

CORPORATE DOWNSIZING, SURVIVORS, AND EMPLOYABILITY-RELATED ISSUES IN EUROPE

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ABSTRACT

This research article examines the accounts of survivors of reorganization and downsizing processes of a large car manufacturer in Europe. It looks at how corporate downsizing survivors adjusted to meet the new reality and dynamics of the corporation and how individuals developed new skills and competencies for their new roles and responsibilities within the reorganized firm. The study also reflects upon issues relating to the motivation and attitudes towards employability and learning aspects of individuals. The research highlights the onus upon individuals to take responsibility for their own training and development needs and to initiate learning opportunities. The advancement of self-development skills was shown to be of particular importance in transforming a corporation successfully.

1. INTRODUCTION

The occurrences of major organizational change, including restructuring and downsizing, represent some of the most profound (Gandolfi, 2006) and problematic issues facing modern-day corporations, non-profit organizations, governmental agencies, and global workforces (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). Corporate restructuring, or simply ‘restructuring’, is a relatively broad concept. Black and Edwards (2000), for instance, define restructuring as a major change in the composition of a firm’s assets combined with a major change in its organizational direction and strategy. The change management literature distinguishes between various types of restructuring. Heugens and Schenk (2004) present three forms of corporate restructuring, namely portfolio, financial, and organizational restructuring. This research paper is concerned mainly with organizational restructuring which is defined as a dimension with significant changes in the structural properties of an organizational entity (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). Multitudes of reasons have been put forward to justify the adoption of restructuring (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). Bowman and Singh (1993) assert that the desire to increase an organization’s levels of efficiency and effectiveness is generally at the core of managerial thinking and action. Prechel (1994) contends that organizational restructuring is not a primary strategy *per se*, but occurs as a “by-product” (Carbery & Garavan, 2005: 489) of portfolio or financial restructuring. This is mainly due to the fact that changes in the strategic and financial capital structures of an organization are likely to call for corresponding changes in an organization’s authority hierarchies (Prechel, 1994) and decision-making processes (Carbery & Garavan, 2005).

Organizational downsizing or ‘downsizing’, on the other hand, constitutes a particular category or form of corporate restructuring (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). Downsizing generally involves the reduction in personnel (Cameron, 1994) and frequently results in the redesign of work processes to improve organizational productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness (Kozlowski, Chao, Smith, & Hedlung, 1993). Since the early 1990s, downsizing has generated a great deal of interest among scholars and managers alike (Gandolfi, 2007). As a consequence, a considerable body of literature on the phenomenon of downsizing has emerged (Gandolfi, 2006). Carbery and Garavan (2005) view downsizing as “a deliberate strategy designed to reduce the overall size of the workforce” (p. 489). Downsizing is distinguished from non-intentional forms of organizational size reductions and a variety of downsizing techniques has appeared, including natural attritions, hiring freezes, early retirements, and, more frequently, layoffs (Gandolfi & Neck, 2005). Downsizing is used reactively in order to avoid bankruptcy and secure survival (Fisher & White, 2000) or proactively in order to increase productivity and enhance competitiveness (Gandolfi, 2007). Some research points out that downsizing is commonly adopted after large investments in labor saving technologies have been made by the organization (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). De Vries and Balazs (1997) deem downsizing an inevitable outcome and manifestation of globalization where organizations are continually forced to make adjustments to strategies, products, services, and the cost of labor. At its core, downsizing has regenerative purposes (Carbery & Garavan, 2005), yet empirical evidence suggests that the overall consequences of downsizing are persistently negative (Gandolfi, 2006, 2007).

A substantial amount of scientific and anecdotal research has been generated on survivor illnesses, or the so-called “survivor syndrome” (Gowing, Kraft, & Quick, 1998; Carbery & Garavan, 2005). Cross-sectional and longitudinal data suggest that downsizing survivors exhibit a plethora of symptoms and illnesses, including decreased levels of commitment, loyalty, motivation, trust, and security (Gandolfi & Neck, 2005). A considerably less researched area concerns the extent to which downsizing survivors adjust to the new realities and dynamics of the organization, develop new skills and competencies, and take on new roles and responsibilities within the organization (Gandolfi, 2006). Carbery and Garavan (2005) point out that there is an underlying expectation that downsizing survivors are “the cream of the crop” (p 489) and thus considered critical to the organization’s overall success (Gandolfi, 2005). Armstrong-Strassen (1998) contends that the overall outcome and success of a downsizing endeavor is largely contingent upon the reactions of the downsizing survivors. Scientific research has demonstrated that the “breaking of the implicit psychological contract” (Carbery & Garavan, 2005: 489) considerably challenges those that remain with the organizational system following a downsizing activity (Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni, 1995; Gandolfi, 2006).

