

# Research Paper

'The nature of bad news infects the teller':

The experiences of envoys in the face to face delivery of downsizing initiatives in UK public sector organisations

Ref: 03/12

2012

Dr Ian Ashman

Institute for Research into Organisation, Work and Employment

University of Central Lancashire

For any further information on this study, or other aspects of the Acas Research and Evaluation programme, please telephone 020 7210 3673 or email [research@acas.org.uk](mailto:research@acas.org.uk)

Acas research publications can be found at [www.acas.org.uk/researchpapers](http://www.acas.org.uk/researchpapers)

ISBN 978-1-908370-14-3

**'The nature of bad news infects the teller':**

**The experiences of envoys in the face to face delivery of downsizing initiatives in UK public sector organisations**

**Dr Ian Ashman  
Institute for Research into Organisation, Work and Employment  
University of Central Lancashire**

# CONTENTS

<b>FOREWORD</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1. SCOPE AND RATIONALE</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1 Introduction	3
1.2 Research aims	4
<b>2. DEFINITION OF TERMS</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1 Downsizing	5
2.2 Envoys	5
2.3 Bad news	6
<b>3. EXISTING RESEARCH INTO THE DOWNSIZING PHENOMENON</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4. DOWNSIZING IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>5. EXISTING RESEARCH INTO THE ENVOY ROLE</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>6. METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>7. FINDINGS</b>	<b>20</b>
7.1 Introduction	20
7.2 Factors affecting envoys that are particular to the public sector context	21
7.2.1 <i>Politics</i>	21
7.2.2 <i>Front line versus support staff</i>	22
7.2.3 <i>Perceptions of public service ethic</i>	24
7.2.4 <i>Trade unions</i>	25
7.2.5 <i>Duration of downsizing implementation and the effect of redeployment</i>	27
7.3 Understanding the experience of being an envoy	30
7.4 The value of prior experience and preparation	35
7.5 The influence of relations between the HR function and line managers	38
<b>8. CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>9. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE</b>	<b>44</b>
9.1 Evidence of good practice	44
9.2 Issues for further consideration	45
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>48</b>

## FIGURES AND TABLES

Fig. 1	A framework for studying organisational innovation	7
Fig. 2	Preliminary conceptual framework of executioners' reactions to layoffs	17
Table 1	Ways of coping – the executioners	14
Table 2	Downsizers' reflections: research themes	15
Table 3	Downsizing agents' experiences: research themes	16
Table 4	Summary of participating organisations by sector and respondents by role	18

## **FOREWORD**

The prospect of redundancy brings challenges for managers and employees, both those facing job loss and those remaining in employment. An important aspect of handling any downsizing exercise is breaking the news to individuals about their potential job loss. This research report considers the experiences and needs of individuals charged with the role of imparting this information, who in the context of this study are called 'downsizing envoys'.

Acas is keen to support all the parties involved in the sensitive process of downsizing. The research provides a useful insight into the needs of a group of individuals who are often overlooked both in research terms, and in practical guidance.

This research was commissioned under the Acas research partnership programme. It concentrates on experiences in the public sector and a subsequent study, to be published later in 2012 will focus on downsizing in the private sector. We will be looking closely at the findings from the research as we consider future guidance on redundancy, downsizing and change management.

Acas is grateful to Dr Ashman for his research and thoughtful contribution.

Susan Clews  
Director of Strategy  
Acas

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Aim**

This report explores the experiences of public sector employees that have been given the task of delivering the generally bad news of downsizing decisions face to face with the victims and then deal with the immediate repercussions. For the purposes of this study the people fulfilling such a role have been labelled (downsizing) *envoys*.

The aim of the research is to better understand the demands that being an envoy places on individuals undertaking the role and, in particular, how the public sector context impacts upon those demands. The study explores such issues as emotional strain, the value of prior experience and preparation, and the relationship between the HR function and line managers.

### **Literature**

A review of the relevant literature is undertaken. It indicates that whilst a great deal has been written about the phenomenon of downsizing, there is relatively little about downsizing in the public sector and even less about the envoys. Nevertheless, four studies that explore the plight of employees that undertake the envoy (or similar) role are identified and they help to establish themes to carry forward into the report's primary research, such as, coping strategy, personal well-being, social isolation, relational ties (proximity to victims) and role overload among others.

### **Methodology**

Twenty four envoys were interviewed drawn from nine public sector organisations of varying size and purpose operating in the North West of England. Fourteen envoys were HR professionals and 10 were non HR managers.

### **Findings**

The research data gathered indicates that the public sector context may have a specific effect on the experiences of envoys. Particular factors that characterise public sector workers, such as their public service ethic, and the way in which certain occupations are protected from downsizing, creating a disproportionate effect on those that are not, tend to heighten the emotional aspects of the envoy role. Likewise, the tendency for organisations and unions to make full use of the ninety day statutory consultation period (sometimes longer) and to adopt voluntary means of severance often extends the duration of downsizing activity and so can prolong the envoys' emotional discomfort. It is clear that the envoy role requires a distinct set of abilities and that prior experience acts as an important mediator in how the role is undertaken. Last, the relational dynamic between the HR function and other organisational functions can cause a tension, based on different goal orientations, which has an impact on how envoys perceive and carry out their task with concern regarding different perceptions of procedure, fairness and goal displacement.

### **Issues for further consideration**

Some instances of good practice are identified and a number of policy issues are put forward for consideration. In particular issues including the need for decision makers to be sensitive to the political context surrounding downsizing in the public sector and to the significance of recognising the public service ethic that underpins the psychological contract of envoys, victims and survivors are emphasised. The potential benefit of providing training and continuous professional development for envoys is identified and the importance of understanding the relationship between envoys (especially those that are non HR line managers) and the organisational HR function is stressed.

# 1. SCOPE AND RATIONALE

## 1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research is to explore and better understand the experiences of employees performing a demanding role that has been largely ignored by existing research into downsizing and yet may be vital to the success of downsizing initiatives in organisations. The role in question involves people who have been given the task of delivering the generally bad news of downsizing decisions, face to face, with the victims and then dealing with the immediate repercussions. For the purposes of this study the people fulfilling such a role have been labelled (downsizing) *envoys*.

The frequency and scale of downsizing or other restructuring activities in organisations (even at times of relative prosperity) indicates that this category of person is not trivial in terms of numbers or potential impact. Downsizing, as a business process, has been a constant theme in private sector organisations for many years (Gandolfi, 2008; McKinley et al., 2000). However, given the immense pressure on state finances in the aftermath of the global banking crisis in the UK and elsewhere, the spectre of downsizing is being visited upon the public sector too. The Office for Budget Responsibility (2011) has estimated that around 330,000 posts will be lost from the public sector in the foreseeable future. Bach (2011), therefore, draws attention to the major challenges that public sector employers are about to face when managing the costs and processes of redundancy and emphasises that the inexperience of public service managers in dealing with such things could be a key issue. For that reason this research concentrates on recent downsizing activities in public sector organisations and the envoys that operate within them.

The public sector organisations participating in the research here are drawn from across the North West of England. This is a region that, according to research conducted for the North West Development Agency (Experian 2011), is likely to be disproportionately affected by the Government's recent Comprehensive Spending Review because of its relatively high dependence on public sector employment. The same study estimates that 140,000 full time equivalent jobs will be lost across the region by 2015 and that 60,000 of those will be in the public sector. The enormous strain that will be placed on those charged with managing this downsizing activity is apparent, not least for the envoys.

Another facet of the research is to explore the extent to which human resource management practice acts as a mediating variable in relation to the processes and experiences surrounding the envoy role and so, to that end, there is an emphasis on ensuring that testimony is drawn from HR professionals and non-HR managers. This study is significant within broader debates about the relationships that exist between the HR function and line managers in organisations and the extent to which line managers are prepared for undertaking what are generally seen as 'people management' roles. Research conducted for Acas (Saundry et al 2011) and research by the CIPD (2007) have both highlighted concerns about the limited extent to which training is provided for those who have to deal with conflict management in the workplace.

This research coincides with a period of considerable uncertainty and apprehension regarding the best way to manage downsizing and how much it will cost – not just in terms of redundancy payments but also regarding the long term impact on organisational performance. For instance, the CBI (2009) has recently urged the British Government to facilitate an 'Alternative to Redundancy' scheme that would enable employers to, in effect, lay off employees for up to six months during which they would receive an allowance amounting to twice that of the Job Seekers Allowance and paid for by employer and Government each providing half the sum. The CBI argues that the

Scheme would defer and perhaps avoid the need for redundancy payments and help to retain skills.

Similarly, last year the CBI called for the statutory consultation period for redundancy to be reduced from 90 to 30 days (CBI 2010 p7) and in 2011 the Government have now announced that they intend to review collective redundancy consultation periods (BIS 2011).

## **1.2 Research Aims**

- To review existing research into downsizing activity (and any related concepts) and ascertain its significance towards better understanding the envoy role.
- To seek evidence of any factors affecting the envoy role that may be particular to, or exacerbated by, the public sector context.
- To examine both the process driven and emotional demands of the envoy role and to gather evidence that may explain the variations in those demands.
- To explore the extent of prior experience that envoys possess and their preparation for undertaking the role.
- To establish whether substantive differences in approach exist between envoys from the HR profession and those that are not – and how such differences may impact upon the relationship between the HR function and line managers.

A review of the research that is relevant to this report is provided below and a number of potentially significant themes and ideas are identified. However, it is important to note that the intention is to allow the envoys participating here to identify the issues that are important for them and this is reflected in the methodological approach adopted. Ultimately, the ambition of this research is that it will contribute towards, not only a better understanding of the envoy experience, but also the impact of the role on downsizing activity as a whole.

## 2. DEFINITION OF TERMS

### 2.1 Downsizing

Use of the term 'downsizing' has a checkered history. For many it is simply a euphemism intended to mask the negative impact that organisational change can have on employees. Redman and Wilkinson (2006, p357) refer to the 'sanitisation of dismissal' and associate 'downsizing' with rather empty jargon such as *rightsizing*, *reengineering*, and *rationalisation*. However, the term does have some descriptive power in that it indicates a reduction of scale in relation to the number of people employed in an organisation, although authors, such as Freeman and Cameron (1993), are at some pains to point out that 'downsizing' should be treated as a separate concept from organisational decline. Much downsizing takes place when organisations are in relatively good shape and is intended to improve efficiency and competitiveness (the fact that downsizing generally fails to deliver these outcomes will be discussed later) and so Freeman and Cameron (1993, p12) provide four defining characteristics of downsizing:

- It is an intentional endeavour;
- It involves reductions in personnel;
- It is focused on improving efficiency or effectiveness;
- It affects work processes.

These characteristics certainly apply to the restructuring endeavours in the public sector where there is no evidence of decline in the demand for the services provided – in fact, demand in many areas is increasing (for instance, health and law enforcement). In addition, public expectations seem constantly to rise because, as Froud et al (2008) point out in their analysis of downsizing at the BBC, there is no market mechanism in the sector for adjusting stakeholder expectations to coincide realistically with available resources. Similarly, and in keeping with Freeman and Cameron's (1993) view that downsizing is not synonymous with organisational decline, it is possible to argue that the downsizing occurring at present in the public sector is a consequence of external factors (budget cuts) that have nothing to do with declining organisational performance standards but, nevertheless, the demand for services endures and forces managers into an increasingly difficult search for efficiency savings beyond headcount reductions alone.

For the purposes of this research the term 'downsizing' is considered applicable because it covers a multitude of actions and outcomes. Each organisation participating in the research had experienced a significant reduction in headcount but had achieved it using a variety of techniques and, for the most part, without recourse to (compulsory) redundancy.

### 2.2 Envoys

Knowing how to label the category of practitioner that is the subject of this research is somewhat problematic because there may be few, if any, common characteristics that connect the people whose role it is to deliver face to face the news of downsizing decisions. They need not be specialist consultants or HR professionals and perhaps, in some instances, they may not even be part of a managerial function. To refer to them as 'downsizers', which is a popular term in the relevant literature, seems reasonable but, it might be argued, is perhaps misleading as it implies that the individual concerned does more than simply deliver the message, and that they are also a decision maker, which often they are not. It is, perhaps, a term better reserved for the 'executives' that sanction the downsizing process in the first place.

Some writers, notably Kets de Vries and Balazs (1997) and Wright and Barling (1998), refer to those involved in downsizing as 'executioners'. This analogy may seem more apposite because historically the executioner is not involved in the decision to execute - they simply and dispassionately deliver the final retribution. However, that epithet has overtones that practitioners would not want to be tarnished with and the comparison, regardless of the connotations, begins to unravel under closer inspection. For instance, executioners are normally anonymous or remote from the condemned and their milieu (family, community and so on) whereas often the individuals highlighted in this research are not. Likewise, an executioner will not have to endure an on-going dialogue with victims, nor is there a continuing relationship with survivors. Further, executioners are carefully selected and psychologically well suited to an occupation they have chosen, whereas that may not be the case for the category of employee under scrutiny here.

A more recent study by Clair and Dufresne (2004) uses the expression 'downsizing agents' (DAs), which, on the face of it, seems like a preferable and less partial phrase. However, the word 'agent' lacks any real descriptive power and is intentionally broad as the authors admit.

"We define DAs as individuals with responsibilities for planning, carrying out, and/or dealing with the aftermath of downsizing. This definition is deliberately broad so that it refers to any individuals, no matter their organisational level or daily professional role, who have formal responsibilities for carrying out a particular downsizing." (p1598)

Interestingly Clair and Dufresne do refer to the specific category of individual that is the subject of this research but call them either 'toxic handlers' (2004 p1598; also Frost & Robinson, 1999) or 'death-tellers' (2004 p1605) neither of which seem appropriate here.

For the purposes of this study the term 'envoy' is preferred because it denotes the function of an agent or messenger, or even a diplomat, which is much more in keeping with the experience of the position under discussion. For instance, the typical attributes required for diplomatic activity include sensitivity, discretion, resilience and ability to mediate – all of which seem applicable here. Moreover, that expression can be considered more appropriate and fair because of its neutral, perhaps positive, implications with overtones of the essential intermediary nature of the job. Almost any individual could fulfil the role of envoy and an envoy may be involved in various stages and processes of downsizing, so it is felt that the term envoy better captures the face to face interaction that is an essential feature of this research and which is not inherent in the other studies referred to above or later.

### **2.3 Bad news**

Last, it is worth setting out what constitutes delivering bad news. This is because what counts as 'bad news' cannot be treated objectively – the message that a job no longer exists may be devastating to one individual and a blessed relief to the next. Similarly, the notion that some news will always be worse than other news is also problematic. For instance, it need not necessarily be the case that the option of redeployment will always be received as preferable news to being made redundant. In disciplines where the breaking of bad news is a regular aspect of everyday life efforts have been made to define the notion and the following definition drawn from medical literature is apposite for the purposes of this study. So, bad news relates to:

"situations where there is either a feeling of no hope, a threat to a person's mental or physical well-being, a risk of upsetting an established lifestyle, or where a message is given which conveys to an individual fewer choices in his or her life." (Bor et al, 1993 p70)



### 3. EXISTING RESEARCH INTO THE DOWNSIZING PHENOMENON

There is an extensive literature on organisational downsizing, the vast majority of which originates in North America. Bhattacharyya and Chatterjee (2005 p65) suggest that this literature broadly focuses on three issues:

- Why do organisations downsize?
- What are the consequences of downsizing on the individual and the organisation as a whole?
- What are the strategies that can be adopted for successful downsizing?

