

# *Research Paper*

Downsizing envoys:  
A public/private sector comparison

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**Dr Ian Ashman**

**Institute for Research into Organisation, Work and Employment**

**University of Central Lancashire**

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## **Downsizing envoys: A public/private sector comparison**

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

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## **FOREWORD**

This report explores the experience of 'downsizing envoys' – the individuals at work charged with the responsibility of breaking the news to employees about their potential job loss. It focuses on experiences in the private sector and contains comparative evidence drawn from an earlier study which focussed on the same issue, but conducted in a sample of public sector workplaces (Ashman, 2012).

Redundancy handling carries a considerable burden of responsibility for managers and unions, and the envoys play a unique and especially challenging part in this process. This is why Acas believed that exploring their experiences and identifying lessons in good practice is important in its overall understanding of the requirements of downsizing, and redundancy exercises.

The research uncovers that envoys experience is emotionally demanding. Many adopt strategies to distance themselves in order to cope, but in this research, all sought to conduct their role to meet a high standard, often at personal costs.

Acas is grateful to Dr Ian Ashman for instigating this particular strand of research on redundancy handling. We will be revisiting our guidance in order to more fully explore the implications for employers of supporting individuals in an envoy role.

Ed Sweeney  
Chair of Acas

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Aim**

This study builds on a previous research paper published by Acas (Ashman 2012) that 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 – labelled ***downsizing envoys***. The evidence from that paper is combined here with data gathered from envoys in the private sector in order to identify the similarities and differences in the experiences of envoys between the two sectors.

The aim of this paper is to develop further our understanding of the envoy situation and to identify what instances of good practice can be garnered from either sector.

### **Methodology**

In combination with evidence from the public sector study a total of 50 envoys were interviewed; where 24 came from across 9 public sector organisations, a further 24 from across 8 private sector organisations and two independent consultants. The interviewees are all presently or recently based in the North West of England. Including the 2 consultants 30 envoys are HR professionals and the other 20 are envoys drawn from other organisational functions.

### **Findings**

A broad summary of the data gathered would indicate that in terms of how they undertake the role - that is, regarding attitude and personal conduct - the envoys are very similar irrespective of their sector or organisation. However, where the sector does have a differentiating influence is on how the role affects the envoys – in other words, the emotion and strain experienced in carrying out the task. Factors that make a difference here include how much support is available to envoys and what part they play in decision making processes.

### **Suggestions for good practice**

The suggestions for good practice include ensuring that envoys are involved in decisions that affect their role and impact upon their understanding of downsizing rationale; that envoys do not feel forced into the role; that realistic efforts are made to train and develop envoys – especially with regard to the emotional aspects of the role; and to ensure that envoys are properly supported throughout downsizing activity.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This study explores the activities and experiences of 'downsizing envoys'. The term is explained in more detail shortly but essentially refers to individuals charged with the role of delivering downsizing decisions to affected employees. The research covers envoys operating within both the public and private sectors of the UK economy and, in particular, seeks to understand the effect that context and situation may have by searching for any similarities and differences between the two sectors. It draws upon the research conducted with envoys in the public sector that was published by Acas earlier in the year (Ashman 2012) and adds to it a similarly constructed sample of private sector organisations for purposes of comparison.

In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, job losses have become an unwelcome spectre across all sectors of the economy. It follows that all of the agents affected by downsizing activity deserve investigation and consideration; including decision makers, employees as either 'victims' or 'survivors', and employee representatives (such as trade unionists). The focus here, however, is on the envoys that have largely been neglected by existing research and yet play a vital role in downsizing activity. The practical and emotional consequences of the role are explored.

The public sector paper mentioned above (Ashman 2012) presents extensive verbatim evidence from the envoys in that sector and so this paper will provide direct quotations from the private sector envoys only in order to avoid repetition. This research paper can be read as a stand-alone document; however, because it deliberately avoids repeating the material that is presented in the public sector envoy paper it may be beneficial if they are read in combination. It is, nonetheless, important to note three things in particular that were established in the public sector envoy paper:

