

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

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions. Give details.

- Has a company ever decided to end your job (lay you off)? What happened?
- What are the lay-off procedures at your current company?
- How should companies handle mass lay-offs?

2 Reading for gist

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

1. Changes in the markets because of AI are causing mass lay-offs in the tech sector.
2. Many people are being laid off via email or a call, but companies should do better.
3. Being fired has many negative effects on mental health.

3 Key words

a. Choose the key words that match the definitions. Check your answers and your understanding of how the words are used by using them to complete the example sentence 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.

chief executive	acquisition	retrenchment	doubtless
badge	cowardice	grapevine	remote
unavoidable	lacking	blot	sharp-elbowed
dismal	dismayed	laid bare	be dispensed with

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

The _____ of our company has retired, so we all want to know who will get the top job now.

2. _____ means not having enough of something.

The candidates were promising, but ultimately, they were _____ the technical skills needed for the role.

3. A(n) _____ is a card that shows an official job title and allows access to buildings and facilities.

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

4. _____ means something that cannot be prevented.

With the company's profits down for over a year, lay-offs became _____.

5. _____ describes something very bad or poor in quality or performance.

The quarterly report showed _____ results, which resulted in urgent changes at the company.

6. If something is _____, it means it was revealed openly and clearly, especially something previously hidden.

The audit _____ the serious problems with how the money from the budgets was used.

7. _____ describes an action that you are very certain of.

The restructuring will _____ bring short-term disruption to some departments.

8. _____ refers to the act of gaining control of another company by buying most or all of its shares.

The _____ of the smaller company led to several job redundancies.

9. The _____ refers to unofficial communication or rumours spreading within an organisation.

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

10. A(n) _____ is a reduction of costs or spending, often by cutting jobs.

The tech firm's latest _____ affected over 1,000 employees globally.

11. _____ means aggressively pushed ahead of others, often to get an advantage.

She _____ her way into a leadership position despite lacking the experience and knowledge.

12. _____ means something far away at a distance (either physical or conceptual).

Many employees now prefer _____ work arrangements, especially after the pandemic.

13. If something can _____, it is considered no longer necessary or important.

The position of junior analyst will _____ during the restructuring phase.

14. _____ means not having the courage to face difficult or risky situations.

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

15. _____ means feeling shocked, worried or disappointed.

Many staff were _____ by the sudden announcement of department closures.

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

The scandal left a lasting _____ 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.

FT

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4 Understanding the article

a. Read the article carefully. Then fill in the gaps in the article summary below.

Pilita Clark's article discusses the recent wave of (1) _____ at major tech companies. It focuses on how many of them are done in an (2) _____ way, like via a call or an (3) _____. She gives the example of (4) _____, a 47-year-old (5) _____, who was fired from his job at (6) _____ in early 2023. He learnt about his dismissal when he could not log into his company email. Gulati later described his experience in an article for (7) _____.

In the US, lay-offs increased rapidly in (8) _____ this year. A survey by Zety showed that (9) _____ per cent of employees learnt of their dismissal by email or a call. Only (10) _____ per cent were told face-to-face.

Gulati is not surprised by this trend but argues that everyone has a (11) _____ who should deal with lay-offs personally. He contrasts his dismal experience at Google with the time the VP of his previous employer called him and not only informed him of the lay-off but also expressed his regret and offered (12) _____.

The author of the article argues that lay-offs should always be done face-to-face. The company cannot know where the employee might receive the email or call. She gives the example of (13) _____ who got the call about her termination at a (14) _____. Clark points out that (15) _____ people is sometimes necessary, but an impersonal way of handling them is (16) _____ and unnecessary.

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.

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

Formal	Neutral	Informal

- b. Fill in each sentence with the most appropriate phrase from the box. Remember to choose the correct form and keep in mind the tone (formal, neutral or informal).

the chop	lay-offs	sacked	dismissal
has been dismissed	was let go	were terminated	
will fire	to give him the boot	is going to lay off	

1. Due to restructuring, over 300 employees _____ at the regional branch last week.
2. Management announced that it _____ 40 per cent of the factory workforce next month.
3. I heard Mike _____ yesterday because the company could no longer afford three managers.
4. She _____ after violating the company's ethical policies recently.
5. The company plans major _____ in the finance department this quarter.
6. After I told him off a million times, and he did nothing, I finally decided _____.
7. Following the scandal, the company immediately _____ the three executives responsible.
8. When Tom forgot to deliver the client proposal again, his boss said she _____ him.
9. Her _____ was handled professionally, with a generous severance package.
10. After the project ended, our temporary contractor was given _____.

6 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

1. What legal protections exist for employees in your country when a company is planning lay-offs?
2. What role should HR play during the redundancy process?
3. What emotions do you associate with someone being laid off or firing someone?

7 Wider business theme – writing a business article summary

a. You are going to write a summary of a business news article. To do so, you need to plan first.

1. Read each step for writing an article summary carefully to put them in order. Write the correct number (1–6) in the left-hand column.

Number	Step
	Underline the topic sentence in each paragraph to help you follow that structure and identify key points.
1	Read the full article slowly and carefully to understand the big picture.
	Highlight important names, numbers, places, dates and other key facts that should be included in your summary.
	Identify what the article is really about. What is the overall message or focus?
	Ask yourself which information is essential, and which can be left out. What does the reader really need to know?
	Pay attention to the way the article is structured. Is it chronological, problem-solution or something else?

2. Go back to the summary in Activity 4. Compare it to the steps above. Do you think the author used these steps? Why / why not?
3. Find a Business English article online, ideally about lay-offs. Use the steps suggested above to analyse the article and prepare for writing. Then write a summary of the article.
4. Share your summary with your partner. Give them feedback on their summary. Did they follow the steps outlined above?

Useful language

The article discusses the topic of ...

According to the article, ...

The main focus is on ...

It describes how ...

The author highlights the fact that ...

The article also mentions ...

One key point is that ...

The author gives an example of ...

The article concludes by saying that ...

Overall, the author argues that ...