

# Outplacement Revisited

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*In today's changing economy, downsizing has become a common phenomenon. Organizations cannot assure job-security to their employees. Even if the organization is forced to take a decision to lay-off its employees, it can provide some assistance, at least when they are leaving the organization. Outplacement i.e. helping the outgoing employees in the job search process goes a long way in preserving the image of an organization. The objective of this paper is to understand the importance of outplacement and to explore to what extent this service is provided in India and all over the world. In addition to this, the article also provides detailed narrative of literature related to outplacement and a compilation of what possible outplacement services could be offered as against the misconception of providing a job to those being forced to leave the organization.*

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## Introduction

Today's world of work is not only about paying salaries, incentives, welfare facilities and other things but also is going that extra mile to help people who are going-to-be laid-off or are no more on the rolls of the company. It involves money when it comes to helping people who are no more going to be with the organization. Are we looking at only the money part or something more than that? When an organization asks people to leave, the 'news' itself comes as a blow to them. In a place like India where there is no unemployment insurance and the society's acceptance of unemployment of a person is low this definitely comes as a loss difficult to bear. Adding to this is the stigma associated with job loss in the Indian society. At this point if the employer is not willing to take any responsibility it could aggravate problems in the society. It is at this moment, that the employer plays a very crucial role in helping the employee to cope with the loss. For today's workforce, especially in the private sector, to the already existing performance pressures, added are the woes of external factors like slowdown etc. Suddenly the laid-off employees find themselves faced with new challenges of choosing and preparing themselves for a

new career. Providing help at this juncture will enable the employee to get the strength to regain equilibrium in life.

### **The Global Scenario**

With globalization i.e. removal of barriers to free trade and the closer integration of national economies people all over the world have benefitted. But with the integration, anything happening anywhere in the world, affects other parts too. One of the devastating effects could be downsizing.

As Meyer and Shadle (1994) put it, we have always had people lose their jobs involuntarily through what has become known as incompetence, immoral or irresponsible behavior, or social incompatibility. What is still relatively new, however, is the increase in ‘social degree’ dismissals. These are dismissals resulting from the global competition, technological advances, improved productivity, and corporate restructuring. In industrialized countries, the pain of layoffs is acknowledged and somewhat ameliorated by the safety net of unemployment insurance. In less developed countries, the unemployed workers typically do not become a public charge, since there are seldom unemployment insurance schemes. There can be large social cost nonetheless – manifested, in its worst forms, by urban violence, increased crime, and social and political unrest. But even in the absence of these problems, there are huge costs of unemployment. They include widespread anxiety even among workers who have managed to keep their jobs, a broader sense of alien-

ation, additional financial burdens on family members who manage to remain employed and the withdrawal of children from school to help support the family. These kinds of social costs endure long past the immediate loss of a job (Stiglitz, 2008).

Even if the victims have to leave the organization, a fair treatment towards them affects the perception of the survivors to a great extent. A just treatment towards the victims goes a long way in the survivor’s perception of the management as sensitive.

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### **Outplacement through History**

According to Papalexandris (1996), “outplacement” is a term, which appeared in the US in the early 1970s, is used to describe the efforts made by the downsizing company to help its redundant employees find a new job. Professional outplacement counseling as an organized profession is of fairly recent origin, developing within the past 20 years, within the aerospace industry. But it is being added to many employee benefits packages, as another form of employee assistance, which ranges from mental therapy, drug and alcohol rehabilitation to divorce assistance and child care. The basic concept of concern for employee welfare can be traced back hundreds of years, to Europe and the Far East

(Camden, 1982). Driessnack (1980) defined outplacement as the removal of redundant or marginal personnel with minimum benefit to the individual involved. Through a competitively developed methodology and professional assistance, separated personnel can be taught how to successfully organize their capabilities in marketable form and to find suitable employment elsewhere... The variety of combinations to be provided can be many and lavish: a lump-sum payment for a year, or even two year's pay are provided. Fictitious duties may be assigned: 'Special Assistant-to...' titles may be created. All of these arrangements, while well intentioned, may be expensive to the company but do they help an employee find a new job? "Outplacement" is a package of services to raise the odds of finding a new job - but placement per se is not one of those services (Gelb, 2001). Thus, it will be helpful if the employer provides those services which are actually going to reduce the job search process.