1. The term 'envoy' has been used across this research because it is felt that it better reflects the role in question and the attributes necessary to carry it out (including diplomacy, sensitivity, discretion and resilience) than the sometimes used expressions, such as 'executioner' or 'grim reaper'. Specifically, the envoy role is defined as the task of delivering the generally bad news of downsizing decisions, face to face, with victims and then dealing with the immediate repercussions. The evidence from both the public and private sectors indicates that the repercussions can endure for some time with victims often taking many months to leave their organisation after the initial notification of downsizing. Generally the relationship between envoy and victims is on-going, not the one-off event that the notion of 'executioner' implies. One envoy provided a clear illustration of the how the role is crucial in paving the way forwards during downsizing:

*The last thing that people can afford to do in that situation is become despondent. What you have to do is create a picture of hope, new opportunity and new horizons. The better you are at doing that the more supportive people are of the change that you are making and they may well come and thank you for what you have done for them. [Non HR envoy, organisation 14]*

2. A search of the literature revealed only a handful of studies that examined explicitly the envoy role (generally using the term 'executioner') although these did uncover a number of relevant themes that resurface in the current research. In particular, important issues concerning emotional taxation,

coping reactions, role overload, feelings of isolation and the nature of relational ties (proximity to downsizing victims) were highlighted. The studies identified were all undertaken with respondents from private sector organisations.

3. Similarly, a search of the literature revealed relatively little published on downsizing in public sector organisations. The material that is available tends to concentrate either on the rationale for public sector 'cutback management' or on the plight of those who survive downsizing and remain in the public organisation; especially in connection with the impact on their psychological contract and public service ethic/ethos, which is generally negative. This contrasts with the mass of material that explores and evaluates downsizing in the private sector although even within this extensive literature the themes are relatively narrow:

- 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?

(Bhattacharyya & Chatterjee 2005 p65)

Perhaps more of a problem is that the tone of much of the material is somewhat prescriptive and seems often to take little account of the social, economic or organisational context. It is notable that very little attention has been paid to the practicalities of downsizing management; specifically, the day to day and face to face reality that this research sets out to explore. No studies have been found that compare downsizing in the private sector with downsizing in the public sector although one article by Flint (2003) does endeavour to identify best practice in private sector downsizing management to see if it is applied in a public sector context.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The respondents for this study are all individuals that have recently acted as downsizing envoys for their organisation in the face to face delivery of downsizing decisions to the (potential) victims. Fifty envoys, drawn from nine public sector organisations (as reported in Ashman 2012) and eight private sector organisations, along with two consultants that had experience of downsizing with small and micro organisations, were interviewed – of which thirty are HR professionals (including the consultants) and twenty are from other management functions. The envoys are all located in the North West of England with the exception of two that have worked recently in the North West but are now based elsewhere in the North of England.

In light of the absence of an identifiable research population the approach to gaining respondents was based on a non-probability sampling procedure, thus, envoys were identified by making appeals through existing networks. Nevertheless, the intention was to cover a diverse array of organisations in each sector in order to ensure that the findings of this study have a wide applicability. The exact distribution of the sample is provided below.

**Table 1 – Summary of participating organisations by sector and respondents by role**

	<b>Sector/type</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
<b>Public sector</b>		
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

<b>Private sector</b>		
Organisation 10	Medium size engineering	1 x HR
Organisation 11	Medium size manufacturing	2 x HR 2 x non-HR
Organisation 12	Medium size care services	1 x HR
Organisation 13	Large food process	2 x HR
Organisation 14	Very large retail	3 x HR 3 x non-HR
Organisation 15	Large manufacturing	1 x non HR
Organisation 16	Medium size design and manufacture	1 x HR 2 x non HR
Organisation 17	Very large manufacturing	4 x HR 2 x non-HR
Consultants	Working with small and micro businesses	2 x HR

It should be borne in mind when considering the findings below that, inevitably, the organisations involved from the private sector are considerably more diverse than those drawn from the public sector, in terms of product/service type, size and so on, and that they are somewhat less representative of the sector as a whole than the public sector organisations. A commitment to confidentiality was essential to secure the participation of the envoys and so no organisations or individuals are named.

The interviewees were drawn from across organisational hierarchies and so for both HR and non-HR categories there is a mix of management levels, although not all of the HR participants had line management responsibilities. The organisations vary considerably in terms of purpose, size, structure, culture, funding models and rationale for restructuring, 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 may render the particular organisations identifiable, but they have been taken into account when analysing the data.

Interviews were loosely structured around the recollection of downsizing events, which enabled respondents to identify and evaluate the key issues and experiences for themselves. On average each interview lasted around an hour and the depth of auto-exploration that this afforded each envoy is an important feature of the data gathered. The interviews with public sector envoys were carried out between late January and early March 2011 and the private sector envoys were interviewed between October 2011 and April 2012.