2. THEORETICAL CONTEXT: THE MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE

The majority of research on change management views major change as taking place incrementally (Carbery & Garavan, 2005) and based upon consensus, collaboration, and participation (Quinn, 1980). In one sense, this view implies that the change process is ‘owned’ by the individual employees (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). The incremental view of change has received a lot of criticisms due to a lack of contextual elements and the difficulty in explaining

the pervasiveness of “coercive reorganizations” (Carbery & Garavan, 2005: 490) in the 1990s and in the early days of the new millennium. This has resulted in the rise of a so-called “transformatory perspective on organizational change” (Carbery & Garavan, 2005: 490). Carbery and Garavan (2005) assert that change strategies are traditionally classified into four types along two dimensions, that is, incrementalism versus transformation and collaboration versus coercion (Dunphy & Stace, 1990). The first dimension refers to whether the change is implemented in a small, linear, and continuous manner or in large, erratic, and a discontinuous fashion. The second dimension determines whether employees are empowered to participate in the planning and implementation stages of a major change. Hinings and Greenwood (1989) propose a typology where transformational change results in the emergence of an alternative interpretive knowledge framework where prevailing ideas lose legitimacy and a new structure emerges. This may entail a reformed mission statement, newly defined core values, and an altered distribution of power (Kleiner & Corrigan, 1989). Gersick (1991) combined the incremental and transformational perspectives into the punctuated equilibrium model of organizational transformation. This approach, which is growing in prominence and pervasiveness (Carbery & Garavan, 2005), recognizes that organizations evolve through long periods of stability (incremental view) that are punctuated by short bursts of revolutionary periods (transformational view), which subsequently establish the basis for new periods of equilibrium (Romanelli & Tushman, 1994; Carbery & Garavan, 2005).

3. THEORETICAL CONTEXT: LEARNING

Carbery and Garavan (2005) assert that change and change processes pose unique challenges to individuals. Huy (1999), for instance, points out that the key challenges for individuals in times of major change are receptivity, motivation, and learning. Receptivity is concerned with the individual’s willingness to accept and embrace change. Motivation, on the other hand, refers to the capacity to implement the change which in turn depends upon the existence of various components, including resources, systems, support structures, and skills (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). It has also been shown that individuals learn from experiences in an organization which will further impact their willingness to embrace change. Thus, learning involves both emotional and skill components (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). Dodgson (1993) claims that individual learning is at the heart of organizational learning. In this sense, individuals are the primary learning entities in organizations. Carbery and Garavan (2005) add that it is individuals who create organizational forms that enable learning in ways which facilitate organizational transformation.

4. THEORETICAL CONTEXT: EMPLOYABILITY

Research suggests that the notion of lifetime employment is being replaced by the paradigm of lifetime employability (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). The latter concept refers to an individual’s capacity and willingness to become and remain attractive in the labor market. Employability is generally considered at the individual level of analysis (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). Thijssen (1997) highlights the existence of three forms of employability. Accordingly, employability may refer to an employee’s capabilities which encompass all individual possibilities to be successful in a wide range of jobs. The second form of employability refers to both the capacity

and the willingness to be successful in a variety of jobs. The third perspective considers individual as well as contextual conditions that determine employability, such as the amount of training provided by the firm. These context-bound factors facilitate or hinder an individual's level and development of employability (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). Groot and van de Brink (2000) distinguish between internal and external employability. The former refers to an employee's ability to remain with the current employer, whereas the latter refers to an individual's ability and willingness to find employment outside the firm. Sanders and de Grip (2004) extend Groot and van de Brink's (2000) work and distinguish between job match employability, firm internal employability, and firm external employability. Job match employability refers to a situation where employees are sufficiently qualified to remain in a current job. Both Bagshaw (1997) and Baruch (2000) stress the importance of the notion of employability. Bagshaw (1997) claims that the creation of mutual dialogue between the individual and the organization fosters an environment of collaborative effort and shared learning. Carbery and Garavan (2005) argue that individuals are required to have high levels of self-insight and self-understanding, possess the ability to clearly articulate their values and vision, and recognize joint responsibility in terms of the nature of the new psychological contract.

