

AFTER REDUNDANCIES

Hidden hurt

People made redundant face the worst, fearfully uncertain times. But as **Vic Motune** finds, employees left in their jobs after a round of job cuts often suffer too

When marketing executive Tom Amene found out he'd survived a round of job cuts at his Manchester-based IT firm, he was relieved. But escaping redundancy has also been emotionally devastating. In fact, when he talks about work now, it sounds like he's describing a scene from a film about prisoners of war awaiting execution rather than a day at the office.

"Managers hold meetings behind drawn blinds and tell us nothing except the bad news – you could be laid off or you are about to be laid off. Even though I've escaped redundancy this time, I know that because of the market the company is facing, I might be facing the chop later on in the year, or perhaps sooner than that.

"Since the most recent round of redundancies were made, there has been this real poisonous atmosphere in the office. You find colleagues so afraid of putting a foot wrong teamwork has plummeted. Office gossip is much more blame centred, with everyone covering their backs. I guess we're all so afraid that any one of us could be given the bad news at any moment."

For Amene, surviving redundancy has also had another negative effect.

"Three of my team lost their jobs, and to be honest, I didn't really expect what followed," he recalls. "I began to feel this overwhelming sense of guilt that I had survived the chop and other colleagues who were passionate and committed were let go. I also realised that when speaking to colleagues who have been made redundant, I actually didn't know what to say. What is the right thing to say to someone who's just lost their job?"

According to occupational psychologists and mental health experts, cases like Amene's are part of a relatively unexplored but growing trend that's been dubbed post-downsizing stress syndrome, a psychological response to a combination of widespread layoffs and high levels of job stress.

And given the fact that the downturn seems to have hit the north particularly hard, with the North West now the second worst unemployment blackspot behind London according to the Office of National Statistics, the trend is one that is likely to hit workers in the region particularly hard.

US-based Professor Barry Shore, an authority on workplace psychology, says post-downsizing stress is different from traditional job stress.

"Certainly, those who still hold their jobs feel grateful for being spared," says Shore. "But many also



Shore: employee resilience drops

"I'm working longer hours than ever before because I'm afraid of what might happen."

feel threatened and abandoned. A downsized environment is usually the result of deteriorating business conditions that are beyond the immediate control of management. It affects a wider percentage of the workforce in the organisation than it would under more normal circumstances. Employees become obsessed with their plight.

"It dominates informal discussions in the organisation, and, as a result, employees turn their focus inward and worry about job security rather than focusing outward on job performance."

However, the most damaging effect of post-downsizing stress is on people who have recently found employment after a long time searching for it.

"What often happens when a company has to make people redundant is that there is a real sense of anger at the company and loyalty drops," continues Shore. "But employees do recover. What makes this situation unique is the length of the recession we're facing and the severity of the cutbacks.

"Because this is a much longer recession than many people have experienced before, and job cuts are occurring more often, employee resilience, their ability to recover from the emotional impact of