Performance Based Feelings

If you survey major news outlets about tech layoffs one thing you’ll find is a distinct lack of individual perspective. It isn’t devoid of granular experiences, however, on the whole, popular media is focused on providing macro observations on current events. The long list of emerging tech layoffs is no different in this regard. Articles are populated with statistical data on the latest company to cut a percentage of their workforce. Usually, these articles are punctuated with a timely quote from a former employee of the company, but these quotes are passed over as quickly as their written. In reaction to this, Newsico sets out to show more directly the responses of those affected by layoffs.

Today I’m sitting down with an engineer who was affected by a layoff in early February. They worked at a mid-size financial services company that provides a solution to small and medium business who don’t want to or can’t invest in full-scale HR departments.

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While layoffs have been a staple of capitalist economies since their inception, one development that’s unique to this generation is the publicized nature of the event. Within hours of an announced layoff, the information is public and it includes lists of affected employees along with “heartfelt” statements from tech CEO’s on the unfortunate nature of the decision. I talk more about this here, where I dissect the long list of CEO memos that all seem to reference the “Unfortunate economic conditions” while at the same time “Taking full responsibility” for the employees they need to let go. I talk directly to the engineer about this phenomenon.

Rob K: How do those memos and letters resonate with you? Especially those broad statements saying, “Our economic realities are now different”

Engineer: To me, they definitely don’t land well. I definitely have a distaste for them. It’s an excuse, it’s a public excuse. I mean companies are entitled to do whatever they want, and it’s something we agree to by working in this country. But it’s trying to blame this external factor. I think especially when you work at the place and you have a deeper understanding of the company’s financials, and you know better than the public how a layoff doesn’t align with the financials, that’s when it’s frustrating.

They go further to share a sense of optimism laden with questions.

Engineer: Ultimately, I will say I’m grateful it happened and I’m grateful I experienced this. Because this is my first job out of college. I’ve never experienced a layoff, I’ve only heard about it. I can’t imagine what it’s like to be someone who has a family, someone who has a partner, someone who has someone to take care of and then just suddenly is laid off. I’m very fortunate I don’t have that, but if I was them I would very mad you know?

It's in this list of questions that we can start to see the heart of what a layoff does to the individual. On the corporate sheets and statistical analyses, the layoffs are just that, numbers and dollars. But to the individual, the layoff can be, and almost certainly will be, a pillar of change – for better or worse. As our engineer said, it’s something we all agree to by working here, but is that agreement healthy? Does the executive mindset have any overlapping with the individual who’s thrust into uncertainty by the saving of a budget balance?

As we talked further, we discussed more specifically the circumstances of their layoff:

Engineer: It’s funny because I’ve seen the other layoffs happen. You hear those stories and then to see it happen to you is always really funny because you don’t expect it. You don’t understand how mentally sudden that is. The day before was a regular day. I was coding, submitting, and I actually had some code to submit in the morning. I even lined up some pairing sessions and a meeting with my manager. And when I log on that day, I don’t know what kind of magic they use, but nothing worked. I thought it was some kind of technical mistake because I hadn’t seen the text from some random number telling me to check my email. Only after I googled the company did I realize, holy shit I might have gotten laid off.

Engineer: And yea, that day I went through a lot of emotions. It started with laughter, because I was like, there’s no way someone has the audacity to do this. And then it became sad, and then angry, and then I found out another person I knew was also laid off. The worst part of it was not really knowing if it’s performance based.

Part of my goal with this series is to leave an impression from the transcript above. People deal with traumatic events in different ways but the description as it reads most certainly leaves an impression of trauma. Certainly, we can all imagine worse circumstances or another more severe form of trauma, but when the consistent thought is, I went through a roller coaster of emotions, from laughter to sadness to anger, this isn’t something that should be ignored or set aside, especially not in favor of the polite one-liners of a CEO memo.

The last line from the Engineer is telling in this case, “The worst part of it was not really knowing if t’s performance based.”

This, again, strikes at the heart of what a layoff entails. It spawns so many questions that dig deeper than the mask of professionalism can deflect. If I was contributing value, why was I let go? One answer is, the tech industry quantifies value in a less tangible form then say, the salesman. The engineer, unlike the salesman, can’t point to revenue dollars generated by their mere presence. More from the engineer drives this point home.

Engineer: For me, I do care about my performance, I do care about how I present myself. I was very fortunate to have friends and folks tell me, ‘No, it wasn’t performance based.”

They went a little deeper and talked about the role management played in representing their performance.

Engineer: There was no indication from management, quite the opposite. It was like, ‘things are fine, that’s over there, not here.’ I reached out to some [coworkers], some reached out to me and they’re like, ‘I’m so sorry this happened’, ‘We totally miss you’. And I need those validations to make me feel like okay. Like I wasn’t just stranger on a team and they are equally mad.

A final quote in their reaction after a few days makes this clear.

Engineer: I think I just let myself be sad. I wanted to do my favorite things, but also I couldn’t do my favorite things right? Because now I’m thinking about money. I like to eat out you know? And I can’t even do that now.

I talk further with the Engineer about a variety of topics unrelated to layoffs: Growing as Juniors, How to build your skills, Hackathons and more. This discussion can be found here.

This is a Behind the Screen, a continuing series devoted to understanding the individual response to the tech layoffs of 2022 and 2023. View the archive here.