

# Employee Dismissal: Understanding Attitudes & Rights

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## Attitude toward Dismissal: Definition and Conceptual Framework

The concept of **Attitude toward Dismissal** refers to the complex psychological and emotional orientation held by employees, both those terminated and those remaining, regarding the process, outcome, and perceived fairness of employment separation initiated by the organization. This attitude is not a monolithic construct; rather, it encompasses beliefs, affective responses, and behavioral intentions concerning job loss and termination procedures. While it fundamentally addresses the immediate reaction of the separated individual, scholarly inquiry also extends its definition to include the organizational culture's collective stance on job security and the perceived legitimacy of management's actions when enforcing involuntary turnover. Understanding this attitude is crucial because it acts as a powerful predictor of subsequent behaviors, including litigation, organizational sabotage, and the morale of the surviving workforce.

From a theoretical standpoint, **Attitude toward Dismissal** is deeply rooted in social exchange theory and organizational justice models. When an individual accepts employment, an implicit psychological contract is formed, outlining mutual obligations and expectations regarding job performance and security. Dismissal, particularly when perceived as arbitrary or poorly handled, represents a profound breach of this contract, leading to immediate negative affective reactions such as anger, betrayal, and anxiety. The attitude formed in this context is heavily mediated by the employee's attributional style; if the dismissal is attributed internally (e.g., poor performance), the attitude might be less hostile than if it is attributed externally (e.g., managerial bias or economic scapegoating). Furthermore, this attitude is inextricably linked to the individual's self-esteem and professional identity, as job loss often constitutes a severe blow to personal worth, exacerbating negative feelings toward the former employer.

The conceptual framework differentiates between the attitude held by the separated employee and the attitude held by the remaining employees, often termed "survivors." For the separated employee, the attitude is a direct reaction to personal loss and perceived injustice, often evolving through stages akin to the grief process--denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and eventual acceptance. For the survivors, the attitude is a reaction based on observation and vicarious learning, serving as an indicator of future organizational climate and trustworthiness. If survivors observe that dismissals are conducted unfairly or without compassion, their **attitude toward dismissal** will become highly negative, fostering fear, distrust, and reduced commitment. Therefore, the definition must encompass both the individual, subjective experience of the terminated employee and the collective, objective assessment by the ongoing workforce regarding the legitimacy of the termination process itself.

## Psychological Antecedents of Dismissal Attitudes

Several psychological factors predispose individuals to form specific attitudes toward dismissal,

long before the actual event occurs. One primary antecedent is the employee's preexisting level of **organizational commitment** and job embeddedness. Employees who are deeply committed and highly embedded within the organization--having strong links, good fit, and high sacrifice--tend to experience a more intense and negative psychological reaction to dismissal because the perceived loss is greater. Conversely, those with low commitment or high turnover intention may view dismissal with a more neutral or even positive attitude, seeing it as an opportunity for desired change, though the handling of the process remains critical. High levels of perceived psychological safety, established through consistent management behavior and transparent communication, serve as a protective factor, mitigating the intensity of negative attitudes should dismissal become necessary.

Another significant antecedent is the employee's perception of their own **procedural fairness expectations**. If an organization has a history of vague performance metrics, inconsistent disciplinary action, or opaque layoff procedures, employees will anticipate unfair treatment during any termination event. This anticipation fuels a negative attitude even before the dismissal occurs, making the eventual separation process fraught with hostility. Individuals who value control and predictability are particularly sensitive to deviations from expected procedures. When these expectations are violated--for instance, being dismissed without prior warning or opportunity for improvement--the resulting attitude is characterized by extreme resentment and a desire for retribution, often manifesting as negative word-of-mouth or attempts to undermine the company's reputation.

Furthermore, personality traits play a moderating role in shaping **Attitude toward Dismissal**. Individuals high in neuroticism or low in emotional stability may exhibit more intense and prolonged negative affective reactions compared to those high in resilience or conscientiousness, who might engage in more adaptive coping mechanisms, focusing on future employment rather than past grievances. The concept of **locus of control** is also critical; employees with an external locus of control are more likely to blame external forces (the company, the manager, the economy) for their job loss, leading to a highly negative attitude characterized by anger and externalized blame. In contrast, those with an internal locus of control may accept some responsibility, leading to a slightly less antagonistic attitude, though fairness perceptions remain paramount in determining the ultimate psychological outcome.

## The Role of Organizational Justice and Fairness

Organizational justice is arguably the single most critical determinant of **Attitude toward Dismissal**. This construct is typically divided into three primary components: distributive, procedural, and interactional justice, all of which must be addressed during termination to prevent severe psychological fallout. **Distributive justice** concerns the perceived fairness of the outcome itself--was the termination justified, and were the severance and benefits equitable compared to

others? If an employee perceives that they were unfairly targeted while less productive colleagues were retained, the attitude formed will be intensely negative, regardless of how politely the message was delivered.

