

Here's how
in the aftermath of
downsizing
you can turn the
HOBBOs in your
organization
into SOBBOs. It's a
good thing.

It is one of the curious ironies of organizational life: After the dust of downsizing settles, employees who have managed to retain their jobs often find that they feel worse about their work lives than those who were forced out. Just as laid-off workers are surfacing from the struggle to reclaim their professional lives, kept-on workers are suffering from the stress of losing organizational life as they once knew it. Others seem to be adjusting quicker. They find themselves, though not thrilled with the new work environment, surviving and even thriving.

The bad news is that downsizing, restructuring, and their cousins have caused companies to lose many loyal, talented, and hard-working employees. Many did not leave their organizations easily, or without great distress to their families and their self-esteem. However, recent data is beginning to show that many (though not all) laid-off workers are reporting that their terminations, although causing great difficulty in the short term, eventually created opportunities and actions that resulted in changes for the better. Some let-go workers have gone on to more exciting organizations; some have become entrepreneurs; some have rediscovered the joy of family life; and some have changed professions. Those layoff victims, now resuscitated, might be called POBBOs: Pushed Out But Better Off. This article is not about them.

THE KEPT-ON WORKFORCE

B Y B E V E R L Y L . K A Y E

The surviving core

The people that remain are often called survivors, and we're told that they're the debilitated members of the workforce. Not true for all of them. One group within the surviving core offers an encouraging example of a bright future for themselves and their downsized organizations. They are people who managed to avoid the waves of downsizing and move past the debilitating backwash. They have learned valuable lessons about the reality of contemporary employee-employer relationships. They have productively retooled their ideas and plans about their current jobs and professional futures. They are valuable contributors who actively seek a match between the contributions they make and the future they carve for themselves within or outside of their current organization. They might be called SOBBOs: Staying On But Building Options.

The third group—due to survivor guilt, low morale, or the fatigue that comes from doing more with less—does not function as well as the SOBBOs. Whatever the label, an identifiable and often debilitating syndrome exists among the members of the workforce who have remained after retrenchment. They experience the sadness, anger, mistrust, and psychological uncoupling from their organizations that most survivors experience. However, they got stuck. Because they can't move beyond those emotions, they feel trapped in jobs that no longer engage their full energy, interest, or talent. This group doesn't see a way out. They know that the ax could fall again. They mourn the loss of what used to be, and they feel mistreated and unrecognized. So do SOBBOs, but to paraphrase a vernacular phrase, they don't "get off on it." These suffering survivors might be called HOBBOs: Hanging On But Bummed Out.

To capitalize fully on the talent remaining in an organization, its managers and leaders need to address and motivate both groups continually. HOBBOs aren't (yet) poor performers, but they could be headed that way. SOBBOs need to keep their SOBBO mentality. People should recognize which group they fall into and decide what to do about that.

To understand the current circum-

stances of downsized organizations and their employees, it's useful to revisit the history of changes that have occurred in relations between organizations and their employees. Not only have the products and processes of the American workforce changed vastly throughout the 20th century, but so have the way that employees view their work and the way that organizations view their employees.

The most evident change can be seen in the growing number of jobs, employers, and careers that people typically average in a lifetime. Organizations now often see employees as payroll costs rather than long-term resources, with cost efficiency taking precedence over developing and building a stable workforce. Employees often see their organizations as places to go to work rather than to develop careers.

A quick overview of the recent history of employment indicates a departure from earlier trends.

Figure 1 demonstrates the changing reality of employment throughout most of this century. For our grandfathers, and a few grandmothers, a job position defined one's career. They stayed put, unless they were pioneers and except in times of a widespread disaster like the Great Depression. Perhaps one's position got bigger or redefined, but it was still *there*. Later, a career path became possible as our mothers and fathers found opportunities for movement within their growing organiza-

tions or, less frequently, industries. Good benefits, a mutual covenant of employer-employee loyalty, and healthy economic growth prompted our parents to venture off their career paths only rarely.

Sometime around 1980, however, we began to see signs of change. The economy wasn't always rosy, companies weren't always competitive in a global marketplace, middle managers weren't always seen as necessary, and nearly any function could be downsized or parceled out to people who were on contract rather than payroll. A career became a push to retrain or realign—an effort during this transition stage to hang onto your job or find a new job (and possibly a new career) elsewhere.

