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SWP 15/93 A POSITIVE POLICY? CORPORATE PERSPECTIVES ON REDUNDANCY AND OUTPLACEMENT

NOELEEN DOHERTY, PROFESSOR SHAUN TYSON and CLAIRE VINEY
Human Resource Group

A Positive Policy ?

Corporate perspectives on Redundancy and Outplacement

Noeleen Doherty, Shaun Tyson and Claire Viney

Abstract

The management of the job loss situation is becoming of central importance to top management and human resource executives in the current climate of redundancy. The current nature of severance packages and the provision of outplacement may be interpreted as a move towards normative practices within the policy making of many UK organisations. This paper reports on the results of a recent survey of over 600 UK organisations. The survey covered organisational perspectives on redundancies and the use of outplacement in the event of redundancy. The results indicated a change in corporate values in the 1990's. There appeared to be a move towards normative practices in the management of redundancy and in particular in the use of outplacement as a moderator of the potentially detrimental impact of the redundancy situation.

Downsizing, Rightsizing, Redundancy and Lay-offs

The UK is in the most serious recession since 1945 and many organisations are under pressure 'to restructure and reorganise in order to remain competitive. *Downsizing* and *rightsizing* are euphemistic terms which are all too familiar in todays business vocabulary. Reorganisation, closure of parts of businesses and delayering of management have resulted in widespread job losses across all industries and in organisations of all sizes, irrespective of occupational level. Even organisations which have previously espoused 'no redundancy' policies have had to reduce their numbers and the management of change relative to reorganisation and retrenchment provides just as serious a challenge to organisations as rapid expansion. This has promoted redundancy and job loss policy formulation to centre stage for corporate boards and HR executives. In this paper we will describe how organisations are developing important elements of their HR policies to manage such change.

Planning for Redundancy

The purpose of downsizing or rightsizing may be presented as essential to make an organisation more successful, productive and competitive but the impact of redundancies on those who remain may actually inhibit this. We are already familiar with the effects of redundancy on departing employees and the problems and opportunities it brings for those leaving [2] but layoffs are *traumatic for everybody involved* [3] especially so if the organisation has not previously used enforced redundancy policies.

Footnote 1. : This paper is based on the results of a recent survey, sponsored by Pauline Hyde & Associates and supported by the IOD, which covered over 600 UK organisations from all industry types and sizes. The report entitled *Organisational Perspectives on Outplacement* [1] is available from the Human Resource Research Centre at Cranfield School of Management.

Thus, the impact of the job loss situation on an organisation can be far reaching. Departing employees are subjected to considerable stress but the remaining work force can be also be 'severely affected by uncertainty and suspicion and there may be detrimental effects on customer and supplier relationships, making the organisations' external and internal relationships potentially difficult and possibly damaging.

In the event of such turbulent times it is suggested that organisations should be encouraged to implement positive policies as careful planning can help to minimise the trauma [4]. A positive policy should cover a number of issues before, during and after the event [5]. The organisation should clarify its business objectives, communicate clearly and design the downsizing programme in order to avoid the uncertainty and anxiety created by the situation. The positive results arising from a proactive approach include the organisation meeting its ethical commitment to its departing employees, encouraging remaining employees to accept the situation more readily, allaying their fears about the future, showing the organisation in a favourable light in the business community and in society in general. Therefore, planning for retrenchment and in particular planning for the impact from an human resource perspective are very important. There is evidence from the organisations' point of view that the most successful downsizings are those which are strategically thought out in terms of both the business and the human resource implications. [6]. The adoption of a positive policy in the event of redundancy can therefore be seen as a central part of an human resource management philosophy which aims to secure the organisation's long term survival.

The benefits of outplacement

The use of Outplacement, a concept imported from the US in the early 1970's, may be seen as an integral part of the downsizing plan to help implement the change with as little trauma as possible both to departing and remaining employees. Outplacement is designed to help the redundant individual with the job search process, providing practical services such as the use of

an office and more specific help in the form of personal counselling. The initial focus of outplacement service provision was at the senior executive level. Increasingly services are being modified to address the needs of the non executive employees who are made redundant and outplacement provision now ranges from individual one-to-one level counselling and job search activities to group programmes where CV compilation and job search strategies are applied with groups of individuals.