When it comes to the question of why downsize – that is, the reason for downsizing – contributions are often theoretical in their approach, rather than empirical, and there are a number of conceptual frameworks for analysing the reasons for adopting the strategy. For instance, Budros, who describes downsizing as a ‘radical’ but ‘non-technical’ organisational ‘innovation’ (1999 p71), offers a framework with two dimensions and consequently four broad categories of rationale. He distinguishes the basis for action (rational versus arational) from the social context ([intra]organisational versus extraorganisational) as the two dimensions to give the four categories of:

- Rational organisational factors
- Rational extraorganisational factors
- Arational organisational factors
- Arational extraorganisational factors

Possible factors are illustrated in italics in figure 1.

**Fig.1 – Framework for Studying Organisational Innovation (Budros, 1999 p72)**

<b>Social Context</b>	<b>Basis of Organisational Action</b>	
	<b>Rational</b>	<b>Arational</b>
<b>Organisational</b>	Size	Culture
	Structure	Leader Traits
<b>Extraorganisational</b>	Business Cycles	Institutionalisation
	Deregulation	Social Networks

Budros, writing from a Canadian/US perspective, focuses entirely on downsizing in the private sector but acknowledges:

“... the fact that downsizing is spreading from conventional economic organisations to other kinds of organisations, including cultural institutions, schools, and social movement organisations.” (1999 p80)

This suggests that an understanding of downsizing rationale, given the public sector context here, is likely to be important. The principal relevant rationale from the perspective of the current research appears to be *arational extraorganisational*, which asserts that the main driving force behind downsizing activity in the UK public sector is the necessity for organisations, as effectiveness-oriented actors, to adapt their operations in order to survive in the face of external pressures beyond their immediate control (Budros, 1999 p72). However, it would be a mistake to assume that all downsizing and restructuring in the UK public sector is as a response to reductions in State funding. For instance, one of the organisations participating in this research remains largely unaffected by the squeeze on public finances, but began a quite sizeable downsizing initiative in 2009 for strategic reasons (i.e. *rational organisational*).

It is notable that there has long been a tendency for some politicians and commentators to paint the public sector as inefficient and ineffective (especially compared with the private sector – see, for instance, Hopkins 2009), which in itself may provide an internal rationale (i.e. rational organisational according to Budros's framework) for current downsizing activity as downsizing could be seen by some public sector employers as simply a continuation of the drive for efficiency. Such distinctions in rationale may be significant in understanding how actors, such as envoys, experience and internalise the reasons for their role. For instance, an envoy may feel much more comfortable in their role if they reason that it is an inevitable consequence of cuts forced on their service ('somebody has to do it') rather than if it is believed to be a consequence of choices made by managers attempting to gain greater efficiency savings.

The literature on the consequences of downsizing is substantial and almost entirely negative. In short, the general conclusion of those writing about the organisational impact of downsizing is that, regardless of the motives, it fails to deliver its intended consequences (i.e. improved efficiency and effectiveness) in the medium to long term (Cascio et al, 1997; Galagan, 2010). Indeed, there may even be many unintended harmful consequences (McKinley & Scherer, 2000), often relating particularly to HR outcomes, such as voluntary turnover (Trevor & Nyberg, 2008), loss of trust, decreased morale, lack of teamwork (Appelbaum et al, 1999), and declining job satisfaction (Lee and Teo, 2005).

For those writing about the impact of downsizing on individuals the message is also fairly consistent; inevitably downsizing has an adverse effect on the victims, but it also has a negative consequence for the survivors. The notion of 'survivor syndrome' (an expression originally used to explain the psychological distress experienced by survivors of the Holocaust (Ryn, 1990) and so, arguably, its use is not wholly justified in this context) is now common across the HRM/personnel psychology literature. Devine and her colleagues conclude their study of Canadian healthcare employees by suggesting that it may in fact be better to be a victim rather than a survivor.

"Results indicate that displaced employees, or victims, who secure new employment fare better than survivors. The victims in our study perceive higher levels of control, less stress, and fewer negative job strains than continuing workers, or survivors." (Devine et al, 2003 p109)

This, perhaps counter intuitive, argument may have an influence on the way in which envoys understand their role and, in particular, their interaction with employees who are 'at risk'. The assumption that compulsory redundancy must necessarily be the worst possible outcome is perhaps misconceived. Whilst the research and advice concerning victims and survivors is extensive, in contrast, research into the envoy type role is very limited and is discussed in detail in a later section.

The final issue identified by Bhattacharyya and Chatterjee (2005), concerning what strategies can be adopted for successful downsizing, is also widely addressed across the relevant literature. The broad message here is that downsizing should be used exceptionally, that there should be absolute clarity in terms of rationale and long- and short-term goals (Cascio 2005), and that robust and participative HR procedures are paramount (Cameron, 1994). The logic of that argument seems incontrovertible but it is necessary to be cautious when reviewing the more prescriptive material on downsizing because any evidence on which it draws is necessarily uncertain. The general approach is to look at key corporate indicators, such as profit or return on investment, and assume that if they have gone up after a downsizing exercise (a rare event by all accounts) then the exercise has been a success. However, because no control comparison is available there must be an element of doubt in drawing such a conclusion. In other words, it is conceivable that an organisation experiencing increased profits

might have accrued even greater profits had it not downsized. Proving cause and effect in the 'real world' context is all but impossible.

The problem is exacerbated for public sector organisations where notions of rationale and goal achievement may possess less clarity than for organisations in the private sector. Under the present circumstances success for organisations in the public sector might be judged in the following terms:

- Achieving the financial reductions demanded.
- Maintaining quantity of service delivery.
- Maintaining quality of service delivery.
- Minimising the negative consequences for the actors affected by downsizing (victims, survivors and envoys).

The first two criteria are relatively straightforward to measure, although simply achieving the reductions does not in itself justify the downsizing from an intra-organisational perspective. The second two criteria are extremely difficult to measure and the last, relating to envoys in particular, is obviously pertinent to the present study.

#### 4. DOWNSIZING IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

The apparent dearth of literature exploring downsizing in public sector organisations is lamented in a paper from the American journal *Public Administration Review* by Pandey (2010) called 'Cutback Management and the Paradox of Publicness'. Pandey, drawing on the work of Charles Levine (1978; 1979; 1980 and 1984) from the last era of global recession some thirty years ago, argues that:

"Public organisations are different because their organisational structures and processes are shaped profoundly by their external political environment." (2010 p565)

As a consequence the downsizing of public organisations presents particular demands that stem from the paradox that publicness simultaneously confers opportunities and imposes particular constraints. For instance, public sector organisations benefit from generally predictable resource inputs but at the same time have restricted ability to influence or alter those inputs. Similarly, public organisations have distinctive goals that are appealing to significant stakeholders (including communities and employees) but they are often ambiguous and the organisation has a very limited capacity to regulate them (Pandey, 2010), so unlike those in the private sector, schools and hospitals in the public sector cannot choose who they educate or who they treat. Goal ambiguity makes the process of deciding where cuts should fall especially problematic for management and evaluating the outcomes of public sector downsizing is equally difficult. Flint (2003) points out that whilst it may be possible to judge fiscal success or failure by the extent to which budget reductions have been met, it is far from straightforward to assess the impact on quantity or, more particularly, quality of service. He goes on to argue that, in keeping with the comments at the end of the previous section, this difficulty in determining outcomes may explain why the results of public sector downsizing have not been studied with the same rigour as they have in the private sector.

It may be the case that the public sector in the UK has appeared to be relatively immune from the downsizing phenomenon over the decades in which it became embedded in the private sector, although official statistics show that public sector employment in the UK declined considerably in the first half of the 1990s before rising at a consistent rate until 2005 (Hicks et al, 2005 p17). Nevertheless, the restructuring of public organisations has been a constant presence connected to changing social needs and expectations as well as a political agenda of increasing marketisation (see, for instance, Pollock et al, 1999).

It has taken the global economic crisis to reintroduce the spectre of public sector 'cutback management' and so it is unsurprising that a search for analyses of public sector downsizing reveals little of note. The material that is available generally concentrates on either the rationale for downsizing public institutions (for instance, Lambright's (1998) analysis of a NASA satellite programme or Froud and her colleagues' (2009) analysis of the BBC) or the consequences of downsizing *per se* (rather than the management and impact of the downsizing process – our focus here).

There are some studies that may inform the present research but none emanate from the UK. For example, in the US context, Feldheim (2007) hypothesizes about the impact of downsizing on public organisation employees and concludes that it is likely to undermine trust, morale and commitment, which in turn can compromise the public service ethic that is central to their psychological contract<sup>1</sup>. Feldheim's arguments are

---

<sup>1</sup> The principle of the public service ethic (or ethos) is that public employees place an intrinsic value on providing a service to their community, which is important in motivating their work behaviour and may compensate for what is sometimes seen as poorer employment conditions across the sector.

based on models and assumptions, rather than empirical evidence, but they possess an intuitive logic that is of possible interest. Similarly, Weil evaluates evidence from the downsizing of hospitals in the US, Canada and Finland to conclude:

“Downsizing, workforce reductions, re-engineering and resizing apparently have limited impact on access to health services, on quality of patient care, and on reducing the region’s healthcare costs. These cost cutting measures result in an adverse effect on employee-employer relationships and on the overall work (hospital) environment.” (2003 p17)

The research looking at Canadian healthcare employees carried out by Devine and her colleagues (2003), cited earlier, reinforces this view in claiming that survivors experience increased stress as a consequence of downsizing. The stress derives from the likelihood that survivors will have to work harder in order to cover the work left behind by the victims, and from them feeling less in control of their future when wondering if it will be their turn next time. Yet another study undertaken among Canadian nurses explored the extent and duration of the impact of downsizing on job satisfaction and turnover intentions<sup>2</sup>. Armstrong-Stassen and Cameron (2003), in a six year study covering two downsizing events, found that immediately after downsizing turnover intention reduced, but eventually increased, perhaps as a result of a fairly consistent decline in surviving nurses’ satisfaction with job content, workload, career prospects, working environment, and even co-workers. Of course, these types of consequence are not peculiar to the public sector and similar findings are well established in the wider literature on ‘survivor syndrome’ in the private sector.

Flint (2003) seeks to draw lessons from the private sector when identifying the characteristics of successful and unsuccessful downsizing practices and then applying them to the public sector context; specifically, hospital mergers in Metropolitan Toronto. He sets out the following features as examples of, in essence, good practice adopted by the hospitals being studied:

- A well-articulated mission and strong definition of core business/ medical competencies;
- Systematic analysis of positions;
- Involvement of customers and employees;
- Slow implementation;
- Reasonable justification;
- Good communication;
- Advance notice of downsizing;
- Application of consistent procedures;
- Services provided to those laid off.

(Flint 2003, pp447-53)

The following represent poor practice:

- Use of lay-offs, buy-outs and early retirement;
- Use of re-hiring;
- No adjustments to workload of affected positions;
- No revision of performance appraisal systems.

(Flint 2003, p4470)

---

<sup>2</sup> The number of studies of healthcare sector downsizing that come from Canada in the early 2000s reflects problems with public finances in the late 1980s and early 1990s that resulted in the closure and amalgamation of a considerable number of hospitals. There are some Australian studies but relatively few from anywhere else in the World and, as mentioned, none from the UK were found.

It is worth commenting on the fact that Flint associates natural attrition (lay-offs, buy-outs and early retirement) with negative downsizing outcomes. He refers to Cameron's (1994) research in the private sector where Cameron likens natural attrition to throwing a grenade into a crowded room; it being difficult to predict how many and who will be eliminated. The inference is that the strategic imperative of ensuring that the organisation's most valuable employees are retained whilst dispensing with the least valuable outweighs any desire to soften the impact on employees by adopting voluntary means of severance. This view is at odds with widespread use of voluntary redundancy and early retirement in the UK public sector (including all of the organisations participating in this study) and also the preferred approach of some other commentators (for example Cascio and Wynn, 2004).

As noted at the end of the preceding section, caution must be exercised regarding the veracity of Flint's evidence (also because it is based in just two case organisations), but the relevance of some, though by no means all, of these ideas of good and poor practice will become apparent when analysing the evidence from the current research.

The issues addressed in this section of the report, although not drawn from research about envoys, may affect envoys both directly, in terms of how they are influenced personally by downsizing as potential victims or survivors themselves (they must eventually be one or the other), and indirectly, in mediating how other victims react to the downsizing process in the presence of the envoy.

## 5. EXISTING RESEARCH INTO THE ENVOY ROLE

Amidst the many studies that enquire into the impact of downsizing on the decision makers, victims and survivors there appears to be just four research papers that address the situation of the envoys. It is conceivable that because of the problem associated with inconsistent terminology (in key word searches, for instance) some may have been missed, but correspondence with a number of academics who have an interest in downsizing (including some of the authors mentioned below) has unearthed no others. Of the four studies none of them deal exclusively with the envoy group. Nonetheless, each one offers some important insights and so it is worthwhile reviewing each in turn in order to explain how they have influenced this research, whilst also noting some of the differences.

The earliest study uncovered, by Kets de Vries and Balazs (1997), takes a clinical approach to evaluating the psychological effect of downsizing on the 'executioners' (as well as the victims and survivors, which can be left aside). The 'executioner' group consisted of eighty interviewees drawn from an executive leadership development programme at INSEAD, an international business school located in France. It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that all of the respondents operate at an executive level in their organisations. Indeed, Kets de Vries and Balazs refer to them collectively as executives and so, whilst no doubt they are significant as decision makers, the likelihood is that the majority will be somewhat removed from the day to day lives of the victims and survivors and have limited experience, if any, of face to face interaction with them. Despite there not being enough detail provided to completely confirm or refute such an assumption their reference to the argument that "executives often reduce communication while downsizing" (1997 p44) implies it is a reasonable one. Predictably, Kets de Vries and Balazs conclude that downsizing activity is detrimental psychologically to the executive 'executioners'. However, their speculation that the primary disruption to the 'inner life' of the 'executioners' derives from a fear of the *lex talionis*, is perhaps less anticipated.

"There exists an unconscious 'equation' in human interaction: the belief that what we do to others will be done to us. This so-called *lex talionis* – the law of retaliation (or, as it is often phrased, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth') – is an ancient rule with a long presence in human interaction." (1997 p28)

The implication seems to be that the distress of the executives comes not from the angst of the decision or from *witnessing* the misfortune of others, but from the fear of a realignment of organisational karma – real or imagined.

Kets de Vries and Balazs then acknowledge that some executioners appear to remain 'well adjusted' (p29) in the face of downsizing operations, although regrettably they give no indication as to what proportion of their sample fall into this category. Others resort to one of the coping strategies that are summarised in table 1.

**Table 1 – Ways of Coping: The Executioners (adapted from Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1997 pp30-37)**

<b>Coping Typology</b>	<b>Coping Strategy</b>
The Compulsive/Ritualistic Executive	Emphasis is on the objectivity of the process. Emotional detachment/displacement facilitated by rigid adherence to rules, procedures and schedules.
The Abrasive Executive	Emphasis on aggression and narcissism. Create an 'us and them' scenario where the victims are seen as the architects of their own plight.
The Dissociative Executive	Emphasis on ontological separation. Emotional detachment facilitated by partitioning the 'downsizing me' from the 'real me'.
The Alexithymic/Anhedonic Executive	Emphasis on repression of feelings. Emotional numbness accompanied by a loss of enjoyment, interest and enthusiasm in work role.
The Depressive Executive	Emphasis on self-accusation and guilt. Not so much strategy as submission. Typical symptoms include, insomnia, low sex drive, personal neglect.

