

What's the redundancy opportunity?

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Nigel Bowen

Being 'let go' from a job is frightening. But often, it's the start of bigger and better things.

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Plenty of people have bounced back from humiliating sackings to create mighty business empires. Walt Disney lost a cartooning job because he "lacked ideas", Oprah Winfrey was once boned from a news reading gig, and Steve Jobs was famously booted from Apple before making a spectacular comeback.

We asked four somewhat less famous former wage slaves to explain how being "let go" went from being one of the worst to one of the best things to happen to them and how the experience affected how they run their business.

Has redundancy been an opportunity for you? Share your story in the comments.

The foreign firing

In 2010 Jen Saunders move to China with her partner to teach English. After she'd completed the requisite training, she was fired without explanation.

"I had to stay because my boyfriend did have a job and within the community of English teachers gossip spread about what had happened; I felt it followed me everywhere," Saunders says.

"I was shattered and convinced I was destined for a life of failure and misery. However, that was oddly liberating because it removed the fear that had been holding me back from launching my own business. I was at rock bottom and figured I could only go up. When we got back to Australia, I launched *Wild Sister*, an online women's magazine."

Saunders says she's kinder both to herself and others as a result of what happened and that is reflected in the way she runs her business. "It would be hard for me to let an employee go but if it was absolutely necessary I'd make sure it was as kind a process as possible," she says.

The corporate canning

Damian Cerini had been in a senior marketing role for seven years when he found himself increasingly sidelined. "The company's MD turned on me. Long story short, after an ill-advised attempt to get HR to help out, I was made redundant. No one wants to be moved on and there's no denying I was hurt," Cerini says.

"I took some time to think and decided I didn't want to ever again be in that type of toxic work environment. I'd already been running cellar-door cycling tours as a hobby, so I used my payout to turn that into a full-time business called Tour de Vines."

Cerini read a lot about managing organisations after he was let go, trying to make sense of what had occurred. Nowadays, he's a big believer in communication. "Leaders need to have the courage to have honest discussions with staff. I'd never let anyone go without any real explanation of why I'd come to that decision, as happened to me," he says.

Class dismissed

After three decades as a teacher, Dianne Ferrara found herself "let go" alongside a group of similarly aged colleagues. "We were all on contracts and at the start of one year they weren't renewed. We were replaced with first-year-out teachers who were a lot cheaper and presumably more compliant," says Ferrara.

While disgusted at the manner which she had been "unceremoniously dumped", Ferrara simultaneously felt a "sense of freedom" at being released



Jacquie Tewes started a business after being made redundant.



Di Ferrara: employees are coldly dispensed.

from a career she'd become increasingly disillusioned with.

"I was taking steps to start my own business even before my contract wasn't renewed but that certainly accelerated everything," says Ferrara, who now runs a [business](#) which assists first home buyers secure a property.

"What happened demonstrated how dehumanised modern workplaces have become," she says. "Employees are coldly dispensed with, there's no gratitude or respect shown. In contrast, I believe if you invest in your employees it reaps big dividends in terms of both their performance and creating a pleasant place to work."

The insider's ouster

With a background in HR, Jacquie Tewes was no stranger to the human consequences of contracting job markets. Nonetheless, she "went through the typical rollercoaster of emotions" when she was forced to take redundancy after the global recruitment firm she worked for downsized.

"I didn't panic but I was conscious of being in my late forties and wondered how attractive a proposition I would be to employers," Tewes says. "I had a great job that I never would have voluntarily left but seeing as it was gone I did decide to start my own [career-coaching business](#)."

"I'd estimate around half the people I see who've lost a full-time job look at alternatives to going back to their former situation," notes Tewes. "For a few that's retirement, for some it's contract or part-time work and for others it's self-employment."

While relatively unscarred by her own forced redundancy, Tewes says she'd think carefully about doing it to someone else. "Redundancies are necessary and inescapable part of business. But I'd certainly look for alternatives and, if there weren't any, provide the staff member with plenty of support to assist them transition to their next job as quickly and easily as possible."