More impactful in shaping post-dismissal attitude is **procedural justice**, which relates to the perceived fairness of the processes used to arrive at the decision. Procedures are deemed fair when they are consistent across persons and time, based on accurate information, correctable, representative of all concerned parties, and free from bias. When organizations fail to provide adequate notice, deny the employee the right to respond to allegations, or apply rules inconsistently, the resulting attitude toward the employer becomes adversarial, often fueling legal challenges. Employees need to believe that the decision-making process was sound and unbiased, even if they disagree with the final outcome, reinforcing the principle that fair means are as important as fair ends in managing dismissal.

Finally, **interactional justice**, which encompasses informational and interpersonal justice, dictates the quality of the treatment received during the execution of the dismissal. Informational justice requires providing honest, candid, and timely explanations for the decision, ensuring the employee understands the rationale. Interpersonal justice demands treating the employee with dignity, respect, and sensitivity throughout the termination meeting. A lack of empathy, a rushed or impersonal delivery of the news, or the use of disrespectful language can instantly override positive perceptions of procedural fairness, resulting in an extremely hostile **Attitude toward Dismissal**. Research consistently shows that even in cases of necessary layoffs, high interactional justice significantly buffers the psychological distress experienced by the terminated employee, leading to a less antagonistic overall attitude toward the organization.

## Manifestations of Negative Attitudes Post-Dismissal

A negative **Attitude toward Dismissal** manifests in a variety of detrimental behaviors, both directed at the organization and internalized by the individual. Externally, the most common manifestations include negative public relations, such as spreading derogatory information through social media or professional networks, which can severely damage the organization's reputation as an employer of choice. This is often framed as an attempt to restore equity by inflicting reputational damage commensurate with the emotional damage experienced. Furthermore, high levels of negative attitude correlate strongly with increased risks of theft, sabotage, and workplace violence, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the termination when anger is peak and perceived justice is lowest.

A particularly costly manifestation is the propensity for litigation. When employees feel unjustly treated, they are far more likely to seek legal recourse, regardless of the objective strength of their case, simply as a means of seeking revenge or validation for the perceived injustice. Research

indicates that the decision to sue is often driven less by the economic value of the severance package and more by the perceived lack of **interpersonal justice** during the termination process. Organizations that handle dismissals poorly face disproportionately higher legal costs, not only from successful suits but also from the defense of frivolous claims driven purely by employee resentment and a desire to punish the organization.

Internally, a negative attitude translates into significant personal costs, including prolonged periods of unemployment, reduced motivation in subsequent job searches, and severe psychological distress. The terminated individual may suffer from clinical depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and chronic stress related to the loss of identity and financial stability. This internalized negative attitude also impacts future employment relationships; individuals carrying unresolved resentment from a previous dismissal may exhibit lower trust and higher cynicism in new workplaces, potentially hindering their reintegration into the labor market. Therefore, mitigating negative attitudes is not only an organizational imperative but also a social responsibility to aid the psychological recovery of the separated employee.

### Impact on Remaining Employees and Organizational Climate (Survivor Syndrome)

The **Attitude toward Dismissal** held by remaining employees, often referred to as survivors, profoundly shapes the organization's climate and future performance. When dismissals are perceived as unfair, arbitrary, or handled inhumanely, survivors develop a phenomenon known as **Survivor Syndrome**. This syndrome is characterized by a constellation of negative psychological and behavioral outcomes, including decreased job satisfaction, heightened job insecurity, increased stress, and guilt over retaining their jobs while colleagues were dismissed. This collective negative attitude acts as a pervasive organizational toxin, eroding trust in management and the commitment to organizational goals.

The primary behavioral manifestation of Survivor Syndrome is reduced organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and increased withdrawal behaviors. Employees may reduce their effort, adhere strictly to minimum job requirements, and become unwilling to take on extra responsibilities, fearing that high performance will not guarantee security. Turnover intention among high-performing survivors often increases dramatically, as they perceive the organization as unstable and untrustworthy, leading to a detrimental loss of critical talent. This pervasive fear and negative attitude toward management's decision-making ability directly impairs productivity and innovation, as risk-taking and collaborative efforts decline in an environment dominated by self-preservation.

To mitigate the adverse effects on survivors' attitudes, organizations must engage in proactive communication and demonstration of justice. If survivors perceive that the dismissals were necessary (distributive justice), followed fair procedures (procedural justice), and were

communicated with respect and transparency (interactional justice), their negative attitudes are significantly reduced. Management must also address the guilt component of Survivor Syndrome by providing opportunities for survivors to process their feelings and by clearly articulating how the organization will move forward, demonstrating a renewed commitment to the retained workforce. Failure to manage the survivors' **Attitude toward Dismissal** leads to a long-term decline in organizational health and resilience.

