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SEE YOU LATER

Re-evaluating termination strategies amid turbulent times

BY ANNA HUDDLESTON

The severest job cuts may be over but the end of challenging times for employers and employees is nowhere in sight, a mid-February report by global consulting firm Watson Wyatt suggests.

The survey found that of 245 large U.S. employers, the number of companies planning layoffs has fallen from 23 percent to 13 percent. Many of the companies surveyed are also using measures to forestall layoffs, such as salary freezes, 401(k) match reductions and shortened workweeks.

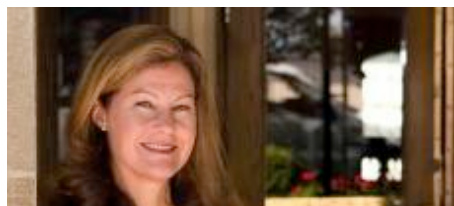
Researchers say that when it comes to unavoidable terminations, the safest approach is to try to keep some semblance of a relationship with ex-employees in place. Employers should in general "play nice," experts suggest.

"Many times a firm will no longer have a full-time employment position but will bring the ex-employee back on a contract basis," said Amelia Warren Tyagi, chief operating officer of Business Talent Group in Los Angeles and author of several books on wealth management.

This is just one of the examples of the "Auf Wiedersehen," German for "until we see you again," approach, described by Laurence Stybel and Maryanne Peabody of Stybel Peabody Lincolnshire, an executive career management firm in Boston. They say their experience shows that instead of "burning bridges" with former employees, companies should make terminations as



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 To stave off a layoff, employment experts recommend that employees reach out to supervisors in other departments to build relationships that may be useful should circumstances change.



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respectful as possible.

"Given the growth of the assignment mindset within corporations, the unprecedented ease of movement between companies, and the difficulty of attracting excellent employees, it no longer makes sense to slam the door behind departed workers who have been solid performers," the researchers argued as far back as July 2001 in a report in the Harvard Business Review.

If employees learn of their fates in internal memos or e-mails, they are bound to feel humiliated and betrayed. These methods can undermine the potential for any future relationships with exiting workers and decrease morale and productivity for remaining employees.

"After all, employees don't just vanish into the night," the researchers say in the report. "They go to professional meetings, where they can openly discuss their exit treatment with prospective recruits. And once the noncompete clause in their employment contract expires, they might even decide to work for a competitor."

The researchers suggest that the "see you later" strategy opens new doors for all parties. Companies preserve their reputations and make it possible to re-recruit top-performing former workers.

Some companies invest heavily in "postemployment" support. One example comes from McKinsey and Co. The management consultancy maintains a secure Web site to let former employees keep in touch with the company and with one another.

With the site, individuals keep their affiliation with the company and their networks long after their employment has ended. And the employer maintains an excellent talent pool.

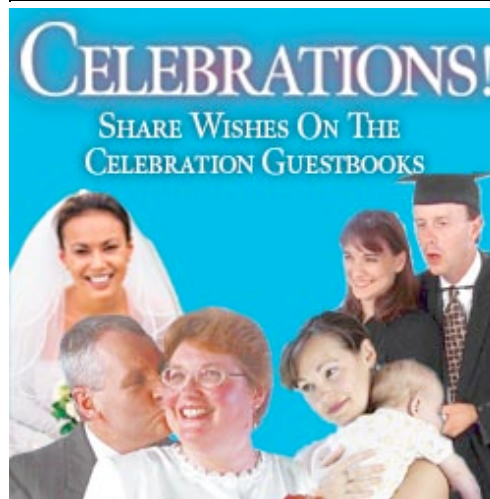
Positive exit strategies needn't have big costs for companies.

"It's the little things that make a big difference," Tyagi said. "Whenever possible, it helps to let people hold onto their e-mail accounts and cell phones to make the transition somewhat smoother at very little expense to the company.

"Opening your Rolodex to people who are leaving is also very valued. Introducing them to people in the industry is another positive move."



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Jenny Schade, president of JRS Consulting Inc., suggests workers share cost-cutting ideas with management and learn other business skills to forestall termination.



Tyagi's experience with matching top-tier executives and employers has led her to believe that there is an overall shift towards "expertise-on-demand" mindset.

"More and more companies are thinking about engaging talent for specific projects and tasks, rather than about hiring people forever," she says. "The marketplace is changing rapidly so it is just not possible to have the right skill mix in house at all times."

Whether or not terminations are planned, Tyagi emphasizes the value of maintaining professional bonds.

"Remember that life is long," she said. "An ex-employee today might be your customer tomorrow. It is really worth it investing in a long-term relationship."

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Avoiding the Axe

As job cuts threaten just about everybody, Jenny Schade, president of JRS Consulting, Inc. suggests simple steps to avoid it:

Share your ideas about cost-cutting. Tell your boss about ideas such as substituting conference calls for travel. One of Schade's clients teaches at a university parallel to her full-time work. She approached her employer and suggested switching to part-time and increasing her teaching hours. The solution was a win-win.

Broaden your skills. Gain experience in other areas of expertise that are valuable to your company. There is better chance that if you will be transferred to another department than fired if you have cross-functional experience.

Be clear on your value to the organization. Periodically meet with your boss to update him or her on your contributions.

Build relationships. Reach out to supervisors in other departments to build bonds that could be useful should circumstances change.

Stay positive. Do your venting at home. Your attitude will make you stand out in the sea of negativity.