For present purposes Kets de Vries and Balazs's research provides a valuable context, but it might be anticipated that downsizing envoys will experience a different 'inner life' rationale from that of the executive 'executioners'. The coping strategies are of most interest although it is likely that many envoys will not be in a position to adopt the abrasive approach. That said, whilst the strategies outlined are vivid and suggest that personality type may be an important factor in understanding how downsizing roles are experienced, in common with the 'well adjusted' category, no indication is given as to the proportion of executives falling into each 'type' or the range of intensity across which each 'type' operates.

The second study identified, by Wright and Barling (1998), adopts a grounded theory approach and here again the focus is on participants drawn from an executive development programme – this time in Canada. A purposeful sample of eight interviewees were recruited from a population of two hundred and supplemented by two other executives not on the programme and identified through acquaintances. Clearly, the research approach of Wright and Barling is quite different from Kets de Vries and Balazs and there is another significant contrast.

"Most of the respondents were given guidelines from superiors or from their boards of directors to reduce staff by a percentage of the total workforce. Others were directed to hold costs down, and they selected downsizing themselves as a cost saving strategy. They had all personally informed members of their staff who were being laid off." (Wright and Barling 1998 p341)

Thus, despite being a much smaller sample and, in most cases, having some involvement in downsizing decision making, these executives do conform to the definition of envoys used here, which has an emphasis on face to face interaction.

Wright and Barling begin their findings by emphasising how demanding professionally a downsizing exercise is likely to be and how the personal effects can linger for many years (10 years in one particular case). They then identify five research themes that are outlined in table 2.

**Table 2 – Downsizers’ Reflections: Research Themes (adapted from Wright and Barling 1998)**

<b>Research Theme</b>	<b>Research Findings</b>
Role overload	“In addition to working longer hours and having expanded duties, downsizers also shouldered the responsibility for getting others through this difficult time.” (p343)
Personal meaning	“... perceptual reference points are: ‘attribution of cause: guilt versus opportunity,’ ‘reflections on communication style: maintaining self-respect,’ and ‘confronting the victims’ and survivors’ emotions.’” (p344)
Organisational and social isolation	“Downsizers described how the experience of downsizing served to isolate them from their staff, friends and families. The factors that appeared to promote this isolation were an increase in job duties (with a corresponding increase in time commitment), a need to conceal information from colleagues, and their attempts to further manage their emotions.” (p347)
Personal well-being	“Respondents frequently and adamantly described the personal strains they experienced [...] Undoubtedly, part of the personal strain was a function of the fear that the victims’ emotional reactions inspired.” (p347)
Family functioning	“Respondents said that after the layoffs they had less time to spend with their families and even when they were home they had less energy and enthusiasm to do the things they used to do.” (p348)

Each of the themes identified has the potential to be significant for the purposes of the current research. That view is mitigated only a little by the fact that Wright and Barling’s respondents seem to have decision making powers that could amplify the levels of guilt they experienced beyond what might be the case if they served solely as envoys. It is also worth bearing in mind that two of the themes above – role overload and problems of family functioning - are likely to be experienced by many survivors of downsizing too (Devine et al. 2003) and so are not uniquely an effect of being the ‘executioner’.

The third empirical investigation of relevance here adopts a case study methodology. Clair and Dufresne (2004) interviewed forty downsizing ‘agents’ (the definition of which we considered earlier) from a financial services company located in the north east United States, employing 2,800 staff given the pseudonym ‘BSO’. By the authors’ own admission, the case study approach does have notable limitations for the purpose of exploring downsizing (2004 p1622). For instance, they point out that the downsizing event at BSO was comparatively small scale (fifty employees were let go); however, from the point of view of this study, a more significant confounding aspect is the US legal system in which BSO operates. Clair and Dufresne explain that:

“DAs planned BSO’s downsizing over several months. The management team not involved in planning was given two days’ notice of BSO’s downsizing. There was no prior announcement to the general employee population. Most of the lay-offs were executed in one day.” (2004 p1600)

Although this guerrilla approach to downsizing is possible in the UK, employment legislation requiring consultation periods and procedures is instituted to prevent it and organisations of the order of BSO in the UK are extremely unlikely to adopt a strategy

that is, in essence, outlawed. Many countries around Europe have even stricter requirements than the UK.

The case itself then has limited applicability, but the analysis drawn from it does add depth to the matters discussed so far and introduces some new considerations such as the importance of prior experience and the extent of relational ties, both of which will be important to explore. The broad findings are summarised in table 3.

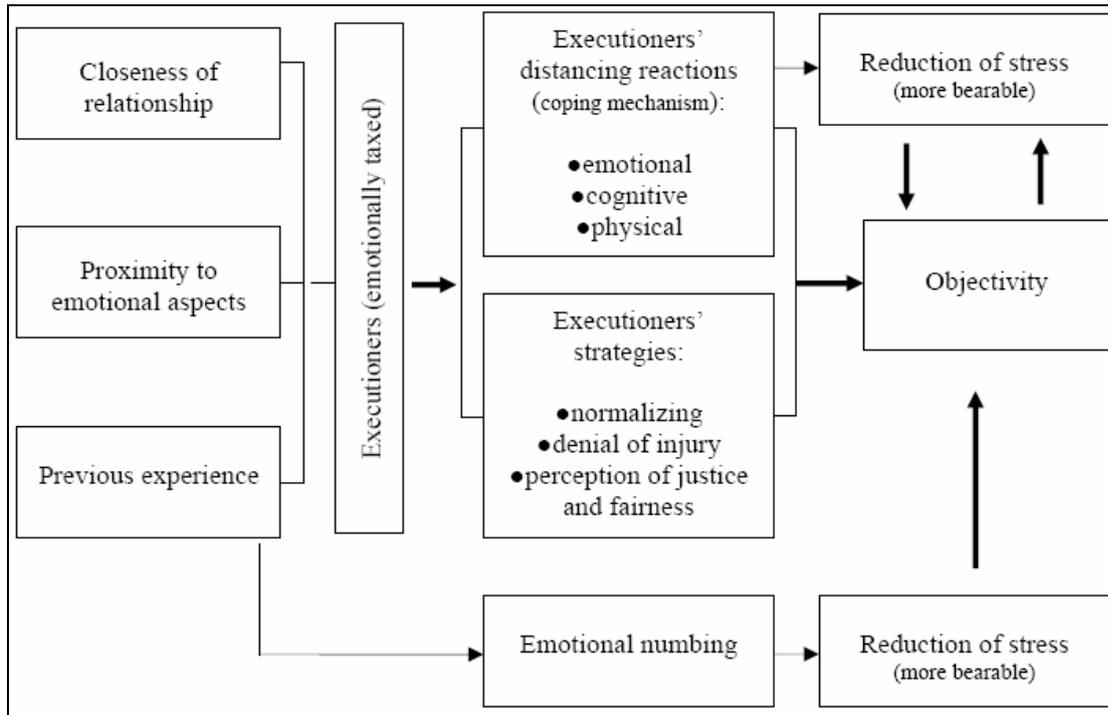
**Table 3 – Downsizing Agents’ Experiences: Research Themes (adapted from Clair and Dufresne 2004 pp1606 - 18)**

<b>Research Theme</b>	<b>Research Findings</b>
Emotionally taxing	The need to deceive others (a direct consequence of keeping the downsizing confidential) Making tough, uncertain and confused decisions Dealing with the emotional pain of others (an interesting contrast with the executives studied by Kets de Vries and Balazs (1997)) Being stigmatised
Coping reactions	Emphasis on trying to place ‘distance’ between self, the event and its victims (similar to Kets de Vries and Balazs’ ‘dissociative executive’): Emotional distancing Cognitive distancing Physical distancing
Role of prior experience	The advantages of familiarity, anticipation and practiced coping mechanisms
Relational ties	The closer the relationship with the victims the greater the distress and the more difficult it is to engage distancing techniques

That last empirical study of note is by Gandolfi (2007; 2009). In common with Clair and Dufresne he adopts a case study approach, looking at downsizing in six large Australian banks, and in one of his papers (2009) he draws from Clair and Dufresne’s work to supplement his own findings in the development of a conceptual framework of ‘executioners’ reactions to downsizing.

Gandolfi interviewed thirty six executive and middle managers with the only criteria for inclusion being that each respondent had served the downsized banks prior to, during and after the conduct of a downsizing initiative. He takes a holistic view of downsizing activity that is beyond the scope of this research project, for instance, he is particularly concerned about the way in which downsizing process may be phased. Nevertheless, the framework of ‘executioners’ reactions’ (reproduced in figure 2), although not corresponding exactly with the envoy category, does incorporate and integrate many of the themes highlighted in the other studies and is useful as an articulate model against which to contextualise the current research.

**Fig. 2 – Preliminary Conceptual Framework of Executioners’ Reactions to Layoffs (Gandolfi 2009 p194)**



The framework sets out to make clear how the important variables mentioned by Clair and Dufresne (2004) influence the coping strategies (similar to those identified by Kets de Vries and Balazs (1997)) that an executioner may enact in order to reduce their emotional taxation. For instance, it is explicit that previous experience contributes to emotional numbing. An interesting aspect of the framework is the reference to ‘objectivity’ as an ultimate outcome for the executioner. The upward arrow from ‘objectivity’ to ‘reduction of stress’ implies that being objective mitigates against emotional taxation, but the other arrows may suggest that objectivity is an end in itself, perhaps because executioners believe that it best serves the interest of the victims. It is only possible to speculate because Gandolfi does not elaborate on reason for objectivity being presented as a key outcome.

## 6. METHODOLOGY

The respondents for this study are all individuals that have recently acted as downsizing envoys for their organisation as defined by the fact that each was involved in the face to face delivery of downsizing decisions to the (potential) victims. The majority of envoys had recent experience of delivering news to groups of employees (often at the start of collective consultation) followed generally by experience of detailed consultations on a personal basis (often with a colleague and perhaps a companion accompanying the victim), however, a small number had experience only of one or the other.

Between late January and early March 2011 twenty four envoys, drawn from nine different public sector organisations, were interviewed. The envoys are all located in the North West of England, but spread across the entire region (Cheshire, Lancashire, Cumbria and some metropolitan boroughs). Given the inevitable absence of an identifiable research population the approach to gaining respondents was based on a non-probability sampling procedure. Envoys were identified by making appeals through existing networks; specifically, Acas North West, associate members of the Institute for Research into Organisation and Employment, and alumni of the University of Central Lancashire.

Principally in order to address the stated aim of exploring the experiences of both HR and non-HR based envoys an effort was made to interview at least one of each type in each organisation accessed. Whilst this did not always prove possible an acceptable coverage of both HR and non-HR envoys has been achieved; the exact distribution of the sample is summarised in table 4 below.

**Table 4 – Summary of participating organisations by sector and respondents by role**

	Sector/type	Respondents
Organisation 1	Law and order	1 x non HR
Organisation 2	Emergency service	1 x HR
Organisation 3	Education	3 x HR 2 x non HR
Organisation 4	Health	2 x HR 2 x non HR
Organisation 5	Local government	2 x non-HR
Organisation 6	Utilities	2 x HR 2 x non HR
Organisation 7	Health	2 x HR 1 x non HR
Organisation 8	Law and order	3 x HR
Organisation 9	Local government	1 x HR

The interviewees were drawn from across organisational hierarchies and so for both HR and non-HR categories there is a mix of senior management (including one at executive level), middle management and first line management, although not all of the HR participants had line management responsibilities or experience.

It is, perhaps, worth emphasising that only envoys have been interviewed for this study. So, for instance, although there was a high trade union presence in all of the participating organisations no trade union representatives were engaged. Likewise, no executives, victims or survivors were interviewed although, as will become apparent in due course, a number of envoys had experience of one or more of these situations.

Consequently, wherever any of these other actors are discussed in the findings it is always from the perspective of the envoys.

A commitment of confidentiality was necessary to secure the participation of organisations and full disclosure of experience and views from envoys, so neither organisations nor individuals are identified in table 4 or elsewhere in the report. The organisations vary considerably in terms of purpose, size, structure, culture, funding models and rationale for restructuring, among other things, and some of the organisations have possibly unique characteristics that undoubtedly impacted upon the experience of downsizing activity. Those characteristics cannot be specified because they would render the particular organisations identifiable, but they have been taken into account when analysing the data.

Interviews were conducted individually at the workplaces of envoys and were very loosely structured around a recollection of downsizing events, rather than a schedule of questions, that enabled respondents to identify and evaluate the key issues and experiences for themselves. It was, therefore, important, in order to ensure a consistency of approach, that all of the interviews were conducted by the same interviewer - the author of this report. On average each interview lasted 70 minutes, with the shortest being 40 minutes (it had to be discontinued as a result of an unforeseen interruption) and the longest being 95 minutes. The depth of auto-exploration that this allowed each envoy is an important feature of the data gathered and the quotations from the envoys provided in the analysis that follows are often quite lengthy in order to convey the richness of the evidence collected.

The data was coded manually into what eventually amounted to twenty-nine broad themes such as, 'effect on family/home life', 'HR and non HR dynamic', and 'fairness/transparency'. Some themes required sub-categories so, for instance, evidence of 'previous experience' was split into 'no experience', 'experience as victim' and 'experience as envoy'. The self-exploratory approach adopted for the interviews meant that all of the themes identified emerged from the data. Some of the themes did have parallels with a number of the concepts identified in the literature discussed earlier and so similar terminology was used to label them. For example, there were clear incidences among the envoys of the use of coping strategies similar to those noted by Clair and Dufresne (2004) and so were coded using their labels – 'emotional hardening' and 'cognitive distancing'. Clair and Dufresne (2004) also describe a coping strategy called 'physical distancing', but as no incidences of this type were reported by the envoys it was never coded.

## 7. FINDINGS

### 7.1 Introduction

All of the nine organisations participating in this research had recently undertaken downsizing activities and in most cases these activities are on-going. Perhaps because the research was conducted over a period shortly before the anticipated full impact of public sector spending cuts was felt, much of the activity could be described as pre-emptory and tended to be managed through voluntary severance and redeployment. Nevertheless, some compulsory redundancies had been made across the organisations surveyed and the majority of envoys anticipated that the need for compulsory measures would arise, if they had not already.

The downsizing procedures adopted by the organisations varied but a common pattern can be discerned. Generally the process would begin with notifying relevant trade unions and employee representatives that downsizing activity was about to commence followed immediately by collective face to face announcements to those employees directly affected. An announcement would most likely be made by a manager with appropriate seniority and with the HR function in attendance. These initial meetings represented the beginning of collective consultation which would be augmented with one to one meetings between envoys and those 'at risk' (potential victims). Across all the organisations the approach was always to downsize through a combination of natural wastage, recruitment freezes, voluntary severance (redundancy and retirement) and redeployment. Without exception, compulsory redundancy was considered to be the last option<sup>3</sup>.

By contrast there appears to be no such thing as a typical envoy. Inevitably, the envoys were diverse in terms of their occupation and even those categorised as HR envoys represented a variety of functional areas. The envoys differed considerably in terms of status, tenure and experience in their organisations. As mentioned at the beginning of this report the role of envoy is defined by the delivery of generally bad news in a face to face situation, however, that act is rarely as straightforward as it sounds. For instance, often the face to face context was, initially at least, in collective meetings with potential victims and sometimes an envoy participating in this research might have to present the bad news (generally non HR envoys), whilst on other occasions they may be in attendance to provide information or monitor process (generally HR envoys). All of the envoys were involved in one to one meetings with victims (though often there would be a third party in attendance), but usually as part of a follow up process and so not involving the initial delivery of bad news<sup>4</sup>.

