

The good, the bad and the outright rude: how bosses behave when the chips are down

Some are going the extra mile to look after their people,
others are doing anything to put profit first

[Sabah Meddings](#)

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Clockwise from top left: Alison Brittain, Tim Martin, Alan Jope and Richard Haynes

Peter Bradley was called by his manager on Tuesday. “I’ve got to read something to you,” he said. “I’m sorry to say that following a review of your performance and a re-evaluation of the staffing level needed . . . the decision has been made to terminate your employment.”

Bradley, 56, was confused. He had been employed by Wren Kitchens, which has 91 showrooms across the UK, for a year. He had assumed he would be entitled to 80% of his pay as part of the chancellor’s scheme to protect jobs.

“I’m at a loss on what to do now,” said Bradley, a father of two from Hempstead in Kent. His partner, Deborah O’Neill, has cancer and her work as a psychologist has stopped — meaning he was the sole earner in a household of four.

Bradley discovered he was one of many to have had their employment terminated by Wren last week. His boss was reading from a script that had been given to scores of managers to sack hundreds of employees. Each was given just seven days’ pay and told the decision was down to their performance.

Despite government measures to protect jobs, Covid-19 has exposed a wide gap between employers trying to treat workers fairly and those seeking to minimise commitments.

In some cases — including at moribund restaurant chain Carluccio’s, which last week said staff pay would be cut in half until the government money came through — the extreme measures are due to a lack of cash.

Healthier businesses such as Premier Inn owner Whitbread have promised to retain staff on full pay until the crisis is over. Many businesses are being forced to strike a balance between protecting their bottom line and looking after their staff.



Left high and dry: Peter Bradley and Deborah O’Neill

Two founders, in particular, were put in the stocks and pelted. Tim Martin of JD Wetherspoon caused outrage by telling staff they would not be paid until the government's rescue money came through. He later rowed back on that. And Mike Ashley of Sports Direct parent Frasers Group issued a public apology on Friday after trying to keep his stores open despite the lockdown — a move he said was “ill judged and poorly timed”.

The hundreds of staff laid off by Wren were told to re-apply once the coronavirus outbreak was over. “It makes no sense,” said one, who, nonetheless, hopes to return. “If it was down to my performance, then why would they ask me to come back when the showroom reopens?”

Wren, which is owned by reclusive Yorkshire billionaire Malcolm Healey, said it was “incumbent upon all retailers to carry out regular performance reviews, especially in these unprecedented times”.

Malcolm and his brother, Eddie, are worth a combined £1.6bn, according to The Sunday Times Rich List. Wren, which employs 5,500 people, made pre-tax profits of £37.2m on sales of £490.8m in 2018, according to its latest available accounts.

The Healeys are among Yorkshire's richest families, having made their millions in retail and property. Eddie, 81, sold the Meadowhall shopping centre near Sheffield to the FTSE 100 giant British Land in 1999 for £1.2bn.

Malcolm, 75, made his first fortune by selling an earlier kitchen business, Hygena, to MFI in 1987, pocketing £200m.

Eddie made a rare appearance in the tabloids in 2008 when it emerged that he had paid Girls Aloud £125,000 to perform at his 70th birthday party at the Dorchester hotel in London. Malcolm is more private, though it was reported that he once spent £40m on an entire village — the Warter Priory Estate in East Yorkshire, which has 11,000 acres and 63 houses.

By Thursday, staff had launched a petition calling on Wren to close its warehouse sites, which were being kept open to allow kitchens to be completed. The layoffs, and safety issues, prompted local politicians to call for action. “They’ve expanded rapidly and have now sacked hundreds of workers,” said Labour MP Alex Cunningham.

Staff at Wren are far from the only ones facing an uncertain future. The enforced closures of shops, pubs, restaurants and other businesses across Britain have thrown employers into chaos — especially those with thin cash reserves.

According to data from JP Morgan bank, restaurants have, on average, 16 days of “buffer” cash. Government help to pay workers could take weeks to arrive, meaning that many are being forced to borrow money to pay staff. Others, already in debt, are not paying them at all.

Steve Holmes, chief executive of Azzurri, owner of restaurant chain Zizzi, said he was in talks with shareholders and lenders about extra liquidity to pay workers. “We’ve still got a huge cashflow issue,” said Holmes, who fears being part of the “squeezed middle” of companies with sales of more than £45m, but without the investment-grade rating needed to secure a government-backed loan from one of the banks.

Smaller businesses are doing their best to pay workers but are often being forced to make difficult choices.

Samia Evans, 41, is the owner of Moorish, a falafel restaurant in Norwich, which employs nine people. A steady decline in footfall since late February means she has taken no pay herself for the past two months, choosing instead to ensure staff and suppliers received what they were owed.

Now Evans, a mother of three, is waiting to hear from her local council about a £10,000 grant, and hopes that the government furlough scheme for workers will be in place by April.

“I’ve spoken to each member of staff individually,” said Evans, who opened Moorish nine years ago. “I took out just enough money this month to pay my mortgage . . . but other than that, I have been living on savings.”

Shepherd Neame, the family-owned pub group, will pay all staff put on temporary leave — including those earning more than £30,000 — 80% of their salaries. Those continuing to work will take a smaller cut of between 10% and 15%. Directors took a 20% cut this month.

