

# Best Practice in Outplacement and Career Transition

“WHAT HAS CHANGED IN CAREER TRANSITION AND OUTPLACEMENT OVER THE LAST 40 YEARS? DON SMITH A FOUNDING DIRECTOR OF THE DONINGTON GROUP BELIEVES BEST PRACTICE IN OUTPLACEMENT HAS SHIFTED FROM A TECHNICAL AND MECHANICAL MAKEUP TO INCLUDE AN APPROACH MORE ALIGNED WITH EMOTIONAL ISSUES AND CAREER ADAPTION”



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**I**n the old days, when an employer wanted to let go of a staff member, they handed them the proverbial pink slip. Maybe in the pay envelope just before Christmas.

They were tough times.

So the world thought it had become a much more human place when someone invented a way to help people who had been discharged, often through no fault of their own.

It was dubbed Outplacement.

Until then, there were community based assistance programs for the socially disadvantaged but, those others who had held better jobs were perceived as “not disadvantaged”. There was scant recognition that these people too had to face the senses of rejection and loss that losing your job can bring. So, with nowhere to turn for help, they were saddled with facing the future with uncertainty, and stuck with out-moded and slow job-search practices and techniques.

Outplacement came along in 1960, and the person who invented it was James Challenger, of the Chicago firm of Challenger, Gray and Christmas. Jim and his firm are still prominent players in the industry, and still at the cutting edge.

Jim Challenger’s initiative was to offer a service that dealt with one of the most difficult tasks an employer must perform, in a way that was sensitive to the employee and employer alike.

It represented a revolution in human resources management. It replaced the passive job-search techniques where people relied on external sources to help

to seek out a new job, and then sat by the phone waiting for a call. It provided these people with new techniques to take charge of their own job-search.

Still, these were pioneering days after all. In the same year, Kennedy vowed to put a man on the moon by the end of the 60s. Today though, its worth asking the question - who’d travel in the same technology today that NASA employed then?

Similarly, who’d expect that the “technology” employed by the early outplacers – Challenger and his peers – would still be regarded as industry best practice today?

Nowadays, best practice is not about helping an unwanted employee to prepare a CV and sit by the phone waiting for calls, with an overall aim of avoiding guilt in the shedding employer. At best, as we look at that today, we might see that as a self-serving objective and very crude practice. It was all about passivity. Calming the disaffected employee, managing them out the door and salving the conscience of the employer.

Nowadays, best practice goes well beyond merely helping with a C.V., and passing on some job-search and interview skills. It has to deliver real benefits to the organisation, and to the released individual, into the future.

Consider the case of the released manager who feels they don’t need help, and who wants the cash value of the program instead.

An edited version of a presentation to the Financial Institutions Remuneration Group Inc Conference in Sydney recently.

Why shouldn't you just hand over the money? Think of this reply: "First, let me give you the organisational reason. Your employer is investing in your well being and your future, to see you get your career re-started successfully and happily. Despite confidence now, if you de-rail and you are still unemployed in twelve months time, or you land up in some lousy job, it will reflect badly on your employer in the commercial community. Meanwhile in the wider community, the all-powerful grapevine will carry negative messages back inside the organisation. Everyone will feel you have been treated poorly, including you. Providing you with career transition is your employer's risk management." After a further discussion about how prepared he was for the career challenges he faced, one such manager replied "I understand now. It's a lot like selling your house. You resent paying the real-estate agent their fee, but you wouldn't do it without them would you?"

Another view of best practice is whether an employer has a 'goodbye' or 'auf wiedersehen' (German for 'until we see you again') termination policy. The former policy assumes that a departing employee simply disappears into the night. The latter policy recognises the reality that they will meet again in another context. The termination is handled as respectfully as possible. The departing employee is left well resourced for their future. This is likely to result in healthier ongoing relationships back into the organisation through informal networks, and through the business community. This is called the 'alumni effect'; one which the management consultants McKinsey, for example, manages particularly well for genuine mutual benefit.

It carries a strong message about how the organisation treats people.

In a rapidly changing business environment, a key question is does the career transition provided merely deliver technical assistance such as C.V. preparation, or does it genuinely enable a person to adapt to the new situation they find themselves in?

Today's best career transitions take a total 'career management' approach which addresses both the technical and the emotional work that needs to be done to deliver a successful outcome for the stakeholders. Organisationally, the view point may be across factors such as does the career transition:

- Reduce stress on the accountable managers?
- Enable a smooth transition?
- Help maintain morale and productivity?
- Help us manage the separation process?
- Limit commercial and legal risk?
- Project a positive organisation image to staff and community?

One current question is 'Can this be delivered on-line?' The short answer is "yes and no". There are elements of the technical work that a released employee needs to do that can be delivered online, but the emotional and adaptive work still needs more skilled human interaction if people are to engage with the real work required for their career journey. This "real work" requires a constructive career transition environment of re-assurance, along with a different idea of consulting support which promotes people's adaptive capacities to deal with challenges that may require change to

attitudes, behaviours, and even career goals, rather than the harbouring of inappropriate expectations. This is not straightforward as it typically requires new learning, rather than merely answers from on high. It requires new levels of interpersonal interaction, not less.

As with any business activity, career transition needs to be managed, and needs to be measured. Does the person need to leave the business right away? Is the career transition advisor assigned to an employee matched to their needs? Does the program provided match their needs? How do the organisation, the person and the transition advisor all know whether the way they are doing it is working out? Technology advances now enable these aspects to be measured and managed in ways that could only be imagined in the past. Ways that are very different from those available to Jim Challenger back in 1960, and ways that are very different from those practiced only five years ago.

A parting thought: how the employee feels about the process when it happens can be likened to their experience at school: if they enjoyed their schooldays and respected their school, they'll talk about it for the rest of their lives; if they didn't, they'll still go on about it, but the listener won't like what they hear.

And neither would the school, if they knew.

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