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Goodyear Tyre and Rubber Company, US, contacted an outplacement concern to assist them in two plant closings. The management decided to provide outplacement counseling to all employees who wanted it, regardless of work classification or seniority. In addition to salaried administrative and supervisory staff, the hourly unionized production

workers were also included. Some of the features of the program were: an introductory multi-media presentation in which Goodyear acknowledged the workers for the contribution they have made, explaining why it was necessary to close the plant and introduce the outplacement team and the process; a six hour job strategies workshop covering the entire job finding process; individual counseling using the outplacement agent's counselors and trained employees from within the company; a three hour resume clinic showing each worker how to draft an effective resume and cover letters; a three hour interviewing workshop with video and other visual to train participants in most effective self-presentation; a computerized job targeting vocational information system to help workers select new job targets (Jackson, 1980).

The Career Development Team (outplacement consultants) conducted five half-day workshops along with some individual counseling. If retirement was an option, some pre-retirement counseling also was provided by the group of consultants. In some instances, these groups worked at the company but in a different location. Some companies move the outplacement groups to an outside location for security reasons (Farish, 1982).

At a General Electric plant, about one-fourth of a group of 200 departing managers were in the \$50,000 plus class, while the remainder were below that - the higher-paid worked in groups of eight, while the others operated in groups of 20. Members of support

groups made contracts among each other until everyone had a new position. In a sense, the group system operates as a small company, the mission of which is to market each other's skills. It is a totally different situation when people work together. It is not only less costly for the organization to do outplacement this way, but the results are better. (Farish, 1982). Services of outplacement agencies range from individual counseling, interview training and computer lessons to interview arrangements (Fuyuno, 2001). As put forth by Challenger (2002), companies have much to learn about downsizing humanely and ethically... Provide job search assistance and outplacement. Assure that it begins on the day people are notified. It will provide a safe haven for confidential discussions and frustrations. Quality outplacement counseling will help the entire organization come to terms with the loss. Though the outplacement activity finds its roots in the US, even today it is not being extensively followed by all organizations, excepting for the larger ones who are concerned about their brand image.

Normally, outplacement is understood as providing jobs to the outgoing employees or the laid-off employees, whereas, it could mean any help extended by the organization to help the employee which would smoothen the job search process or career alternative. This assistance could be in the form of any of the following: helping job seekers to identify strengths and weaknesses and accordingly chalk out a career alternative which one might have missed out in or-

der to widen the opportunities; advice and clerical services provided as to how to prepare a resume; providing a counselor for any help.

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### **Why to Provide Outplacement?**

In the long run, the employer ought to look at the return from a larger perspective. Expecting immediate returns might be looked at as too ambitious. Imagine when an organization lets go an employee who has been with it for the last two decades. S/he is not mentally prepared to look around for a new job. Suddenly the employee finds himself as though "in the middle of high seas". Here if the management can pitch in it goes a long way for the victim as well as those who are still with the organization. Especially, when an employee is at mid-level and above it becomes a challenge finding another job and secondly getting over the shock. Any help provided could help in boosting the morale of the outgoing employee.

When employee layoffs are no more a new phenomenon then helping the outgoing employees should not be something unique to some organizations only. An analysis and review of best reduction-in-force (RIF) practices suggests that constructive damage control can be achieved and corporate goodwill developed through

open, candid and timely communication with all stakeholders. Moreover, the firm must consider the needs of both the remaining and existing employees (Makawatsakul & Kleiner, 2003) including the provision of ongoing training and retraining for surviving individuals and outplacement services for existing employees (Zyglidopoulos, 2003).

According to Kirk (1994), just as companies call on outside consultants to help them manage difficult business transitions, many firms are now doing the same to help their employees. This new type of employee's assistance is called outplacement and it can help laid-off workers regain their equilibrium, plan for new careers and become gainfully reemployed. The process by which reduction is implemented can have long-term implications for the firm as well as the employee. Poorly handled layoffs may negatively impact the company's image in the local and professional communities, which could result in difficulties for the company in future hirings. In addition, the productivity of remaining employees may be reduced as they experience increased levels of anxiety and guilt (Hill & Fannin, 1991). Those remaining on the job "watch the way management treats a terminated employee, and they take this as a signal of how they will be treated" (Guinn, 1988). Management can "show its commitment" to its employees, even... in the process of separating them from the organization" (Brockner, 1992). Thus, the sort of treatment/help meted out to former employees has a direct impact on the morale and productivity of the remaining workers.