Jonathan Neame, the chief executive, said he had made the “difficult decision” to ask some staff to step aside while pubs were shut and the company restricted itself to producing beer for supermarkets. “As soon as the situation improves, we . . . look forward to welcoming our team members back,” he said.

For every boss battling to provide for staff, another has fallen short. Workers at a Britannia hotel in Aviemore, in the Scottish Highlands, were sent a letter earlier this month terminating their employment and ordering them to leave their

accommodation immediately. The company later released a statement declaring the letter had been sent in “error”.

Travelodge, led by Peter Gowers, told homeless guests that they had just hours to move out after the government ordered hotels to shut down. It said it had opened 40 of its hotels near hospitals and in cities where it is supporting local councils, including one near London’s Excel Centre, site of the new Nightingale hospital.

Businesses that quickly laid off staff with no pay had to reckon with furious backlashes on social media. Celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay came under fire for placing 500 staff on gardening leave while his restaurants are shut. When fellow celebrity chef Rick Stein refused to pay workers’ wages for at least a month while restaurants are closed, users on Twitter wrote that he should be “ashamed of himself”.

Bookshop chain Waterstones was lambasted by furious employees who claimed that they were forced to work in customer-facing roles with no hand sanitiser, even after Boris Johnson had told the public to stay away from pubs, bars and leisure facilities.

“I witnessed customers openly coughing, the elderly mingling with the general populace and absolutely no social distancing being observed,” wrote one staff member on Facebook. Boss James Daunt responded that claims it had forced employees to work were “utter s***”.

Wren, named “retail employer of the year” by job site Indeed this month, has left its staff scrambling to find new jobs. Daniel I’Anson, 28, is applying to supermarkets after being laid off from Wren’s shop in Durham. “I’ve got a family to

support, so I've got to find work," said I'Anson, a father of three who had worked for Wren since August.

Another employee, Chloe Riley, had been working at Wren in Sunderland since August. Riley, 21, was hired with a two-year probation period, meaning she could be dismissed with a week's notice. "There's hundreds of us up and down the country who have been let go," she said.

While businesses hope that slimming down staff numbers will allow them to survive the crisis, poor treatment of workers could leave reputational damage that take a long time to put right. As one Twitter user put it: "People will remember the good guys."

HEROES

Alison Brittain, Whitbread

The Premier Inn owner, which has been forced to close its pubs and hotels, has placed all staff who have been furloughed on full pay, topping up the 80% that will be covered by the government to 100%. It also plans to use some of its hotels, near hospitals, to support NHS staff. Alison Brittain, the chief executive, oversees an empire of more than 35,000 people in 800 hotels in the UK, Germany and the Middle East. Whitbread has about 400 Beefeater, Brewers Fayre and Table Table restaurants.

Alan Jope, Unilever

The FTSE 100 consumer goods giant behind Dove soap and Lynx deodorant has moved to ensure the jobs of all its 155,000 employees are protected for at least three months. "This includes men and women that guard our offices, that work in our cafeterias or clean our facilities," said Alan Jope,

chief executive. “Most of these staff will work for Compass Group or Sodexo or someone like that.”

Unilever has switched some of its deodorant factories, which are equipped to handle alcohol, to manufacturing hand sanitiser, which it is giving to the NHS without charge.

Daksh Gupta, Marshall Motors

Marshall Motor Group, a chain of 119 motor dealerships, shut all its sites last Monday, although it is keeping some servicing centres open for emergency vehicles and public service workers.

Daksh Gupta, chief executive, said the company would “do everything we can to avoid” redundancies and is paying 90% of furloughed staff’s wages — making up the extra 10% above the government’s contribution. It is also paying that sum above the £2,500 monthly cap.

“If you do the right thing, right things will happen,” said Gupta. “You can’t forget those things you’ve built over many years. We are going to need these people because I believe there is going to be a massive bounce-back, and they will have comfort and security from us.”

VILLAINS

Pete Gowers, Travelodge

Travelodge gave homeless families and key workers just two hours to leave before shutting 360 of its hotels at short notice to comply with coronavirus measures. The chain, led by Peter Gowers, slipped letters under guests’ doors asking them to leave as soon as possible. It prompted local authorities to scramble to find alternative rooms for families who had been turfed out. Travelodge said it had asked councils to move temporary residents to other hotels that it had chosen to keep

open — adding that it opened 140 hotels on Tuesday to support council bookings.

Richard Haynes, Urban Outfitters

Fashion brand Urban Outfitters, which also owns Anthropologie, was criticised for allegedly forcing staff to work at its factory in Philadelphia — telling them they should use holiday or sick leave if they were too scared to come to work. The company, led by Richard Haynes, had been forced to close stores and has placed its hopes on e-commerce. Urban Outfitters said it had boosted cleaning and added: “We understand how, on the surface, some might consider online fashion retailing to be non-essential, but the reality is Covid-19 is a serious threat not only to our health but our economy.”

Tim Martin, Wetherspoons

The boss of Wetherspoons found himself in hot water after a video emerged of him telling staff they may have to wait for the government’s furlough scheme cash to arrive before receiving their April pay. Martin later rowed back, confirming that staff would be paid after a public outcry caught the attention of MPs and drew calls for the chain to be boycotted. However, the pubs company then revealed that its food, drink and other suppliers would not be paid until its 874 venues reopened. “Wetherspoons tried to do the right thing, but the realities of closed pubs, banking covenants and lack of firm government offers made life complicated,” Martin said.