

The Essence of Downsizing: A Review of Literature

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The process of downsizing has often been considered as a one-time activity that is disconnected from the processes and the outcomes associated with the activity. Since the strategies, organizational, industrial and environmental characteristics play a crucial role in determining the success and/or failure of the downsizing process, a piece-meal approach to the research on downsizing is not enough. This paper thus presents a holistic view of the downsizing process where the dynamics that ensue during the downsizing are elucidated in a framework. This paper further discusses certain implications for practitioners and provides scope for future research for the researchers.

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Introduction

The aftermath of the process of downsizing by organizations is a very crucial point of concern. Several researchers have spoken about the possible outcomes in relation to firm's operational performance such as organizational learning capacity, change in the organizational culture (Cascio, 1993), technological advancement (Maheshwari & Kulkarni, 2003), improvement of the organization's competitive position (Amabile & Conti, 1999), financial and market outcomes such as market valuation (Love & Kraatz, 2009;), short-term market reaction (Love & Kraatz, 2009), signal for potential synergies (Bowman & Singh, 1993; Cascio et al., 1997; Demuse et al., 1994), and willingness for future acquisitions (Krishnan, Hitt & Park, 2007). However, after the organization has been downsized, additional challenges are made in handling the remaining human capital in the organization. In this paper, we have concentrated on the outcomes of downsizing based on current and potential employees. It is vital for an organization as an employer to consider various factors to ensure high commitment and low turnover intentions of the present employees and the attractiveness of the organization for the po-

tential job-seekers. These factors are firm characteristics, industry characteristics, individual characteristics (employee and their supervisors); possible outcomes of various downsizing processes, and various steps implemented by the organization to combat negative effects of downsizing.

What Is Downsizing?

Downsizing has been defined as “the planned elimination of positions and jobs, which does not include the normal retirements or resignations, but the voluntary severance and early retirement packages” (Cascio, 1993). It refers to a deliberate intention of laying off a certain number of workforce from the organization. Organizational decision makers provide various reasons behind downsizing, which are the following:

Downsizing is basically considered a mode to remove the redundancies in the organization, and it is mostly considered in the terms of headcount reduction.

- (a) To reduce costs (Gandolfi & Hansson, 2011; Sahdev, 2003), (b) to improve the speed of decision-making (Cameron, 1994), (c) to improve one’s competitive strategy (Levitt, Wilson, & Gilligan, 2008; Macky, 2004), (d) to enhance communications within the organization (Cameron, 1994), (e) to maximize shareholder returns (Escalante, 2001), and (f) to improve organizational efficiency (Zyglidopoulos,

2003) and productivity (Cameron, 1994). Downsizing is basically considered a mode to remove the redundancies in the organization, and it is mostly considered in the terms of headcount reduction; but it can also be a form of revamping the job design and revisiting and redesigning certain jobs (Cascio, 1993).

Forms of Downsizing

Downsizing can thus be broadly categorized into three types:

Workforce Reduction: Organizations have taken up workforce reductions not only to reduce the salary, training, promotion, and rewards related to the costs in the organizations but also as an attempt to create a ‘lean’ organization. The workforce reduction could be in terms of hiring freezes, layoffs, voluntary retirement, and golden handshakes (Howard, 1988; Maheshwari & Kulkarni, 2003; Tourish, Paulsen, Hobman & Bordia, 2004). The first form of workforce reduction unlike the other three is the stoppage of the recruitment into the organization, and thus barring the entry of the potential employees and keeping the current employees unaffected (Feldman, 1996). The downside of hiring freezes is the signal to the job market about the difficulties in the functioning of the company, which will affect the future jobseeker’s attraction to the organization (Feldman, 1996). The effectiveness of voluntary retirement and golden handshakes is decided by the timing, the composition of the people asked to leave, and the rationale behind the re-

duction in workforce. If the employees in the organization are nearing their retirement age, their commitment and productivity probably decrease, the early departure of such employees enhances the proportion of highly motivated and productive employees in the organization (Howard, 1988).

Work Redesign: Organizations take up work redesign to eliminate redundant jobs and units, and the target of the redesign is to define better job roles and refine the work done by the employees. The redesigning of work could be in the form of abolition of functions, merger of units, job redesign, and reduction of work hours (Gandolfi, 2005). Work redesign is based on two parameters of work in the organization—autonomy and workload; the primary aspect is to bring change in the two parameters (Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998). Gandolfi (2005) discussed the depth and breadth of the downsizing strategies; the four levels of downsizing with the objective of work redesign are layer elimination, unit combination, product removal, and process arrangement. With the merger of organizations, there are instances where similar units or products in both the organizations are merged, and thus, these redundancies could either be completely eliminated or redesigned with newer process roles or objectives. Griffin (1991) showed that the work redesign has no immediate short-term effects, but in the long term, it affects employees' behavioral outcomes as well as the organizational outcomes.