The data was coded manually into twenty-nine broad themes such as, 'effect on family/home life', 'emotions', and 'coping'. 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 emerged from the data, however, some of the themes did have parallels with a number of the concepts identified in the literature and so similar terminology was used to label them.

### **3. FINDINGS**

The findings draw out a variety of issues connected to the experience of envoys most of which were introduced in the first report on public sector envoys. The emphasis here is on comparing experiences of envoys in the public sector with those in the private sector and so the matters discussed below are divided into those where there is consistent evidence of similarity across the two sectors and those where there is a marked difference. A broad summary of the data gathered would suggest that in terms of how they undertake the role - that is, regarding attitude and personal conduct - the envoys are very similar irrespective of their sector or organisation. However, where the sector does have a differentiating influence is on how the role affects the envoys – in other words, the emotion and strain experienced in carrying out the task. Factors that make a difference here include how much support is available to envoys and what part they play in decision making processes.

#### **3.1 The similarities**

##### **3.1.1 Emotional demands**

Every envoy interviewed considered the role to be emotionally demanding. Adjectives used to describe the experience, like *traumatic*, *nerve wracking*, *dreadful*, *very upsetting* and *hideous*, were typical across both sectors. The vast majority considered the envoy task to be the most emotionally demanding thing they had undertaken in their working lives – to quote one non HR envoy issues such as grievance and discipline are like *water off a ducks back in comparison*. Despite this there were no reported adverse effects on health or personal relationships, although more than one envoy acknowledged that they drank more alcohol (and in one instance smoked more) during downsizing activities. A quote from an HR envoy indicates that there is also the potential for the role to present a challenge to an individual's sense of personal identity.

*There is not one time that hasn't reduced me to tears in some shape or form, for one reason or another, because again I'm the Grim Reaper. It's not a nice feeling because I'm actually a quite happy amenable person – I'm not a hatchet person. [HR envoy Organisation 13]*

Indeed, none of the envoys showed any of the characteristics of a 'hatchet person' with all providing evidence of their diligence, conscientiousness and empathy for victims and they tended to see the same qualities in other envoys in their companies. There was no evidence in the organisations consulted that one sector was overall, less compassionate than the other in relation to the handling of the victims of downsizing – although it should be acknowledged that companies or individuals who treat victims thoughtlessly are unlikely to be willing to take part in this type of study. The emotional reactions of victims, and even survivors, upon the news of downsizing can be extremely hard to predict and this was something that many envoys commented on as being particularly challenging. It might be anticipated that it is the angry employees that are the most difficult to deal with but many envoys indicated that it was the ones that were distressed or quiet (giving up no emotional cues) that were most demanding. An HR envoy described the following situation as presenting her most demanding case:

*A lot of them were very emotional. I sat with one lady for an hour in my office, while she was drinking coffee, in complete silence because she was stunned – she had been with the Company for thirty six years. [Organisation 11]*

### **3.1.2 Relational ties**

Without exception envoys across both sectors acknowledged that the closer the normal working relationship with the victims the more difficult the role became. Unsurprisingly, it was generally line (non HR) managers that were in closest proximity to the victims and so felt the effect most keenly although it is a remark from an HR envoy that perhaps best illustrates the issue and also highlights the potential fallout.

*At the previous closures I didn't know one single person that went through the redundancy process. For the management restructure here I knew all of them and that was incredibly difficult. When the managers you considered almost as friends stopped speaking to you because they think you've stabbed them in the back – that's when it has got to me. [HR envoy organisation 13]*

Despite this there was no suggestion that any envoys shirked what they saw as their responsibility to work through the downsizing with their staff. In the largest participating private sector organisation the potential difficulty of relational ties was recognised ahead of the start of face to face meetings and an opt-out possibility was offered to envoys if needed, perhaps when having to deal with a family member or where a conflict of interest arose. Whether the option was ever taken up was not disclosed.

Nevertheless, in some instances it may be preferable if the initial news, at least, of downsizing is communicated to 'at risk' employees by somebody with whom they do not normally have day to day contact or even an independent third party. Both of the consultants interviewed said that they had acted as envoys in small and micro organisations specifically because the business owner was too close to their employees to deliver the downsizing message effectively and conduct a full and proper consultation.

