

# Job Termination: Employee & Employer Attitudes

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## Defining Attitudes and Termination Contexts

Attitudes toward job termination represent a complex psychological construct influenced by myriad individual, organizational, and socio-economic factors. Termination, defined broadly as the involuntary separation of an employee from their employment, encompasses various forms, including layoffs, redundancy, dismissal for cause, and organizational restructuring. The study of these attitudes is crucial because they profoundly affect mental health, subsequent career trajectories, organizational climate, and legal compliance. Fundamentally, an attitude is a learned predisposition to respond consistently favorably or unfavorably to a person, object, or event, meaning that attitudes toward termination are shaped by past experiences, societal norms surrounding work, and the perceived legitimacy of the separation process itself.

The context surrounding the termination event is perhaps the single most important determinant of the resulting attitudes. A termination due to performance deficiency (dismissal for cause) often elicits feelings of failure, shame, and defensiveness from the employee, contrasting sharply with the resignation or relief sometimes experienced when termination is due to large-scale, impersonal organizational restructuring (layoffs). Furthermore, the prevailing economic climate significantly mediates the perceived threat; losing a job during an economic boom, where new opportunities are abundant, leads to vastly different attitudes compared to job loss during a recession, where financial insecurity dominates the psychological landscape. Thus, researchers must categorize the specific type of termination event to accurately model the attitudinal responses of those involved, including the target, the manager, and the remaining workforce, recognizing that **involuntary job loss** fundamentally threatens an individual's sense of identity and financial stability.

From an organizational perspective, attitudes toward termination are often viewed through the lens of efficiency and necessary adaptation. Management may hold the attitude that termination is a regrettable but essential tool for maintaining competitiveness or correcting structural imbalances, prioritizing long-term organizational health over immediate employee welfare. Conversely, employees, particularly those targeted, typically perceive termination as a violation of the **psychological contract**--the unwritten set of expectations between the employee and the employer regarding fairness, loyalty, and reciprocal obligations. This violation triggers strong negative affective responses, including anger, betrayal, and anxiety, which form the core of the immediate negative attitude toward the employer and the process. Understanding this fundamental divergence in perspectives is key to analyzing the subsequent behavioral outcomes and organizational fallout.

## Employee Attitudes Post-Termination: Psychological Stages

The immediate psychological reaction of an employee facing job termination often mirrors the stages of grief, though the process is rarely linear and intensity varies greatly depending on the

individual's financial stability and self-identity tied to the role. The initial phase is frequently characterized by **shock and denial**, where the reality of the loss is difficult to assimilate, leading to cognitive dissonance and a temporary inability to process the implications. This denial serves as a protective mechanism, buffering the individual from the immediate emotional impact. As the realization sets in, attitudes shift dramatically, often manifesting as intense emotional distress and anger directed either internally (self-blame) or externally (blame toward the organization or supervisor), marking a critical juncture in attitude formation toward the former employer and the future job market.

Following the initial shock, employees often move into a phase of **ruminating and bargaining**, attempting to negotiate mentally or physically for reinstatement or a fairer outcome. During this period, attitudes are highly volatile; the individual may vacillate between intense negativity toward the former employer and a desperate attempt to find fault in their own behavior, hoping that correction could reverse the decision. If the termination was perceived as unjust, the attitude hardens into resentment and a desire for retribution, potentially leading to negative word-of-mouth, litigation, or even workplace sabotage if the individual remains in the vicinity. The severity of this negative attitude is highly correlated with the perceived lack of procedural and interactional justice during the termination delivery, reinforcing feelings of helplessness and betrayal.

The final, desirable stage involves **acceptance and reorganization**, where the individual shifts their attitude from dwelling on the loss to focusing on future opportunities and career transition. This transition is marked by a constructive change in attitude toward the future, replacing hostility with proactive job-seeking behavior and a reassessment of personal career goals. Successful navigation through these stages is contingent upon robust social support, effective coping mechanisms, and the availability of external resources, such as severance packages and outplacement services, which signal organizational care and reduce the intensity of negative attitudes toward the former employer. Failure to reach acceptance can result in prolonged psychological distress, chronic negativity, and difficulty forming positive attitudes toward subsequent employment opportunities, creating a cycle of professional instability.