Outplacement in Recession

Due to the increasing number of redundancies on a large scale in the late 1980's and early 1990's in the UK, there has been a surge of clients for Outplacement consultancies. In the UK, the 'Outplacement industry' has grown exponentially from a £2 million turnover in 1978 to over £55 million in 1992, now divided among about 200 firms offering these types of services [7].

In most instances the organisations initiating the redundancies incur the cost of outplacement programmes and although we are in the midst of a major recession, outplacement services are still very much in demand. UK companies even through these financially difficult times are continuing to engage external consultants to provide services to ameliorate the detrimental impact of redundancy.

Why do organisations use outplacement

Many organisations have been forced to face redundancy situations in the past few months and a number of these have provided outplacement for departing employees. Outplacement is becoming an integral part of severance packages. Although some research has explored organisations' reasons for using outplacement [8] many aspects relating to the corporate perspective still remain unknown.

Issues relating to the job loss situation and use of outplacement which have not so far been exposed include: corporate views on the redundancy situation, what policies have been 'instituted to deal with redundancy, how are organisations locating Outplacement services into their HR policies and practices, what do they see as the benefits, how are they evaluating the use of Outplacement and what are the future requirements of industry for outplacement services ?

Methodology

A large scale survey of organisations was implemented to address these issues. The survey population consisted of companies from all industry sectors, ranging from 200 to 50000 plus employees from throughout the UK. This included users and non-users of Outplacement services. A total of 628 organisations participated in the survey (a response rate of 16.2%), the range of organisations responding representing all industry sectors and company sizes. The survey data was obtained via a self completion questionnaire, covering the organisations' job losses, job loss policies, the effect on remaining employees, the services provided for departing employees and the use and perceptions of Outplacement services. The sample showed no systematic bias and we therefore assume the views expressed are representative of these organisations. The data was gathered over the period from September to December 1992.

Corporate perspectives on job loss

This survey, spanning a sample across all industry sectors and company sizes gave some indication of the severity of job losses in the UK. We found that 88% of the responding organisations had encountered job loss situations resulting in enforced redundancies and 57% of the responding organisations had used voluntary redundancies to reduce their labour forces.

We found that many organisations were planning for redundancies and in particular, were considering how they could best manage the event itself. A large number of organisations responding (over 86%) had some type of formal job loss policy. This finding corresponds with another recent survey on severance practices [9] where 82% of organisations indicated that they had a formal severance policy which went beyond the statutory requirements.

Policy on Outplacement

In our survey 75% offered some form of Outplacement (internal and / or external) service to their departing employees. External outplacement services were offered by over 62% of organisations. Even in recession and for large numbers of departing employees, organisations are providing outplacement services. Given the small scale of outplacement in the 1970's, we believe that in previous years this type of caring approach from organisations would have been the exception rather than the rule. This is an indication that organisations now have normative policies and practices which include the provision of outplacement services in the event of redundancy. Is this an expression of the caring face of the 1990's ?

During the recession of the 1980's some organisations used outplacement provision for senior level employees, however this trend appears to have mushroomed in the 1990's. Many organisations are now providing outplacement as standard across all levels of employees. Now not only senior executives but blue collar workers are being offered some type of outplacement provision. This is quite significant compared to the level of help and services being offered to those made redundant in the 1980's. Large numbers of individuals are now being provided for and organisations are picking up the cost. The underlying philosophy for this change becomes more apparent in the reasons quoted for using outplacement and the perceived benefits accrued by organisations.

The perceived benefits of outplacement

Outplacement *"won't turn a layoff into a day at the beach but a good outplacement program can solve a whole lot of problems"* [10]. The problems which organisations perceived to be most widely addressed by the use of external outplacement were mainly of a resource nature. Organisations used external outplacement services primarily because they provided specialised expertise (20%) and could provide the resources and the time (18%) which were not available internally. The perceived independence of external consultants was also a major factor for 16% of responding organisations, external outplacement being perceived as more credible, professional and objective third party help for the redundant individuals.