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The outplacement literature also points out that terminations have broader implications. Recruitment can prove difficult for firms once they become known for holding little promise of job security or dealing coldly with their employees (Granholt, 1991; Latack & Dozier, 1986). Hence, it is not only on humanitarian grounds that taking care of an outgoing employee will prove fruitful later but also the image of the organization while attracting future employees when the time is good. This initiative helps earn a lot of goodwill for the organization.

#### **By Whom & for Whom?**

As understood by now, the outplacer helps the dismissed employees in managing their psychological state and offers aid and advice relating to job search, thus, smoothening the transition from job loss to re-employment. Waraich and Bhardwaj (2003) were of the view that the role of ethics, here, should not be sidelined because when the organization is footing the bill for the outplacement services, the outplacers should always be just towards the employees also rather than being tempted to work only in favour of the organization forseeing business in the future. Main (1989) pointed out that the corporations that pay for outplacement service generally love it; having the outplacers around makes firing easier.

Outplacement services can be provided by the company itself, or it can be outsourced. If provided by the company it is always advisable to have senior managers in the team. Since they are experienced and know their employees well they will be in a better position to help the dismissed employee. But at the same time it depends to a great extent as to how fair the employees perceive their senior management to be. By outsourcing the outplacement services the element of suspicion is ruled out due to the neutral nature of the agent. Besides, the level of motivation of the internal facilitator might be questionable or low compared to that of an external agent (Waraich & Bhardwaj, 2003).

Bearak (1982) suggested that organizations should consider using outside consultants in the design and implementation of their outplacement programmes. He believes consultants can play a major role in assisting employers in the initial training of those individuals who will be responsible for actually performing the outplacement service. This is important to the programme's success because many employers do not know how to handle the termination, let alone how to

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help terminees seek new employment. Alternatively, Waraich and Bhardwaj (2003) opined that there may be organizations which even having the willingness to go for outplacement services, have to think twice about the cost. In such cases,

it is preferable to spend once and train the internal employees (who would handle the situation as and when required). This would also save the organization from recurring costs while hiring outplacement services on a retainership basis. A lot of training is provided to the managers but rarely on acquiring the expertise to dismiss employees effectively. But at the time of termination this skill becomes very useful or is looked up to. It is not only the outplacement services provided but as put forth by Morin and Yorks (1990) the outplacer should be prepared to employ crisis counseling techniques with these clients. Open-ended questions, accepting behaviors, restatement, and silence are the fundamental tools of such counseling.

Which level/ category of employees should be catered to with outplacement services? From Goffman's (1952) perspective, it is apparent why outplacement came to be focused on upper level employees. They are thought to be far more emotionally distressed by termination than others, given their time, financial and ego-identity investments in career (e.g., Kaufman, 1982; Latack & Dozier, 1986). However, it is felt by the author that at whatever level an employee is it comes as a shock when he is asked to leave the company. So it would be ideal if outplacement could be provided to employees at all levels though the form of assistance might differ. For e.g. people at higher levels do not necessarily require any sort of training for facing interviews while for those at lower levels it will be of great help. Whoever provides the ser-

vices to employees exiting the organization across all levels should keep in mind the interests of the organization as well as those of the employees. When it comes to the non-monetary assistance there should be no harm in going that extra mile in the interest of the employees.

### **Outplacement Scenario in India**

In the developed economies like the US outplacement services have existed since long (early 90s). There are a number of firms specializing in outplacement services to help the outgoing employees, especially in case of mass layoffs/pink slips. Apart from the unemployment insurance this sort of service contributes a lot to the society. This talks about how caring an employer is even when the employees are leaving the organization.

There was a time when companies could shrug off their responsibility to help an outgoing employee in the job search process. But with mass workforce reductions happening, either due to fear of losing image in the market or on humanitarian ground more and more organizations are turning to outplacement initiatives.

