

MANAGING MY WAY

SUE WIGLEY
AREA DIRECTOR,
CITIZENS ADVICE
IN CENTRAL ENGLAND

The Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) is a network of independent charities which belong to the national association by way of a membership scheme, so to be part of CAB you need to meet our nationally set membership standards. On the ground, CAB delivers advice on anything from multiple debt, redundancy and faulty purchases to the threat of homelessness. Most people have a bit of a historical view of us as 'tea and sympathy', but we've moved so far away from that, it's almost unrecognisable.

We rely mostly on volunteers – 80% of CAB staff are volunteers. You don't need any qualifications to be a volunteer, but you do need to be numerate and literate. People think that volunteers are free, but training them

takes anything from three to six months, after which they're still closely supervised, their work is checked and we have ongoing training to keep people up to date with new legislation.

I started off on the frontline of CAB as a volunteer way back in the mid-1980s, worked various jobs here and then worked for other charities and local authorities. I came back about four and a half years ago in more or less the role I'm in now.

I do two main things – manage 117 bureaux across central England, and develop external relationships with regional agencies and partners. I have a team of eight business consultants out in the field every day, working to support the trustee boards and managers of local bureaux. They are then managed

by two consultancy services managers.

I have a partnership development manager who works with me doing the external relations work, and a business support co-ordinator who produces presentations and deals with the data about performance that we can feed to head office.

All the staff are quite geographically dispersed which is a challenge. Twice a year we have a two-day residential with the whole team, and that's really important to me in terms of us feeling like a team. It also enables me as the leader to be clear about the direction we're going.

I'm absolutely committed to what we do. Somebody can walk into one of our bureaux completely stressed, and within an hour or two that person can go out feeling different and back in control. When I have a bad day I go to a bureau and remind myself what we're doing it for, because it's so powerful and important – it's life changing.

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WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS ABOUT... RADICAL REDUNDANCY NEGOTIATIONS



The past year has seen the emergence of a radical new employment negotiation technique, known as 'bossnapping', where staff hold senior managers to ransom. Workers frustrated with uncommunicative management are turning to these extreme tactics in a last-ditch attempt to have some

say in the future of their companies.

It started in France, when factory workers held the boss of Sony France hostage, releasing him after he agreed to reopen talks on redundancy pay. Senior managers at Caterpillar, 3M (pictured) and Hewlett Packard have also been taken hostage by angry employees. These coup d'etats have been reasonably civilised affairs and as such, the French police have adopted a laissez-faire attitude, viewing the hostage-taking as a valid and unthreatening part of the negotiation process.

But in the UK and Ireland, employers have taken a tougher line, says employment law specialist at CM Murray Clare Murray, often responding to sit-ins 'with bailiffs and police'. She warns that all employees engaging in direct action in the UK are at risk of summary dismissal for gross misconduct and could lose their right to redundancy packages.

With protests taking a more serious turn lately, including threats from workers at French firms New Fabris and Nortel to blow up their respective factories, and the recent death of steel firm executive Chen Guojun during an employee riot in north-east China, it's clear tensions are running higher than ever.

'Desperate people take desperate measures,' says Murray. 'The combination of a sense of hopelessness and injustice together with some high-handed employer tactics has led many employees to take extreme direct action.'

The key then, suggests Murray, is not to let the situation get this far in the first place. 'Longer consultation periods may be required, particularly where redundancies will have a significant impact on a local community. Employers should be looking at ways of reducing its effects: alternative employment, employee retraining, sabbaticals etc. You need to negotiate a deal that enables both sides to walk away with their heads held high.'

She warns employees that direct action is more powerful as a last resort. 'Once that card has been played, you may have nothing left in your hand with which to negotiate. Collective action through joint legal representation is far more effective than barricading senior management in the boardroom.'