Systemic Strategy: This strategy, unlike the other two, aims at eliminating

workforce or at changing the organizational culture and brings about attitudinal differences in the employees. The strategy aims at a bottom-up approach and increases the accountability of the entire organization (Cameron, 1994). Cascio (1993) discussed the systemic strategy, which being a long-term strategy leads to the development of a continuous improvement in the organization. These strategies can vouch for a better employer brand, as it sends a signal to the potential employees about the organization's objectives to develop an environment for the employee's career advancement.

Process Elements & Outcomes

Organizational Commitment and Turnover Intentions: Downsizing is implemented through workforce reduction, and hence, it is often followed by role overload and lack of role clarity. In addition, the survivors or the employees retained in the organization exhibit low levels of organizational commitment and high turnover intentions (Allen, Freeman & Russell, 2001; Waraich & Bharadwaj, 2012). Thus, organizations implementing the downsizing processes through work redesign strategy further intend to develop clearer roles for the employees, reduce the role overload, and enhance role clarity that would lead to higher commitment levels and lower turnover intentions (Ugboro, 2006). Hence:

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Proposition 1: Organizations implementing the downsizing strategy through utilization of the workforce redesign strategy would report higher levels of commitment and lower turnover intentions compared to the workforce reduction strategy.

Organizational identification is a step ahead of organizational commitment, where the employees incorporate the organization's values, norms, etc., into their self-identities, and the self-definition is tied to the collective (Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). Organizational commitment is found to be strongly related to the perceived organizational support than the organizational identification because the former considers the individual and the organization as two distinct entities. Organizational commitment has been found to be more closely related to turnover intentions than organizational identification owing to the greater association of organizational membership in the former (Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006; Gautam, Dick & Wagner, 2004). Hence:

Proposition 2: Downsizing would be more closely related to organizational commitment than organizational identification.

Trustworthiness of the Leader: Cameron (1994) discussed the importance of visibility, accessibility of the leader, and the frequent interactions to confront the pain and discomfort in the organizational environment. The individuals who remain in the organization after the downsizing process exhibits workplace behaviors based on the leadership

characteristics in the organization. If individuals perceive the competency of their leader, they consider the management can improve the competitive stance of the organization (Spreitzer & Mishra, 2002). One major dimension of trustworthiness of the leader is the employee's awareness about the goal of the organization, i.e., the goals that the organization seeks to achieve and the means by which they would be achieved (Cho & Park, 2011). The second component of trustworthiness is dependent on the amount of autonomy given to the employees (Cho & Park, 2011). However, immediately after the organizational downsizing, it may not be feasible to provide autonomy owing to the sparseness of resources and dipped financial performance. At that point, communication about the various measures taken in the organization, supervisor's attention towards job redesign, and reduction of work overload would increase the trustworthiness in the leader.

Proposition 3a: The leader's accessibility is strongly related to the trustworthiness of the leader.

Proposition 3b: The leader's competency is strongly related to the trustworthiness of the leader.

Proposition 3c: The greater the communication about the organization's goals to the employees, greater is the trustworthiness of the leader.

Presence of Unions: Appelbaum, Simpson, and Shapiro (1987) discussed in their paper that wrong communication about any downsizing decision in the

unions might lead to possible disruptive behavior and employee unrest. The time and content of the news as well as the situational factors play a crucial role in determining the delivery of the notification of the downsizing plan. Hellgren and Sverke (2001) discussed in detail the effect of union participation in the downsizing process. The proper communication about the reasons for downsizing, educating the employees about the interventions, and organizational strategies following the downsizing process would increase both the union satisfaction as well as the well-being of the employees.

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Managerial Discretion: Elvira and Zatzick (2002) discussed the role of managerial discretion in the case of involuntary layoffs. But if we consider the voluntary exits in the form of severance pay and early retirement incentives, the managerial discretion is lost to a greater extent. The reason behind it is that individual's decision about staying or leaving the organization depends on the individual's interests and the benefits received from the organization.