Practical help with preparing CV's and learning job hunting skills (8%) and specific help such as counselling (6%) were also cited as important contributions from external outplacement services. PR was quoted by over 6% of the organisations as a reason for using external outplacement services. By offering outplacement services organisations convey the image that they are doing the best for their employees.

The Kingsland James survey [8] also cited PR as a major reason for employing external outplacement services and improvement of the company image as one of the primary objectives (7%). In our survey the organisations indicated that this objective was met, as 56% stated that one significant impact of using external outplacement services was that they helped the external reputation of the organisation.

Other corporate reasons for using outplacement highlighted in the Kingsland James survey [8] included helping staff to obtain new employment and reducing the emotional trauma of redundancy (57% and 22% respectively). Again the findings of our survey indicate that these objectives are met, as 93% of organisations noted that external outplacement services both

helped the individual's career and also helped with the separation process for the individual and the organisation.

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(FIGURE Reasons for using external outplacement)

The 'Survivors Syndrome'

Adopting a proactive job loss policy means taking a positive stance in the management of the situation by not only providing help for those who leave but also for those who remain. After the actual downsizing event another real problem can exist for the organisation. Research has indicated that there can be a degree of survivors guilt [11, 12] often termed 'survivors syndrome' among those who stay in the organisation. The reactions of the remaining employees can range from shock, animosity towards management, concern about their colleagues who have left, guilt that they still have a job, to fear about the future. This may result in the low morale, decreased confidence in the company and fragmented communication which are sometimes reported.

Ultimately any lack of trust may have a detrimental impact on the organisation's performance. Outplacement has been described as beneficial not only to those departing but also to easing the trauma for the remaining employees.

Addressing the 'Survivors Syndrome'

Over 46% of the responding organisations perceived decreased motivation among remaining employees, an indication of the potentially detrimental effects of redundancy on *'survivors'*. *'Survivors syndrome'* is a significant area for consideration in the light of its impact on the subsequent productivity and success of the organisation. A large number (78%) of organisations also perceived that external outplacement had a positive impact on the maintenance of morale.

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The positive philosophy being adopted by organisations was apparent in the actions they took subsequent to the redundancies. As a consequence of the job losses a significant number of organisations (42%) indicated that they had increased communications with employees and over 17% indicated that they would increase communications in the event of further job losses. Such practices as providing individuals with support through the redundancy experience and increasing communication were perceived as ways to decrease some of the impacts of 'survivors syndrome'.

However, for the majority of organisations the use of external outplacement did not appear to have longer term effects in relation to retention. The use of outplacement consultancies had no observable effect on the retention of key players or on retention in general (82% and 84% of respondents respectively). Although the use of external outplacement was perceived to have a positive effect on the external reputation of the organisation (56%), this was not reflected in customer / supplier relations, (87% of organisations reported that the use of outplacement made no observable change to customer / supplier relations).

It would seem that although organisational motives for using outplacement include its perceived ability to address survivors syndrome issues and act as an external PR exercise, the actual impact of outplacement has less longer term influence on the remaining employees or on customer relations.

This data provides some clarification as to the organisational impetus for promoting the provision of outplacement as a normative practice. There appears to be a shift in values in the HR philosophy now adopted by organisations which are driven not only by a sense of duty towards individuals but also by the desire to ensure that a good corporate image is promoted in the market place and that the subsequent success of the organisation is not adversely

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effected by the redundancy situation. This is manifested in the perception that outplacement not only helps those who leave but is also beneficial to remaining employees and to 'organisational image. There are dual motives in operation from the organisational point of view. These are not only humanitarian in nature but are also grounded in business self-interest and our research shows that some organisations do consciously make use of outplacement as a retention and damage limitation strategy during major change.

Price sensitivity to external outplacement

Nearly a third of the organisations surveyed did not use external outplacement services because of the perceived expense. However, for those organisations that did use external outplacement services, 42% perceived the cost of the service as less than 5% of the total redundancy package and 88% indicated that the cost of outplacement accounted for less than 15% of the total cost of redundancy.