## Legal and Ethical Dimensions of Dismissal Attitudes

The legal and ethical management of dismissals plays a critical, preventative role in shaping the resulting attitudes. Legally compliant dismissals, while mandatory, are insufficient alone; ethical considerations regarding the human impact must also be integrated into the process. The failure to adhere to employment laws concerning wrongful termination, discrimination, or inadequate notice periods immediately validates a negative **Attitude toward Dismissal**, providing tangible grounds for legal action and reinforcing the perception that the organization operates without integrity. Compliance serves as the floor, not the ceiling, for ethical conduct in termination.

Ethically, organizations have a moral obligation to minimize the harm caused by involuntary separation. This involves maximizing **informational justice** by providing clear, truthful reasons for the decision, even when difficult. Furthermore, ethical practice dictates providing adequate support mechanisms, such as comprehensive severance packages, outplacement services, and assistance with healthcare continuation. When organizations demonstrate this ethical responsibility, the separated employee's attitude, while still negative regarding the job loss, is significantly less hostile toward the organization itself, often transforming anger into disappointment or sadness, which are easier to resolve.

The ethical dimension also extends to managerial accountability. Managers must be trained not only in the legal requirements of termination but also in the delicate psychological dynamics involved. Using "layoff scripts" or impersonal, automated processes to deliver termination news is ethically questionable, as it strips the event of necessary human compassion, fueling intense resentment and validating the employee's negative attitude. Organizations that prioritize the ethical treatment of departing employees, viewing the separation process as the final critical interaction in the employment relationship, proactively invest in reducing the likelihood of adversarial post-dismissal attitudes and subsequent legal challenges.

## Strategies for Fostering Positive/Neutral Attitudes

Organizations can employ specific, proactive strategies to foster a more positive or at least neutral **Attitude toward Dismissal** among both terminated and retained employees. These strategies center primarily on maximizing all three forms of organizational justice and maintaining consistent,

transparent communication throughout the employment lifecycle, not just during periods of reduction.

**Enhance Procedural Transparency:** Clearly define performance management processes, disciplinary guidelines, and reduction-in-force criteria well in advance. Ensuring that employees understand the rules of engagement and the objective metrics used for separation reduces the perception of arbitrariness.

**Prioritize Interactional Fairness:** Train managers extensively on how to conduct termination meetings with dignity, empathy, and respect. Meetings should be private, concise, and focused on the facts, allowing the employee time to process the information without feeling rushed or dismissed as a commodity.

**Provide Robust Support:** Offering competitive severance packages, extended health benefits, and high-quality outplacement services demonstrates organizational care and investment in the employee's future success, significantly softening the negative affective response to the termination itself.

**Manage Survivor Communication:** Following dismissals, management must immediately communicate with remaining staff, explaining the rationale for the changes, outlining the procedures used, and detailing how the organization will support the remaining workforce to prevent the onset of Survivor Syndrome and restore trust.

Furthermore, a culture that emphasizes continuous feedback and corrective action, rather than relying on sudden, punitive dismissals, helps shape a healthier attitude. If termination is the inevitable result of documented, consistent performance issues where the employee was given multiple opportunities to improve, the resulting attitude is often one of acceptance rather than betrayal. Conversely, a sudden, unexpected dismissal, regardless of the severance offered, invariably generates intense hostility because it violates the fundamental expectation of due process and fairness in the workplace.

## Measurement and Assessment of Dismissal Attitudes

Measuring **Attitude toward Dismissal** is complex, requiring both quantitative and qualitative methods to capture the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of the response. Quantitative measures typically involve surveys administered to terminated employees or organizational survivors, utilizing Likert scales to assess perceptions of justice, procedural fairness, and overall satisfaction with the separation process. Key constructs measured include perceived organizational support (POS), trust in management, and intention to engage in negative word-of-mouth or litigation.

For terminated employees, assessment often focuses on specific dimensions of justice using established scales, such as Colquitt's Justice Scale, adapted to the termination context. Items might assess the perceived adequacy of the explanation received (informational justice) or the degree of respect shown by the manager (interpersonal justice). For survivors, measurement focuses on indicators of organizational withdrawal, job insecurity, and psychological well-being, often assessed via measures of stress and anxiety related to job stability. Longitudinal studies are particularly valuable, tracking how attitudes evolve over time, moving from immediate anger to eventual acceptance or persistent resentment.

Qualitative assessment, through exit interviews (conducted by a neutral third party) or focus groups with survivors, provides rich contextual data that quantitative measures often miss. These methods allow organizations to understand the narrative behind the negative attitude--specific managerial actions or communication failures that fueled the resentment. By systematically measuring and analyzing the components of **Attitude toward Dismissal**, organizations can gain actionable insights into which aspects of their termination process require immediate ethical and procedural refinement to minimize legal risk and preserve organizational reputation.