It is worth saying that the evidence from this research does justify the label 'envoy' for the role in question. Earlier in this report it was argued that an envoy was defined by the application of such attributes as sensitivity, discretion, resilience and ability to mediate, and the respondents here often spoke about their diplomatic endeavours. They described themselves variously as: *delivering hard messages; remaining positive; a sounding board; a shoulder to cry on; counsellors; mediators; and go-betweens*. A quote from an envoy involved in organising redeployment illustrates the type of aptitudes involved:

*I think it's been a bit about development, a bit of help with the applications, a bit of confidence boosting really and also it's about liaising*

---

<sup>3</sup> It is worth emphasising again that this use of natural attrition is associated with negative downsizing outcomes by Cameron (1994) and Flint (2003).

<sup>4</sup> A recent Hollywood film called *Up in the Air*, which has generated some interest in the envoy role (Diffin 2010), depicts a character that flies around the US on behalf of his corporation delivering summary notice of termination to employees on a one to one basis. The activities of the envoys in this study are a long way removed from the fictional portrayal, but some of the emotional effects are similar.

*a lot of the time with that member of staff, with the manager that the job is in, because a lot of the time, when you ring a manager up and say 'oh we've got somebody on the redeployment register here who wants to come over and do a work trial', the reaction is, 'ugh! Don't want them' ... So you've got to do quite a lot of persuasive talking with that manager and try and sell that person. [HR envoy, organisation 7]*

Based on this evidence, and much of what appears in the rest of the report, it can be argued that the label of 'executioner' is inaccurate and somewhat unfair in terms of describing what these people do.

Last, it is important to point out that the definition used here of downsizing victim is fairly broad. Compulsory redundancies were rare across the participating organisations and so a victim is considered to be anybody whose job was 'at risk' as a consequence of downsizing activity. The reason for this is that the 'at risk' victim will not know at the stage they meet with envoys as to whether they will become redundant, be redeployed or survive.

The findings below reflect the research aims identified at the start of this report and will be presented in the same order, namely:

- Factors affecting envoys that are particular to the public sector context.
- Understanding how it feels to be an envoy.
- The value of prior experience and preparation.
- The effect of relations between the HR functions and line managers

## **7.2 Factors affecting envoys that are particular to the public sector context**

There are a number of issues that appear to have a particular impact on envoys in the public sector that might be expected to have less significance or be non-existent in other sectors. Care must be taken in making assumptions regarding the uniqueness of the public sector context because this is not a comparative, public versus private, study, however, it seems reasonable to posit some thoughts that can be considered and tested empirically in the event of further research. It is also worth noting that fourteen of the envoys participating in this research declared that they had experience of downsizing in both public and private sectors and their testimony adds some legitimacy to the factors discussed below.

### **7.2.1 Politics**

Recalling Pandey's (2010) assertion that 'public organisations are different', it can be argued that the political milieu within which public sector organisations have to operate creates a particularly demanding set of circumstances for the envoys, which may not apply in other sectors. Many of them mentioned that the political process surrounding funding decisions and the regular spectre of localised political interference left them with a constant sense of uncertainty where information was often unreliable and patchy. For instance, one respondent cited an occasion when a politician, perhaps seeing an opportunity to improve their image with the local electorate and despite a collective agreement to secrecy, chose to disclose details of service cuts to the local press before the service staff could be informed. Thus many employees found out that their jobs were under threat from reading their local newspaper rather than in the controlled manner that envoys had intended.

The fact that a great deal of the political process is in the public domain has the potentially positive outcome that victims are rarely taken by surprise when envoys announce the onset of a downsizing programme – they had often seen it coming for months – and so may be much more measured in terms of their initial reaction compared with an announcement that is completely unanticipated. However, the ongoing political process and public interest may undermine the envoys' ability to deliver a consistent message to victims as they negotiate their way through the restructuring process. For instance, one HR envoy described how 'at risk' notifications had been provided to the staff of a local amenity scheduled for closure, when a campaign in the local press resulted in a reprieve. This was good news for the staff at the amenity, yet created a problem later on for envoys when dealing with subsequent notifications because the victims did not trust their veracity. Political lobbying is not only undertaken by the public and press, but also by trade unions and the executive function of the public organisations themselves. This type of activity was mentioned by at least one envoy in all but one organisation (though not always in connection with the present downsizing). It is difficult to provide specific examples without being in danger of disclosing identities, but one envoy described how fear of the withdrawal of funding dogged a particular service for two years. She referred to a *rollercoaster ride* for staff (and envoys) of being 'at risk' then being reprieved, being 'at risk' then being reprieved and so on. Eventually, she claimed, all of the employees concerned were on sickness absence.

The political interest that the media has in public organisations can be a double edged sword as far as envoys are concerned. On the one hand, as mentioned above, it can help to inure victims against the shock of downsizing as long as the coverage is accurate and about the general financial climate. However, on the other hand, specific but inaccurate information or speculation can heighten insecurity and lead to a mistrust of envoys.

To sum up, a non-HR envoy said, when describing his frustration at seemingly being subject to frequent bouts of political interference:

*The organisation can do everything in its power to try and help their managers [envoys] and the victims, but all of that gets blown out of the water by politics.* [Non HR envoy, organisation 5]

Ultimately, the effect can be to undermine the trust and confidence of everybody in attempting to deal with an already difficult set of circumstances.

### **7.2.2 Front Line versus Support Staff**

Another factor, and one that also has a political dimension to it, is the distinction and interaction between front line services and support services that is made by many organisations when handling downsizing. Private sector organisations may make reference to the relative importance of client facing employees *vis a vis* employees who are not in direct contact with customers. However, arguably the distinction between front line and support staff is made more stark in public organisations on account of public perceptions and expectations of the services they receive – a situation that can conceivably lead to tension or antipathy between the two types of employees. The drive for greater public sector efficiency, even during times of relative prosperity, is typically targeted at 'back office' staff. In addition, commentators and politicians may guide public perceptions if they call for more police officers on the beat, more doctors and nurses and more teachers. In this context managers and administrators may be painted to be relatively less important functionaries. Indeed, Bach (2011) has recently predicted that 'back office' employees will be particularly vulnerable to staffing reductions and there is evidence to support his view from the organisations participating in this research.

According to a number of envoys some front line staff may believe that they are immune from the harshest consequences of downsizing and, indeed, some may be immune in practice. A number of envoys pointed out that, for instance, police officers and fire-

fighters are protected from redundancy. One HR envoy acknowledged her belief in the privileged position of 'uniformed' staff and the likely disparate impact on 'non-uniform' staff in the following terms:

*But they've been working here on their restructuring and it's turned out it's 140 jobs. Now I've said to the people here, I said have you read the [restructure] papers? And they said, no, no. I said, well let's have a look and see who's impacted. Big, big percentage of them is people like me, the non-uniform staff as we're called, or support staff; very few uniformed. You know that galls me because we're half the cost. You know? So it's going to take more of us to make up that change. [HR envoy, organisation 2]*

Unsurprisingly, in the organisations consulted in this research, envoys reported that the cuts were falling disproportionately on support staff, which caused them personal unease. This was because almost all of the envoys participating in this study would be classified as support staff and so many felt themselves to be in danger of losing their jobs as a consequence of downsizing activity. Thirteen indicated that they considered themselves to be at risk (there may have been others who did not disclose this), three had already been redeployed from other locations, and two were serving notice still hoping to be redeployed. The upside to envoys having been, or still being, 'at risk' is that victims may feel slightly more at ease talking with somebody who has experienced what they are experiencing. The personal experiences of these envoys may even offer other victims examples of positive outcomes from downsizing exercises.

*Yeah! I mean look at me! In my instance there was an opportunity created for me so it's not all bad news. There are opportunities and some people I've spoken to have said 'right', well they're seen as getting redeployed, they're seeing this as an opportunity to work in another department, to get another taste of [the organisation] and what they do in that area and it's good in some ways ... I don't think it's the culture of the organisation, I think it's individuals themselves and how each individual deals with change. [HR envoy, organisation 8]*

The effect on the victims of the distinctions made by organisations in their treatment of front line and support staff varied but some envoys felt that explaining the uneven distribution of downsizing placed them in a difficult position. For instance, a non HR envoy struggled to justify to her colleagues, in accordance with the organisational line, why they were required to reduce headcount by 15%, while other functions were only required to shed 5%.

In an organisation where downsizing was having an impact on front line as well as support staff it was still the latter, according to a senior HR envoy that were most vulnerable, and yet according to another HR envoy in the same organisation handling the support staff was much the less daunting and more rewarding prospect.

*[The front line staff] very much had the attitude of, 'well you need me more than I need you' because of the lack of [this type of employee], so their [redeployment] interviews are very different. They're very much... they tell you what they want and you've got to meet their demands, whereas, the lower banded [support staff] were much more accommodating and were grateful for whatever you could do for them ... There's such a difference and I thought how lovely doing theirs, the [support] staff, and the [front line staff] were quite bolshie and like I say, 'you need me more than I need you so I can go and get a job', and to be honest they are quite right. [HR envoy, organisation 7]*

If any antipathy does already exist between front line and support staff then it may be exacerbated by downsizing activity (as is also illustrated in the next section) a feeling recalled by an HR envoy in an organisation where front line staff are protected. Thankfully, she did receive some backing from a senior front line official.

*I had an impression that the [front line staff] were just like 'oh well, whatever...' and didn't really understand the impact that [downsizing] has on people who are [support] staff ... The senior [official] actually turned round to the [front line staff] – anyone who's basically whinging – and just said 'your colleagues have been made redundant and you're moaning about having to work 'til 8 o'clock tonight' ... and he sent a clear message. [HR envoy, organisation 8]*

### **7.2.3 Perceptions of Public Service Ethic**

In reviewing the literature on public sector downsizing reference was made to the concept of a public service ethic. Feldheim (2007) speculated that downsizing may undermine the public service ethic that is an important part of the public employee's psychological contract. Tangible evidence of this effect was uncovered in only one organisation, which is not to say that it did not occur elsewhere or is insignificant, and in large part it derived from the front line/support staff distinction discussed above. There was some indication that in this particular organisation certain senior staff viewed support staff as relatively expendable and envoys feared that such a viewpoint would ultimately have a detrimental impact on the commitment of staff. For instance, one non HR envoy, whose line manager was a front line professional, had this to say:

*I've been here 28 years and it's never changed, the focus of those people in those roles is always towards the [front line] side and admin' is – 'we don't know anything about admin''. So the difficulty for me, then, is well 'I am an administrator and I'm managing an admin' team, you are my line manager so you really need to be understanding where I'm at and giving me support' ... There's the [various front line occupations], there's the admin' team, and none of those people understand each other. [Non HR envoy, organisation 4]*

The impression was confirmed by her fellow envoy in the same organisation.

*We're not getting that support and all we seem to feel at this moment in time that we're not appreciated because we're not [front line] staff, you know? 'It's okay, it's only them', and it does make you feel like that ... How we feel and at the moment the morale is really low ... We regularly feel like we're very undervalued. [Non HR envoy, organisation 4]*

Ultimately, the concern for both envoys was that this attitude from management (along with an increasing workload for survivors, which will be discussed later) belittled and, therefore, would diminish the public service ethic held by the administrative staff and ultimately impact upon their desire to deliver a high quality service. In other words, they were of the view that their colleagues' motivation, commitment and morale will decline, not just as a result of being downsized but also because of the attitudes of key (front line) managers during the process.

In some of the participating organisations this potential decline in public service ethic may be mitigated against by the relationship between victims and the client/community groups they serve, a dimension that brought particular nuances to the role and reactions of many envoys.

Some envoys referred to dealing with victims that were employed in providing services for disadvantaged and vulnerable people in society and the victims were evidently much more concerned about the plight of their service users than they were for their own

positions. Thus, an issue that is beyond the sphere of the envoys' influence becomes central to the sense of well-being of the victims and, whilst it needs to be dealt with in a sensitive way, the concern of the victims is transmitted to the envoy. Perhaps the words of two of the envoys best express the matter and are, therefore, are worth quoting at some length. The first relates to the closure of a service for children, the second to a restructuring of specialist healthcare for women and children.

*It was all in one go and very emotional. No blame, no anger at the time, but an understanding ... because we have some very loyal staff. They've been here a long time and the services that we actually deliver for a lot of them it could be their hobby ... It's passion and commitment and they truly believe in what they do and part of our mission is making a difference to peoples' lives. And they're from [this area] they work in [this area]. They know if that service goes the detrimental impact that that could have on peoples' lives in [this area], you can't quantify that because they work with some of the most disadvantaged groups and that is what seems to have been their concern. Obviously they've got a concern as individuals but first and foremost it's about the loss of service ... What about the community? [Non HR envoy, organisation5]*

*But it was the Women's' and Children's that I felt very uncomfortable about ... [The staff] were telling you about some of the patients that they have and they deal with. 'They come to us and they know exactly who we are. We're almost like friends'. You could almost feel what they were going through and they were saying, you know, you're just ripping this apart and you're moving us to another area that I've no understanding about. It was like they were passionate... Everything they talked about was about the patient. [Elsewhere] it was all about [the victims] and, 'oh I can only do this and I want to do... and I don't want to work there because I don't like her and I don't like the [workplace]. Where they, the whole time, it was never their needs, it was all about the patients' needs. Oh... it was draining because I really felt for them. That's what I found difficult... I was on their side but I couldn't show that. [HR envoy, organisation 7]*

Not all of the organisations participating in this study were engaged in providing direct services for vulnerable people so this issue arose in only two of them. Nonetheless, very many public organisations in sectors such as health, education, public order and local government do provide such services and so it is an aspect of public sector downsizing that could be more widespread than this sample suggests and may develop into a more prevalent factor for envoys as cuts deepen.

#### **7.2.4 Trade Unions**

Another significant characteristic of the UK public sector is the broad extent of trade union recognition and relatively high membership density, which explains why all of the participating organisations involved the relevant trade unions immediately and throughout the downsizing process. The impact that trade union involvement had on the envoys would best be described as mixed. Most envoys claimed to recognise that trade union officials (whether internal or external to the organisation) were themselves in a difficult situation that, perhaps, resulted in an unspoken empathy. There was an implied recognition that envoys and trade union officials had a shared agenda – to get victims through a difficult process with the minimum individual and collective harm. A senior HR professional explicitly recognised the rather invidious position that trade union officials could find themselves facing in the current economic climate:

*We [trade unions and organisation] try to come to a mutual solution to problems. When it's a redundancy situation, whatever we agree about,*

*it's very difficult for them because they can't condone job losses that will affect their members. So, even if it came to agreeing selection criteria ... they won't be able to say 'yes, we agree it'. They'd have to say 'yes, we've commented on it', but they can't agree it because it means they're condoning job losses. So I think they find themselves in a difficult position. [HR envoy, organisation 3]*

The subtext is that the trade unions have to support their members, but that from the union perspective there is no benefit from treating the organisation, management or envoys as adversaries and perhaps for this reason a number of envoys had a positive relationship with trade union officials. The HR professional cited above described her contact with the trade unions as *very good and helpful*. There was a sense among a significant number of envoys, where the subject was broached, that constructive and supportive trade union officials could play an important role, not only in supporting victims but also in facilitating the downsizing process and, by implication, assisting the envoys.

