Causes, Implementation, and Processes of Downsizing (A literature Review of Corporate Downsizing: Part 2)

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Abstract

Corporate downsizing has become a strategy of choice by a multitude of organizations worldwide. The prime impetus for most downsizing activities is the desire to attain higher levels of efficiency, effectiveness, profitability, and competitiveness. The adoption of downsizing has shown to have considerable impact on the firm and its many stakeholders. There is strong evidence suggesting that the consequences of downsizing are persistently negative. Indeed, numerous firms in all industries around the world embarking upon downsizing have failed to accomplish their highly anticipated objectives. It has also been shown that the execution of downsizing is not confined to economic and organizational realms, but has profound after-effects upon all stakeholders. The second part of this literature review presents the relevant body of literature and clarifies the many mysteries and misconceptions associated with the causes, implementation strategies, and processes of downsizing.

Keywords: *Downsizing, causes, implementation, strategy*

Introduction

Workforce downsizing is a change management strategy that has been adopted for more than two decades (Williams, 2004). During the 1980s and early 1990s, downsizing was embraced primarily by firms experiencing difficult economic times (Gandolfi, 2006). Since the mid-1990s, downsizing has become a leading strategy of choice for a considerable number of corporations and governmental agencies around the world (Mirabal & DeYoung, 2005). Despite the on-going popularity and pervasiveness of downsizing to increase an organization's competitiveness (Macky, 2004), empirical and anecdotal evidence suggest that the consequences of downsizing are largely negative (Morris, Cascio, & Young, 1999).

Moreover, the repercussions of strategic downsizing transcend financial and organizational realms and adversely affect the entire workforce in a most profound manner (Littler, Dunford, Bramble, & Hede, 1997).

Why firms downsize

Luthans and Sommer (1999) identified two contrasting approaches concerning effective HR, that is, the human investment approach and the approach focusing upon managing or reducing costs. The former embraces the notion that investing in and focusing upon the skills and capabilities of employees will produce increased effort, commitment, empowerment, and synergies and its subsequent increase of attachment and firm-specific knowledge may represent a form of competitive advantage for the firm. In contrast, the latter approach focuses upon analyzing and streamlining work processes in order to improve organizational productivity and profitability by means of expediting operational processes and/or managing or decreasing costs. This is frequently achieved through the implementation of information technology. Luthans and Sommer (1999) concluded that global competition, technological innovation, increased customer influence, and economic forces as well as pressures from rival companies have constituted the main driving forces for companies to employ downsizing strategies. Appelbaum, Delage, Labibb, and Gault (1997) view downsizing a cost-containment strategy implemented in order to streamline activities and to reduce the waste and inefficiency that a corporation may have built up over time. Other tools may include strategies, such as Total Quality Management (TQM), reengineering, transaction processing, and information systems. Possible drivers that may explain why firms adopt downsizing are the aftermaths of acquisitions and mergers (M&A), a 'quick-fix' to delay closure or bankruptcy, a preparation for privatization, or a need to reduce costs in an attempt to remain competitive in an increasingly global market. Harrington (1998) attributes downsizing to the surplus problem, including both employees and facilities. This in itself is believed to be a manifestation of increased competition, increased efficiency, declining need for middle managers as a result of de-layering and employee empowerment, and improved quality and reliability of products which require fewer resources for maintenance.

Ryan and Macky (1998) distinguish between downsizing as a reactive and downsizing as a proactive strategy. The former is regarded as a strategy implemented predominantly prior to the late 1980s in order to