*The managing director was in the room opposite with his ear to the wall, but he couldn't face the workforce himself – it's a lot easier if I'm a third party ... It's just that they're too devastated in trying to rescue the business so they don't actually see the options. [Consultant]*

The issue of how to deal with matters connecting downsizing management and close working relationships is a particularly problematic one because at its heart lies a paradox. It is the proximity of the envoy/victim relationship that, on the one hand, compels the envoy to want deal directly with their colleagues but, on the other hand, also multiplies the emotional distress. Opt outs or the use of third parties might not always be available alternatives, however, the evidence here indicates that they are worthy of consideration in some instances.

### **3.1.3 Role overload and coping**

The issue of work overload was universal with almost every envoy claiming that the role was a preoccupation while the downsizing process was taking place and

the majority saying that it resulted in very long working hours. What did vary is how individual envoys, whether in the public or private sector, perceived and, therefore, coped with the burden. It is difficult to generalise, as there were always exceptions, but some broad observations can be made. For instance, it was suggested in the paper on the public sector that the non HR envoys appeared to endure a more onerous workload because they often had to perform the role alongside their normal jobs whereas for the HR envoys the role became the day job while other tasks were set aside. The private sector was similar in this regard and testimony from an HR envoy and non HR envoy working in the same organisation provides a typical illustration:

*When we go through these types of exercise it becomes a little bit quieter. It's almost like the subconscious of the office thinks 'oh yeah, HR are working on something, I'm not going to go near them.* [HR envoy, organisation 14]

*[The envoy role] massively impacted on [workload] because it was important ... The day job suffers and [the downsizing] affected only one of ten areas that I looked after at the time, so the others got left to their own devices a little bit ... but I was lucky I had a strong group of managers.* [Non HR envoy, organisation 14]

The envoys interviewed from the private sector tended to occupy relatively more senior levels in the organisational hierarchy than their counterparts in the public sector (a factor that will be returned to later), which often meant that whilst the role was time consuming the long working hours that came with it were not that unusual and might be considered to go with the territory. The main issue for these more senior envoys may have less to do with the long hours and more to do with the overall intensity of the activity. One non HR envoy explained:

*The aggregate hours increase only slightly – it's the activity in those hours. Those times when you get to sit back and reflect and do a bit of planning become more and more precious.* [Organisation 17]

Many envoys claimed that a considerable contributory factor to their high workload was a personal desire to do a '*thorough and professional job*' on behalf of their organisation and its employees especially. However, according to one public sector HR envoy with extensive downsizing experience in the private sector such an attitude may in practice reflect an inability '*to let things go*' to an extent that it may not necessarily deliver any tangible benefits to the victims. A common consequence of the long hours and emotional intensity of the job was an overspill into the envoys' home and personal lives although nobody suggested that they experienced any long term detrimental effects. Nevertheless, workload management is clearly an issue that requires consideration from both organisational and individual perspectives.

The desire to be '*professional*' may serve as a coping mechanism for many envoys and so should not be dismissed lightly. In common with those in the public sector, the private sector envoys tended to cope in one or both of two ways; through emotional distancing and/or by cognitive distancing. Emotional distancing generally manifest itself as a hardening towards the reactions of employees to the news of downsizing and envoys in the private sector were more likely to experience this effect than those in the public sector simply because downsizing events occurred much more often private companies. As a consequence of repeated exposure and, no doubt, a sense of self-preservation

many private sector envoys claimed that whilst not devoid of emotions they were adept at depersonalising the process.

*It sounds terrible because it gives the impression it's just about procedure again ... but [through] probably just the sheer volume ... I may have become desensitised. [HR envoy, organisation 14]*

The reference made to 'procedure' here indicates that alongside the emotional hardening there is evidence of cognitive distancing too. Many public sector envoys coped with a lot of the emotional pressure they may have felt by emphasising the procedural aspects of the role, in effect convincing them that their investment in the rigour of downsizing systems and processes ensured the fair treatment of victims and reduced their personal responsibility. Private sector envoys adopted a similar coping approach although they tended to invest less in the procedural aspects of downsizing and more in the rationale; in other words, they bought into the reason for why the organisation had to downsize, which helped justify their own actions. The rationale for downsizing in the public sector organisations (and perhaps the way the process was being delivered) was, in some instances, at odds with the personal views of envoys in that sector and so buy-in was much less likely - an issue that will be revisited later in this paper.