In one organisation, despite there being a recent history of some restructuring and downsizing activity, there was a level of uncertainty because the current downsizing process was of a different order. Two of the envoys from that organisation spoke positively about trade union involvement where experience could be brought to bear:

*During collective consultation it was the external [trade union] person that essentially took the lead because from that perspective they had most experience. [HR envoy, organisation 6]*

*The union man was present at virtually all of [the collective consultations]. So he gave us quite a good steer because he had done it so many times. I got quite hung up, I remember, on selection criteria and he sort of said 'actually by the time you get to selection criteria you've already lost people ... You're better off concentrating your efforts on getting people the right terms and trying to steer the staff [towards their own interests]', which was a good steer. It was a very good steer. [Non HR envoy, organisation 6]*

Nevertheless, elsewhere there were some misgivings about trade union involvement. In one case an envoy at senior management (executive) level was surprised to hear a regional organiser for a large public sector union confess that he had never dealt with anything of this scale before. She intimated that it may explain why the union was reacting officiously and even aggressively to the situation – *'you can't talk to our members without us being there'* – which was uncharacteristic of the normal trade union/organisation relationship and which confused her managers (envoys). She expressed disappointment that in areas of her organisation where:

*... There were no members of staff who were in unions – the unions didn't want to know. Yeah, 'I haven't got time for that. I'm not prepared ...' and for me, as a manager, as an individual, I was quite shocked because I strongly believe in representation, and I actually think that if you have good shop stewards and good regional officials you can achieve such a lot more. But the attitude was 'not union members - not interested'. And that's been the theme actually, but it's a real opportunity for them. They've lost a lot of members. Real opportunity! Don't want to know. [Non HR envoy, organisation 5<sup>5</sup>]*

---

<sup>5</sup> This organisation, in common with many in the public sector, employed people in the type of jobs with a strong trade union tradition (generally manual, skilled or semi-skilled, full time, permanent,

The seniority of this particular envoy meant that she had an overview of the downsizing situation that most envoys would not possess and she was able to conclude that the unions representing employees in her organisation may have an agenda to protect jobs that are of particular interest to the media and, therefore, politically expedient, whilst neglecting jobs with less of a public profile. Here again is an example of an issue that would not normally be a factor in the private sector.

For some other envoys, where difficulties arose with trade union representatives, it was more likely to be as a consequence of the personalities involved. For instance, one envoy who had to engage with officials from two trade unions said:

*The union representative that's from [Union A] is not necessarily the best one to work with, whereas with [Union B] they do work alongside you. They might disagree with what you're saying or we might disagree with them, but you come from a more common background. The [Union A] representative, who we've had a lot of dealings with, he's a fun character, but he was very, very militant all the way through it and not very helpful because the staff were trying to get answers to questions and he just kept shouting them down and saying it wasn't appropriate and he was going to fight these cuts. No one could fight these cuts ... he couldn't really grasp that, and he spent a lot of time trying to block everything, which didn't really help the staff that were there. [HR envoy, organisation 8]*

Of course, the union representatives being described here might offer a very different interpretation of their actions.

### **7.2.5 Duration of Downsizing Implementation and the Effect of Redeployment**

Notwithstanding legal requirements in the UK regarding consultation periods for redundancy, there is some evidence that downsizing in public sector organisations is a considerably longer and more drawn out process than it is in private sector organisations. A number of envoys that had direct experience of downsizing in the private sector commented on this. The following reflection is typical:

*The most recent one, as I said, at my previous job was that it just seemed to happen very, very quickly and orders that had been committed were suddenly pulled so we went from having a thousand orders to having two hundred ... It was very, very quick and we started around September so by Christmas we'd lost the first, probably, two hundred (people) and then the rest gradually went over the next six months. [HR envoy, organisation 3]*

The company being described shed many hundreds of jobs through voluntary and compulsory redundancies (including this envoy), at the same time as implementing a radical cost-cutting exercise (no hospitality, canteen, new company cars and so on), in a matter of months. In contrast, this envoy's current public organisation had taken five months to reduce staffing by a fraction of that amount and the process was not yet complete. One non HR envoy whose purchasing function had been centralised explained that the process of dispensing with her small regional team was still on-going after eighteen months.

Flint (2003) viewed 'slow implementation' of downsizing to be desirable and the envoys, looking at things from the victims' perspective, held this to be broadly true.

---

staffed by men) but also many in roles with little trade union penetration (generally, non-manual, unskilled, part time, insecure, staffed by women).

Nevertheless, 'slow implementation' is not necessarily good from the envoys' point of view because it extends the period across which they have to endure heightened emotions and increased workload (the evidence of which will be discussed later).

A number of the issues already considered, such as political uncertainty and trade union involvement, along with the emphasis placed on procedural fairness (which will be discussed later), may contribute to the drawing out of the process. However, probably the main reason for this was the priority given to redeployment as an approach to downsizing in the public sector. Redeployment is inevitably a slow process, often involving the envoys throughout, as skills are audited, vacancies waited on, interviews (often competitive) are conducted and sometimes there is a trial period. For any individual that is unsuccessful at any point the process begins again.

Redeployment, alongside voluntary severance, was treated as the first option in every organisation, the logic being that the right thing to do is to protect the employment (not the jobs) of existing staff (also typically the priority of trade unions). It also had the public relations benefit of preventing the need for an announcement of large-scale redundancies. envoys reported a variety of successful redeployment initiatives. For example, one HR envoy described how she had assisted in successfully redeploying forty low skilled workers, from a function that was about to be outsourced, into roles that most would not have dreamt of applying for under normal circumstances. However, a more senior HR envoy from the same organisation, whilst acknowledging this success, provided a different perspective.

*As I say the [function noted above] has been a huge success in redeploying people into places they never thought they would go ... So we've got some real success stories but that is outweighed by the unsuccessful stories. [HR envoy, organisation 7]*

So, the success of redeployment can be patchy and envoys also identified a number of other problems with the redeployment approach. It might be assumed that the reactions of victims will be much more favourable to the idea of possible redeployment when contrasted with being made redundant and, therefore, make the lives of envoys easier. This does not appear to have been the case for two reasons. First, when initially hearing about downsizing the victims tended to assume the worst because envoys always had to include the caveat that compulsory redundancies were a possibility even where they thought them unlikely (in case downsizing targets were not met by other means). Second, for some victims, redeployment seemed to be a less desirable option than redundancy. An HR envoy described how one group of employees in her organisation feared they were about to be redeployed back to roles that they had previously made great efforts to escape from.

Unsurprisingly, many redeployment opportunities were in less prestigious, often lower grade, roles and, although the salary of a victim might be protected for time, there was a reluctance to take them. This caused a considerable dilemma for envoys trying to advise victims because a number of organisations operated a system whereby if two offers of redeployment were turned down the victim is dismissed without redundancy benefits. One non HR envoy explained:

*Yes, and you only get two chances of accepting what they offer before you really make yourself unemployed and that was really, really hurtful ... You're dismissing yourself! [Non HR envoy, organisation 4]*

Likewise, according to the same envoy, where victims were redeployed into roles they were not suited to and failed the probationary period the effect was the same. When redeployment is competitive (perhaps, in effect, for a role the victim is already doing)

there is an obvious negative psychological impact on the unsuccessful applicants, who this envoy still had to line manage:

*Oh, it was horrible ... You say 'you've not been successful', so those people are now still sat in the offices where they've always worked knowing that they're not the best candidate and they've been displaced, but still have to sit there probably feeling, not embarrassed, but you probably just want to get out of there, don't you? I know I'd be gutted if I was told you weren't the best candidate out of your group. [Non HR envoy, organisation 7]*

As spending cuts bite deeper the opportunities for redeployment diminish and there is a danger that victims are given false hope to the extent that they may neglect to look for opportunities outside of their present employer. One non HR envoy indicated that his organisation was in danger of misleading victims.

*I think it's been different [from a previous downsizing] because redeployment [as an] option is not there. And I think [the organisation] keep using it because of procedures and it's not there really ... But they're still trying to use it and it's a bit disappointing to some of the staff because that's giving them a bit of hope that's not there. [Non HR envoy, organisation 5]*

So, from the envoys' perspective, redeployment and 'slow implementation' certainly are not easy options. Two envoys from the same organisation, both with experience of what might be considered more brutal downsizing processes in the private sector, gave similar summations.

*I think there is a lot to be said for, maybe not if you're on the receiving end, but just going down, delivering a message, albeit a hard and unpleasant message, because there's no 'oh, we don't know what's going to happen'. It's – 'this is what's happening, there is no job, but we're giving you notice, there's your holiday pay and there you go. [HR envoy, organisation 3]*

*Tell us how much cuts you want to make and we'll try very hard to make them, but don't do 5 percent now and 5 percent in a few months because it's just the emotional trauma that it causes people is too much to drag out. You know, do it... it's almost like ripping the plaster off. [Non HR envoy, organisation 3]*

It is worth mentioning that some of the more senior envoys were also concerned about the destabilising effect of a lengthy process. One non HR envoy regretted the uncertainty that seemed to surround the process in her organisation.

*One of the biggest problems with the process has been the length of time that it's taken ... What I would like to do now is to be able to go out with really positive messages ... try and get morale built back up, but we keep getting these central messages coming out which are worrying and keeping the culture of worry and concern going, which is quite destructive actually. [Non HR envoy, organisation 3]*

Another non HR envoy was typically blunt, but saw the root of the problem differently:

*It took so bloody long that that in itself became a problem. So you destabilise the whole organisation and then you drag it out for ever and ever. And yes, you have to do consultation, but it just went on and on*

*and on. In the name of being fair to everybody we pissed everybody off  
...We absolutely locked ourselves into process mode. [Non HR envoy,  
organisation 6]*

The apparent tension here regarding the emphasis on fairness and process will be revisited when the relationship between the HR function and non HR envoys is discussed later.

### 7.3 Understanding the experience of being an envoy

It may appear to be stating the obvious but it is important to confirm that all of the envoys found the role to be demanding in a number of ways. Pressure in terms of time, effort and competence were all revealed, however, without question, the most demanding aspect of the envoy role was considered to be its emotional constituent, in terms of both managing the envoys' own emotions and attending to the emotions of the victims. It is conceivable that an envoy could be immune to the emotional aspects of the role, or even take a 'macho' pride in being dispassionate, but there was no evidence of any such attitude among the participants here. Typical adjectives used to describe the emotional impact of the role included – *traumatic; nerve wracking; dreadful; very upsetting; hideous;* and ultimately, *stressful*. Even those envoys with considerable experience, who were generally better equipped to manage this aspect of the role, found that the duration of the process exacerbated emotional demands and that particular victims or episodes could still have a significant personal effect. A minority of envoys claimed that up until now they had not found the role to be particularly traumatic, but each put that down to their good fortune, whilst recognising that the role is inherently charged with emotion and that their luck may change.

Of course, the specific emotional effect experienced by an envoy is mediated by various factors. For instance, the reactions of victims to the bad news is significant but not in a simple or predictable way – something that a number of envoys found disturbing. It might be expected that the emotional impact on envoys will be greater when victims react angrily, but that was often not the case. So, whereas some envoys did claim to find angry or aggressive victims to be the most difficult to deal with, there were others that said it was the victims that sat quietly, offering no emotional cues, that were more disconcerting.

In a similar vein, it is not always the case that a victim about to lose their job will be angry and that those who are safe will be grateful, as the following quote illustrates.

*One that was definitely going to lose his job was very dignified and the other one who wasn't going to lose her job but didn't feel that she was comfortable with the process so she was very angry. [HR envoy, organisation 7]*

This, of course, is notwithstanding the fact that some employees, who are told they have an opportunity to leave with a redundancy package, might conceivably be delighted with the windfall if they are unhappy in their current work or if they feel they can get another job easily elsewhere. The danger is that an envoy may anticipate a particular emotional response from a victim, be prepared for it, and then if a different response is forthcoming the envoy experiences the situation as more stressful than may otherwise have been the case. One of the most experienced envoys spoken to gives the following assessment and advice (which is significant with regard to the next section concerning how envoys can prepare):

*I think in all of these programmes people react differently and people don't always react how you expect them to react. Some people get very kind of uppity and stroppy and rub people up the wrong way because it's like 'How can you possibly be doing this to me? Don't you know who I am?' Other people get very weepy, very emotional about it. Some people disengage completely from the process and kind of remove themselves from it and are almost in a denial and I think you have to look out for all of those all the time and not make any judgements about how or why they're reacting as they are. [HR envoy, organisation 6]*

A further factor that affects the emotional experiences of the envoys is the extent of their normal working proximity to the victims; what Clair and Dufresne (2004) refer to as relational ties. All, bar six, of the envoys reflected upon this issue during the course of their interviews and their conclusion was unanimous in its agreement with Clair and Dufresne's view that dealing with people that the envoy has (or has had in the past) a close working relationship is significantly more distressing than dealing with relative strangers. Most of the envoys were able to testify from personal experience, though not necessarily in their present organisation, and an HR envoy provided a characteristic example:

*But what you've got to do is put your feelings and emotions to one side, unfortunately, because even though you've worked alongside these people for years and years I'm still the manager and you've got to... If you're the one who's got to deliver the message then you can't really allow your emotions to come into it ... And I did, I did it yeah, I tried not to show it as much in the meetings, but because these people are friends... I think it's different when you do it in groups, with people who work in [areas] and services that you don't know. Bbut when you're in a small group of people who've worked together for quite a long time, that's quite difficult. Then the other one that was very difficult was my last senior HR advisor who had worked there thirty years. You couldn't fault him in his job. The only reason we had to get rid of him was because we had to make savings, and that was very difficult. [HR envoy, organisation 3]*

The HR envoys, in particular, were likely to have delivered news of redundancy to a range of colleagues; from some that they had never met, to some that they had provided services for on occasions; to immediate HR co-workers. At the extreme, one HR envoy explained how, in a previous organisation, he had been involved with making members of his family redundant.

The non HR envoys were all involved inevitably in the delivery of downsizing news to their subordinates and many speculated that it would be easier to handle if the victims were not close colleagues. It might be surmised, therefore, that emotional impact of the role may be greater on line managers than on other types of envoy and the evidence from the interviews, although not quantifiable, would seem to bear that out. Nevertheless, they made it clear that they felt it right and proper that they should perform the role and they had particular motives for doing so. A number felt that it was better for victims to hear the message from somebody they know, trust and who understands them than from a stranger, and so undertook the role as a sense of duty. Some of the more senior non HR envoys saw it as an opportunity to demonstrate a camaraderie that would build a better relationship for the future with the survivors.

The general perception drawn from all the data gathered was that the non HR envoys endured a somewhat tougher time in the role than the HR envoys. Wright and Barling (1998) identified role overload as a significant problem for their respondents and it proved to be a major issue here too, especially for non HR envoys. Only two interviewees claimed not to be experiencing increased workload as a consequence of the envoy role: a HR envoy that maintained she had learned over time to devolve many tasks in order to protect against excessive hours, and a non HR envoy that had been released from her regular job for the duration of her envoy activity. Some of the most senior envoys were working extraordinarily long hours, but saw this as nothing particularly unusual and not necessarily a consequence of the envoy activity – it came with the managerial level they occupied.

Many HR envoys did complain of work overload as the following quotes illustrate:

*So, I was sat today thinking 'how am I going to do this then?' Because I'm meant to be on leave next week and I'm just, like, 'I don't really think I can'. [HR envoy, organisation 8]*

*My 'things to do' list is getting very long, but we've got so many different things on our time that are paramount. [HR envoy, organisation 7]*

*Yeah there's other work that goes alongside it but it never diminishes, so in terms of... it is full on. You're just working from eight 'til six, eight 'til... whatever time it is, because you can't let your other services down ... I mean there is, to be fair, recognition from the directors that ... if it takes you slightly longer to do a particular thing then they understand why. [HR envoy, organisation 3]*

However, without wishing to diminish the perceptions of the HR envoys, the grievances of the non HR envoys seemed to be of a somewhat different order. Take, for instance, the sentiments of two of the non HR envoys:

*So that'll come to me and then there's other bits that'll come to me. And then the other bits that'll go to the [service] manager and there's only two of us. So anyway, so we had this discussion last week. I said this is fine! But we're already running at crisis point. And I said and I'm not sinking. I've sunk. And I have. [Non HR envoy, organisation 4]*

*I mean it's always a very busy job, you know ... and it did become unmanageable yes, and the workload, I mean even if you're working all your waking hours and weekends as well you couldn't actually get everything done. [Non HR envoy, organisation 3]*

There was also for one non HR envoy some, perhaps, unanticipated commitments, the effects of which begin to add up.