The Kingsland James survey [8] considered the perceived value for money and found that 49% of organisations felt that they were getting value for money for the One-to-One Programmes and 56% felt that they were getting value for money for the Group Programmes. There is an obvious discrepancy here between the perceptions of cost of outplacement services and the perceived value for money. In combination with the findings of the Kingsland James report [8] this data would suggest that the discrepancy may be due to organisations perceiving the less expensive group programmes as cost effective but viewing the expenditure on the more expensive One-to-One programmes as less cost effective.

Other reasons quoted for not using outplacement services were also cost-related. In our sample 10% of organisations quoted limited numbers, and 6% the level of job as a reason for not using an external service, implying that they would provide group based, jobshop services for their more junior staff if there were sufficient numbers to justify the cost. Nearly

one in six organisations did not use outplacement services because they felt that they had sufficient capability internally to handle the situation themselves.

The qualifications, professionalism and services offered by some outplacement agencies have recently been questioned [13] suggesting that they often do not give value for money. More businesses are now attempting to obtain feedback. Over half the organisations in our survey (57%) evaluated the benefit of external outplacement services. The major methods of doing so were; *interviews with the departing employees* (84%) and *peer group feedback* (60%).

These methods of evaluation provide some feedback from the individuals who have used the outplacement services. While the Kingsland James survey [8] found that the major method for evaluating the benefits of external outplacement was through feedback from the consultancy, just over 8% of our sample evaluated the benefits in this way.

This is a strong indication that due to the large scale use of external outplacement agencies, organisations are now looking more closely at the cost and benefits of the services by obtaining feed-back from the end users as opposed to the consultancies themselves.

Changing career

Many organisations are aware that career development is in a period of change. We are now in the age of 'knowledge workers' who are not only aware of their bargaining power in a skills based market but who are also more prepared to move to achieve career advancement. The HR philosophy of many organisations is changing to reflect the changing management of this population of people. A large number of organisations in our survey provided development reviews, succession planning and career counselling (85%, 67% and 66% respectively) as standard services for their employees. The propensity for increasing internal outplacement

type activities may be an indication of organisations expanding their internal career development services in the light of the changing demands of employees in the 1990's.

The future of the outplacement industry

In the present climate there is an almost unlimited pool of material for the outplacement industry, however we should ask whether this trend will continue. Our survey examined opinions on the types of services organisations would require in the future event of more redundancies. The predominant emphasis amongst responding organisations was a need for training. If faced with the need for redundancies again, responding organisations indicated that : *training managers in successfully handling the separation interview* (48%) and *training in coaching and counselling* (48%) would be the most beneficial services.

In British companies little or no training is given in how to handle redundancies. One survey [14] found that only 16% of people who conveyed the news had been given external advice on how to make staff redundant. There is generally a poor standard of training in British management. As managers are often ill equipped to fulfil this difficult task, training would be useful to help them perform it sensitively and appropriately. This may be one future development for outplacement consultancies to consider. Even if their prospective clients wish to undertake outplacement activities internally, the staff who are performing this work will require training.

Therefore with the changing needs of the work force and the expansion of internal outplacement programmes the future for the outplacement industry may well lie in the provision of more *up-stream* type services such as training and development for managers in handling the redundancy situation or the more broad based career portfolio management for the increasingly flexible careers of the future. Undoubtedly, the outplacement industry will need to review its positioning in the market place as *"the 1990's may mark the coming of age,*