temporarily adjust to a cyclical downturn or to avoid organizational demise and bankruptcy. The latter strategy appears to be more versatile in its approach, in the sense that it constitutes a human resource strategy for a multitude of organizational situations. These may include rectifying historical tendencies towards overstaffing, managing cyclical business declines, introduction of new information technology and the use of automation, shift in business strategies, mergers and acquisitions (M&A), globalization, and cost-reduction strategies aimed at competitive advantage. Of notable interest is Ryan and Macky's (1998) conclusion that downsizing is not only employed as a strategy to cut labor costs by shedding labor in the short run, but also to apply downward pressure on wage demands from the remaining workforce in the longer term. In the same vein, other researchers have reported about motivational factors that have persuaded and compelled corporations and governmental bodies to embark on downsizing. Hence, current driving forces comprise business downturns, poor management, inadequate planning, increased foreign competition, takeovers, mergers, and divestments (Flude, 1994), deregulation, increased foreign competition, and introduction to new technology (Estok, 1996), competition, lost market share, higher operating costs, lowered profit margins, privatization, and mergers (Allen, 1997), global benchmarking (De Vries & Balazs, 1997), shareholder demands, technology, global competition, regulatory requirements, and excess of the past (Delorese, 1998), and as an aftereffect of the M&A mania (De Vries & Balazs, 1997).

Appelbaum, Everard, and Hung (1999) assert that corporations downsize in order to cut costs. More importantly, in attempting to remain competitive in an ever-increasing global marketplace, firms see few alternatives to downsizing. According to Mishra and Mishra (1994), the kind of downsizing that took place in the 1980s was mainly an effort to reduce the number of employees in order to stay competitive. That trend continued well into the 1990s with firms attempting to cut costs to remain competitive in the global marketplace. The downsizing literature also shows that downsizing has continued into the millennium (Mirabal & DeYoung, 2005) and that firms are expected to continue to downsize extensively (Gandolfi, 2006). Cascio (1993) uses anecdotal evidence and claims that downsizing begets downsizing. He illustrates his point by referring to Kodak which downsized four times between 1982 and 1992. Similarly, Honeywell, IBM, Xerox, and Digital Equipment all experienced multiple and significant employee cutbacks in the 1990s. Appelbaum et al. (1999) assert that other factors that may contribute to downsizing are technological

advancement and innovations that result in increased productivity and a decrease in required workers. Dunford, Bramble, and Littler (1998) contend that a change in technology is not a primary reason for firms to engage in downsizing. Technological improvements often result in hiring additional workers rather than replacing the existing employees. De Vries and Balazs (1997) also incorporate the influence of technology on downsizing, although in a slightly different vein. They state that rather than simply the introduction of technology *per se*, it is the administrative impact of the revolutionary transformation in information and communication technology that has impacted downsizing. The outcome of technological advances has been an increasing redundancy of middle management; employees who were previously responsible for collecting, analyzing, and transmitting information within the firm, who may no longer be needed.

More recently, downsizing has become a common response to an emerging global environment. Downsizing is generally a response to one or more of the following conditions: (1) M&As, (2) loss of revenues and market share through technological and industrial change, (3) the implementation of a new organizational structure, and (4) the belief and social pressures that smaller is better. This corresponds to assertions by Cummings and Worley (2001). Mirabal and DeYoung (2005) also caution that responding to an organizational crisis in the absence of a will-defined strategic plan might result in across-the-board cuts that penalize the most efficient units of the firm and thus decreasing its competitive advantage.

Theories of downsizing

The 1980s and 1990s produced two historic management movements – one involving restructurings and the other involved downsizings. Restructuring has attracted more attention than downsizing among scholars. As Cameron stated, downsizing may be the "most pervasive yet understudied business phenomenon" (Cameron, 1994: 183). Cameron also added that we have approached the phenomenon of downsizing "atheoretically" and the number of systematic studies on downsizing is "paltry" (Cameron, 1994: 185). Interestingly, researchers have overwhelmingly examined the technico-economic and human effects of the practice of downsizing (Budros, 1999). Most of the research shows that the financial, social, and organizational consequences of downsizing are negative. There are substantial reports linking downsizing to declines in employee loyalty, motivation and morale, labor and machine productivity,

profits, product quality and innovation, return on assets (ROA), return on equity (ROE), return on investment (ROI), and stock prices. An increasing number of scholars has questioned the logic of downsizing, including such leading authorities as Cameron (1994), Cascio (2003), Dougherty and Bowman (1995), and Freeman (1994). At the same time, scholars have also confirmed that the adoption of downsizing is not confined to the 1980s and 1990s, but a management practice that has survived well into the new millennium. In fact, some researchers have suggested that downsizing is here to stay (Macky, 2004; Gandolfi, 2006).