*It goes on for months and months after, you know, and nice things but things like all of those people have leaving do's. Well, you want to go to those leaving do's because you want to thank people for the work they've done, and you know you've got to do a speech which I'm not fond of doing and most of the leaving do's were on an evening so it's kind of more every time. But I want to do that and I would never, never not do that, but it does take up a lot of time. [Non HR envoy, organisation 3]*

Three related factors may explain the difference in role overload experienced by non HR envoys. First, that the envoy role may be more in tune with the expected HR skill set; second, HR managers may be more willing and able to predict the need to prioritise time and resource allocation for the role; and third, HR envoys may have more opportunity to defer other tasks. Having said that, one very experienced HR envoy did indicate, albeit with a degree of understanding, that there may be an element of self-determination.

*I think when you've got an obvious peak, like downsizing or redeployment creates, people will know that it's overload and choose to cope with it because actually there's a light at the end of the tunnel; we can see where the project ends so we'll cope with it. Others have just got big broad shoulders and will do it. I think what I'm saying is there's an inability to let go and that it's; 'in my team it's precious and although it's hard I don't want to let it go either'. [HR envoy, organisation 7]*

The notion of 'coping' was highlighted in the research discussed previously and there is evidence of the adoption of coping strategies among the envoys here, although generally

only in terms of emotional and cognitive distancing. Some envoys referred to an emotional hardening that developed as experience of the role increased with reference to notions of *toughening up*, becoming *thick skinned* and *bullet proof*, which confirmed the causal relationship outlined in Gandolfi's (2009) framework. However, they all claimed to be still emotionally affected by the job, just to a lesser extent, so there appeared to be nothing as extreme as the alexithymia (repression of feelings, emotional numbness and loss of interest in work) apparent among the executives portrayed by Kets de Vries and Balazs (1997).

The employment of cognitive distancing is, perhaps, less obvious than emotional distancing and in some cases the envoys may not have been aware they were using it. There was a sense, especially among the HR envoys, that the compulsive/ritualistic strategy described by Kets de Vries and Balazs (1997) was being adopted. The emphasis placed on the objectivity, fairness and transparency of the downsizing process, which is discussed in more detail later, undoubtedly reflects a desire to deliver equitable treatment, but it may also provide an opportunity to form an emotional detachment by displacing feelings into rules and procedures. One HR envoy recognised this in her own behaviour.

*It's difficult sometimes to offer that support but remain professional and deliver bad news. But we try and do it in a positive way by saying, you know, we've got this redeployment policy and we've managed to successfully redeploy x number of people recently and if you've got any ideas for how we could support you in order to find you something else and... I think I probably talk like that. Maybe that's to deflect some of that angst from me. [HR envoy, organisation 9]*

There was some evidence of the enacting of the 'personal meaning' strategy mentioned by Wright and Barling (1998), which although no envoy used these exact words, might best be explained as stoicism along the lines of: 'the downsizing is going to happen and the envoy role can be unpleasant, but somebody has to do it so it might as well be me'.

Kets de Vries and Balazs (1997) also identified, what they called, the 'dissociative executive' as somebody who copes by partitioning the 'downsizing me' from the 'real me'. Only one envoy adopted this strategy, but it is an interesting case because it begs the question as to whether coping strategies can be taught. She refers here to 'dismissing' somebody but made it clear that she adopts the same strategy in her envoy role.

*I remember speaking to the chief exec at that particular time and he said 'it's very upsetting... if you have to dismiss somebody, it's not nice; it's like you have to put this coat on and then you take that coat off and throw it in the corner when it's done' ... He says he has a jacket that he wears and that's when it goes on and then throws it in the corner type of thing. And I've never forgot that, because I actually tend to do that. If I am going to dismiss somebody then I will wear something different that I don't wear all the time. [Non HR envoy, organisation 4]*

Despite the evidence of coping strategies being adopted there was, nevertheless, an impression that some envoys found managing difficult. The research by Wright and Barling (1998) reported earlier identified the negative impacts of being a 'downsizer' on personal well-being and family functioning. Whilst every respondent here complained about the pressure of being an envoy, which must have some effect on how good they feel about life, only two made any reference to a direct impact on their health. One non HR envoy said she needed, what she referred to as, *stress therapy* as a consequence of the job and another non HR envoy said that it left her without the reserves to deal with a bout of flu in the way she normally would. However, a significant majority of envoys

reflected that the role had an adverse effect on their lives at home. Thankfully, nobody reported any serious marital or child related problems, but the reactions of family members did seem to vary from being very supportive to rather uncaring as in this case:

*I mean I did say to my [partner] actually, it's going to be really shitty for the next 18 months and I will need your support at home and the minute you say that then obviously your family turns against you doesn't it?*  
[Non HR envoy, organisation 5]

The most common issue raised was an emotional overspill, which tended to result in moodiness at home and an inability to 'switch off' leading to irregular sleep patterns. Only one very experienced HR envoy claimed expressly, that they were able to separate work and home life, whilst recognising the difficulties that not being able to do so could present.

*I'm fortunate that when I'm at work I believe about my work passionately and want to do the absolutely best I can but when I get in my car and on my way home, I'm at home. Mentally I switch off and I'm able to do that and I think that when you're looking for the person to deliver [downsizing] or to lead on that then you need somebody who's able to do that because I think otherwise it would be very, very difficult to deliver.*  
[HR envoy, organisation 6]

Last, another stressful aspect of the envoy role worth discussing, but not identified in other downsizing research, is the cognitive dissonance that some respondents experienced. The dissonance may arise because of disagreement with the politics of the situation, with toeing the 'company line', or simply not being able to speak one's mind. Ten envoys made reference to this issue (although they did not call it dissonance) and the discomfort and frustration that resulted was a clear concern. The political dimension includes politics both external to and internal to the organisation. The matter of external politics, which was noted earlier as a factor particular to the public sector, is best illustrated by the view of an envoy that disagreed with political decisions regarding what services should be cut.

*We make a difference; we really do make a difference and the decisions that are being made at a national, regional and local political level are short-sighted in the main. 'Chop off that bit because it's an easy bit of money to ring fence', but actually the impact that this hundred thousand pounds has on however many people is far greater than that million you're spending over there. For me it's short sighted and I agree with the staff but I can't articulate that.* [Non HR envoy, organisation 5]

More often, though, the dissonance arose from internal politics and one HR envoy made it clear how her opposition to certain executive decisions affected her attitude to the role.

*Like I said about the [cuts to women's and children's services], I find it difficult getting involved in something if I don't believe it's right. I find some people think 'well, that's what I've been told to do', the manager's told me that's what I've got to do so I'll just get on with it. But I can't get on with it if I don't feel that [it's right].* [HR envoy, organisation 7]

The inability to disclose information also discomfited certain envoys, for instance, where a decision was known to have been made but not officially announced or where an envoy wanted to provide reassurances to colleagues but could not do so for fear of breaching procedural conventions or being attacked for not being even handed. For one non HR envoy the frustration was double:

*When we were doing all the scenario planning we didn't tell anybody what we were doing, but information was going out through the [executive] about stuff and through the unions and through various other places. So us sitting there saying 'we don't know anything' actually looks worse because it makes us look incompetent. [Non HR envoy, organisation 3]*

#### **7.4 The value of prior experience and preparation**

Clair and Dufresne (2004) and Gandolfi (2009) highlighted the importance of prior experience of the downsizing events and activities (of being a 'downsizing agent' or 'executioner' respectively) and concluded that it confers a number of advantages to those who possessed it, especially with regard to familiarity, anticipation and experimentation with coping strategies. It is, therefore, appropriate to assess the depth and value of experience among the envoys participating in this research.

The amount of prior experience of downsizing activity that envoys possessed varied enormously. The largely self-selecting nature of the sample meant that participants tended to be those with prior experience may have predisposed them to understanding of the significance of the envoy role. Most of the participants had acted as envoys before the current round of downsizing in their public organisations. However, the extent of that experience ranged from localised closures of specific functions that involved the loss of just a few staff through voluntary means through to major site closures involving hundreds of victims shed through voluntary and compulsory means.

Three envoys declared that their only experience of downsizing before now was as a victim. Two had recently been redeployed within their current organisations as a consequence of the restructuring that they were now party to as envoys and one had been a victim with a previous employer. Beyond those three, many of the others with prior experience as envoys had encountered downsizing as victims too. Such exposure to downsizing 'from the other side' can have a profound influence. Quite often the envoys claimed that having been a victim dictated their attitude towards their role because the experience engenders a genuine empathy. The following is a typical reflection:

*We've just been through a restructure ourselves so by knowing, for one, what it feels like and then, for two, for doing it – you know? – it does actually help that you've been through it yourselves because you can understand the feelings of others. [HR envoy, organisation 8]*

For this particular envoy the outcome of the downsize activity ended up being relatively acceptable, albeit not ideal, but a number of envoys described how they had been affected by what they considered to be poor downsizing practice. For example, an envoy described the process for announcing the bad news that her previous employer had adopted.

*There were four areas fighting for the work as such, in the [organisation]. There were four areas, so you had Manchester, Liverpool, Wales and Preston and the work could have gone to any site and so there were bids put in. And they ferried you on a coach, all the people from all the areas to a big hotel in Manchester and you went through all this rigmarole, these speeches, and they did a bit like X Factor of opening an envelope and announcing where the work would go to, and it went to Manchester. And it was a case of, there you go, very sorry Preston, Wales and Liverpool and you were ferried back on the coach and that was it ... [The coach journey back] was awful. [HR envoy, organisation 8]*

Another envoy described the approach to downsizing at a retail organisation.

*It was the time when they said, 'if you don't like it get off the bus'. In other words, it was a cull of dead wood - that's what they said ... So they had a meeting with the store manager - 'Who do you want to go?' and they were finished and that's how it was and I was the Assistant at the time so I got involved in a lot of the meetings because I took the minutes. So I saw that side. I do feel it was dealt with wrong because it was just that managers say so. There were no competencies checked or anything so if that manager didn't like you, you were out. [HR envoy, organisation 7]*

It is unsurprising, then, that this envoy believed wholeheartedly in the pre-eminence of redeployment as an appropriate downsizing policy.

Only three envoys claimed to have no prior experience of downsizing whatsoever, but many of the others indicated that they knew of colleagues acting as envoys who also were completely new to the role. Of course, those envoys with no experience had nothing to compare their present situation against, but they acknowledged a lack of awareness regarding the demands that the envoy role would place on them, in terms of procedural complexity, workload and, especially, emotionally. Indeed, every respondent said that they were generally unprepared for their first occasion as an envoy and that included individuals that had been through downsizing as a victim or survivor.

It is unsurprising that the vast majority of envoys indicated that there is no substitute for experience because, in principle, there is no obvious way of convincingly replicating the realities of colleagues feeling threatened and being displaced in a classroom style situation. Nevertheless, most thought that some sort of development relating particularly to the emotional stresses of the role would be worthwhile. A few envoys acknowledged that they had undertaken some relevant training, either through bespoke short courses or through professional development for those in HR, but pointed out that it addressed only legal and procedural issues and never the human aspects of downsizing.

This raises the question of whether individuals can ever be adequately prepared for undertaking the envoy role before they have to perform it, or whether the approach has to be to throw the envoy into the deep end and hope that they will swim? In fact, respondents described a number of examples of imaginative ways to assist in the development of envoys but those examples were generally accompanied by questions regarding their efficacy and the appropriate timing of delivery. For instance, one HR envoy spoke about how she introduced sessions on bereavement counselling, for her HR team in a previous organisation dealing with a major downsizing, which was delivered by trainers from a local hospice. Other HR envoys had been involved with the provision of workshops where 'best practice' could be shared, but they were generally informal affairs. Similarly, when one HR envoy was asked whether her organisation offered any formal preparation, she responded:

*Well not specifically, but for my HR officer when we did the last round I took her along with me so that she could observe that sort of scenario so that if she has to do it then she's kind of knows what it's like. You can't compare the answers for everything but at least you've got some sort of general sense of what atmosphere [to expect]. [HR envoy, organisation 3]*

However, it transpired that there was an unexpected difficulty with this type of mentoring.

*Well the thing is the more from HR turn up the less people like it as well because it was commented when I'd taken [my HR officer] with me that, 'Why did it need two of you?' [HR envoy, organisation 3]*

Three of the envoys were indirectly prepared for the role as a result of being trained in and using mediation techniques. They were each at pains to point out how transferable the skills needed for mediation were to the downsizing situation and how helpful that was to them and their colleagues as a non HR envoy explained.

*Me and another [envoy] are mediators and the third one isn't, so the two of us talk to the third one about that stuff. It is just the same core skills. It's about recognising that when someone's angry they're not angry at you as a person. It's the situation ... You switch it into a more positive or a more constructive framework, and the fact that I've sat through loads of mediations where people are crying and shouting, threatening to thump each other, and you kind of do get used to dealing with emotional situations. [Non HR envoy, organisation 3]*

A small number of envoys, on the other hand, seemed to be of the opinion that preparing people for the human interaction inherent in the role was, perhaps, unrealistic and one seemed to imply that the issue was less to do with training and more do with the innate capabilities of individuals.

*There's a parallel with project management. You can train people in project management. Some people you can train from now 'til doomsday and they'll never be a project manager. Some people who have very little training are very good project managers. That's not a widely recognised sort of principle that everybody agrees with but that's certainly my view. [Non HR envoy' organisation 6]*

He was correct in that this was not a view given expression by other envoys, but he does raise interesting issues concerning how well suited individual envoys may be for the role and whether any thought is put into their selection for it. With regard to the latter point - the evidence suggests very rarely. Only three envoys were obviously selected especially for the role. Two were experienced HR professionals with extensive experience of downsizing that had been co-opted from elsewhere in their respective organisations, and the third was an elected representative on an already existing staff consultation group that was felt to be well placed to act as a conduit for both the executive and the employees. In all other cases the envoys felt that they occupied the position more or less by accident; either because the downsizing was happening in their area or because they were HR professionals (the assumption being that they must be suited to the role even if their normal day to day activity bore no similarity to it).

Nevertheless, when asked directly about, in particular, their suitability for the task, every envoy reasoned that they were well suited because they possessed necessary attributes, such as empathy, compassion, resilience and so on. Nobody admitted to being inappropriate for the role or to being bad at it but, it goes without saying, the envoys may not be the best judges of their own capabilities.

A last point regarding matters regarding experience and preparation of envoys is about the depth of involvement that they may or may not have in the design and development of downsizing decisions and processes. The evidence is not clear enough to draw any firm conclusions on this matter, but there is certainly some indication that those involved in shaping the downsizing policy, before they embarked on envoy activity, were better prepared for events and may even have had a greater sense of ownership of the role. The types of policy decisions ranged from specifying how financial cutbacks would be implemented, through establishing procedures and scenario planning, to making

recommendations and fighting for the interests of the envoys' own staff. The difficulty is that the twelve envoys that demonstrated a significant input into downsizing policy were all in middle or senior management positions and so they may necessarily have a broader and clearer understanding of what is happening within the organisation compared with non-managerial personnel.