## Management Attitudes and the Termination Process

Managers responsible for executing job terminations often harbor complex and conflicting attitudes toward the task, frequently experiencing significant emotional strain, sometimes referred to as "the executioner effect." While the official managerial attitude must align with the organizational necessity--viewing termination as a necessary strategic action--privately, managers often feel guilt, anxiety, and moral distress, especially when terminating long-serving or high-performing employees due to restructuring. This dissonance between the required professional detachment and personal empathy can lead to avoidance behaviors, resulting in poor communication during the termination meeting, or, conversely, overly apologetic and inconsistent messaging, all of which

negatively impact the employee's resulting attitude regarding the organization's integrity.

The attitude of the manager is critical in shaping the terminated employee's perception of fairness, particularly regarding interactional justice. A manager who approaches the termination with professionalism, respect, and clear communication, despite the negative outcome, fosters a less hostile attitude in the departing employee. Conversely, managers who demonstrate callousness, rushed delivery, or dishonesty generate intense negative attitudes, often fueling legal challenges and reputational damage. Therefore, organizations must cultivate an attitude among managers that emphasizes **dignity and procedural rigor**, ensuring that terminations are handled consistently and ethically, mitigating the psychological harm for both parties involved and protecting the organizational climate.

Furthermore, managerial attitudes toward the preparation for termination are crucial. Effective preparation involves establishing clear documentation, ensuring compliance with legal standards, and developing a coherent communication strategy. Managers who view this preparatory work as burdensome or unnecessary often rush the process, leading to procedural errors that reinforce the terminated employee's belief that the process was arbitrary or discriminatory. A proactive, compliant attitude from management ensures that the rationale for termination is perceived as legitimate, even if painful, thereby softening the long-term negative attitude the employee holds toward the organization and bolstering the confidence of the remaining workforce in management's competence and fairness.

## Organizational Justice and Perceived Fairness

Organizational justice theory provides the most robust framework for understanding attitudes toward job termination, positing that attitudes are primarily driven by perceptions of fairness across three dimensions: distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. **Distributive justice** concerns the fairness of the outcome itself--did the employee deserve to be terminated, and was the severance package equitable compared to others? If the employee perceives the outcome as disproportionately harsh or inconsistent with their contributions, negative attitudes characterized by envy, resentment, and a sense of being cheated are likely to form, particularly if the termination was performance-related and the employee disputes the evaluation.

The perception of **procedural justice** is arguably the most critical determinant of post-termination attitudes. This refers to the fairness of the processes used to arrive at the termination decision. Key procedural elements include consistency (applying rules equally), bias suppression (avoiding personal prejudice), accuracy (using valid information), correctability (allowing appeals or challenges), and representativeness (including input from all affected parties). When employees perceive that the process was transparent, unbiased, and consistent, their negative attitude toward the organization is significantly mitigated, even if the termination outcome remains unfavorable. A

strong sense of procedural justice often prevents the transformation of disappointment into litigation because the process itself is deemed legitimate.

Finally, **interactional justice** focuses on the quality of the interpersonal treatment received during the termination delivery, encompassing both informational justice (providing adequate explanations regarding the decision criteria) and interpersonal justice (treating the employee with dignity and respect). A respectful and empathetic termination meeting, where the manager provides clear reasons and handles the conversation professionally, significantly reduces the intensity of negative attitudes, minimizing feelings of humiliation and betrayal. Organizations that train managers to prioritize interactional justice demonstrate a strong commitment to ethical practice, which subtly shapes the attitudes of both the departing employee and the remaining staff, signaling respect for all individuals regardless of their employment status.

### The Role of Remaining Employees: Survivor Syndrome

Attitudes toward job termination are not confined solely to the terminated individual or the manager; the remaining employees, often termed "survivors," develop complex and often detrimental attitudes in the wake of significant layoffs or organizational change. This phenomenon, known as **survivor syndrome**, manifests as a combination of guilt, anxiety, fear, and resentment. Guilt arises from the perceived unfairness of retaining their position while colleagues lost theirs, leading to decreased morale and productivity. Anxiety stems from the realization of their own vulnerability, fostering an attitude of insecurity regarding their future employment status, which can drastically reduce organizational commitment and trust in leadership's stability promises.