Perceived Justness of the Process: Employees eligible for the voluntary workforce reduction program expect fairness in the process in terms of adequacy of the provisions and communication about the downsizing process. Although they are not the ones who leave

the organization, the probability of being targeted in the further downsizing processes makes the employees receptive about the fairness of the measures taken by the organization. The fairness is based on the amount of input an individual has put in the organization and the provisions received in return, in other words, the distributive justice. Those who perceive the process to be fair would show higher levels of commitment and lower turnover intentions. Hence:

Proposition 4a: Survivors who find the provisions taken up in the downsizing process adequate would show higher levels of organizational commitment and lower turnover intentions.

The survivors often feel the loss of control over the situation, and so an environment of uncertainty develops in their workplace (De Vries & Balazs, 1997). In the process of the workforce reduction, if only the workforce is eliminated without any redefinition or elimination in the job, there can be incidences of high stress in the organization. The primary reasons behind it are work overload, role ambiguity, etc. (Brockner, 1992). This could even lead to lower perceived organizational support, lower organizational commitment, higher burnout, and greater intentions to quit (Tombaugh & White, 1990; Ugboro, 2006). Hence:

Proposition 4b: Greater the perceived uncertainty in the workplace, lesser is the perceived organizational support.

Proposition 4c: Survivors perceiving uncertainty in the workplace would ex-

hibit lower organizational commitment.

Proposition 4d: Survivors perceiving uncertainty in the workplace would exhibit greater intentions to quit.

Proposition 4e: Survivors perceiving uncertainty in the workplace would exhibit higher burnout.

Perceived Degree of Threat:

Lazarus and Folkman's framework elucidates the stress in the post-downsizing environment, especially when there is a limitation on the autonomy of the individuals, increase in workload and an uncertainty of further layoffs in the organization. These factors lead to an increased perception of threat in the minds of the individuals (Brockner, Spreitzer, Mishra, Hochwarter, Pepper & Weinberg, 2004). Hence:

Proposition 5a: Individual's perceived degree of threat is related to work overload.

Proposition 5b: Individual's perceived degree of threat is related to the increased uncertainty in the environment.

Perceived degree of empowerment:

Brockner et al. (2004) explicated in their paper that the perceived control of the post-layoff situation could help the survivors to cope with the perceived threat of well-being that might arise due to the uncertainties in the workplace and job roles. Mishra, Mishra and Spreitzer (2009) developed a matrix on two dimensions, namely, the degree of trust in management and the degree of empower-

ment, and concluded that employees high on both the dimensions provided the most constructive responses and also acted as "active advocates" by giving useful insights for the development of the organization. An important point highlighted in this paper is that high degree of empowerment should be coupled with high trust in the management; otherwise, the responses could be detrimental.

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Career Life Cycle Stages- Early-career, Mid-career, and Late-career: The effects of downsizing have been found to be varying on the individuals at different stages of their career life cycle (Feldman, 1996). The mid-career employees, who are in the pursuit of reaching the top management roles, are greatly affected by the downsizing process (Feldman, 1996). The relationship between job involvement and organizational commitment is maximum in the early-career stage (apprenticeship) and minimum in the late career stage (establishment stage) (Jans, 1989). Thus, the employees at different stages of their career have different preferences. Hence, the assistance provided after the downsizing at various stages of career would be different. A person in the earlier stage of the career would seek a job with high job involvement, whereas a person in the latter stage would look at pension benefits (Jans, 1989). However, some extremely competent employees

are lost in the “open window” or golden handshake program, and so there are organizations that even practice managerial discretion through acceptance of VRS applications, but the firm performance in India shows not much improvement (Maheshwari & Kulkarni, 2003). In this situation, it is vital for an organization to carefully develop a plan for categorizing the employees whom they definitely want to retain and the ones who can be offered VRS. The most critical factor that needs to be considered before applying managerial discretion is the individual’s willingness to stay in the organization. Despite the competencies that the individual possesses, if an individual prefers voluntary retirement instead of staying in the organization, the idea of retaining the individual may not be fruitful.

Proposition 6: The managerial discretion would be significantly related to the exit of an employee from the organization. The relationship is moderated by the voluntariness of the process in such a manner that the managerial discretion is predominant in the case of an involuntary turnover, whereas in the case of voluntary turnover, other factors such as severance package or the presence of unions predominate are also considered.