## 7.5 The influence of relations between the HR function and line managers

Great care has to be taken when discussing the relationship between HR professionals and other managers performing 'people management' activities<sup>6</sup> because every individual, organisation and situation is different and so there is a significant danger of over generalising. However, if treated with caution, a number of broad issues of interest relating to the situation of envoys can be gleaned from the current research. For instance, in every participating organisation the implementation of the downsizing activity followed a similar pattern:

- The organisation's executive decides on where downsizing will take place and to what extent.
- The management of downsizing procedures is devolved to the HR function.
- The delivery of the downsizing message is devolved to line managers, often with the HR function present.
- HR professionals provide technical advice to line managers and may undertake various elements of the envoy role described earlier (discussions with victims around redundancy provision, redeployment interviews etc.).
- Tactical downsizing decisions often fed back up the organisational hierarchy for approval.

It may be difficult to envisage an alternative way of managing downsizing, but this approach does seem to lead to difficulties in terms of ownership and control of the process. Often, because the HR function owns the procedures and possesses the necessary technical (frequently legal) knowledge there was a propensity to view downsizing as an HR activity and the envoy as an HR role. This tendency was not lost on a HR envoy that was seconded to her organisation's downsizing project because of her extensive experience.

*I went back and said to the Chief Executive, 'You do know that your line managers don't want to do this? You know, I'll happily deliver it but they will have no credibility going forward if they don't. And he was very supportive from that point of view and said, 'No, no, go back and tell them that they're delivering it,' so I did. I don't just see it with downsizing. I see it with things like objective settings, with annual appraisals ... where it's like, 'Oh! It's dealing with people, give it to HR to do,' and I think that's one of the big battles that HR have the whole way through, is to say, 'Actually it isn't a HR process. We've put down the framework for it. We're the experts in how to handle people so let us help you to get through it... But at the end of the day it's yours to deliver'. [HR envoy, organisation 6]*

Nevertheless, none of the non HR envoys spoken to for this research questioned the idea that they were the right and proper people to deliver the potentially bad news to 'their staff' despite the fact, given the previously mentioned issue of relational ties, it was inevitably an emotionally challenging role. However, regardless of the envoys willingness to do the job, there was evidence in many instances of a tension between the HR function (not just HR envoys) and line managers, particularly in terms of:

- the relative importance of being able to demonstrate the fair application of procedures as against more individually focussed practices; and
- their respective roles and responsibilities, availability of support and how that support is perceived.

---

<sup>6</sup> There exists an extensive literature that examines the relationship between the HR function, the executive function (for overviews see Storey, 2007 and Touche, 2004) and line managers (for overviews see Cunningham & Hyman, 1999 and Renwick, 2006).

The HR envoys seemed mainly to give highest priority to the demonstrable robustness of downsizing measures and, in particular, the fairness and transparency of procedures. In many cases the key objective was the avoidance of employment tribunals. The following quotations are quite typical:

*Well, you've got to have a transparent, consistent process because you leave yourself open for industrial tribunal claims ... So it's got to be transparent and justifiable in law ... It's very, very difficult and that's why a lot of companies and probably public sector institutions ... have what's called selecting in, rather than selecting out ... What we say is, that's the job, that's the job spec', we will measure you against the job spec'. It's a competitive process. There are five of you, there are four jobs and it will be done that way, and it will be very, very fair. [HR envoy, organisation 3]*

*The whole thing for us was making sure that people were treated fairly and we weren't ending up in tribunal situations ... We had to ensure that it was as fair as possible ... I'm not saying that we managed to accomplish it completely but anything that we saw, if we thought it was being biased towards somebody, we shut it down because back to the point I made before: our view was not to end up in tribunal ... So from an employee side that can then look overly process driven and very unsympathetic but from the other side it was just trying to make sure that we were even-handed. [HR envoy, organisation 6]*

The experienced HR envoy cited first in this section pointed out an inherent danger in this prioritisation. She was the exception among the HR envoys in sharing the view of a number of the non HR envoys when recognising that there is a risk of the means becoming ends and goals getting displaced:

*I think there certainly was an element of that. It didn't get lost entirely but I think at the end there was a little bit of a scramble to say, 'was this really the outcome that we wanted because we now need to just steer it round that way a little bit to kind of get the outcome that we actually really did need'. And I've never seen it done like that before... I've always been influencing right from the start, and saying, 'Okay, what outcome do we really need'. And by that I don't mean, 'What people do you want to retain?' but what outcome do we want? We want the best people to be able to do X. We want this group of people to be settled before we move on. We want to make sure that we retain this amount of skill in this area. So, how do we best put a process together that's going to do that? That is fair and that is reasonable. It doesn't have to be text book and if you use the test of what goes to a tribunal, then tribunals simply look at what is fair and reasonable. And if we've been fair and reasonable and we've kept to our processes then you normally get a pretty good outcome that people can understand. And there was a lot of people questioned the process because they couldn't really see why we ended up with some of the things that we did. [HR envoy, organisation 6]*

Non HR envoys often had a different priority for, perhaps, two reasons. First, they did not feel they 'owned' the process in the same way that HR envoys might and second, they were equally as concerned about the plight of the survivors as they were for the victims because it was the non HR envoys that would be required to manage the survivors in the aftermath. One non HR envoy offered a different interpretation of how fairness might be understood.

*We absolutely locked ourselves into process mode. The thing, we were concerned about was nothing other than some potential legal challenge from some individual when you got to the other side of it, which completely skewed how we looked at this ... I'm simplifying it, but is it best to be fair to everybody equally and then end up with a sub-optimal organisation that's not effective, or is it best to do what's right for the organisation so that the organisation is as healthy and as strong as it can be, which then protects the people that are in that organisation and gives you the potential to move some... you know a high performing strong organisation that has the potential to grow and make work for more people?* [Non HR envoy, organisation 6]

Both of the envoys quoted here seem to be reflecting indirectly on the issue raised by Cameron (1994) and Flint (2003) discussed earlier in this report. Their observation, that downsizing principles and procedures that do not retain vital employees whilst dispensing with less essential individuals are sub-optimal, pertained to using attrition as a means of reducing headcount, but it is possible to see how an overemphasis on being process may have a similar consequence.

A further theme in connection to fairness and the avoidance of employment tribunal claims was how to ensure that all victims are treated equitably in respect of all the information and support they may require. The response from HR functions tended to be to reinforce existing procedures. Many envoys, both HR and non HR, were provided with scripts and schedules for meetings with victims to ensure consistency in terms of presenting the rationale for downsizing (there was a fear that individuals may go 'off message'), complying with the law, and supplying information on redundancy provision. The HR envoys seemed comfortable with this arrangement, maybe because they were some of the people writing the scripts and schedules, but the non HR envoys were ambivalent. Whilst they recognised the importance of accurate and consistent information some interpreted the provision of such strictures as a lack of trust and an attempt to prevent an expression of personal views (which links back to issues of dissonance discussed earlier). There was also a frustration from some non HR envoys because they felt that the consistency of the message was undermined much more by the HR or executive functions frequently shifting the goalposts than their own ill-discipline.

Moving on to the respective roles of envoys, HR envoys often attended collective and individual meetings with victims alongside non HR envoys but did not play an active part in the meeting. Non HR envoys said that on these occasions they, and the victims, felt that they were being monitored, whereas the HR envoys saw their presence as supportive. The sample for this research was intentionally diverse so the envoys when talking about other envoys were rarely referring to individuals in the sample. This means that statements made by HR envoys about line managers, or by non HR envoys about the HR function cannot be cross referred. Nonetheless, it does appear that HR personnel and line management personnel were often at cross purposes.

An overview of the evidence indicates that HR envoys wanted line managers to take ownership of the downsizing process, with HR providing expert support, but that they found resistance to this. More than one HR envoy suggested that it was expedient for line managers to use the presence of the HR function to deflect responsibility away from them in front of their staff. An HR envoy talked about HR being *the bad guy*, and another described their relationship with a line manager acting as envoy as like a *good cop, bad cop* routine. A third said:

*We're trying to get managers to take ownership I suppose [but] they don't actually. They want to be able to blame it on HR and interestingly*

*they want to be able to say 'HR is doing this to you'. [HR envoy, organisation 9]*

Some non HR envoys, conversely, felt that it was the HR and executive functions that were evading responsibility and that, whilst they did get procedural and technical support from HR, there was a notable lack of strategic and emotional support.

The availability of emotional support was clearly something that distinguished the HR from non HR envoys. The HR envoys, generally speaking, had colleagues within their organisations they could go to for reassurance as well as external support networks. HR envoys are very likely to have HR colleagues that are also undertaking the role so the opportunity exists to talk through the emotional pressures with kindred spirits. The following passage is indicative:

*We meet once a fortnight and we go through where we're up to and that's where it's like a bit of, 'well what's your issues, have you got any problems that you need answers to, or...?' You know we very much work as a team. [HR envoy, organisation 8]*

If that option is not available then contact with professional colleagues in other organisations is possible typically through the CIPD. By contrast non HR envoys often felt, as one put it, *isolated and overlooked*. Generally, the non HR envoys would be acting on their own within their particular area and, although there may be other envoys among line managers elsewhere in the organisation there is little opportunity to connect even if they are aware of one another. In some situations non HR envoys found support from their own line managers, but only rarely from HR colleagues. In the very worst case a geographically centralised HR function appeared to have abandoned the non HR envoy, cited here, and her manager.

*We had to look after ourselves basically. Every time we reached out for support from the relevant people ... they said they'd get back to you and nobody ever did. So because they were so far away we felt quite isolated because we were sat over here and we just felt that nobody was communicating with us ... I think because [HR] was based so far away it was quite easy for them to just shut the problem out really, because they weren't faced with it every single day. [Non HR envoy, organisation 1]*

An obvious solution would appear to be to ensure that all envoys have the opportunity to liaise with others in the same position, but even that can create unwanted demands as one non HR envoy explains:

*Obviously there's only so much you can say to people above you and to HR, so yes the only other people you can speak to are other [line managers] and since I was the only [line manager] to begin with who was going through it there wasn't... even if they might give you a sort of sympathetic whatever, but you can't actually properly discuss it with anyone and then as other people started to go through it of course they were told to come and see me. 'Oh go and talk to [her], because she's been through it' ... But you do feel incredibly isolated. [Non HR envoy, organisation 3]*

In common with much of what has been discussed over these research findings, here is another example of an issue where a potential solution may raise as many problems as it solves.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

The nature of exploratory research means that the data gathered here does not lend itself to making generalisations, so any conclusions must necessarily be understood in the context of the research background. Nevertheless, a number of worthwhile insights and inferences can be drawn that may inform future policy, practice and research, whilst all of the time bearing in mind that the actors involved in downsizing events, be they envoys, policy makers, victims or survivors, cannot be treated as separate and independent entities – the actions and experiences of one group necessarily affects the others.

First, it can be asserted, on the basis of the evidence presented here, that ‘public organisations *are* different’ (Pandey, 2010 p565) when it comes to the rationale, implementation and experience of downsizing. Private sector organisations have an economic rationale for their actions with some discretion as to where and how they execute downsizing. In contrast, public sector organisations are subject to a political rationale that manifests itself in severe financial pressures but places significant limitations on how those pressures can be addressed. The public and political context results in a great deal of uncertainty that makes the envoy role particularly demanding, in terms of delivering a consistent message to victims. Particular factors that characterise public sector workers, such as their public service ethic, and the way in which certain occupations are protected from downsizing, creating a disproportionate effect on those that are not, tend to heighten the emotional aspects of the envoy role. Likewise, the propensity for consultation to extend as far as, and often beyond, the required statutory period and the adoption of voluntary means of severance as a first course of action lengthens the duration of downsizing activity and so can perpetuate the envoys’ emotional discomfort.

Second, it is clear that the envoy role requires a distinct set of abilities and it seems reasonable to assume that the competence of envoys will have an impact on the outcomes of downsizing events. The two issues that affect most adversely the experiences of envoys are role overload and the emotional strain associated with the interaction with victims. Despite the obvious pressure that the envoy role placed on individuals there was never any question among the participants here that it was a responsibility to be shirked or avoided. Such dedication may act as a double edged sword; on the one hand giving envoys an internal rationale to cling to, but on the other hand, perhaps contributing to overwork. Envoys seemed to employ a fairly narrow range of coping mechanisms, but there is some evidence that emotional distancing and hardening were the only approaches realistically available.

Third, it is apparent that prior experience of downsizing events can act as an important mediator in how envoys approach their role although, whilst it often helps to diminish the emotional pressures of the role, it certainly does not extinguish them. One issue that arises from evidence around the consequence of prior experience is the question of whether individuals can be prepared for the envoy role, through pre-emptive training and development, before they have to perform it in a ‘live’ situation. It is interesting to note that the envoys contributing to this research, even those from the HR profession, felt that whilst they were well versed generally on procedural matters they had a very limited insight into the human aspects of the role. The majority indicated that it was the human side of the job where prior development was most needed.

Last, it can be concluded that the relational dynamic between the HR function and other organisational functions can cause a tension, based on different goal orientations, which has an impact on how envoys perceive and carry out their task. It appears that the emphasis that the HR function traditionally places on procedural thoroughness and fairness is seen by many envoys, including some that are HR professionals, as

misdirected with the potential to lead to goal displacement. This issue of treating fairness or objectivity as a key outcome for envoys was identified as problematic when reviewing Gandolfi's (2009) Conceptual Framework of Executioners' Reactions and there is perhaps a need for further research on this nuanced but important subject.

## 9. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

### 9.1 Evidence of good practice

Identifying good practice has to be done with care. First, because, as was noted previously, it is difficult to ascertain what counts as successful downsizing; and second, because there is no existing body of research looking at envoys from which to draw support. Reflecting on Flint's (2003) list of characteristics of successful and unsuccessful public sector downsizing the evidence from envoys<sup>7</sup> indicated that a considerable number of positive practices were adopted across all of the participating organisations with many of them being carried out by the envoys. Instances of such positive practices include:

- systematic analysis of positions;
- employee involvement;
- paced implementation;
- good communication;
- advance notice of downsizing;
- application of consistent procedures; and
- provision of services to those 'at risk'.

There was also, according to Flint's characteristics, some evidence of bad practice too:

- a reliance on natural attrition to reduce headcount<sup>8</sup>; and
- failure to adjust workloads.

There is, perhaps, a certain irony that the general good downsizing practice noted above can place particular demands on envoys, which may adversely impact upon their ability to carry out the role effectively. It seems reasonable to posit that if the envoys struggle to perform their jobs then the result will be less than ideal downsizing, which may in turn undermine the experiences of victims and survivors. For this reason it is important to draw out instances of good practice that facilitate high quality envoy performance.

Throughout the account of the research findings there are instances of factors that influenced positively the experiences of envoys but they often derived from the initiatives of the envoys, rather than the conscious application of good organisational practice, or often simply by accident. Likewise, generalisation is difficult because the use of, say, a particular coping strategy that may work well for one envoy may not be appropriate for another. Nevertheless, some instances of good practice can be identified.

- One non HR envoy was released from her normal job to concentrate solely on conducting the envoy role. Unsurprisingly, the benefits to the envoy were immense and there is some evidence that the downsizing activity benefitted as well. The circumstances under which this situation arose are, perhaps, unrealistic or rare in most organisations, but it is a clear indication of how guarding against role overload is important. There is evidence that all of the other envoys experienced role overload to a varying degree as a consequence of the role and that was particularly acute for non HR managers.
- In some instances the envoy role was presented as a development opportunity or, at least, it was interpreted as such by a number of respondents, which

---

<sup>7</sup> It is important to emphasise that the conclusions here are drawn only from the evidence of the envoys provided in interviews.

<sup>8</sup> As was indicated earlier many commentators and practitioners dispute that this approach is bad practice.

undoubtedly helped them redefine their rationale for undertaking it. Without question, envoy activity does represent a chance to develop key transferable 'people' (diplomatic) skills that should be recognised if the envoy remains in the organisation (remember, many envoys were themselves potential victims) or be valuable if they have to seek work elsewhere.

