

As the public sector is about to face severe job cuts, **Robert Munro** asks if outplacement services can lend displaced workers a helping hand

MAKING THE TRANSITION

The public sector – over-staffed and a drain on the nation’s finances or vital provider of essential services? Whatever your view, the UK’s state-funded employers are facing major upheaval.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies says the coalition government’s cuts will be the most severe since World War II, and the new Office for Budget Responsibility says up to 610,000 jobs will disappear in the next six years.

Compulsory redundancies are inevitable, as is industrial action by workers protesting against the cuts. “Not only will job losses create real personal cost to those affected, but they could plunge public sector employers into conflict with the people responsible for service delivery and the unions that represent them,” says Philip Webb, head of public sector at HR consultancy Penna.

So what can public sector managers do to reduce the fallout and help soon-to-be redundant workers find new employment?

One option is outplacement, the process of providing ongoing support and advice to employees facing redundancy, aimed at getting them back to work quickly or facilitating other options such as early retirement.

“Public sector employers are under no illusions about the challenges facing them, and organisations are already looking to make efficiencies and protect front-line services as a priority,” says John Moore, director at recruitment

specialists Hays in Northern Ireland. “Given that cuts are inevitable, it’s positive that the majority of employers have plans in place. Those employers who ensure they have the right skills to deliver the necessary changes and who work hard to retain talent will be best equipped to cope.”

A recent survey by Hays found that 85% of public sector workers believe outplacement or career transition support should be compulsory, and over half of employers in the public sector agree. Outplacement can have a positive ►

impact on organisations because it creates goodwill even among employees who are made redundant. In the survey, over 60% reported the greatest benefit is that staff leave on favourable terms.

Career transition services work by helping employees regain their confidence and find a new job. For employers who have not used career transition services, the reasons come down to a lack of internal resources to organise services (44%) and because it’s not seen as important by management (40%). In these cases, it’s often in-house HR teams which are asked to carry out what little support is offered.

SUPPORT FOR ALL

“Traditionally, outplacement and career transition services – such as CV advice, one to one career coaching, and interview support – have been the preserve of senior managers experiencing redundancy in the public sector,” says Mark Staniland, managing director of Hays Career Transition Services. “But our

research shows that this may be changing, and more employees at every level are being supported in this way. Outplacement support can be any combination of practical and emotional support interventions that help an employee recover from the impact of redundancy and find another job more quickly.”

Outplacement packages vary according to sector and the fees charged by providers. “Inevitably there is a cost implication, which as you would expect, varies depending on how far the support needs to go,” says Staniland.

“But investing in this support for employees being made redundant now will help avoid longer term problems. If redundancies are handled badly, and people leave on unfavourable terms, the employees remaining in the business will have a negative view of their employer.”

“Protecting the employer brand is worthwhile, even in difficult times, to prevent difficulties recruiting talent in the future. In areas where the public sector is a significant



CASE STUDY

POLICE SERVICE OF NORTHERN IRELAND

Changing the shape of the force



In the wake of the Good Friday Agreement, politicians in Northern Ireland undertook a major reorganisation of the predominately Protestant-staffed Royal Ulster Constabulary, renaming it the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

A Voluntary Severance Scheme was introduced to reduce staff numbers over about three years and a '50% Catholic, 50% Others' recruitment campaign attempted to address the religious imbalance that existed in the old force.

HR consultants Penna tendered for and won the outplacement service contract and set up six full-time resource centres, a series of roadshows, individual interviews and skills workshops.

The roadshows, run at local hotels across Northern Ireland, explained the process to officers and offered general outplacement advice, including information from other relevant bodies such as pensions providers and the Inland Revenue.

Penna also provided a team of ten career coaches offering one to one interviews and personally focused outplacement advice to help officers make an informed decision.

"The economy itself posed an extra challenge, as did the structure of employment in Northern Ireland,

which is heavily skewed towards the public sector," says Philip Webb of Penna. "We had to identify potential unemployment blackspots so that we could advise officers on how and where they might find employment in the new Northern Ireland that was returning, slowly, to a peaceful dispensation."

Officers who chose the severance package were offered another interview with the same career coach to look at potential employment areas, carry out a skills analysis and begin preparing their CV.

"The professional advice and career guidance provided has been invaluable to officers and has assisted many in securing alternative careers outside the PSNI," says Joe Stewart, PSNI's senior director of human resources. "Surveys conducted and feedback received indicate a high degree of satisfaction and appreciation for the level of support provided."

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JOE STEWART

FACT

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