### **3.1.4 Trade union involvement**

One important issue that was identified in the earlier paper on public sector envoys, and where differences in public and private sector experience might be anticipated, concerns the involvement of trade unions in downsizing events. Surprisingly perhaps, the evidence from the range of organisations participating in this research indicates that the experience across both sectors was quite similar when it came to the association between envoys and trade union officials.

Whilst nationally, union recognition is lower among private enterprises when compared with public sector organisations, in this research sample all bar one of the private sector organisations did recognise one or more trade unions in representation of at least some of their staff. The experience of envoys in dealing with trade union representatives was positive on the whole (as it was in the public sector). Public sector envoys reported that trade union officials were generally co-operative and, in dealing with the needs of the victims, often took some of the burden away from the envoys. There were some exceptions, but this was put down to issues of personality or inexperience rather than trade union policy. Envoys in the private sector also spoke positively about the effect that trade union involvement had on their job and the wider downsizing process; using words like *challenging but not disruptive; progressive; measured; mature; and invaluable* to describe it. There was also some indication that the depth of experience of some trade union officials, which was sometimes missing in the public sector, acted as a source of support to envoys.

The organisation/trade union/envoy dynamic is an important one and although a detailed discussion is beyond the remit of this paper it is worth pointing out that trade union representatives appear to have to tread a fine line between being constructive, without appearing to be incorporated, while still representing the interests of their members. One envoy experienced the dynamic first hand:

*The TUs got on the stage and said 'we'll fight them on the beaches'. Personally, I didn't expect it and I had a really good relationship with the work's convener so I kind of went after him afterwards and said what was all that about? [I was] genuinely*

*quite upset by what he'd done. I had a really good conversation with him and I understood why he'd done it and actually I was quite grateful because ... he needed to show [his membership] that he had a level of authority, number one and number two that he would represent them and could take all of them with him. What would have been worse, if they hadn't have had any faith in him and he'd have been disempowered. [HR envoy, organisation 17]*

In only one organisation did the envoys suggest that relations between company and trade unions had broken down and that it was because the unions believed that a recent significant downsizing event had 'rightsized' a particular site (an expression used by the organisation's management) and that it would, therefore, be the last for some time. The unions appeared to lose faith when it turned out not to be the case and another large scale downsizing programme was announced. The relationship decline occurred only shortly before the interviews were conducted for this research and so it is not possible say whether bridges can be mended or what impact it will have on the envoys.

## 3.2 The differences

### 3.2.1 Politics

Testimony from the public sector showed that in some cases the influence of politicians and interest from the media created great uncertainty in communicating downsizing messages as information could be leaked or decisions changed at short notice, which had the potential to make envoys appear inept as well as making the whole process more difficult. Private sector downsizing is not immune from political and media attention but it is, perhaps, much rarer and whilst such things as the timing of downsizing messages and the ways in which they are perceived by employees could be affected by outside parties there is no evidence that political pressure, say, had an impact on strategic downsizing decisions in the way that it could in the public sphere.

It is not surprising that it was only in two of the largest organisations among those participating from the private sector where envoys mentioned any political or media related issues. In both cases the organisations are significant local employers. For the first of the organisations there was no evidence that apparent media interest had any impact on its envoys:

*On the day the site closed down for people to go home and absorb the message. A lot of them went down the local pub and the local press were there. Then it was really business as usual thereafter ... to give people their credit the site was able to continue operating [until it closed]. [HR envoy, organisation 14]*

However, when it came to the largest organisation there was some evidence of an adverse impact. One non HR envoy spoken to, who held a very senior position in the Company, recounted his frustration at having to meet with politicians and justify the need for downsizing.

*I find it hard to sit in a room and be vilified by politicians ... because I'm trying to do my best for [everybody] ... They put hope in people's hearts – 'we can make this go away' – whereas they can't. [Organisation 17]*

There was some speculation that political lobbying may be taken into account in making first order strategic downsizing decisions by the Company executive but not in the short term manner that was experienced in the public sector and so no uncertainty was created for the envoys. Media attention, on the other hand, did cause problems in that regard. The press, radio and television were all interested in the Company's downsizing activity - campaigning on behalf of employees and interviewing them about their views and experiences. One incident created a particular challenge:

*Speculation appeared in the press and on the TV that there was going to be this major redundancy ... The Company had to respond and was basically forced almost into making the redundancy [announcement] earlier than it would have liked ... I think it really placed us on the back foot. [HR envoy, organisation 17]*

There is nothing that can be done to reduce political and media interest about high profile organisations, regardless of the sector, so perhaps the only possibility is to keep envoys informed of outside attention (as, indeed, both of the organisations mentioned above did) and pay particular heed to how it might influence other parties (victims, survivors, local community, trade unions and so on) or initiate change.