The prevailing attitude among survivors is often characterized by a strong sense of injustice, particularly if they perceived the terminated colleagues as high performers or if the selection process appeared arbitrary and lacked clear criteria. Survivors may develop a cynical attitude toward leadership and organizational promises, believing that loyalty is not rewarded and that job security is illusory. This cynicism often translates into behavioral changes, such as reduced effort (sometimes referred to as quiet quitting), increased absenteeism, and decreased willingness to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors. To counter these negative attitudes, leadership must proactively address survivor concerns, focusing on transparency and reinforcing the rationale for the terminations while providing visible support for those who remain.

Furthermore, the perceived workload redistribution significantly affects survivor attitudes. If the remaining staff feels overwhelmed by the tasks previously handled by terminated employees, their attitude toward the organization shifts from relief to resentment over exploitation, leading to stress and burnout. Management must demonstrate an attitude of fairness regarding resource allocation and workload management post-termination, actively avoiding the perception that layoffs were merely a cost-cutting measure designed to extract more labor from fewer people. Providing

adequate support, training, and acknowledging the increased burden can help mitigate the negative attitudes associated with overwork and burnout, fostering a more resilient and engaged remaining workforce.

## Strategic Communication and Attitude Mitigation

Effective strategic communication is paramount in shaping and mitigating negative attitudes surrounding job termination, both internally and externally. Organizations must adopt an attitude of **transparency and honesty**, providing clear, consistent messaging regarding the necessity, process, and impact of the terminations. Ambiguous or evasive communication fuels rumors, distrust, and intensely negative attitudes, as employees fill informational vacuums with worst-case scenarios and conjecture about hidden agendas. Communication should emphasize the business rationale rather than assigning personal blame, protecting the dignity of the departing staff while justifying the strategic decision to the survivors and external stakeholders.

Key communication strategies should focus on delivering the news with empathy and providing practical support details. For the terminated employee, clear communication about severance, benefits continuation, and outplacement services signals an organizational attitude of care, which can soften the blow and reduce the likelihood of legal recourse. For remaining employees, communication must focus on the organization's future vision, stability plans, and how the changes will enable success, thereby shifting their attitude from fear of loss to focus on future opportunity and stability. Failure to communicate strategically reinforces the perception that the organization is cold, incompetent, or attempting to conceal critical information, further embedding negative attitudes.

Moreover, the communication must be multi-directional, allowing for feedback and addressing employee concerns directly. Management must adopt an attitude of receptiveness, actively listening to the fears and resentments expressed by the surviving workforce. Establishing forums for open dialogue and demonstrating a willingness to adjust post-termination workflow based on employee feedback signals respect and commitment to the remaining staff. This interactive approach helps rebuild trust and counters the cynical attitudes that often proliferate when leadership appears distant or indifferent to the human cost of organizational change, ensuring that employees feel heard and valued.

## Long-Term Organizational Impact of Termination Attitudes

The collective attitudes generated by job terminations have profound and lasting consequences for organizational health and competitiveness. Poorly managed terminations that foster widespread negative attitudes--among the terminated, the survivors, and the public--can severely damage the organization's reputation (employer brand). A negative employer brand makes future recruitment

efforts significantly more difficult and expensive, as talented candidates adopt a cautious attitude toward joining an organization perceived as lacking ethical standards or stability. This long-term attitudinal damage often outweighs the short-term cost savings achieved through the layoffs, impacting market valuation and long-term talent acquisition strategies.

Internally, the lingering negative attitudes among surviving staff--manifesting as reduced trust and lower morale--can erode organizational commitment and increase voluntary turnover (attrition). Employees who feel their colleagues were treated unfairly adopt a protective attitude, prioritizing their own self-interest over organizational goals, leading to decreased collaboration, reduced knowledge sharing, and diminished innovation. Restoring a positive organizational attitude requires sustained efforts in transparent communication, visible investment in remaining employees (e.g., training, resources), and a commitment to procedural justice in all future decisions, demonstrating that the organization genuinely values its human capital.

Ultimately, the long-term success of an organization following significant terminations hinges on its ability to manage the attitudinal fallout effectively. Organizations that approach termination with an attitude of ethical responsibility, prioritizing fairness and respect, preserve social capital and maintain a degree of goodwill, even among those departing. This positive approach minimizes litigation risk, protects the employer brand, and ensures that the surviving workforce maintains a constructive attitude necessary for driving post-restructuring recovery and long-term strategic success. The attitudes created during separation define the organization's culture far more than the attitudes fostered during recruitment and onboarding, serving as a critical measure of leadership integrity.