

## The careful and considered approach to dealing with redundancies

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### Susan Clews, Acas Chief Executive

Acas Chief Executive Susan Clews has worked in Acas frontline operations and as Director of Strategy and Chief Operations Officer.

As Sir Brendan Barber made clear in his recent [discussion paper about building better working conditions based on compassion](#), many predictions for the future of work present a very bleak picture indeed. And for an increasing number of people, this future has arrived with many organisations announcing large-scale redundancies.

While the focus for some will be on the here and now, it's important to take a long-term approach when planning redundancies. I have been listening to the insights and experiences reported by some of the senior advisers in Acas as recounted in the recent [Acas podcast on redundancy](#).

My colleague Faye Law, a senior adviser based in London, rightly advises that employers should ask themselves: "what do I want this organisation to be like after this process has finished?" Leaders need to consider the needs of the business and future structures, but they also need to consider the welfare of their staff, those leaving and those remaining.

It's not surprising that handling redundancies has been such a hot topic on our national helpline (with an increase of 160% over the past 2 months compared to the same period in 2019).

Although many employers, HR managers and unions will be familiar with both the law and good practice, the current environment throws up some unique challenges.

### It's all happening so fast

Another colleague, Maggie Steven, a senior adviser based in the Midlands, warns of companies and employees who have been caught out by the speed of change brought about by the health crisis. For example, an employer may initially be planning to make 15

employees redundant, but new circumstances could mean that the number increases steadily. In such cases, there is a danger that they may fail to comply with employment law on collective redundancy procedures, which apply when employers are planning to make 20 or more staff redundant within 90 days.

As well as getting things wrong in haste, consideration of the best protocols can be overlooked. One company distributed leaflets suggesting that staff might be stressed by what was going to happen that day, before staff even knew about any pending redundancies. But there have also been some examples of good practice. Faye worked with a company who not only gave their employee representatives training on redundancy law, but also gave representatives and managers training on the benefits of joint working.

## Reaching appropriate compromises is possible

During the last economic recession, I recall coming across many cases of unions and employers working together to limit the damage done to businesses and livelihoods. There are justifiable concerns that these compromises should not be used to drive down terms and conditions but, if agreements are reached through genuine consultation, they can have their merits. For example, agreeing to a temporary reduction in working hours, as happened in one recent organisation Acas was involved with, may mean the difference between keeping or losing jobs. But employers need to manage employee expectations going forward, as there may be differing perceptions about what 'temporary' means. As ever, transparency is paramount.

## Imagining the future can be tough

Redundancies are made up of those who leave, those who tell them to leave and those who are left behind. The ongoing success of a business is based upon all groups being treated fairly and with dignity and respect. As Maggie pointed out, employers need to remember that the people they are making redundant today may be "the same people they want to re-employ in 6 months' time". If possible, and this can be a difficult ask, employers should try and maintain a good relationship.

It can be a daunting process. I would advise employers to focus on both the small details, and the big picture.

### The small details

It may seem insignificant, but if you are consulting with staff remotely do they have good broadband access to support the conversation? And think in advance how to handle those difficult conversations about possible redundancies – you can't offer to make someone a cup of tea if they become upset.

### The big picture

Every organisation needs to think of change as an ongoing process. There's no end point. And it seems certain we will be living with the consequences of the pandemic for some time to come. Think about the culture you have and the one you aspire to. And think about the skills you have and the ones you will need in the future. Workforce planning is integral to redundancy planning.

For more great tips on handling redundancies:

- [listen to the new redundancy podcast with Faye and Maggie](#)
- [read our advice on managing staff redundancies](#)