Downsizing implementation strategies

A number of distinct implementation strategies have been identified. Cameron, Freeman, and Mishra (1991, 1993) have conducted one of the most extensive empirical studies on workforce downsizing to date, in which they identified three distinct forms of downsizing (Farrell & Mavondo, 2004: 385). These forms are referred to as the three major implementation strategies - a workforce reduction, an organization redesign, and a systemic strategy. This is presented in Table 2.

Downsizing implementation strategies

Table 2

	Workforce reduction strategy	**Organization redesign strategy**	**Systemic strategy**
Focus	Workers	Jobs and units	Culture
Target	People	Work	Status quo processes
Implementation time	Quick	Moderate	Extended
Temporal target	Short-term payoff	Moderate-term payoff	Long-term payoff
Inhibits	Long-term adaptability	Quick payback	Short-term cost savings
Examples	◆ Natural attrition ◆ Hiring freeze ◆ Early retirement ◆ Buyout packages ◆ Layoffs ◆ Retrenchments	◆ Abolition of functions ◆ Merging of units ◆ Job redesign ◆ De-layering ◆ Reduction of overall work hours	◆ Staff involvement ◆ Simplification of processes ◆ Bottom-up change ◆ Continuous improvement

Source: adapted from Cameron et al. (1993); Farrell & Mavondo (2004); Gandolfi (2006)

First, the workforce reduction strategy, often referred to as the "layoff strategy" (Ryan & Macky, 1998: 38), concentrates upon the elimination of headcount *per se* and the reduction of the overall number of employees. It encompasses activities, such as layoffs, retrenchments, natural attritions, early retirements, hiring freezes, golden parachutes, and buyout packages. This strategy is frequently implemented in a reactive manner as a cost-cutting measure and often serves as a short-term response to declining profits (Ryan & Macky, 1998). According to Cameron (1994), such "grenade-type" (p 198) approaches to downsizing are rarely successful and tend to be negative in their consequences. Second, the organization redesign strategy focuses upon the elimination of work, rather than reducing the number of employees (Luthans & Sommer, 1999). It encompasses activities, such as abolishing functions, groups, divisions, and products, eliminating hierarchical levels (de-layering), redesigning tasks, consolidating and merging units, and reducing overall work hours. Organization redesign strategies are difficult to implement quickly since doing so requires some advanced analysis of the areas concerned (Cameron et al., 1991). Third, the systemic strategy is fundamentally different from the former two strategies in that it embraces a more holistic and macro view of organizational change. Thus, downsizing ought to more comprehensive and wide-ranging (Gandolfi, 2005) and embrace all dimensions and aspects of the organization, including suppliers, customer relations, production methods, design processes, and inventories (Cameron, 1994). Systemic strategy focuses upon changing the organization's intrinsic culture and the attitudes and values of its employees (Luthans & Sommer, 1999). Hence, downsizing is viewed as "a way of life" (Filipowski, 1993: 1) and an on-going, continuous, and incremental process (Cameron et al., 1991). Within this framework, employees *per se* are not the primary targets, but instead considered key resources in an attempt to generate and incorporate downsizing ideas (Cameron, 1994).

