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Layoffs cause stress for remaining workers

Survivors feel worry, gloom, even guilt

BY CHRISTOPHER YASIEJKO
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The morning walk for years invigorated Marian Delp. She had a job working with the registrations of DuPont Co.'s agricultural products. Delp, of Brandywine Hundred, liked to arrive early at the Walker's Mill building in Barley Mill Plaza. Each day, she vowed, she'd walk three laps, back and forth, following the bends of a hallway that connected the six buildings in the complex.

The views mostly were mundane, but the trek ended at a lovely atrium near the office of her department's vice president. Besides, she liked greeting others who also arrived early, including managers.

This was her exercise for the day, and she did it until she was among the six employees in her group of 30 who were laid off in November 1999. During the three years prior, the scenery along Delp's morning route changed, piece by piece, as if in a perpetual autumn.

"More and more empty offices were there," said Delp, now 77. "Empty cubes and empty offices. The name plates outside the cubicles were gone. There were still people scattered there, but it felt like a graveyard with no names on the tombstones. ... I'd get to my office, glad for a moment that I still had a job."

Bank of America plans to eliminate 6,000 jobs nationwide as a result of its takeover of MBNA. About 1,500 have been cut so far in Delaware. But experts say those laid off aren't the only ones affected.

Survivor syndrome is the condition psychologists say befalls some employees who aren't snagged in the net of their companies' layoffs. They might feel less motivated, with reduced loyalty to the company and, in some cases, feelings of guilt.

People who have lost their jobs, however, might take umbrage

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THE NEWS JOURNAL/BOB HERBERT
Employees gather in the break area of Bank of America's Dover call center Monday. The bank announced it will close the center.

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[Help for laid off Bank of America workers](#)

IF YOU EXPECT TO LOSE YOUR JOB

BUDGETING

Anyone faced with losing a job should pare down spending before layoffs begin. Here's a quick list of things to keep in mind:

- **WRITE IT DOWN.** Documenting monthly expenses is the first step when deciding what's essential.
- **CUT THE SMALL STUFF.** Small purchases, such as cups of coffee, add up. Changing one habit – making coffee at home, for instance – can save money.
- **REDUCE SERVICES FIRST.** Cut extra cable channels or phone features you can live without.
- **TALK TO A FINANCIAL PLANNER.** If you have a significant retirement plan with the company you might be leaving, learn of the tax implications that accompany an early dip into a 401 (k).
- **AVOID USING CREDIT CARDS.** Compounding interest is difficult enough to swallow when utility bills aren't sapping your savings.

UNEMPLOYMENT

Unemployment benefits kick in only after a company's severance package runs out. So if you get several months worth of severance, you can't collect unemployment until the payments end. The maximum benefit is only \$330 a week, but it lasts for up to 26 weeks.

at a term that echoes gloom amid what essentially is good news for those experiencing it -- they are, after all, survivors.

Nonetheless, life at any office changes when the staff is thinned. Responsibilities must be redistributed. And there is, of course, the possibility of more layoffs.

Kay Keenan, 52, left her job as Scott Paper's director of marketing for Warehouse Clubs distribution in 1996, when the company was sold and required employees to relocate. She had worked there since the early 1980s and had survived several rounds of layoffs.

"I will guess that there were probably thousands of people over about 18 years," she said.

The first layoff she noticed happened within six months of her taking the job. The person in a neighboring cubicle was the victim.

"I was just shocked that it would happen," said Keenan, president of Growth Consulting, a strategic marketing firm in Wilmington. "But that's corporate America today."

Those who survived each round adapted by cleaning and reorganizing the cubicles of vanished colleagues.

"And we would try to celebrate people moving on. We'd have farewell parties for the individual, frequently paying for it ourselves. We'd celebrate the contributions and friendship."

Such constructive deeds ought to be the norm, according to Cary Lichtman, an industrial psychologist at Wayne State University in Detroit. He called the notion of survivors' guilt "a useless concept."

"You're not going to feel good when your friends get fired," he said, "but what meaning does this supposed guilt have?" Employees who retain their jobs while colleagues are dismissed, he said, may feel "a pang of pain for a moment, but then you're fine."

In keeping with the tendency of companies to announce layoffs in waves, Lichtman suggests that remaining employees focus on such practical matters as the severance packages their colleagues get. It also is wise to begin looking for another job, an effort some companies aid by way of classes on job hunting or by offering access to an office environment.

Practical or not, feelings can run strong.

With each round of cuts Delp survived at DuPont, "it was like the whole family that broke up."

LOCATIONS

- 4425 N. Market St. Wilmington. 761-8446.
- Pencader Corporate Center 225 Corporate Blvd., Suite 108, Newark. 368-6600.
- 1114 S. Du Pont Highway, Suite 103, Dover. 739-5461.
- 600 N. Du Pont Highway, Suite 205, Georgetown. 856-5611.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

New Castle County: 761-6576.

Kent & Sussex counties: (800) 794-3032.

ASSISTANCE

Delaware offers several forms of social assistance.

To find out if you qualify or what's available, start here:

Call the Delaware HelpLine at (800) 464-4357. This service has information on a wide variety of state and private benefits programs, such as food pantries. You can also get the location of the nearest state service center, where you can apply for benefits.

For most state programs, you can use Delaware ASSIST – at assist.dhss.delaware.gov – to find out if you are eligible or to apply for benefits.

BANKRUPTCY

If you're considering your options in bankruptcy court, contact Legal Services Corp. of Delaware or Delaware Legal Services.

Both Legal Services Corp. and Delaware Legal Services can be reached by calling Legal Help Link at 478-8850 or (800) 773-0606 from Sussex and Kent counties. The phone line is open 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday to Thursday and 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Friday.

In her colleagues who also survived, she saw compassion, relief, anxiety and anger at those who made the decisions.

To employees who were let go, Delp's department provided access for several months to an office complex on Foulk Road. Former employees could use computers, phones and cubicles or attend lectures on retirement and job-hunting.

Keenan, who during her time at Scott also administered layoffs, suggests survivors at Bank of America stay in contact with those who lost their jobs.

"The people who leave the company will become your best contacts for networking," she said. "Those people are the pioneers for the next jobs."

In the meantime, however, employees might find themselves in an unusual position.

"Every time there was an announcement about downsizing," Keenan said, "I would get calls from people asking a lot of questions about something I had no control over. That experience, having to defend the company, was very difficult. ... And a lot of times, they were laying off my friends."

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