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»But unfortunately for most of us over fifty it means going backwards. Doing jobs we did twenty years previously at similar wages. For me the funny thing is that Australia is ruled by fifty year old white guys who shouldbe made redundant but 'won't be.«

»«

kellybellyfonte | August 20, 2014, 8:37AM

« »

»I think that applies to people over 40 these days - you are lucky to made even a sideways move unless your skills/experience is in very short supply«

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MST | August 20, 2014, 10:21AM

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»All great, inspirational stories. I have just been made redundant from a billion dollar organisation. I was replaced by a software program. True story. Problem is the software program doesn't exist. If they had have been honest, it would have been (still would) be a much easier, respectful process. I am almost 50 with limited options available.«

»Bottom line is to maintain respect for the employee. I understand business is business, but as is pointed out in this article, an honest and helpful transition is vital.«

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Churchy | Melbourne August 20, 2014, 9:08AM

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»Look, this is all warm and fuzzy, but what about workers with a limited skill set and/or no capital backing? Or those who don't have a viable business idea?«

»I'm in my early fifties and have just survived yet another round of cuts. Each and every day I cast my mind around looking for a business idea. The reality is, though, with two young kids and a mortgage, that without capital backing I'd be hard-pressed to put an idea into practice.«

»When I was in my 20s, being retrenched was thrilling and did, as you say, open the door for new opportunities. The idea of losing my job now fills me with dread.«

»«

phnud | August 20, 2014, 9:45AM

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»Look, I'm only in my early thirties, so what the hell do I know, but I want to say something to you. You don't need to look for a business idea. You already know what motivates you, what will keep you up at 2am working with a smile on your face. Do that instead. Don't go looking for an idea you might not care about or be good at.«

»I left the public service before I was pushed and did just that. Haven't looked back, except to laugh.«

»«

was public now private | August 20, 2014, 9:11PM

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»Thanks.«

»Apart from kids and the need to pay the mortgage, I don't know what motivates me anymore. I think you'd call it a mid-life crisis! And that's a whole other kettle of fish.«

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phnud | August 21, 2014, 7:25AM

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»4th July 2003 was my Independence Day.

The Golden handshake was attractive.'

Lucky I dug myself an 'escape tunnel' well before I was told that my services are no longer required.

When cost cutting means I have to reuse, reuse and reuse toner for a photocopy machine, I thought it is time to leave.

I have never been Happier since.«

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Who Cares | August 20, 2014, 10:03AM

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»Redundancy in my experience is more often negative than positive. I've made lots of people redundant in my career and I have been made redundant a couple of times too, due to down sizing and business purchases.

Very rarely is it positive. It is for those that are close to retirement or would resign anyway as they have either worked for employer for a long time or need a change and would have done so anyway within short time of being made redundant.

For the rest redundancy is a stressful time. Often the first job you get after redundancy is not the one you want and is often short lived.

I would say most employers do redundancy well, that's my experience anyway but when you are on the receiving end you never think it is, unless you are one of those that was leaving anyway and it is seen as a bonus.

I dislike doing redundancies and certainly hate myself being made redundant. I always say it is better to leave an employer on your terms and for most the best career opportunities are when you are in a job. You are always more unattractive as an employee if your not in a current role.«

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HR | August 20, 2014, 10:21AM

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»Your article correctly points out that being made redundant is rarely to do with your performance. It is to do with a myriad of situations often outside your control eg mergers, automation, offshoring, etc. You simply have to keep your skills up to date and keep going. There is NO guarantee of work. As others have stated, try being over 50. No one will hire you. The HR managers and their key-word search advisors block you and even then the younger bosses are scared of people who they perceive may buck their authority. None of which is likely to be true but they have made their mind up and that's that. Successful entrepreneurs are usually young. It is statistically unlikely an older person will be successful starting up a business. That said I did as I had no choice. It's hard and I make a fraction of what I used to earn but man am I enjoying life.«

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a don | sydney August 20, 2014, 11:09AM

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»I've been made redundant twice - once involuntarily and once I asked for it. The first time I was on holiday in Europe and my boss called me to say I had no job to come home to. He said he didn't want to wait until I got home in case I wanted to stay on in Europe for longer. He seemed to have forgotten I had just bought my first house two months earlier. I was back there temping a week after I came home and used the time to look for a new permanent job. I moved into a bigger organisation with more opportunities and never looked back.«

»Second time I was made redundant was 2.5 years ago and I was more than ready to go after 10 years with that company. I got more than a year's salary in the hand, took time off, started studying to upskill and found a job when I was ready. I've completely changed my career, am starting out again but can afford to with my redundancy money still supplementing my current income.«

