The survivors of organizational restructuring and downsizing: An Australian study

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The downsizing of global workforces has been a corporate reality since the early 1980s. This Australian study examined accounts of downsizing survivors of a large firm. The research probed into how downsizing survivors adjusted to their newly found corporate realities in the aftermath of restructuring and downsizing and how individuals developed new skills for their new roles and responsibilities within the restructured firm. The primary purpose of this study was to verify Carbery and Garavan's (2005) empirical work. The current study also reflected on issues related to the motivation and attitudes towards employability and learning aspects of individuals. The findings highlight that individuals are responsible for their own training and development needs and are thus continually required to initiate their own learning opportunities. The advancement of self-development skills was considered of primary importance in successfully transforming a firm.

Introduction

Modern-day change management practices, including restructuring and downsizing, represent some of the most profound (Gandolfi, 2006) and problematic (Mirabal & DeYoung, 2005) 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 change in the composition of a firm's assets combined with a major change in organizational direction and strategy. The change management literature distinguishes between various types of restructuring. Heugens and Schenk (2004) discuss three forms of corporate restructuring, namely portfolio, financial, and organizational restructuring. This 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). A multitude of explanations has been presented to justify the adoption of restructuring. Bowman and Singh (1993) assert that the desire to increase an organization's levels of efficiency and effectiveness is at the core of managerial thinking and action. In contrast, Prechel (1994) contends that organizational restructuring is not a strategy *per se*, but occurs as a by-product of portfolio or financial restructuring. This is due to the fact that changes in the strategic and financial capital structures of a firm call for corresponding changes in a firm's authority hierarchies (Prechel, 1994) and decision-making processes (Carbery & Garavan, 2005).

Downsizing constitutes a particular form of organizational restructuring (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). This 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 mid-1980s, downsizing has generated a great deal of interest among scholars and managers alike (Gandolfi, 2007) which has resulted in the emergence of a considerable body of literature (Farrell & Mavondo, 2004). Downsizing has been defined as a deliberate strategy designed to reduce the overall size of the workforce (Cascio, 1993) and is distinguished from non-intentional forms of organizational size reductions. A variety of downsizing tools and techniques has appeared, including natural attritions, hiring freezes, early retirements, and layoffs (Gandolfi & Neck, 2003). Downsizing has been used reactively in order to avoid bankruptcy and secure survival (Fisher & White, 2000) or proactively in order to increase productivity and enhance competitiveness (Gandolfi, 2006). Some research points out that downsizing is commonly adopted by firms after making large investments in labor saving technologies (Carbery & Garavan, 2005). De Vries and Balazs (1997) consider downsizing an inevitable outcome and manifestation of globalization where firms are continually forced to make adjustments to strategies, products, services, and considerations regarding 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 largely negative (Cascio, 1993; Macky, 2004).

Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have reported the occurrence of downsizing survivor illnesses, including the so-called downsizing ‘survivor syndrome’ (Littler, 1998; Williams, 2004), following the conduct of downsizing. Empirical data suggests that downsizing survivors exhibit a plethora of symptoms, including decreased levels of commitment, loyalty, motivation, morale, trust, and security (Gandolfi & Neck, 2003). A considerably less researched area concerns the extent to which downsizing survivors adjust to the new realities and dynamics of the firm, develop new skills and competencies, and take on new roles and responsibilities within the organization (Gandolfi, 2006). Carbery and Garavan (2005) stress that downsizing survivors are “the cream of the crop” (p 489) and considered critical to the organization’s overall success. Armstrong-Strassen (1998) asserts that the overall outcome and success of a downsizing endeavor is largely contingent upon the reactions of the downsizing survivors. Empirical studies have demonstrated that the breaking of the implicit old psychological contract considerably challenges those that remain with the organizational system following a downsizing activity (Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni, 1995; Gandolfi, 2006).

The main purpose of this study was to examine individual accounts of downsizing survivors of a large Australian firm. In particular, the research probed into how downsizing survivors adjusted to meet their newly found corporate realities and how individuals developed new skills for their newly emerging roles and responsibilities within the restructured firm. As such, the objective of this study was to verify Carbery and Garavan’s (2005) empirical work.

The management of major change

The change management literature assumes that major change takes place incrementally (Carbery & Garavan, 2005) and is based upon consensus, collaboration, and participation (Quinn, 1980). In one sense, this view implies that the change process is ‘owned’ by the individual employees. The incremental view of change has received a lot of criticism 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 first years of the new millennium. This has resulted in the rise of a so-called “transformatory perspective on organizational change” (Carbery & Garavan, 2005: 490). Historically, change strategies have been classified into four types of strategies 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 a large, erratic, and discontinuous fashion. The second dimension determines whether employees are empowered to participate in the planning and implementation stages of a 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 has grown in prominence and pervasiveness, 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).

