

Life after redundancy: 'You're not just your old job'

Wed, Apr 14, 2010

Despite our high unemployment rate, being made “redundant” can still carry a stigma. But some people use their enforced time off to take stock – and then take off in a new direction, writes **KATE HOLMQUIST**

MOST PEOPLE are familiar with the effects of redundancy by now. Considering that the unemployment rate is now 13.1 per cent – double the EU average – if it hasn't happened to you, it's likely to have happened to a friend or family member. This is the second major recession in less than 30 years, so even if today's teenagers don't remember recession, their parents and grandparents surely do.

Yet it's an experience that many people are afraid to talk about. There is an unjustified shame attached to being made “redundant”. The very word is synonymous in the dictionary with “superfluous” and “exceeding what is natural or required”. The word “redundant” carries negative meanings, but so do its kinder variations “jobseeking” and “unemployed”.

As I sought people to share their experiences for this article, many who hadn't a new project under way were too embarrassed to go on the record. One man said that only his close family knew he had lost his job and that he was keeping up a front for everyone else.

Another man saw his unemployment as an opportunity to be a better father, although he didn't want to be named in this article: “I was laid off from a circa 100k salary position. I spent a decade on the treadmill – to the detriment of my spirit. I have so I opted to spend a year getting to know them and be a hands-on dad.

“This past 18 months is the best and most valuable time I ever spent and will stand us as a family in good stead, though it's been quite rubbish financially. However it's important to realise that you are not just your old job.”

What happens to your perception of work and of yourself when you lose your job through no fault of your own? Some see the crisis as an opportunity to reinvent themselves and start new enterprises. Others fear that they will never work again.

FROM CABIN CREW TO RESTAURANT PROPRIETOR

Stephen O'Donnell (39), Carrickmacross, Co Monaghan.

Voluntary redundancy Aer Lingus, October 2009

His own secret-recipe crust and sauce are going to be Stephen O'Donnell's means of doing well in the recession. He left Aer Lingus after 12 years with the airline. “Even though I know we are in a recession I feel very positive and upbeat,” he says.

He invested all his redundancy money in setting up the Pizza Snug – a pizza, sandwich, cake and coffee house in Carrickmacross, Co Monaghan, where he lives, after he saw “a gap in the market” for sensibly priced food

made on the premises. His experience at Aer Lingus and years of travelling gave him insights into how to achieve high standards of customer service. He wants to apply that knowledge now.

“When I spend my money, even if it’s €10, I want to be sure that it’s appreciated. Your message has to be ‘we value your custom’.” Researching the market in his home town of Carrickmacross, he learned that “people still will spend money but they want to get value”.

FROM AIRCRAFT MAINTENANCE EXPERT TO JOBSEEKER

Kieran O’Brien (57), Skerries.

Made redundant from SR Technics, April 2009

Kieran O’Brien has been looking for jobs “here, there and everywhere” but most jobs are filled by word of mouth before they’re even advertised, he says. After 31 years with SR Technics, he was made compulsorily redundant a year ago, along with nearly 900 others, most of whom are now unemployed in Skerries and Balbriggan. His wife, Marie, is a civil servant who took a substantial paycut, “so it’s sit tight and hope it does not get too down,” he says.

He has applied for six jobs with written applications and for many others on the internet, but has yet to be called to interview. “Sometimes you don’t even get an acknowledgement,” he says. O’Brien has a BA in industrial relations and personnel management and “two drawersful” of certifications in aircraft maintenance. Since the aircraft maintenance business has been “wiped out”, he has been looking for less well-paid work that he never would have considered before – “wherever my skills can translate and in some cases my skills are substantially more advanced than required”.

At 57, he was just four years off his retirement age of 61 and had been looking forward to a pension to which he had made voluntary contributions. Now he is subsisting on jobseeker’s allowance of €196 per week. “We’re watching everything much more carefully and making more decisions about paying for things.”

The couple have paid off their mortgage, have no children and enjoy good health, which makes them fortunate, he thinks.

Is he optimistic or is he keeping up a brave face? “That’s the type of person I am. People ask me how I’m getting on and I say ‘as good as can be expected’. I’m trying to keep as calm and collected as possible.” If nothing else works out, he plans to update his driving qualifications to become a heavy goods vehicle driving instructor.