»It's all good, and it has always been a positive experience for me, especially that the companies that made me redundant were in trouble and had terrible cultures by the time I left.«

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Miss Positive | August 20, 2014, 11:41AM

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»Opera Winfrey got boned? Not sure I'd like that job.«

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HighlyDubious | August 20, 2014, 12:05PM

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»I was 62 and the ad industry doesn't like old people so they asked me to train someone who of course eventually took my job ...it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I was set free and now with a very understanding and supportive wife behind me I'm making money out of my art and playing in a couple of different bands. A bit scary at first but I don't think I've ever felt more content, I'm loving it!«

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Fox of Brisbane | August 20, 2014, 12:25PM

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»Nigel you seem to be using 'redundancy' interchangeably with 'termination'. When i volunteered to take a redundancy package i wasn't being fired nor were any of the other hundreds of my colleagues who did the same. For me deciding to leave via a voluntary redundancy process was a way to retire 20 years sooner than I otherwise would have.«

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Jolly Roger | August 20, 2014, 12:50PM

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»Hi Nigel,

Judging by your profile you are around thirtyish and as a Journalist more than likely to experience this yourself a number of times. The issue used to be "the older you get the harder it gets" but there is a whole new variable now and perhaps you can dedicate a column to the subject. I am referring to the innovative disruptor, the new buzz word this decade. In essence new and completely unexpected tech advances are wiping out whole industries, almost overnight. The more tech the more the disruption...and entire work forces going down as well.«

»Hard to get back on the horse when it's been replaced with a driverless car.«

»«

Glenn | Perth August 20, 2014, 1:56PM

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»I once enjoyed continued unbroken employment. From when I left school aged 18 to returning to Australia 2 years ago after 10 years living and working in the United States. Not a single day without a good job.

I started out in junior level positions. I've stacked shelves, I've laid bricks, I've managed government departments, I've worked in Universities, I was CEO of a small company responsible for millions. I'm now 53 and unemployed. Two years looking for work. Nothing. Nadda. Zipp. «

»I've returned to a very different Australia than the one I left.

I once secured any and every job I ever applied for - not any more - recruitment appears as an alien science now.

I'm not good enough for K-Mart. I'm too good for Target.

Unemployment is high. Underemployment is rampant.

Ageism a destructive epidemic.

Whats happened to this country?»

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HappyB | Sydney August 20, 2014, 2:41PM

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»My experience at being made redundant due to a senior corporate change of philosophy (MD decided let's get back to our core business - I was in a profitable but non core subsidiary, which was closed down arbitrarily) in 1992 at age 51 is similar to many others. I started my own business in the same field of endeavor as my previous employers and 22 years later I am doing just fine. Initially it was a little scary, but you get used to working for yourself and you are not at the whim of a boss who may or may not like you. The lower stress also made my life much more pleasant, although the working hours were long.«

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Billnix | Western Sydney August 20, 2014, 2:53PM

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»Am loving the positive comments coming out from people who have been laid off. I am getting paranoid about my own job. Since Jan i have been doing, well, nothing at work. Just existing.«

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Les | Perth August 20, 2014, 3:45PM

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»What if you have no desire and intention running own business? I have never wanted to be self employed. My parents were running small business for 15 years and I have seen how stressed, worried and unhappy they become. I hated seeing them like that. Never ever I want to go down same path.«

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Lilith | Sydney August 20, 2014, 3:52PM

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»Sorry to say, but the alternative is to hang around till you're brutally culled, either replaced by a machine, get outsourced, suffer ageism or other reason. Employees are a very disposable commodity. It's still better to leave on your terms and chart your own destiny, on your terms. Sorry to hear self-employment was so tough for your parents and scarring for you, but not all business owners struggle for 15 years«

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Zen | Sydney August 21, 2014, 5:45AM

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»Gimme a redundancy and I'm outta here at the speed of light ! Close to retirement anyway. What's not to like?»

»«

Dave Murray | Joondalup August 20, 2014, 4:17PM

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»My dad was forced out of retirement and was discriminated for his age. He would have liked to work until physically / mentally fit rather than stay at home with my mother whom in all her wonderful amazing qualities can be a handful at times but I told my dad that my employer will need an ambulance stretcher to take me out of my work before I'd even consider quitting.«

»«

Stretchergirl | August 20, 2014, 4:56PM

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