Nowadays, in the wake and awakening of organizational and career shake-ups, the employment pattern is more about a person than a position or path. With ongoing uncertainty concerning the future of various jobs and industries, people find they need to control their own career destinies by forging personal responses to a wide variety of possible organizational events—ranging from expansions and acquisitions to contracting and downsizing. When an event is a reduction in the workforce, employees may respond as POBBOs, SOBBOs, or HOBBOs.

Crucial differences

Organizational health depends on the continued commitment of layoff sur-

FIGURE 1: AN OVERVIEW OF RECENT EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

STAGE	KEY CAREER ELEMENT	INDIVIDUAL RESPONSE
1. 1920-1960	The POSITION	Remain in one job
2. 1960-1980	The PATH	Grow and advance within one's organization
3. 1980-1990	The PUSH	Rethink, retrench, and realign in response to organizational actions
4. 1990-	The PERSON	Become a career entrepreneur; grow within a profession

vivors, but they—both HOBBOs and SOBBOs—sense that they can't count on the continued commitment of their companies. Not unlike people who survive the death of a spouse, corporate survivors work through stages of mourning that can range from coming apart with grief to coming to terms and recovering. A crucial difference between HOBBOs and SOBBOs concerns how they journey through those stages. Though they experience some common reactions to downsizing, they begin to diverge in their responses as the reality of new organizational life sets in. (See Figure 2 for typical response patterns.)

The key differences between HOBBOs and SOBBOs are related to their long-term coping responses. In the short-term, however, they share common concerns and complaints about their new situations within their organizations, including

- ▶ increased workload
- ▶ stalled salary increases
- ▶ reduced benefits, status, and titles
- ▶ fewer opportunities for mobility
- ▶ limited staff resources
- ▶ greater organizational uncertainty
- ▶ less career-oriented training and development.

Though both SOBBOs and HOBBOs recognize those unfavorable consequences of downsized organizations, they deal with them quite differently in the long run. SOBBOs manage to “stay on but build options” by being active regarding their current positions and future possibilities. HOBBOs, who are “hanging on but bummed out,” vacillate between denial about the long-term realities of an unsettled situation and a sense of powerlessness about influencing the future. Consequently, after having similar initial reactions, HOBBOs and SOBBOs later demonstrate different characteristics.

SOBBOs are

- ▶ politically savvy, proactive, and self-managing
- ▶ realistic about the future
- ▶ development-minded about their skills and network-minded about their profession
- ▶ investment-oriented towards the future
- ▶ committed to growth and learning.

FIGURE 2: TYPICAL RESPONSE PATTERNS



HOBBOs are

- ▶ reactive and victimized
- ▶ in denial about the future
- ▶ waiting for something to happen
- ▶ passive and disconnected from their profession
- ▶ anxiety-oriented towards the future
- ▶ committed only to employment and a paycheck.

HOBBOs, in essence, hang back from new professional futures, while SOBBOs confront their situations head-on by investing in themselves as key resources for their own careers. They are willing to put real and psychic capital into the possibility of future gains, and they do that through the investment strategies of continued learning, development, retraining, and networking.

Just as a savvy investor looks beyond individual stocks to entire industries or markets, the savvy SOBBO looks beyond improving existing skills to gaining skills that can be applied widely. For example, “negotiating skills” may be a more appropriate area of concern than “negotiating equipment leases.” “Marketing” may be a better definition of a skill set than “regional sales representative.” SOBBOs build portfolios that reflect a broad, long perspective with an eye towards long-term capital gains.

In summary, SOBBOs make more of their jobs by investing in the future. While they network, learn, take on new assignments, and assess their capabilities, they also contribute to their organizations by approaching their current positions with motivation and energy. HOBBOs, on the other hand, resist investing more than their jobs require. They share none of the SOBBOs’ enthusiasm for innovation, initiative, or creative solutions, although they do feel a sense of entitlement

vis-à-vis their jobs and paychecks. SOBBOs are investors in themselves and contributors to their organizations; HOBBOs are just hanging on.

Understanding the true difference between SOBBOs and HOBBOs is easier when you consider what their responses might be to typical employee issues and concerns. Over the past two years, I’ve asked workshop participants to relate

words they’d heard HOBBOs and SOBBOs use in reaction to several workplace scenarios. (See the box, SOBBOs and HOBBOs: Different Responses, on page 38.)

From HOBBO to SOBBO

HOBBOs aren’t necessarily inevitable nor are they necessarily in a permanent state. With support, commitment, and some mutual work between employers and employees, HOBBOs can begin a process of renewal aimed at re-establishing their productive contributions and personal satisfaction. A first step is a reality check. People can’t advance until they understand the reality of where they are now. Typically, HOBBOs are uncertain about the current reality of the workplace. They have seen that their old assumptions about work are no longer correct. At the same time, they’ve been unable or unwilling to replace those assumptions with more accurate ones.