5. METHODOLOGY

The organizational setting for this study was a car producer in Europe. The corporation is a recognized world leader and particularly well established in the manufacturing of vans and trucks. The company has earned an enviable reputation in high quality products and increased its market share on a global scale, especially since the mid-1990s. The study was carried out in the firm's headquarters (HQ) in Europe in 2006. In the early days of the new millennium, the management team had unveiled its new campaign entitled "from brawn to brain" which sought to substitute low-value activities with high-value manufacturing. This major refocus was preceded by a thorough strategic assessment which foresaw the re-engineering of the manufacturing processes, the purposeful shift from low to high-value manufacturing, and the off-shoring of about seventy percent of jobs to low-cost bases in Eastern Europe and India. Senior management further sought to transform the organization's focal point from being execution-centric to a commitment to customer-centeredness. The transformed HQ operation is involved with all strategic and operational aspects, including centralized R&D, planning, manufacturing, operations management, and logistics. During the entire 2-year transition period (2002-2004), various restructuring, reorganization, and downsizing activities were implemented which resulted in a decrease of the overall workforce by approximately 2,000 individuals.

In 2006, twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with a targeted sample of professional managerial and non-managerial employees over a period of six months. The qualifying prerequisite was that participating individuals needed to have been with the organization throughout the periods of restructuring, re-engineering, and downsizing activities. All participants were assured that the collected information would be kept confidential. Participants were invited to articulate positive and negative issues that they experienced during the period of change. The interviews were semi-standardized in nature and focused on three broad areas: (1) key drivers and external factors driving the change, (2) skills and learning processes perceived to be helpful in going through the change activities, and (3) enhancement of employability by

means of self-directed learning processes. The interviews were taped and meticulously transcribed. Key issues and incidents were extracted and placed within the three categories. The data analysis phase, which is frequently described as the most difficult phase in qualitative research (Yin, 2003), adopted techniques specified by discourse analysis which is concerned with the variability in individual respondents' accounts and statements. The presentation of results includes both a mixture of direct quotes and paraphrases.

6. RESULTS

The face-to-face interviews focused on three broad areas as expounded in the previous section. Consequently, the results will be discussed within the same three categories:

First major finding: Participants provided detailed information regarding the perceived key drivers and external factors driving the major change. As for the key issues driving the overall change strategy, all participants referred to management's ambition to move the core competency from a low value-adding manufacturing situation to a high-end development and design position. The Chief Operations Officer (COO) discoursed:

"The organization's core competency lies in the conception, design, and development of products, but not in the manufacturing of those products."

This new reality drove the firm to outsource the majority of its conventional manufacturing to Eastern Europe and India. All participants saw the shift in overall strategic focus from manufacturing to research, development, and design (RD&D) and the consequent re-focus on high value-added manufacturing as the key driver. External economic factors were also seen as a "culprit" of the structural change. However, there was an understanding that decisions based upon economic imperatives were required in order to better endure the increasingly competitive and hostile environment. The organizational restructuring activities coupled with two rounds of downsizing were mainly attributed to economic and efficiency factors. There was also a perception that a move up the value chain was not only desirable but, in the words of a production manager, "essential for the survival of the entire corporation". A number of participants justified the reorganization/downsizing decision based upon "cost-cutting pressures", "increased lean management practices", and "concentration, centralization, and rationalization efforts of the entire car industry in Europe". The Chief Quality Officer (CQO) highlighted the importance of focusing on customer relationships by stating:

"Our competitive advantage had slowly eroded and customer satisfaction was waning. We were intent on refocusing on customer satisfaction and customer care."

Participants also highlighted changes in the external environment as key issues affecting the strategic change of the organization. For instance, the competitive nature of the automotive industry, including the emergence of strategic alliances and concentration within the industry, coupled with technological changes, including automation, robotization, and the advent of the internet, forced the company to increasingly examine its overall cost structure which led to the outsourcing and off-shoring of most low value-adding manufacturing jobs.

Second major finding: All participants acknowledged that the overall corporate culture has been considerably impacted by the transition. The Senior Human Resources Manager discoursed:

“All eyes are on costs and the organization has become a tightly managed ship. Costs and expenses issues have definitely become king.”