Gandolfi (2005) undertook a multi-year case study research determining and comparing the downsizing implementation strategies of large Australian and New Zealand banks. His study showed that all participants declared that their respective firms had engaged in workforce downsizing practices. The vast majority of Australians stated that workforce reduction strategies, including workforce layoffs, retrenchments, early retirements, buyout packages, natural attritions, and hiring freezes, were the most commonly utilized strategies, and had been adopted in the most recent downsizing. A considerable number of participants indicated that layoffs

and staff retrenchments were frequently seen as the bank's "first preference" (p 63). In this sense, participants understood that workforce reduction strategies could be implemented quickly and produce short-term payoffs. In contrast, organization redesign strategies, including job redesign, merging of units, abolition of functions, and de-layering, were not seen as primary strategies. Rather, these secondary strategies were direct consequence of the primary downsizing implementation strategies. In other words, in an Australian context, organization redesign strategies were utilized only in response to and as a direct consequence of the adoption of workforce reduction strategies. The systemic strategy was rejected by all Australian managers. Participants perceived systemic strategies to inhibit short-term savings and to merely engender long-term payoffs. Thus, systemic strategies were viewed as suitable in an Australian context. In stark contrast, New Zealand bank managers perceived organization redesign strategies to be the implementation strategy of choice. According to New Zealand participants, the primary focus of any downsizing endeavor should be "work" rather than "people" (Gandolfi, 2005: 64). In other words, the emphasis should lie with the elimination of work rather than reducing the number of employees in the first instance. Participants identified the redesign of tasks and the consolidation of work, units, products, groups, and divisions as the standard practices in downsizing efforts. However, New Zealand managers stressed that the adoption of organization redesign strategies necessitated a profound level of understanding of the individual operations and tasks and also required some advanced analysis of the targeted areas. Workforce reduction strategies were seen as a "last resort". They were also viewed to inhibit long-term adaptability and perceived to be "extremely disruptive" and "damaging to the image, ethos, and culture of the organization". At the same time, New Zealand managers admitted that some workforce reduction strategies were embraced in the last round of downsizing. New Zealand participants stated that even though a systemic strategy *per se*, with its focus on culture, was not adopted, some distinct elements of a systemic strategy were nevertheless being pursued, including, continuous improvement, staff involvement, and bottom-up change (Gandolfi, 2005).

Depth and breadth of downsizing

Cameron and associates compartmentalized downsizing on the basis of the depth and breadth. Firms that incorporate a greater number of actions of the same category of implementation have more depth in their overall downsizing. Conversely, organizations that employ a variety of strategy types have more breadth in their strategy. The results of a four-year study of 30 American firms that had engaged in downsizing activities have disclosed that organizations were generally more likely to have depth rather than breadth in their overall strategy (Cameron et al., 1993). This finding can be attributed to the fact that most downsized firms embarked on workforce reduction alternatives rather than employing a multiplicity of downsizing strategies (Cameron, 1994). Gandolfi's (2005) empirical study examining the adopted downsizing strategies of large Australian and New Zealand banks revealed that there were considerable differences in the breadth and depth of adopted strategies. Australian bank managers generally resorted to workforce reduction as primary downsizing strategies and largely forfeited the options of organization redesign and systemic strategies. All Australian study cases reported the adoption of layoffs, retrenchments, early retirements, natural attritions, hiring freezes, and early buyouts. These strategies were also utilized by all Australian banks in their last round of downsizing. Thus, Australian banks showed great depth in their downsizing. New Zealand bank managers embraced a more holistic approach to downsizing and resorted to a broader variety of implementation strategies. According to the participants, downsizing strategies comprised the primary tools of redesigning tasks and consolidating of work, units, products, groups, and divisions, the secondary tools of hiring freezes, natural attritions, early retirements, voluntary redeployments, and voluntary separation packages, and the "last resort" tools of involuntary redeployment, retrenchments, and layoffs. At the same time, participants declared that systemic strategies, such as continuous improvement, bottom-up change, and staff involvement, were also pursued and implemented. Thus, New Zealand banks showed great breadth in their downsizing (Gandolfi, 2005).