### **3.2.2 Internal politics**

The earlier paper on public sector envoys identified two issues that might be understood to arise from internal organisational politics and both are considered further here. First, it was noted that in some of the public sector organisations there was a tension between what is often described as the front line staff (police officers, fire fighters, teachers, clinicians and the like) and support or back office workers, which in the case of this research were generally administrative staff. Second, a tension existed in some instances between line managers and the human resource management function. Incidences of either did not occur across the whole sample of public organisations but were widespread enough to be an issue worthy of consideration and where either issue did arise it affected envoys directly.

With regard to the front line versus support staff issue the problem in the public sector, as Bach (2011) predicted, was that the impact of downsizing cuts fell disproportionately on support functions including HR. With the exception of perhaps two senior individuals all of the public sector envoys could be considered as falling into the category of support staff and so they felt vulnerable; indeed during the interviews a number had been identified as 'at risk' and some had already been through a redeployment process. Any tension created by this was exacerbated by a perceived lack of sympathy and understanding towards support function employees from their front line colleagues.

No evidence of this type of difficulty was found in any of the private sector organisations in this sample where staff reductions appeared to occur proportionately across all functions and levels of hierarchy. For instance, one envoy explained that initial discussions in the boardroom around where cuts should be made centred on the fact that two directors (who at that time were yet to be identified) would be leaving the company along with managers and rank and file employees. Another envoy drew a triangle to represent the company structure and explained that the effect of downsizing in his organisation was to

take the side off the triangle. He drew a line parallel to the left edge of the triangle to indicate that staff reductions went from top to bottom and were not about targeting particular functions or echelons. In this envoy's organisation, as well as some others, there were occasionally categories of employee that possessed hard to replace skills that were, in effect, protected but they were generally small in number and the need for their retention quite transparent, which may reduce resentment from those adversely affected.

Ultimately, however, the notion that the front line versus support staff tension is a public sector only issue should not be overstated despite the fact that it is only in the public sector that some categories of occupation are protected against compulsory redundancy by statute. Whilst it may be possible to discern the existence of front line (perhaps customer facing) staff in any organisation, the distinction may not be as stark in the private sector as it is in many public organisations. That is certainly true of the private sector organisations participating in this research. All but one of the public sector organisations provided primary care, education or enforcement services, whereas such a proximate relationship with clientele applied to only one of the private sector organisations (and the HR envoy interviewed at this company did not mention any internecine problems). A much more varied sample of private sector service organisations would be required to substantiate a significant comparison between sectors.

Likewise the tensions experienced between the HR function and the non HR envoys that were evident in some public sector organisations did not appear to occur in the private sector organisations. Where problems in the public sector existed they seemed to centre around a sense that HR professionals were policing rather than supporting their line management colleagues through the downsizing process and that in some instances a preoccupation with procedural correctness resulted in strategic goal displacement. In contrast relationships in the private sector were reported generally to be very positive and many non HR envoys paid glowing tribute to their HR colleagues.

*The whole process went like clockwork. A chunk of that was thanks to the HR department and the support they gave me through the whole process. So they did a lot of the administration work for me, they attended every meeting, guided me through, we reviewed every meeting before we went into the next one, so the support from HR was absolutely superb. [Non HR envoy, organisation 16]*

Inevitably there were instances of disagreements but whereas in the public sector the complaints tended to come from line managers, in the private sector it was the HR envoys that were more likely to be frustrated because they felt that some non HR envoys were unwilling to take responsibility for their decisions or take the lead in consultation meetings with victims. It is hard to know why there appeared to be more accord between the HR function and others in the private sector when compared with the public sector but it may have something to do with the stronger downsizing rationale that existed in the former. The significance of downsizing rationale is discussed next.