- Where relationships with trade unionists were positive (and generally they were) there were clear benefits for envoys in terms of sharing knowledge and experiences, and, in some instances, the burden of dealing with the practical needs and demands of the victims.
- During the interviews some mention was made regarding the provision of specific training or mentoring activities for envoys. Generally the events concentrated on the procedural and legal issues associated with downsizing, the value of which should not be underestimated, but there was little connected to dealing with the human emotional aspects of the envoy role. In terms of good practice one HR envoy did describe her attempts to inure a junior colleague to the demands of the role by introducing them slowly (although she encountered problems from victims wanting to know why it needs 'two of you') and another HR envoy spoke of how she had introduced bereavement training for envoys, but that was in a previous, private sector, organisation.

## **9.2 Issues for further consideration**

Claiming to have a privileged insight into the ways in which the experience or performance of envoys can be improved would be imprudent, because none of the questions raised in this research are straightforward; each issue identified inevitably involves the careful balancing of different interests, the time and cost implications, and may appear more or less problematic depending on the type of organisation, political context and so on. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw out a number of policy actions that are worthy of consideration whenever downsizing in public sector organisations is being implemented.

- Having concluded that public organisations are different, in part, because of the political context in which they operate it is possible to identify issues that leaders in such organisations need to be cognisant of. It is, of course, impossible to control the political context in which public sector organisations operate but it is important, nonetheless, for decision makers to be sensitive towards how that context may impact upon envoys. Ensuring that information provided to envoys is complete, consistent and timely should be a fundamental aim and where there is a danger that this ambition cannot be met the decision makers should make every effort to protect envoys from charges of personal ineffectiveness.
- Attention may also be given to the nature of the public service ethic that forms an important part of the psychological contract for envoys, victims and survivors of public sector downsizing. Where cuts impact adversely on less advantaged or vulnerable groups in society it is important to anticipate that all those groups will be seeking reassurance, not just about their own positions, but also the plight of their service users. The challenge is to be sensitive to how the public service ethic frames the experiences of envoys and how it can be preserved in them and the survivors. Linked to this needs to come recognition that it is not only front line staff that possess such an ethic. Envoys, generally, fall into the category of support staff and the evidence of this research suggests that where support staff are disproportionately affected by public sector downsizing, so care must be taken to ensure that they are not viewed or treated as second class citizens.

- There is clearly concern regarding the impact that the envoy role contributes to the workload of individuals undertaking it. The demands of the position are considerable and given the potential importance of the role to effective downsizing outcomes it is reasonable to argue that the resource implications need careful attention. It may be unrealistic to expect organisations to release envoys completely from their normal activities (as noted above), but it is reasonable to expect managers to recognise the demands that the role places on occupants and how they can best be accommodated and prioritised. Without doubt there is a need for greater recognition from decision makers of the demands of the envoy role. That recognition should extend beyond the duration of a downsizing event so that another round of envoy activity is not the only reward for a job well done. As noted above, when considering good practice, there is a strong argument in favour of presenting the envoy role as a development opportunity that can be recognised and carried forward into later career.
- Similarly, there needs to be acknowledgement that the duration of downsizing programmes can have an adverse impact on envoys. The longer the process takes, the more pressure is applied to envoys regardless of accompanying workloads because the emotional aspects of the role, such as dealing with insecure colleagues, are always likely to be in the background. Lengthy periods of consultation are often very important for various parties in the downsizing process but they inevitably have a draining effect on envoys. Leaders of downsizing events need to be sensitive to the demands on envoys that come from extended consultation periods, perhaps by increasing the number of envoys to spread the load over time or where all parties are in agreement to wrap up consultation at the earliest opportunity.
- Consideration needs to be given to the training and preparation of envoys; to both the nature of that training and to its timing. Development programmes that involve mentoring and role playing exercises are a possible option and as experience of downsizing in the public sector deepens, so case studies can be developed that will give envoys an insight into how events unfold. There is some suggestion that mediation skills are transferable to the envoy role and it may be that organisations should invest in the development of abilities that can be used in a variety of circumstances thus adding flexibility to the resources that they have to draw from in handling circumstances such as downsizing.
- Even HR envoys felt that they were underprepared for the human side of their role and there is some justification for recommending that professional development should pay more attention to the emotional demands of downsizing (or similarly traumatic activities). The emphasis that continuing professional development seems to place on process and procedure may have the unintended consequence of distracting envoys from the primary purpose of delivering effective outcomes for victims, survivors and the organisation as a whole, so any educational programmes that address factors associated with downsizing should pay equal attention to strategic, psychological and procedural aspects.
- Many envoys, especially those from outside the HR profession, felt somewhat isolated in their role, so there is a definite need to establish support networks for those who wish to make use of such an arrangement. Support networks could be intra- or inter-organisational depending on whether a large enough body of experience exists within an organisation or not. Where inter-organisational support is necessary for envoys professional bodies, academic institutions and advisory bodies may be able to facilitate contacts.
- Last, those charged with overseeing downsizing need to pay careful attention to the dynamic that exists between their human resource function and the other

parts of the organisation that it serves. There existed a sense that the HR function can put procedural and technical matters ahead of strategic or humanistic concerns, which may lead to incidences of goal displacement that have previously been referred to. Indeed, the evidence provided here indicates that human resource professionals may themselves need to be more aware of how their actions are perceived by non HR envoys especially. Whilst all HR professionals would no doubt want to be seen as both the lead in downsizing programmes and a source of support for inexperienced or pressurised line managers such an ambition was not always achieved.

## REFERENCES

- Appelbaum, S.H., Lavigne-Schmidt, S., Peytchev, M., & Shapiro, B. (1999) 'Downsizing: measuring the cost of failure', *Journal of Management Development*, 18(5), 436-463.
- Armstrong-Stassen, M. & Cameron, S.J. (2003) 'Nurses' Job Satisfaction and Turnover Intentions over a Six-Year Period of Hospital Downsizing and Amalgamation', *International journal of Public Administration*, 26(14), 1607-1620.
- Bach, S. (2011) *A new era of public service employment relations? The challenges ahead*, Acas workplace relations discussion paper. Available at <http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/m/c/Future-workplace-relations-series-public-service-accessible-version-august-2011.pdf>, accessed September 2011.
- Bhattacharyya, S. & Chatterjee, L. (2005) 'Organizational Downsizing: From Concepts to Practices', *Vikalpa: The Journal of Decision Makers*, 30(3), 65-78.
- BIS (2011) *Next steps in employment law review*, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, available at <http://www.bis.gov.uk/news/topstories/2011/may/employment-law-review>, accessed July 2011.
- Bor, R., Miller, R., Goldman, E. & Scher, I. (1993) 'The meaning of bad news in HIV disease: counselling about dreaded issues revisited', *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 6, 69-80.
- Budros, A. (1999) 'A Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Why Organizations Downsize', *Organization Science*, 10(1), 69-82.
- Cameron, K.S. (1994) 'Strategies for successful organizational downsizing', *Human Resource Management*, 33(2), 189-211.
- Cascio, W.F. (2005) 'Strategies for responsible restructuring', *Academy of Management Executive*, 19(4), 39-50.
- Cascio, W.F. & Wynn, P. (2004) 'Managing a downsizing process', *Human Resource Management*, 43(4), 425-436.
- Cascio, W.F., Young, C.E. & Morris, J.R. (1997) 'Financial consequences of employment-change decisions in major U.S. corporations', *Academy of Management Journal*, 40(5) 1175-1189.
- Clair, J.A. & Dufresne, R.L. (2004) 'Playing the grim reaper: How employees experience carrying out a downsizing', *Human Relations*, 57(12), 1597-1625.
- CBI (2009) *New employment measures necessary during critical recovery period*, News release available at <http://www.cbi.org.uk/ndbs/press.nsf/38e2a44440c22db6802567300067301b/9b9a4bac1622174802575e400370f75?OpenDocument>, accessed July 2011.
- CBI (2010) *Making Britain the place to work: An employment agenda for the new government*, London. Available at [http://www.cbi.org.uk/ndbs/press.nsf/0363c1f07c6ca12a8025671c00381cc7/7d5aad93026f5007802577450051b71f/\\$FILE/CBI%20Place%20to%20Work%20Jun%202010.pdf](http://www.cbi.org.uk/ndbs/press.nsf/0363c1f07c6ca12a8025671c00381cc7/7d5aad93026f5007802577450051b71f/$FILE/CBI%20Place%20to%20Work%20Jun%202010.pdf), accessed July 2011.

- CIPD (2007) *Managing Conflict at Work: Survey report*, CIPD, London. Available at <http://www.cipd.co.uk/binaries/manconflwrk.pdf>, accessed July 2011.
- Cunningham, I. & Hyman, J. (1999) Devolving human resource responsibilities to the line: Beginning of the end or a new beginning for personnel? *Personnel Review*, 28(1/2), 9-27.
- Deloitte & Touche. (2004) *Aligned at the Top? A Survey of CEO and HR Directors' Perceptions*, New York, Deloitte and Touche, Available at [http://www.deloitte.com/assets/Dcom-Ireland/Local%20Assets/Documents/AlignSurv\\_13\(1\).pdf](http://www.deloitte.com/assets/Dcom-Ireland/Local%20Assets/Documents/AlignSurv_13(1).pdf), accessed June 2011.
- Diffin, E. (2010) 'The people who sack people', *BBC News Magazine*. Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/8524042.stm>, accessed June 2011.
- Devine, K., Reay, T., Stainton, L. & Collins-Nakai, R. (2003) 'Downsizing outcomes: better a victim than a survivor?', *Human Resource Management*, 42(2), 109-124.
- Experian (2011) *Public Sector in the North West: Final Report – Stage 2*, Nottingham. Available at <http://www.nwriu.co.uk/pdf/Public%20Sector%20in%20the%20NW%20-%20Phase%20two%20working%20paper.pdf>, accessed July 2011.
- Feldheim, M.A. (2007) 'Public Downsizing and Employee Trust', *International Journal of Public Administration*, 30, 249-270.
- Flint, D.H. (2003) 'Downsizing in the public sector: Metro-Toronto's hospitals', *Journal of Health Organization and Management*, 17(6), 438-456.
- Freeman, S. & Cameron, K. (1993) 'Organizational downsizing: a convergence and reorientation framework', *Organization Science*, 4(1), 10-29.
- Frost, P. & Robinson, S. (1999) 'The Toxic Handler: Organizational Hero and Casualty', *Harvard Business Review*, 77(4), 97-106.
- Froud, J., Johal, S., Leaver, A., Phillips, R. & Williams, K. (2008) 'Stressed by Choice: a Business Model Analysis of the BBC', *British Journal of Management*, 20(2), 252-264.
- Galagan, P. (2010) 'The Biggest Losers: The Perils of Extreme Downsizing', *Training and Development*, November, 27-29.
- Gandolfi, F. (2007) 'An exploratory study of the process of downsizing of large Australian banks', *Sasin Journal of Management*, 13(1), 4-16.
- Gandolfi, F. (2008) 'Cost Reductions, Downsizing-related Layoffs and HR Practices' *SAM Advanced Management Journal*, Spring, 52-58.
- Gandolfi, F. (2009) 'Executing Downsizing: The Experience of Executioners', *Contemporary Management Research*, 5(2), 185-200.
- Hicks, S., Lindsay, C., Livesey, D., Barford, N. & Williams, R. (2005) *Public Sector Employment*, London, Office for National Statistics.
- Hopkins, K. (2009) 'Public Sector Inefficiency claimed to cost £58.4bn', *The Observer*, 23 August. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2009/aug/23/public-sector-inefficiency-costs>, accessed September 2011.
- Kets de Vries, M. & Balazs, K. (1997) 'The Downside of Downsizing', *Human Relations*, 50(1), 11-50.

- Lambright, W.H. (1998) 'Downsizing Big Science: Strategic Choices', *Public Administration Review*, 58(3), 259-268.
- Lee, G. & Teo, A. (2005) 'Organizational Restructuring: Impact on Trust and work Satisfaction', *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, 22, 23-39.
- Levine, C.H. (1978) 'Organisational Decline and Cutback Management', *Public Administration Review*, 38(4), 316-325.
- Levine, C.H. (1979) 'More on Cutback Management: Hard Questions for Hard Times', *Public Administration Review*, 39(42), 179-183.
- Levine, C.H. (1980) *Managing Fiscal Stress: The Crisis in the Public Sector*, Chatham NJ, Chatham House.
- Levine, C.H. (1984) 'Retrenchment, Human Resource Erosion, and the Role of the Personnel Manager', *Public Personnel Management*, 13(3), 249-263.
- McKinley, W. & Scherer, A.G. (2000) 'The unanticipated consequences of organizational restructuring', *Academy of Management Review*, 25(4), 735-752.
- McKinley, W., Zhao, J. & Garrett Rust, K. (2000) 'A sociocognitive interpretation of organizational downsizing', *Academy of Management Review*, 25(1), 227-243.
- Office for Budget Responsibility (2011) *Economic and fiscal outlook*, CM8038, OBR. Available at [http://budgetresponsibility.independent.gov.uk/wordpress/docs/economic\\_and\\_fiscal\\_outlook\\_23032011.pdf](http://budgetresponsibility.independent.gov.uk/wordpress/docs/economic_and_fiscal_outlook_23032011.pdf), accessed September 2011.
- Pandey, S.J. (2010) 'Cutback Management and the Paradox of Publicness' *Public Administration Review*, July/August, 564-571.
- Pollock, A.M., Dunnigan, M.G., Gaffney, D., Price, D. & Shaoul, J. (1999) 'Planning the "new" NHS: downsizing for the 21<sup>st</sup> century', *British Medical Journal*, 319(7203), 179-184.
- Redman, T. & Wilkinson, A. (2006) 'Downsizing' in T. Redman & A. Wilkinson (Eds) *Contemporary Human Resource Management*, Harlow, Pearson, 2nd edition.
- Renwick, D. (2006) 'Line Managers' in T. Redman & A. Wilkinson (eds) *Contemporary Human Resource Management: Text and Cases*, Harlow, FT/Prentice Hall, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.
- Ryn, Z. (1990) 'The evolution of mental disturbances in the concentration camp syndrome', *Genetic, Social and General Psychology Monographs*, 116(1), 21-36.
- Saundry, R., McArdle, L. & Thomas, P. (2011) *Transforming Conflict Management in the Public Sector? Mediation, Trade Unions and Partnerships in a Primary Care Trust*, Acas Research Paper. Available at [http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/k/8/Transforming\\_Conflict\\_Management\\_in\\_the\\_Public\\_Sector\\_-\\_Mediation\\_Trade\\_Unions\\_and\\_Partnerships\\_in\\_a.pdf](http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/k/8/Transforming_Conflict_Management_in_the_Public_Sector_-_Mediation_Trade_Unions_and_Partnerships_in_a.pdf), accessed July 2011.
- Storey, J. (2007) 'What is Strategic HRM' in J. Storey (ed) *Human Resource Management: A Critical Text*, London, Thomson, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition.
- Trevor, C.O. & Nyberg, A.J. (2008) 'Keeping your headcount when all about you are losing theirs: downsizing, voluntary turnover rates, and the moderating role of HR practices', *Academy of Management Journal*, 51(2), 259-276.

Weil, T.P. (2003) 'Hospital downsizing and workforce reduction strategies: some inner workings', *Health Services Management Research*, 16, 13-23.

Wright, B. & Barling, J. (1998) 'The Executioners' Song: Listening to Downsizers reflect on their Experience', *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*, 15(4), 339-55.