Downsizing approaches

When a firm considers downsizing, it must first evaluate whether its internal operations and environment are compatible with the external environment (Appelbaum et al., 1999). This will determine which downsizing approach the organization should undertake. Two archetypal approaches to downsizing have appeared in the literature – reinforcement and reorientation. These approaches were originally developed and empirically tested by Freeman (1994), who had labeled these concepts "convergence" and "reorientation" (p 214). The approaches of reinforcement and reorientation are built on differing models of change management. The concept of reinforcement, or convergence, embraces the notion of an evolutionary, incremental, and gradual change model (Farrell & Mavondo, 2004). As a consequence, reinforced or converged downsizing would be implemented on a smaller scale and as part of a process aimed at reinforcing an organization's mission, strategy, systems, and structure (Ryan & Macky, 1998). Convergent downsizing is concerned with reducing the total number of individuals in a firm, typically through layoffs, redundancies, and attrition. While convergent downsizing may yield a reduction in costs, it remains unclear as to whether it is an effective strategy. Cameron (1994) argues that the uncertainty of knowing who will lose or keep their position creates stress among employees. Furthermore, if key individuals leave the organization, it is difficult to ascertain what effect this may have on the knowledge base, organizational memory, and critical skills (Cameron, 1994). Several studies have shown that the effect of convergent downsizing on surviving individuals produced decreased levels of employee trust in the organization and its managers. Furthermore, survivors experienced guilt and exhibited lower morale (Farrell & Mavondo, 2004). Survivors have also shown signs of increased levels of stress due to job insecurity and increased workloads, and are reported to lack concentration (Mone, 1994). Other studies on downsizing have found evidence that convergent downsizing decreases the organizational commitment of survivors (Hallier & Lyon, 1996). In a similar vein, Littler, Wiesner, and Dunford (2003) argue that de-layering results "in the demise of managerial internal labor markets, changing managerial workloads and burnout, reduced organizational commitment, a rise in inter-firm mobility, a collapse in loyalty, and even increases white collar crime" (p 226).

The concept of reorientation encompasses the notion of a revolutionary, metamorphic, and discontinuous change model (Farrell & Mavondo, 2004). Thus, reoriented downsizing would be implemented on a larger scale, with major redefinitions of a firm's mission, strategy, and

structure (Cameron et al., 1993). According to Westerman and Sherden (1991), reorientation focuses on organizational inefficiencies by means of re-analyzing jobs, re-designing tasks, and developing a philosophy of continuous improvement. A notable example would be the US firm Dow Chemical. The firm refused to engage in layoffs and opted to re-deploy employees, whose operations had been eliminated, within the organization (Mishra & Mishra, 1994). Farrell and Mavondo (2004) report that a number of firms have attempted to reduce costs without enforcing job cuts. These organizations are re-orienting their businesses through a variety of methods, such as temporary closures of plants, reductions in capital spending, and greater use of temporary staff. Mone (1997) remarks that reorientation may benefit the firm because it represents a fundamental alternative in the way that work is done, theoretically synchronized, with the needs of the business and strategy the company is pursuing.

Littler (1998) proposed a typology of implementation strategies based upon the severity of impact upon employees as exhibited in Figure 1. The existence of such a typology implies strongly that the adoption of implementation strategies has different repercussions upon different parties involved. Accordingly, the most frequent points of entry to the hierarchy of implementation strategies are believed to be point A (i.e., natural attrition) or point B (i.e., redundancy with assistance). For instance, a company may employ a high severity strategy (point B) in order to produce a “culture shock” (Littler, 1998: 11), and thereafter adopt a less harsh strategy to adjust the remaining workforce. There is evidence that higher severity strategies, such as forced redundancies with short or no notice have been a common practice in Australia (Littler, 1998). Empirical research has unveiled that firms that embark on workforce downsizing in a reactive manner are more likely to employ high severity strategies. In contrast, firms that embrace an incremental process may start with natural attrition and move progressively up the scale until the desired state has been attained (Littler, 1998).

Conclusion

Downsizing became a management catch-cry in the 1990s. As a strategic managerial tool, downsizing has changed tens of thousands of companies and governmental agencies and the lives of millions of blue-collar and while-collar workers around the world. The second part of this literature review of the relevant body of literature has clarified many of the mysteries and misconceptions associated with the causes, implementation strategies, and processes of downsizing.