The antidotes to HOBBO-ism are both educational and structural. The educational cures are easier. HOBBOs can and need to learn the basics of career self-management so that they can reclaim their work lives, wherever those lives may take them. The following model, developed by Career Systems International, Scranton, Pennsylvania, is appropriate for SOBBOs as well as HOBBOs, but it’s the HOBBOs who have to be won over (though they may resist), if we’re to preserve their talent and maximize their contributions.

The model, a basic approach to career self-reliance, suggests that taking charge of one’s career means that one is able to

- ▶ articulate one’s skills, values, competencies, and interests—and consider their transferability

- ▶ be aware of (and be willing to repair, if necessary) one's reputation within one's organization
- ▶ understand the changing nature of the workplace and the implications for one's profession, industry, and organization
- ▶ grow in place and at the same time seek positions in other parts of the organization and other organizations
- ▶ consciously seek learning opportunities that can close the gaps in one's skills and experience, through coursework and on-the-job development.

When applied to HOBBOs, the model takes on more meaning because they feel like exhausted warriors and aren't convinced that any of the planning will pay off. To them, things look bleak. Nevertheless, HOBBOs can have a major turnaround by dealing head-on with each of the areas listed. They need to deal not only with those basics, but also with some tough questions.

Here are a few:

- ▶ What skills and competencies have I used in the past that are no longer vital to my current position?
- ▶ Am I holding onto old specialties or expertise that are no longer vital to my department's mission?
- ▶ What new skills, abilities, and competencies are on the horizon?
- ▶ What capabilities are talked about in my department as critical for our organization's future? Do I have the motivation to go after them? What's stopping me? What has stopped me in the past?
- ▶ Have I studied my last performance appraisal to get a snapshot of how others view my contributions? What can I do to change any misconceptions? How can I show that I care?
- ▶ Do I know who my internal and external customers really are? Do they see me as a player? Am I willing to solicit information from them about my capacity to deliver? Am I willing to change or improve if their requests make sense to me?
- ▶ Who are my political allies in my department? In my organization? What can I learn from them about the ways in which my organization will change in the future?
- ▶ What professional associations are critical to my continued growth and development? Will my organization

support my membership? If not, am I willing to invest in that myself?

- ▶ If I'm caught in the next downsizing or outsourcing, what are my options outside of my organization? What looks interesting? How can I devise a plan to push me in new directions before a change is forced on me? Why do I drag my feet?
- ▶ If I'm given the option to re-deploy to another part of the organization, what are my choices? How can I begin to build alliances to make those choices viable? What's stopping me from doing that now?
- ▶ What skills and experience seem most vital? Do I feel capable of gaining them? Why? Why not?
- ▶ If I could create my own learning plan and knew that it would prepare me for options outside of my company, would I have the energy to commit to that agenda? What would it take? Am I willing to invest my own time and money?

Though those questions are tough, they stimulate HOBBOs into realizing that there are possibilities for satisfying career lives, even within their current organization. HOBBOs have to commit to planning in a way that says: "My plan is no longer the logical outcome of what I know about myself and my organization. Instead, it's an ongoing work in progress that requires continual creative adjustment."

In other words, HOBBOs can move from being "bummed out to building options," if they understand that their traumatic organizational experience isn't the end of their development but the beginning of a new kind of development. At each step, they need new, candid information and new, realistic thinking.

An investment strategy

Typically, organizations get caught up in the processes and policies for executing layoffs and in the programs and activities for addressing layoff victims. They commit extensive time and energy to determining the who and how of cutbacks and to fashioning reorganized systems and units. Generally, little or no attention is granted to layoff survivors. After the cutbacks, there's an expectation—and perhaps a few pep talks—from top management to conduct business as usual.

Layoff survivors may appear to be a group of employees who should consider themselves fortunate. In reality, they face a work world turned upside down. The contract of loyalty and trust between employees and their employer has been breached, and there's little likelihood that a new contract can ever be established. That's the breeding ground of HOBBOs. "Hanging on" because they feel lucky to still have a job, "but bummed out" because they see a future of limited career vigor or personal empowerment. HOBBOs respond naturally and intuitively. They lose faith, become self-protective, disengage from creative and enthusiastic involvement in their work, and slowly become entrenched. The essential task and challenge for organizations that have cut back are to resuscitate remaining employees to full and creative contribution.