According to Mohandas (2008) in India, the service has been performed in fits and spurts, even as an unpaid service based on personal relationships between human resource managers and recruiters. Employers already using outplacement services range from telecommunications giant Motorola Inc.'s India arm and technology provider and

consultancy Sapient Corp.'s India operations to start-ups shutting shop such as telecommunications company Aylus Networks India Pvt. Ltd. CareerNet Consulting, for example, said it did 400 outplacements over the last year alone; data for previous years was unavailable but the company said it was not as significant. Apart from this outplacement is done more as a goodwill gesture by recruiters for free.

A study was conducted by Waraich and Bhardwaj (2009), on workforce reduction (in which managers were interviewed in 2007-08), in the Indian set-up. The sample comprised 34 top level managers from four organizations in the manufacturing sector who had reduced workforce in the recent past. One of the questions posed to the 34 top managers was – “What sort of outplacement initiatives were taken by your current organization?” 85.3% of the respondents shared that there was no outplacement initiative in the current organization; 14.7% shared that outplacement initiative exists in some form in the current organization. 71% of the respondents felt that outplacement was not required and 6% felt that outplacement initiatives should be taken by the current organization.

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organizations as well as not too prevalent in the Indian context. Outplacement, if at all exists in their organizations it is, at the most, in the form of roping in a consultant/placement agent to help the departees get jobs. Some were of the view that their organization had outsourced some work to a few people who were working in similar functions and now after departing from the organization working as independent consultants in these areas e.g. payroll processing outsourced to some ex-employees who have opened own consultancy after quitting and was handling the same while at work. Another example could be – after quitting from the organization working in the form of joint ventures with the organization and supplying to the ancillary units whenever there was a requirement.

Many of the top managers felt that outplacement, especially for executives, is a sheer wastage of time. How does it concern the current organization what its executives do after leaving? It is more important for them to concentrate on the current employees than departees, especially executives, who know how to take care of their careers. More important, they do not necessarily wait for the organization's efforts to help them. If at all required, it should be only for the workers or at the most for some of the good performers at executive level who have been made to depart because of business reasons and are confused as to what to do. Some managers felt that outplacement was not feasible at an organizational level, only could be done at a personal level as a moral obligation.

Thus, according to this study, outplacement as a process is hardly recognized or almost non-existent in these Indian organizations.

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While looking at some recent reports, Biswas (2009) shared that the slowdown appears to have stirred up India Inc's collective conscience. HR consultancy Right Management, the world's largest outplacement firm, is in India since 2006. Clients from the IT and financial services industry have signed on in the past three months, including foreign multinationals in India and 4-5 Indian companies planning to downsize their white collar employees.

Bhattacharya (2012) reported that soon after Citigroup let go of 100 employees across India in January, 2012 many functional heads received an unusual brief. They were asked to scout for jobs for those who had been terminated. Counselors were also roped in to soften the blow and professional services firms were hired to make the career transition of the terminated employees – some of them star performers – smooth. A few others, including Bharti Airtel and DLF have also been doing so recently. When DLF decided to farm out some of its large projects to companies like L&T and Shapoorji Pallonji, nearly 350 employees of DLOR (a subsidiary set up by DLF to manage construction of its large projects)

were likely to be redeployed at the other construction firms. GE India either absorbs the affected employees in other GE businesses/roles or engages outplacement agencies to help them get suitable opportunities externally.

Although some organizations in Asia still think that it is not their responsibility to look after their people, the trend is gradually improving. Nithyanandan, BTI Consultants' vice-president for Asia Pacific, said the focus of a good outplacement service was not just to help someone find another job quickly but also to help individuals take stock and find the best solutions (Bangkok Post, 2009). It is also being heard that some companies in India circulate the CVs of their employees among head hunters well in advance, of the employees being actually asked to leave the organisation. With explicit instructions being given to the head hunter and some obtuse hints to the employees, the exit becomes much easier and in a dignified way even before being asked to leave.

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It is good to know that organizations are to an extent, now aware of the outplacement efforts that need to be made by the employer for the exiting employees. In the Indian context, however, while it has started in a few organizations, it is only a minuscule, looking at

its requirement. Considering the number of employees being shown the door, the outplacement initiatives are way below the expectations.