Change, learning, and employability

Change poses unique challenges to individuals. Huy (1999), for instance, points out that the key challenges for individuals in times of 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) proposes that individual learning is at the heart of organizational learning. In this sense, individuals are the primary learning entities in firms. As a consequence, it is individuals who create organizational forms that enable learning to take place in ways which facilitate organizational transformation.

It must be understood that the notion of lifetime employment has largely been replaced by the paradigm of lifetime employability (Gandolfi, 2006). 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. Thijssen (1997) presents 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, while 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 to successfully find employment outside the firm. Sanders and de Grip (2004) extend Groot and van de Brink's (2000) work and distinguish between firm internal employability, firm external employability, and job match employability. The latter concept 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 overall employability. Bagshaw (1997), for instance, claims that mutual dialogue between the individual and the organization fosters an environment of collaborative effort and shared learning.

Methodology

The study involved a bio-pharmaceutical firm which provided the organizational setting for this Australian research study. The organization is a relatively young subsidiary of a large prestigious pharmaceutical company headquartered in Europe. The firm has earned an enviable reputation in high quality products and considerably increased its market share on a global scale, especially since 2003. The study was carried out in the Australian subsidiary in New South Wales. In 2004, management unveiled its new campaign entitled "Leaping ahead: from brawns to brain" which sought to substitute low-value with high-value activities. This refocus was preceded by a thorough strategic assessment which foresaw the re-engineering of the research and development (R&D) processes, the purposeful shift from low to high-value R&D, and the off-shoring of about fifty percent of jobs to low-cost bases in India, China, and Malaysia. Senior management further sought to transform the firm's focus from execution-centric to a commitment to customer-centeredness. The transformed Australian operation is bestowed with all strategic and operational aspects, including centralized R&D, planning, manufacturing, operations management, and logistics. During the entire 2-year transition period (2004-2006), various restructuring and downsizing activities were implemented which resulted in a decrease of the workforce by approximately 2,000 individuals in Australia.

Ten in-depth interviews were conducted with a targeted sample of managerial, professional, and operative employees over a period of four months in 2007. The qualifying prerequisite was that participating individuals needed to have been with the firm throughout the periods of restructuring and downsizing. Participants were assured that the information would be kept confidential. Participants were invited to articulate positive and negative issues that they experienced during the change. The interviews were semi-standardized and focused on three areas: (1) key drivers 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 in the following section includes a mixture of quotes and paraphrases.

Results

The semi-standardized, face-to-face interviews focused on three broad areas as introduced in the previous section. As such, the results will be presented within the same three categories:

Finding #1

The first finding pertained to the key drivers and external factors driving the major change. Individual participants provided detailed information regarding their perceptions and experiences. Most participants explicitly referred to senior management's quest to move the firm's core competency from a low value-adding manufacturing and production situation to a high-end research, development, and design position. For example, the Operations Officer discoursed:

"Our core competency lies in the conception, design, and development of products, but not necessarily in the manufacturing of those [products].*"*

This new reality drove the firm to outsource the majority of its conventional production to India, China, Malaysia, and Indonesia. All participants saw the shift in overall strategic focus from production/manufacturing to research, development, and design (RD&D) and the consequent re-focus on high value-added production as the principal 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 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 an executive, "*essential for the survival of the entire operation*". A number of participants rationalized the reorganization/downsizing decision based upon "*cost-cutting pressures*", "*increased lean management practices*", and "*concentration, centralization, and rationalization efforts of the entire bio-pharmaceutical industry*". The Chief Quality Officer (CQO) highlighted the importance of customer relationships as a core competency by stating:

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

Most participants highlighted changes in the external environment as key issues affecting the strategic change of the firm. For instance, the competitive nature of the entire industry, including the emergence of strategic alliances and concentration activities 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 staged outsourcing and off-shoring of low value-adding production jobs. A Finance Executive commented:

"*Competitive and cost pressures have had a considerable influence on our strategic re-direction*."

Finding #2

The vast majority of participants confirmed that the transition was driven mainly by cost aspects and financial imperatives. A HR Executive discoursed:

"All eyes are on costs and the firm has become a tightly managed ship."

This was echoed by another senior HR member who stated:

"Cost issues have definitely become king."

This cost perspective and focus was highlighted by a number of participants, especially non-managerial employees who, in some cases, expressed feelings of anger, bitterness, and resentment towards the organization. A long-serving, non-managerial employee commented:

"We have become a lean and mean firm…" and *"The sole focus is the bottom-line."*

Another employee added:

"*They (*management*) are obsessed with a cost focus… they are only concerned with dollar issues, really.*"

A significant number of participants expressed that major changes to the company's culture, structure, reporting lines, individual functions, and operational principles ensued. This was embodied by a Marketing Executive who commented:

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

A number of participants commented that the company has become more customer-focused or "*customer-centric*" in the post-transition phase. 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 revealed 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 (e.g., compressed workweek, flextime) and their working location (e.g., telecommuting).