Dennis Jaffe and Cynthia Scott of Changeworks Solutions (see their article, "How To Link Personal Values With Team Values," in this issue) have described a four-phase model to identify the stages that people move through when confronted by change:

1. denial
2. resistance
3. exploration
4. commitment.

Though everyone who has experienced downsizing or restructuring probably experienced all of those stages, SOBBOs seem able to move on. They certainly experience denial in the beginning and unfairness, fear, and anger in the resistance stage. But they're able to shift to the exploration stage and see that change brings not only danger, but also opportunity. They recognize that maybe there's a way to get on with the new. Many reach the commitment stage and are able to reflect on what they've learned, and they're able to assume accountability for achieving the results they want.

HOBBOs, on the other hand, get stuck in one of the first two stages, denial or resistance. Some may be in shock, having thought that such events could never happen to them. For others, denial is a way of ignoring the effects or implications ahead. Those stuck in resistance may become helpless or confused about finding direction—ever. Or they blame

their circumstances on leadership.

Managers and HR professionals have to recognize that such symptoms may result from HOBBOs' incapacity to move on for the moment and that it's not necessarily permanent or an issue of performance. Managers and HR professionals have to continue to invest in HOBBOs as they would in any other long-term capital asset.

Here are some ideas for managers and HR professionals to keep investing in HOBBOs.

Be candid about the market. Don't ignore what has occurred with the "business as usual" frame of reference. Confront retained employees candidly about their situation, shock, and possible future.

Co-create an investment plan. Revitalize their interest by involving them fully in goal-setting and plans for restructuring and reorganizing. Co-create the plans so that they don't design in isolation, but don't do the task for them.

Limit transaction costs. The cost of each laid-off employee creates an attitude shift in each retained employee. Train the managers of such employees to coach and facilitate in ways that can re-establish the idea that they're viewed as talented and important contributors.

Consider speculative investing. No one knows exactly what the economic or market environment will bring next, but it would be a mistake to stop investing in employees' development just because other cutbacks might be around the corner. Maximize the contributions of all employees by providing them with skills, knowledge, and resources for now and the future.

Strategize for mutual gain. Show employees an approach to contingency planning that provides alternatives for them if entry to a particular option is blocked. Cutback survivors also need their own investment strategies, which might include

- ▮ assessing risks. Cutback survivors should be candid with themselves about staying with their organization (and risking becoming bitter and entrenched) or looking elsewhere.
- ▮ diversifying one's portfolio. They should think creatively about the wide range of skills and abilities they use now and have used in the past. They should consider all of the possi-

SOBBOS AND HOBBOS: DIFFERENT RESPONSES

WORKPLACE SCENARIOS	SOBBOs	HOBBOs
Training	Let me at it!	v. Things will change in six months. Why bother?
Promotions	There are other ways to grow.	v. Promotions are all I care about.
Change	That's life.	v. It never works on my behalf.
Their Managers	What can I learn?	v. No help. Hasn't done one thing to fix this.
Leadership	They're doing the best they can; it's up to me.	v. They don't know what they're doing; they never did.
Further Education	Take advantage of it. Where are the classes?	v. Been there, done that, never got me anywhere.
Computer Knowledge	When can I go?	v. I don't have the time to learn.
Career Trends	Learn, learn, learn.	v. What career?
Downsizing	It will keep happening; I need to take care of myself.	v. I'm safe.
Career Goals	If one route is blocked, I'll try another.	v. Goal setting makes no sense.
Job Satisfaction	We make our own.	v. It's over and done.
Their Future	The future is what I make it.	v. The future will take care of itself.

bilities for transferring those talents to other work opportunities in or outside their organization.

▮ allocating capital. They should put their time and energy into self-development, not wait for their company to start a professional development program.

▮ leveraging assets. Any competency can be applied to more than one area. Someone may be a regional sales manager by title, but his or her core competency may be marketing, communications, or supervision.

▮ considering tax implications. Doing nothing lets people collect a paycheck, but little else. It also causes stress. Doing something may seem like a hassle or risk, but it will improve

one's long-term position.

Kept-on workers should ask other "investors" for advice and support. They should seek information from others in similar positions and find out how they managed to survive. The underlying notion is that employees and employers can begin the long road back after cutbacks to mutual trust and contribution. But they can't do it without new strategies for addressing the needs of cutback survivors—whether they are HOBBOs or SOBBOs. ■

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