Organizational Characteristics

Industry Dynamism and Attractiveness: Downsizing has a negative effect on learning and innovation as well as there is a loss of the social capital that the organization had built over the years

(Amabile & Conti, 1999; Fisher & White, 2000). Harrigan and Dalmia (1991) placed human capital in high-tech organization above any other organizational assets, thus, attributing importance to the knowledge that gives an edge to the innovation-driven industry. This type of industry requires job autonomy and creativity (Amabile & Conti, 1999; Tzafrir & Eitam-Meilik, 2005). Organizations having high R&D intensity are extremely dynamic and base their competitive advantage on skilled human capital, hence, it is observed that these organizations have greater negative impact on their performance compared to the ones that are low on R&D intensity (Guthrie & Dutta, 2008). These organizations have high creativity and thus downsizing would act as an impediment on the creativity owing to increased workload pressures (Amabile & Conti, 1999). Organizations with high capital intensity and growth have been found to exhibit greater negative relationships between the downsizing process and the firm outcomes (Guthrie & Dutta, 2008). Hence:

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Proposition 10: Workforce reduction downsizing strategy will have a greater negative impact on the creativity of a high-tech organization as compared to a work redesign strategy.

Organization's Brand Image as an Employer: Perceived organizational support is the individual's perception of the organization's support and care-taking characteristics that are aimed towards the individual's well-being (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson & Sowa, 1986). It is observed that organizations adopting workforce reduction strategies exhibit less attraction for job-seekers, and this relationship is mediated by the perceived organizational support (Kammeyer-Mueller & Liao, 2006). Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) enumerated the three antecedents of the perceived organizational support—fairness, supervisor support, and organizational rewards and job conditions. Kammeyer-Mueller and Liao (2006) further discussed that the assistance, participation, and communication are the three strategies that organizations undertake to ensure that the impact on the employees is as minimal as possible. Prior communication about workforce reduction to the employees makes them consider the procedures to be transparent and fair and thus induce procedural fairness. Moreover, work redesign is aimed at developing well-defined job roles in the organization. The well-established roles lead to a reduction in work overload and enhancement of job autonomy, thereby increasing the perceived organizational support (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Thus, with the enhancement in perceived organizational support, one can expect an increase in job-seeker attraction.

Proposition 7a: Workforce reduction strategies incorporating prior communication to the employees would

report high job-seeker attraction, which is mediated by perceived organizational support.

Proposition 7b: Work redesign strategies incorporating reduction of work overload and enhancement of job autonomy would report high job-seeker attraction, which is mediated by perceived organizational support.

The impact of the downsizing process is significantly lower for a highly reputed firm.

Downsizing process is found to have a significant negative effect on a firm's reputation as has been perceived by the market analysts and the peer firm executives (Love & Kraatz, 2009). However, the impact of the downsizing process is significantly lower for a highly reputed firm. Gatewood et al. (1993) stated that the individual's perception of a firm's reputation is strongly related to job seekers' familiarity with the organization. The familiarity can develop depending on an individual's acquaintance working in the organization, through advertisements or even through news articles. With the increased perception of organizational support in the downsizing process, the negative relationship between downsizing and firm reputation is reduced. The increase in the assistance provided to retrenched employees and prior communication about the downsizing process possibly induce organization's trustworthiness in the minds of the potential employees, which is also a mode to enhance reputation (Love & Kraatz, 2009). Therefore,

Proposition 8a: The downsizing process is negatively related to the job-seeker attraction and this relationship is mediated by firm reputation.

Proposition 8b: The negative relationship between downsizing and firm reputation is moderated by the perceived organizational support, such that with an increase in the perceived organizational support, the negative relationship between them reduces.

The organizations undertaking the downsizing, especially workforce reduction, send a signal to the potential employees that they can rely less on getting a secured job in the organization (De Vries & Balazs, 1997; Kammeyer-Mueller & Liao, 2006). The individuals who would like to be employed in an organization with high job security would avoid an organization that has downsized. This is because they consider such organizations to be low on stable employment (Kammeyer-Mueller & Liao, 2006). However, the systemic downsizing that aims at revamping the organizational culture is seen as a constructive process that leads to the incremental and long-term development of human resources. Hence:

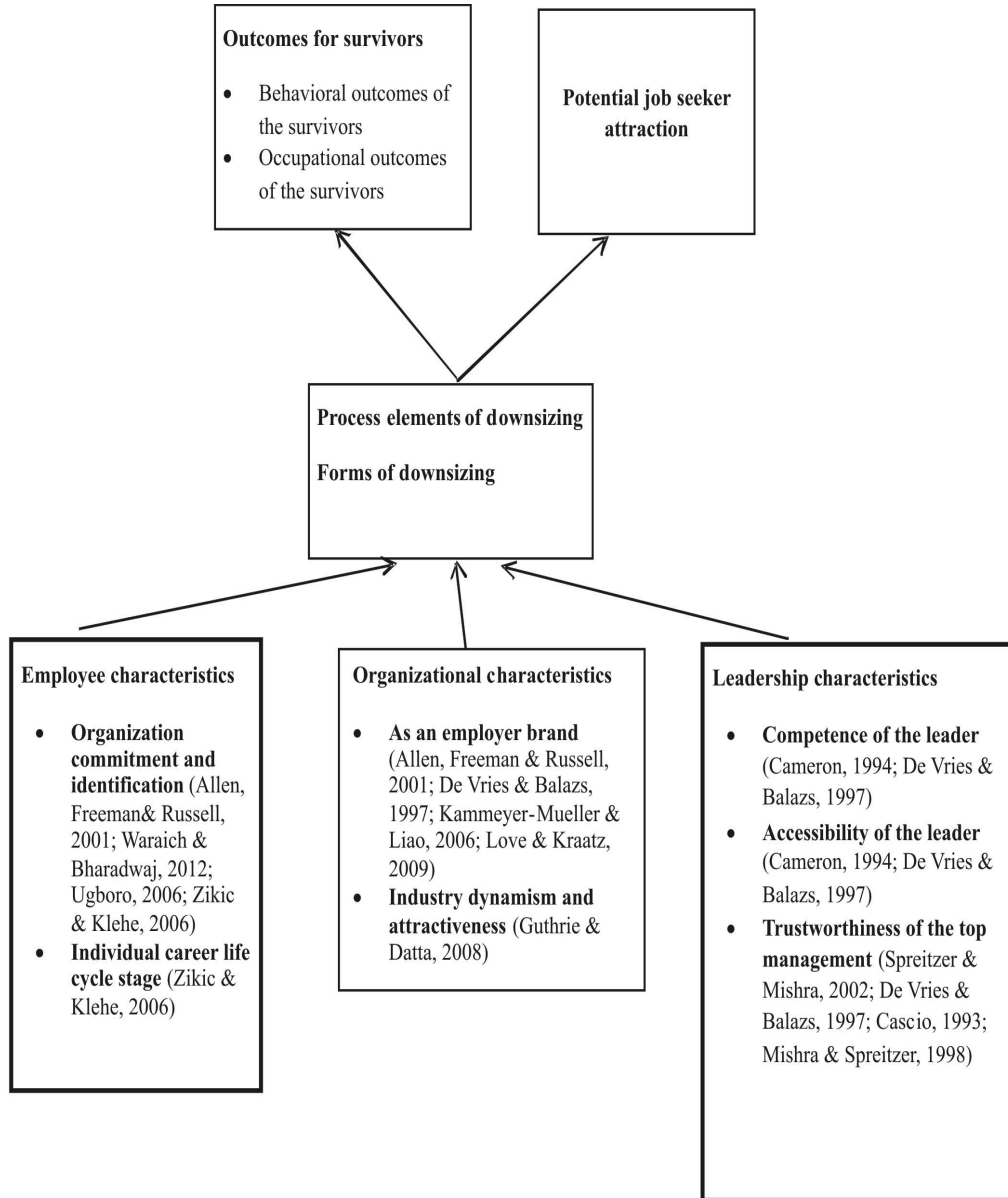
Proposition 9: Organization employing workforce reduction downsizing technique would report lower job-seeker attraction than organizations taking up systemic downsizing techniques.

Conclusion

Despite discussions on the effects of the downsizing process on the current

and future employees of the organization, there have been very few research papers encompassing the process elements, the organizational characteristics, individual characteristics, leadership characteristics, and the future and current employee outcomes. This study tries to collate all the studies that have discussed the various aspects of downsizing and to tie them in one comprehensive theoretical framework. Some of the relationships in the framework have been well-established but there is future scope of developing empirical studies on the other proposed relationships. This study has several implications for both researchers and practitioners. There are several relationships that need to be empirically established, especially the mediation and moderation relationships. So, this study can act as a starting point for future research. Another contribution that the researchers can further make in this regard is to include the established theories for obtaining the causalities in the relationships that have been discussed in the study. Furthermore, the studies conducted in the field of downsizing process should be longitudinal. Organizations that adopt downsizing need to take into account various firm characteristics, industry characteristics, and individual characteristics before choosing a downsizing strategy. It is evident that the combination of these characteristics would bring about a completely different scenario for each organization; therefore, imitating a downsizing strategy without considering these characteristics could lead to detrimental outcomes. Thus, the organizations need to look at the downsizing process in a holistic approach and not a piece-

Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework of the Downsizing Process



meal approach. Incorporation of all the factors, as well as processing of elements and outcomes, would help the organizations to develop a better and fool-proof organizational strategy post-downsizing.

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