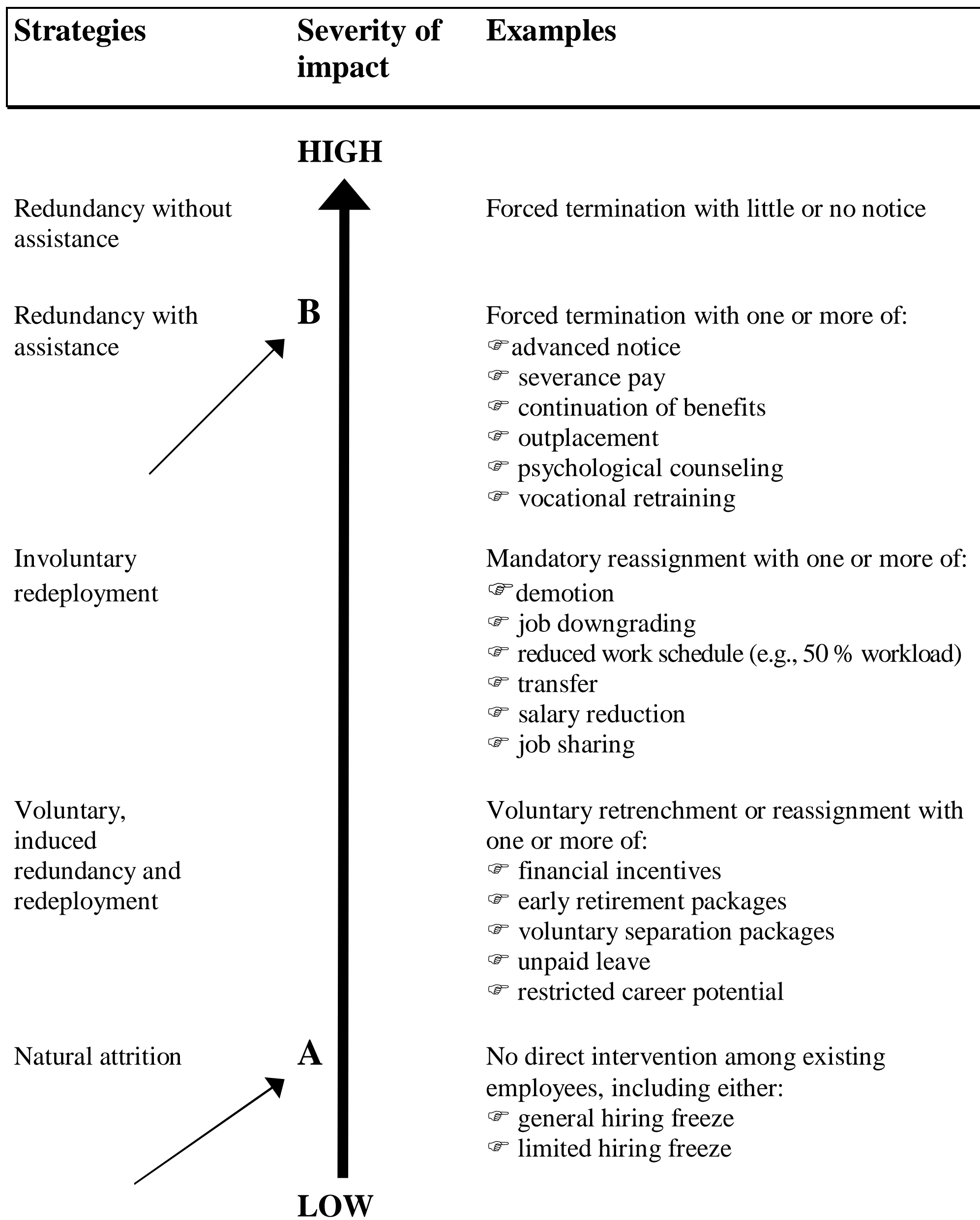

Figure 1 Workforce downsizing implementation strategies

Source: adapted from Greenhalgh, Lawrence, and Sutton (1988), Littler (1998)

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