This view was echoed by a number of participants, especially non-managerial employees who, in some cases, expressed resentment towards the organization. A non-managerial employee, for instance, that has served the corporation for more than two decades commented:

“We have become lean and mean. The sole focus and managerial concern seems to be the overall bottom-line.”

The majority of participants expressed that major changes to the organization’s structure, individual functions, and operational principles occurred. A Senior Marketing Manager commented:

“We have become more focused on our business model and, as a consequence, specifically spell out goals, objectives, and plans for each employee.”

A considerable number of participants commented that the organization has become more customer-focused or “customer-centric” in the post-change and post-transition phases. Some individuals, particularly within the area of production, also emphasized that the overall organizational approach was increasingly metric driven where performance of production was quantitatively evaluated on an on-going basis. Participants’ accounts also stressed that most employees felt a sense of empowerment which allowed them to take ownership over their professional lives and, in some cases, to make individual decisions about their working hours (flextime) and their working location (telecommuting).

Regarding individual skills and qualities required during the transition, the discourse revealed that management perceived certain skills of primary importance during the course of the change. These included technical skills and knowledge pertaining to their current jobs, previous work experience, and self-development skills. Individual qualities that were considered of great value included adaptability, flexibility, creativity, initiative, willingness to learn, and problem solving skills.

Most participants discoursed that there was a lack of provision regarding specific training initiatives for the individuals. A non-managerial respondent stated:

“No training was provided. I had to rely on my own ability to learn, adapt, and absorb.”

A significant focus on on-the-job training emerged and the practice of “shadowing” was heavily utilized. There was a high degree of reliance on people with senior status and individuals who were deemed to have the ability to transfer knowledge effectively. In that sense, there was a considerable dependence upon individuals’ accumulated skills and experience. This finding further validates the perception of a lack of specific training provided and the need for self-management of learning on the part of the individuals.

Participants’ accounts also revealed that little emphasis was placed upon formal training and development activities. A senior finance manager discoursed:

“Very little formal training and development was provided during the transition.”

A managerial member of the Learning and Development (L&D) department echoed this. She stated:

“Most of the provided training was informal and based on the current jobs at the time. Almost no training was provided for the anticipated new roles of the organizational members.”

She further conceded that the individuals had very little choice and personal involvement regarding training and development activities.

Third major finding: Participants' attitudes towards learning and the perceived value of learning during the transition emerged. Most individuals asserted that the learning and training programs offered by the organization were theoretical and abstract and generally lacked practical application. It also emerged that hands-on, practical learning and training with a real-life application focus was seen as a superior form of training. This was discoursed by a Productions Manager:

"Hands-on, practical training is the best form of training. If necessary, this kind of training can be followed-up with classroom sessions for review afterwards."

Interestingly, the participants' accounts revealed that the pursuit of learning, training, and development activities was seen as the employee's own responsibility. The need to take the initiative to pursue such opportunities was stressed by all managerial participants. The Logistics Manager commented:

"The development of an employee is the individual's own responsibility."

A Human Resources Manager confirmed this and added:

"The onus for self-development ultimately rests with the individual employee".

However, although training, learning, and development endeavors were seen as the individual's responsibility, the entire workforce was given a set goals and objectives in relation to performance management.

Regarding the general versus specific training issue, all participants commented that training and development for their current roles was readily available. The accounts of most managers showed that it was difficult for non-managerial employees to obtain training and development beyond their current roles. At the same time, training, learning, and development were current and prospective roles were available at higher levels in the organization. The Senior Manager Research & Development commented:

"It is very difficult, even almost impossible, to get training and development support beyond the job for the non-executive levels of the organization."

Participants questioned whether the firm had a responsibility to provide training, learning, and development opportunities that was likely to enhance the employability of the workforce. Managers' accounts revealed that employability and self-development were not seen as specified goals but, rather, as "by-products". In that sense, all training, learning, and development efforts that were not related to the employees' immediate jobs but positively contributed to their self-development and employability were seen as the individuals' responsibility. Therefore, there was an understanding that these activities needed to be sourced externally to the organization.