FROM MACHINE OPERATOR TO FÁS COURSE

Ray Stanley (37), Tallaght

Made redundant from Irish Biscuits, May 2009

“I’ve lost count of the number of jobs I’ve applied for – about 500.” Since being made redundant, Stanley has been on the internet daily applying for jobs and has been called to only one interview. “A lot of the time people don’t bother to send an email back; you just hear nothing. There are thousands of people like me, applying for jobs and not getting work, all just doing courses.”

He's kept himself busy upskilling in computers on Fás courses, and he and his wife, Catherine (33), have managed to keep their heads "just above water".

The couple have four children, one 13, one five and two-year-old twins. Catherine is not working either; she took voluntary redundancy from Irish Biscuits nearly four years ago and since then has completed a payroll course.

"I'm not feeling down. It's just frustrating when you don't hear anything back – not even an acknowledgement. I'm not the type of person who would let it get to me. You have to keep plodding along and stay hopeful," he says.

FROM "LINE LEADER" IN SHIPPING TO WORKERS' REPRESENTATIVE VOLUNTEER

Gerry Hinchy (56), Limerick

Made redundant from Dell, June 2009

Of the 1,300 people made redundant by Dell last year, Hinchy knows not one who has subsequently found a replacement job. He meets many of them every day in his new role as unpaid treasurer with Dell Redundant Workers Association (DRWA).

"People had the confidence sucked out of them. Some have put out up to 30 CVs and in many cases haven't even got the courtesy of an answer. That heightens their anxiety when they go through that. Highly skilled people came out [of Dell] with no self-esteem whatsoever. It makes it much more difficult to put yourself out there to get another job," he says.

"People can't feed their families. The redundancy payment only lasts so long, only a few weeks in some cases because some people have used their redundancy to pay bills, to pay-off car loans, to reduce top-up mortgages – money they owed through the false economy that was there." Hinchy says that he hasn't met former co-workers suffering from depression yet, "but if something doesn't happen soon, you are going to have marriages in trouble. People say money doesn't matter, but money can cause an awful lot of arguments and hassle when it's not there". Hinchy's current income is "almost impossible to live on", he says. His Dell redundancy payment is gone, and he is living on social welfare benefit of €198 per week, while his wife, Elisabeth, receives an invalidity benefit of €220 per week. Hinchy's monthly income pays the couple's top-up mortgage (€780 monthly), leaving the couple with €880 per month to live on, along with their 17-year-old son, Cian, who is doing his Leaving Cert this year.

Their 22-year-old daughter, Caoimhe, also lives with them and has a six-month-old baby, so she receives some benefit as well.

"We've had to cut down on everything – there are no luxuries, no going out, no eating out. We started shopping at Lidl and Aldi – the food is very good. What makes me very surprised is to see offering two for one, three for two – what profits were they making all along?"

Hinchy's wife has had breast cancer and still "has issues arising out of that. My wife has a positive attitude – you won't beat cancer without a positive attitude." Teenagers may not be coping as well, he thinks. "Teenagers don't do recession. I blame us: what we never had, we made sure they had. Kids are in for a shock in the next year or so – the money won't be there and this country will take longer to get out of recession than others."

“Even coming in here [the DRWA] to have a chat with us is a way to get out of the house and not be arguing with your wife or your family. You can physically see people uplifted a little bit when they come out of here. We’re a one-stop shop offering a bit of chat. The people here are brilliant – and it’s all voluntary.”

Hinchy says he will eventually get a paid job out of his voluntary work, but adds: “I was never materially motivated, as long as I had enough to feed the family. Your job is done once your family are happy.”

FROM CORPORATE PROGRAMME MANAGER TO HOLISTIC THERAPIST AND PAINTER

Dervla Wyley (38), from Sandyford

Made redundant from Empower, December 2007

“A part of my job was letting people go. I knew practically what had to happen, so when it happened to me I never took it as personally as others did – some people fall apart completely. After being made redundant three times in six years, twice in the one building, it was almost comical to me. It was just a sign telling me ‘this isn’t for you’. I had already on some level been preparing for it when I went down the holistic route.”