What individual skills and qualities were required during the transition? The discourse showed that management, in particular, perceived certain skills to be of primary importance during the change process. These included technical skills and knowledge pertaining to their current jobs, previous work experience, and self-development skills. Individualized qualities that were considered of great value and benefit during the transition, included adaptability, flexibility, creativity, initiative, problem solving skills, and a willingness to learn.

A majority of participants expressed that the provision of specific training initiatives for the individuals was lacking. An operative respondent stated:

"Absolutely no training was provided. I relied on my own ability to learn, adapt, and absorb."

This was supported by another operative employee who expressed:

"The firm largely failed to provide technical training."

During the entire transition, a focus upon on-the-job (OTJ) training emerged and the practice of "shadowing" was utilized across the board. There was a high degree of reliance upon 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 on individuals' accumulated skills, knowledge, and experience. This 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' comments further revealed that little emphasis was placed upon formal training, learning, and development activities. An Executive discoursed:

"Unfortunately, very little formal training was provided during the transition."

In a similar vein, a managerial member of the Learning and Development (L&D) department commented:

"We provided training that was informal, impromptu, and based on the current jobs. Almost no training was provided for the anticipated new roles of the organizational members."

She added that the individual organizational members had very little choice and personal involvement regarding training and development activities.

Finding #3

Participants' attitudes towards learning, in general, and the perceived value of learning during the organizational transition emerged. Most participants asserted that the training programs offered by the firm were theoretical, abstract, and generally lacked practical application. It also emerged that hands-on, practical training with a real-life application focus was seen as a superior form of learning. This was evidenced by a Production Manager who discoursed:

"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."

Individual participants' accounts revealed that learning, training, and development activities were seen as the employees' own responsibility. In fact, 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."

Similarly, a Human Resources Manager confirmed this and added:

"While the firm is generally supportive of learning activities, the onus for self-development ultimately rests with the individual employee."

Although, training, learning, and development endeavors were seen as the individual's responsibility, employees received clearly set goals and objectives in relation to performance management. A HR Executive commented:

"*We have a performance-driven culture. For this purpose, we have established clear performance-related parameters."*

"Every employee knows exactly what is expected of him or her."

In relation to the issue of general versus specific training, 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 existing roles. In contrast, training, learning, and development aspects were current and training for prospective roles was readily available at higher levels in the organization. A Manager Research & Development (R&D) 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."

Some participants questioned as to whether the firm had a responsibility to provide training and development opportunities whose objective was 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 unrelated to the employees' immediate jobs but positively contributed to their self-development and employability were seen as the individuals own responsibility. Thus, there was an understanding that these activities needed to be sourced externally to the company.

Did the firm provide any specific training and development activities in order to assist the individuals in coping with the transition process? Consistent with the previous two findings, there was a strong acknowledgment that firm-provided training was intrinsically linked to the employees' current roles and largely dictated by the organizational needs. All involved participants discoursed that they had not taken part in specific formal learning activities to help cope with the transition of restructuring and downsizing. 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. This was evidenced by a Productions supervisor who stated:

"I initiated the funding for further training when I realized that I needed more specific training and further knowledge on an aspect within the job duties of my work."

Finally, the manager admitted that the training focus seemed short-term and the content was specifically job-focused rather than long-term and generic and, thus, career enhancing.

Discussion

The purpose of this Australian research was to verify Carbery and Garavan's (2005) work. 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 corporate 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 considered and understood. The findings suggest that there is a need for individuals to take responsibility for their own learning and development during a period of major change and transition in order to successfully cope with the change. 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. 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.

The study revealed 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. 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.

The study provided some evidence suggesting 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” (i.e., “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. 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 (McGiveney, 1999).

Conclusive remarks

This study has shown that reorganization and downsizing activities are perceived to be tarnished and chaotic. This is in spite of the fact that a major organizational transition produces both positive and negative outcomes. Gandolfi (2007) postulates that downsizing creates major personal challenges for all stakeholders involved. Carbery and Garavan (2005) add that it is mainly the senior managers and downsizing executioners that have a solid understanding of the rationale, approach, and possible outcome of the imminent change. Furthermore, in an environment characterized 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). This study revealed some insights into the skill development and employability dimensions of the downsizing survivors. Participants’ accounts demonstrated that the individuals were the driving forces of their own development with little or no assistance from the firm. The organizational training focus was on ‘the here and now’ and learning opportunities were generally job-related and firm specific. Clearly, this kind of training has only limited value in enhancing the employability of an individual employee.

This Australian research study is limited in scope and application – a single case was selected and relatively few individuals participated. The study was past-oriented which provided a retrospective view of the major transition and change. In this sense, the findings may not be generalizable within and across industries and/or countries. The study was cross-sectional and a longitudinal approach would be the preferred method of obtaining data that tracks changes in perspectives during extended periods of transition. Finally, the paper heavily focused upon Carbery and Garavan’s (2005) work. Considerably more 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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