Did the firm provide any specific training, learning, and development to help the individuals cope with the transition process? Consistent with the previous findings, there was an acknowledgment that provided training was intrinsically linked to the employees' current roles and largely dictated by the organizational needs. All participants discoursed that they had not taken part in specific formal learning activities to help cope with the restructuring and downsizing transition. Managers' accounts revealed that managerial individuals had the opportunity to pursue external learning opportunities if they perceived a skill deficiency or knowledge gap on their part. A middle manager within the Productions division stated:

“I initiated the requirement for further training, especially when I required further knowledge on an aspect of my work”

At the same time, the individual conceded that the training focus seemed short-term and the training content was specifically job-focused rather than generic and career enhancing.

7. DISCUSSION

The participants' accounts have revealed a number of key findings. The study has demonstrated that most individuals were left to their own devices in terms of developing new skills and competencies in order to be successful and effective survivors of reorganization and downsizing activities. Clearly, the new realities that confront individuals following restructuring and downsizing in respect to training, learning, and development need to be understood (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). The study has shown that there is a need for individuals to take responsibility for their own learning and development during a period of major change and transition (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). Respondents generally perceived that the firm adequately provided for firm-specific skills in their current roles, yet failed to foster advanced generic skills which had to be sourced by the individuals themselves. In that sense, training was provided for the transition *per se*, but not for the post-transition phase which included, in most cases, new and increased roles and responsibilities for the individuals (Gandolfi, 2006). There was also a perception that the firm could not be relied upon to provide future opportunities for all individuals and a sub-culture of self-development pursued by individuals emerged (Carbery & Garavan, 2005).

The study showed that the utilization of self-development skills by the entire workforce was imperative to the success of the transition. Individuals were required to engage in strategic thinking and the display of creativity, innovation, and problem-solving skills was vital (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). However, Mabey and Salaman (1995) state that opportunities to develop self-development skills have a tendency to be limited by organizational processes. At the same time, it has been recognized that placing the onus for training and learning on individuals may polarize the workforce into learners and non-learners (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). Potentially, this also has an impact on the concepts of lifelong learning and employability (Keep, 2000). Billet (2004) extends this by commenting that the workplace frequently represents the sole location to develop job-related skills for most individuals (Carbery & Garavan, 2005).

There is evidence that individuals that have previously been engaged in learning are more likely to be current training participants as opposed to those individuals that have not participated in learning activities. McCracken and Winterton (2003) labeled this “The Matthias Principle” (“to those that hath shall be given”) in that managers and professionals tend to enjoy a higher level of participation in learning activities compared to their subordinates (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). This has led to a widening gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ (Beinart & Smith, 1998) in that there is a skill polarization developing with the skilled individuals gaining more learning opportunities than the semi-skilled and unskilled employees (McGivney, 1999; Carbery & Garavan, 2005).

The data showed that the reorganization and downsizing activities were perceived tarnished and chaotic. This was in spite of the fact that positive and negative outcomes emerged from the transition. Gandolfi (2007) claims that the conduct of downsizing creates major personal challenges for all stakeholders involved. Carbery and Garavan (2005) add that it is mainly the

managers and executioners that generally have a solid understanding about the rationale, approach, and possible outcome of the imminent change. Furthermore, in an environment impacted by major change, individuals frequently evaluate their current jobs and career options and tend to take a proactive approach to their career development and employability (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). The study revealed some insights on the skill development and employability dimensions of the downsizing survivors. Participants' accounts demonstrated that the individuals were the drivers of their own development with little or no assistance from the firm. The organizational training focus was on "the here and now" and provided learning opportunities were generally job-related and firm specific only. Clearly, this kind of training has only limited value in enhancing the employability of the individual (Carbery & Garavan, 2005).

8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is limited in scope—only a single case was selected and relatively few individuals took part. The study was past-related which provided a retrospective view of the transition and change. In this sense, the findings are not generalizable within and across industries and/or countries. The study was cross-sectional and a longitudinal would be the preferred method of obtaining data that tracks changes in perspectives during extended periods of transition. Finally, the paper is principally based upon and heavily relies upon the conceptual framework and findings from the empirical work of Carbery and Garavan (2005). In that sense, this current study mainly sought to test, verify, and possibly extend Carbery and Garavan's (2005) work.

Further research is required to assess the long-term financial, organizational, and social impacts of restructuring and downsizing with a focus on the new dynamics of the changed organization and the extent to which employees are required to invest in skills and develop generic competencies.

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