but with client companies and individuals demanding an increasingly professional service for their money, outplacement firms will have to prove why they are a vital component of the 'redundancy and career development process". [15]
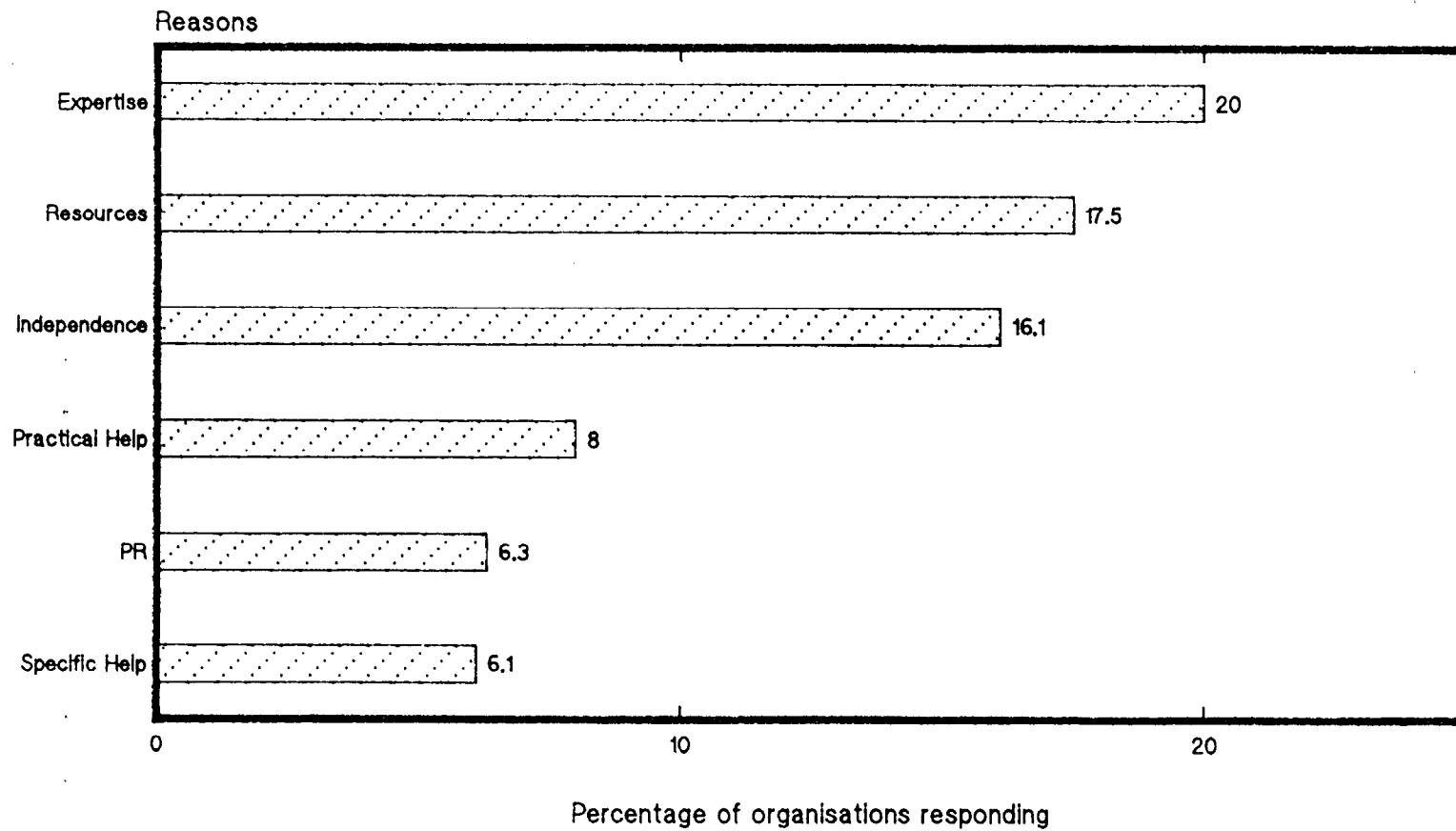
Conclusions

It appears that many organisations are developing a more pragmatic and positive approach towards the management of redundancy and lay-offs. Policy making regarding redundancy is becoming standard practice and an integral part of the HR philosophy of many companies. Normative policies now also contain common elements of outplacement provision as standard for all levels of employees. Organisations are continuing to make use of externally provided outplacement services, mainly because of the perceived expertise and objectivity provided by consultants from outside the organisation and a number of initiatives in the provision of internally delivered services are also gaining popularity. The impetus for such a value change appears to contain elements of both a more caring attitude towards employees in parallel with a concern for bottom line results which may be affected by the way redundancies are dealt with. A planned downsizing exercise is more likely to work effectively when both sets of objectives and outcomes are considered.

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FIGURE I. Reasons for using external outplacement

Reasons

Expertise	20
Resources	17.5
Independence	16.1
Practical Help	8
PR	6.3
Specific Help	6.1

Percentage of organisations responding

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