In 2008, after she’d been made redundant, Wyley applied for many corporate jobs but kept being told she was overqualified. Meanwhile, she was also pursuing her personal interests in holistic therapy and painting. A period of ill-health due to overwork and 16-hour days while she was in her 20s had prompted her to seek out complementary medicine. She felt her own health transformed as a result of Total Body Modification (TBM), a detoxification process, and Reiki. So, after being employed for a total of 20 years, starting out in the Bank of Ireland, then moving to Smart Telecom and Empower, she qualified in TBM and Reiki herself.

She now practises out of her apartment and says that children with autism have been transformed into completely different and “normal” kids back in normal schools after having toxins cleared from their bodies. She is also a painter, creating colourful “healing” work. “You have to be practical – integrating all the knowledge of all the different modalities you have done. It’s an interesting journey for sure,” she says.

Getting to this point was a long road, taking about two years after her redundancy and initial “signing on”.

Starting off on jobseekers’ benefit, she gradually moved from being totally reliant on social welfare to becoming more independent, although she still receives some benefit. She did a Start Your Own Business course, then applied to become a sole trader to officially start her company. Getting a back-to-work grant with the Enterprise Board took months of getting through the red tape but eventually she got an e-commerce grant of €750. She used this to pay a “techie” friend to design her website, which in the boom-times would have cost €7,000, she says.

She was “discovered” by actor Jim Carrey and his then partner Jenny McCarthy’s international autism support organisation, Generation Rescue (their motto is “autism can be reversed”). The couple brought her paintings to a wider audience and now sell them on their website, with a percentage going to autism research. She has a website – dervlawyley.com – where she advertises her healing methods as well as her paintings.

“It’s all about networking as well as reinventing yourself,” she says. “It’s a great time. The recession has given Ireland the kick up the arse it needed – people were sluggish, it’s getting people thinking again and getting ideas flowing again and, like everything else, the recession will pass. Getting into doom and gloom and fear gets you nowhere.”

FROM CORPORATE EXECUTIVE TO SOFTWARE ENTREPRENEUR

John Quigley (38), Dublin

Made redundant from Input Systems, July 2009

When he lost his job, Quigley's confidence was "knocked quite a bit". But by October 2009 he had realised that the crisis was the catalyst he needed to set up an innovative new software company, Biggdogg Technology ("like an ebay for procurement"), based in DCU's incubation centre, Invent. He has also begun blogging on joe.ie.

"In my lifetime I have earned tens of millions of euro for other people and I found myself in a weird position because I had a relatively new-born son (Noah, now a year-and-a-half old). I decided to take stock and give myself a bit of time to get my head around what was going to happen. I knew that I would like to set my own company. I wanted to get involved in an organisation that was the opposite of everything I had seen up until that point."

A former professional basketball player who was educated in the US on a scholarship, Quigley thinks he was protected from feeling too down because he has always kept his mind and body relatively healthy. "I remember that after some time I went down the road of jobseekers' benefit – I'm still almost ashamed to say it. Then I looked back on my last five years of employment and I saw that I had paid over €120,000 in tax."

Quigley won't start paying himself a salary until later this spring, so he and his wife, Mary, have scraped by, keeping up with their mortgage payments, selling a car and not eating out or taking holidays. Quigley has plenty of experience being prudent. He grew up in Darndale, one of Dublin's most disadvantaged areas, as the son of a lone mother. "I'm quite clear about where I'm going for once in my life and I'm pretty excited about the prospect," he says.

"When I went to college in the US, I had to take a part-time job to afford basketball shoes until I was sponsored by sports companies and got all the shoes I could eat –and then it didn't mean as much. Retrospectively, there will always be enough. I will always be OK. I always have been. I worry as much as the next person but the bedsheets are not out the window yet. Since Noah came along, it's given me a completely different perspective a sense of calmness around what I need to be doing and what the really important things in life are.

"Being a millionaire doesn't drive me, it's the sense of achievement that's driving me. In 12 months time, I can turn around and say look what we did with nothing from scratch, taking on the big boys."

© 2010 The Irish Times