### **Outplacement Initiatives – A Compilation**

Normally, it is misunderstood as providing a job to the outgoing employees and because of this misunderstanding organizations shy away from providing any help. Whereas, outplacement in its totality could come in different forms i.e. any sort of help extending to the outgoing employees which would facilitate their job search process. After going through an array of resource materials i.e. articles, research papers and newspaper clippings the author has assimilated possible outplacement initiatives which it is felt could help to a great extent by making organizations aware of the different outplacement initiatives. There are many ways which do not cost the organization too much, as well as are beneficial to the employees:

- Individual counseling to employees by hired outplacement agents as well as by some of the trained and selected employees from the organization to handle the follow-up counseling.
- Financial planning advice to the outgoing employees.
- Counseling of the family members of the employees, if required.
- Employees being continuously counseled to be upfront with their spouses and other family members because

these people could be a major source of psychological support for the employee.

- Personality assessment to identify a career path that is suited to the individual, at that moment.
- Conducting career and psychological tests with detailed feedback.
- Assisting in opening up new possibilities of an entrepreneurial nature.
- Helping outgoing employees with coaching on-job search skills and interview techniques.
- Guiding employees even in the basic application letter-writing skills.
- Many times employees have been so busy with their work that they never had the time to assess their marketable skills. Administering certain tests on personality, skills, and abilities will help them identify such areas where the individual could work but was not aware earlier, especially if they are not able to find a job in their current area.
- Providing typing, copying, postage and printing facilities.
- Helping the candidate to get into the networking chain which could result in generating a few job leads i.e. coaching them how to use contacts.
- When the decision has been taken and before actually asking an employee to leave, without the employees' awareness, floating their CV in the market so that s/he can leave on her/his own.

- For junior level employees, training them on how to succeed in competitive job interviews.

The above list could seem comprehensive but definitely not at all-encompassing. Here, also the organization might show its innovation in finding out ways to help its employees, while not putting too much of a burden on its budget. Though monetary assistance is an important beginning, it is not the end. Along with this, other types of help like counseling, training etc guide the lost employee to a great extent. Many companies in India put in a lot of effort and time into designing their voluntary retirement packages to make it look as attractive as possible. As suggested by Waraich and Bhardwaj (2009), the voluntary retirement scheme in isolation might not be very helpful in some cases, bringing back the victim to status quo after some time. But if the voluntary retirement scheme accompanies the outplacement process, it will be more fruitful. It is felt that monetary benefits accompanied with other types of assistance and motivation can prove to be more constructive.

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### **Conclusion**

If not immediate returns, outplacement could be looked at as social responsibility by the organization in terms of convincing the current employ-

ees as well as attracting prospective employees in future when the things start looking brighter. Apart from being looked up as a social responsibility, some of the good employees who were forced to leave during the bad times, might consider coming back (if the organization had tried to help them at the time of parting) when it has such a requirement in future. The employee herself/himself as well as the organization are together responsible for the career of an employee. So, by telling an employee to leave the organization without doing anything leaves her/him in a lurch.

At the same time, while helping the employees it should not be mistaken by the employees as their right to employment. The organization while helping the employees should also keep in mind that the job search motivation on the part of the employees should be there. Unless the employees are themselves motivated, amidst all the turmoil, it will be difficult to find a job.

In the Indian context, though outplacement is catching up, it is not significant. All the more, in a collectivistic society like India, it becomes more pertinent for the managers in the organization to extend help in any form during the job search process of the out-going employees. Instead of only sympathizing with the victims, they should be encouraged to actively participate in the job search process. Many a times it happens that a good employee gets disheartened to the extent that s/he loses any hope of finding another job. Here, some sort of encouragement or motivation will bring

about a lot of positive change into the job search process of the employee who has lost her/his job.

If we look at the outplacement initiatives it doesn't necessarily imply a substantial budgetary allocation. However, the cost of helping people when asked to leave is as much as the cost of layoff and the image of the organization. The employer, by taking this initiative, helps not only the unemployed/going to be unemployed individual but also manages the larger social cost. Thus, outplacement does not necessarily mean providing a job to an outgoing employee but helping her/him during the job-search process, which could mean anything from counseling, budgeting assistance to any hand holding required.

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