correct the false ones.

1. Vivek was fired from Google via an email.

2. Lay-offs in the US jumped to 200,000 in April 2023 when Vivek was fired.

3. Only 30 per cent of employees are told about being laid off in person.

4. Two per cent of people who have been fired are not told about it directly in any way.

5. Vivek now works at Google again.

6. Vivek thinks the way he was fired from Broadcom was more compassionate because it was done face-to-face.

7. Phone calls are better than emails when informing of lay-offs because you can make sure the person is not receiving the news in a difficult or public situation.

8. Sharyn Ghidella received the email about her termination when she was in a hair salon.

9. Sharyn Ghidella's fans were critical of the network for firing her like this.

10. The author thinks lay-offs should always be done face-to-face.

5 Business language – formal and informal phrases

a. Sort the following phrases into the correct column based on how formal, neutral or informal they are when discussing job termination.

the chop	lay-off	make redundant	be dispensed with
be dismissed	job cuts	lose your job	
fire	your time's up	terminate	
be laid off	sacking	be axed	

Formal	Neutral	Informal
terminate make redundant be dispensed be dismissed	lay-off laid off job cuts lose your job	fired chop' your time's up sacking be axed

b. Fill in each sentence with the most appropriate phrase from the list above. Use the correct form and keep in mind the tone (formal, neutral or informal).

1. After the merger, over 200 employees were laid off or made redundant as part of the restructuring plan.
2. I just heard through the grapevine that the whole marketing team is facing job cuts.
3. Unfortunately, several junior staff members will be dismissed..... next month when the new automation system goes live.
4. He was fired for gross misconduct after repeatedly ignoring company policies.
5. Dozens of workers were laid off... by the company when sales dropped during the pandemic.
6. I can't believe it—Tom just got axed... after 15 years of loyal service!
7. Management announced that several roles will be dispensed with as they streamline operations.
8. With the budget cuts, even some senior executives may be axed, be made redundant.

9. After showing up late three times this week, the manager told her, 'I'm sorry, but _____.'

10. The entire warehouse team got _____ last Friday—it was brutal.

11. They tried to avoid saying he was _____ and called it a 'mutual decision'.

12. Some roles may _____ as the company shifts toward outsourcing.

c. Now, choose six words or phrases from the table in task a and write your own sentences.

6 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

1. Do companies have a moral obligation to avoid lay-offs? Why or why not?
2. Should executive bonuses be suspended during periods of mass lay-offs?
3. What are some alternatives to lay-offs that companies can consider during downturns?
4. What should companies do to rebuild trust and motivation after lay-offs?

7 Wider business theme – writing a formal email about lay-offs

a. You are the chief executive of a design company. Unfortunately, AI has affected your industry, and sales are down. You are going to send out an email to your senior managers instructing them to conduct a round of lay-offs. Follow steps 1-4 to complete this task. Use the phrases below in your writing if needed.

1. Read the text and fill in the notes with tips on conducting successful lay-off meetings.

How to conduct lay-off meetings

Lay-off meetings should be handled with empathy, clarity, and structure. First, you must prepare thoroughly: choose a private setting and get HR involved; prepare the necessary documents. You can use a script to cover key points briefly and orderly. Avoid small talk; there is no way to make this

meeting fun. Begin by delivering the news, clearly explaining reasons and logistics such as final pay, benefits and severance. Allow time for questions and respond with empathy. Finally, discuss further support, including potential continued benefits. Remember, you're also preserving the company's reputation.

Notes:

- Choose a private (1) _____ and gather HR + documents.
- Use a (2) _____ to cover key talking points.
- Deliver the news clearly, without (3) _____.
- Explain the benefits and (4) _____.
- Allow time for (5) _____ and respond with empathy.
- Discuss further (6) _____ like continued benefits.

2. Write the email to your managers. Include the following information:

- the purpose of this email
- background information on the reasons the lay-offs are necessary
- detailed information on how the managers should identify who should be laid off and how many people they have to choose
- relevant dates
- information on the severance package the company will offer
- tips on how to conduct the meetings

Useful language

I'm writing to inform you about ...

The purpose of this email is to outline ...

After careful analysis, we have determined that ...

Each manager is responsible for ...

The following severance details should be shared with affected employees: ... attached for your reference

Do not hesitate to contact HR if ...

The HR will provide ...