

A Crash Course in Conducting Layoff Communications

HR Brew | Mikaela Cohen | January 22, 2025

Layoffs should be a collaborative effort between the company's CEO, and the HR, legal, and communications teams, says Teal Pennebaker, a founding partner at Shallot Communications.



Illustration: Anna Kim, Photo: Getty Images

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What's worse than being laid off? Maybe being laid off with an image of a duck?

Payments company Stripe recently announced a 300-person workforce reduction, Business Insider reported. The emails informing affected employees included, in addition to the news, a PDF with an image of an animated duck. Some emails also included incorrect termination dates. The misstep is particularly notable, as it comes less than three years after the company was lauded for its approach to layoffs.

A Stripe spokesperson declined to comment, but did direct HR Brew to chief people officer Rob McIntosh's follow-up email to employees, in which he said, "I apologize for the error and any confusion it caused. Corrected and full notifications have since been sent to all impacted Stripes."

HR pros preparing for cuts this year, read on for a layoff communications refresher.

Figuring out the game plan. Before communicating a workforce reduction, HR should consult with their company's communications team or an outside professional, Teal Pennebaker, a founding partner at Shallot Communications, previously told HR Brew.

"[Layoffs] often require an outside person, a comms person, who can come in and be another set of eyes to say, 'Hey, I hear that you need to get XYZ across, but in order for this to land with employees in a way that feels compassionate, why don't we consider doing it in ABC way?'" she said.

The layoff process tends to go more smoothly, Pennebaker said, when there's a coordinated effort, or "tiger team," between the CEO, HR, legal, and communications.

Now on to business, with a side of compassion. Have one-on-one conversations with employees to share the news, Michele Bousquet, Strava's chief people officer, told an audience at LinkedIn's Talent Connect conference in October. The fitness platform took this approach when conducting layoffs in 2022.

"It's not a mass email. It's certainly not deactivating people's badges before they walk in the door, which we've seen," she said.

And avoid messaging that feels personal, Mark Brown, SVP of talent and inclusion at Starbucks, said at Talent Connect.

"Make sure you're talking about a moment and not a person," he said. "Meaning, it's like, if you have reductions, it's not about the person, it's about something else. You have to have the right conversation."