### **3.2.3 Downsizing rationale**

Generally, the envoys spoken to from the private sector resided at a higher level (often with access to the boardroom) in their respective organisations than their counterparts in the public sector and so they were much more likely to be

involved as decision makers in the downsizing process. Crucially, this created a sense of ownership that helped to strengthen the emotional resolve of envoys. Without question the business rationale for the downsizing activities being explored with the envoys had an important impact on how they approached and experienced the role. In every case envoys from the private sector claimed to be completely conversant with the reasons for needing to downsize and were in full accord. Likewise, the private sector envoys appeared to be in agreement with issues such as the distribution of staff reductions across their organisations and the procedures instituted to manage them. The outlook illustrated in the following quote was quite typical of the private sector:

*Well I'm responsible, when the announcement came out every head of division or head of channel was asked to look at their area and see where they could trim their cost down. So yes totally my decision for my area and I carry the can as far as that's concerned. I could have [argued against redundancies] but the problem is I couldn't in my own mind justify seven members of staff ... If I could have justified to myself that I needed seven then the business would have supported me and said yes okay. [Non HR envoy, organisation 16]*

Many envoys confirmed that their personal belief in the necessity for downsizing, that it was the right thing to do, helped them to deal with the more difficult emotional aspects of the process. At the extreme, one HR envoy found he was frustrated because he wanted the victims to test the veracity of his internal beliefs, but they did not.

*You know, it was almost, these are the reasons why we've got to do it - and ... you weren't being challenged in terms of the business need, the logic why redundancies were needed. It was 'well, managers manage, we do what managers tell us, you run the business, and you obviously know that's the situation' - come on, fight me! Make me work hard to convince you that that's the case. It was just that almost naïve acceptance of things that in different environments I would have had to work hard to convince people. [Organisation 11]*

In contrast, public sector envoys, whilst understanding the rationale for downsizing, certainly did not own it and it is quite conceivable that some might oppose the political decisions behind the cuts to public spending. They had no influence over where downsizing occurred in their organisations and in the case of non HR envoys they had no influence over the procedures used to carry it out. Even the most senior public sector envoy interviewed, working at directorate level, found that the strategic decisions were being made by politicians not her board. It is well established (Arnold & Randall et al 2010) that the absence of engagement and control accompanying the envoy role in the public sector has an impact on the ability to cope with emotional demands and on attitudes moving forwards. For many in the private sector the end of a downsizing exercise represented a new start, which is not to say that there was a naïve belief that it would not happen again, whereas in the public sector there was no such clarity, which in part was a consequence of the way in which downsizing was approached. Often in the public sector, and sometimes in the private sector too, there was no distinct demarcation of a downsizing event; where one round of job losses would take so long to effect that it would extend into a subsequent round consequently make the process more protracted.

### **3.2.4 Downsizing approach**

There was no evidence across the organisations participating in the research that one sector was more brutal or cavalier in its approach to downsizing than those in another. All the organisations surveyed were nothing less than conscientious and considerate in the way that they handled the processes and victims of downsizing. Nevertheless, there were significant differences between the public and private sector approaches.

A common approach to downsizing across the public sector organisations 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 public 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.

Private sector organisations, on the other hand, adopted a wide range of approaches to achieving downsizing change. One organisation used different strategies and procedures depending on the type of staff involved. In one event the company in question chose, for the first time, to make seventy managerial staff redundant without collective consultation. The process began by pre-selecting against specific criteria seventy managers for redundancy from a pool of around four hundred individuals. One morning the entire pool was sent a communication saying that if they received a phone call they would be asked to attend a meeting in a location off site. On attending a meeting with senior non HR and HR envoys each manager was offered an enhanced redundancy package if they agreed to leave the Company immediately.

The envoys dealt with about ten managers each and the activity was completed in half a day. The HR envoy describing the process said that this approach saved a great deal of money by avoiding lengthy consultation with four hundred non-unionised employees, avoided the uncertainty and bad feeling that could arise during that period and ensured that it was only the least qualified managers that departed. From the envoy perspective the process was emotionally difficult, because the managers were often shaken by the unexpected turn of events, but it was *over before lunchtime* which minimised the length of exposure. An obvious question concerns the impact of the process on the victims and here the HR envoy was confident that they were not adversely affected compared with alternative approaches.

*It's interesting that a lot of the feedback that we got was that it was done quickly and that there wasn't a prolonged three months of wondering if you'd got a job at the end of it or not. Actually, some people wanted to go and left with a nice sum of money. All of them were looked after from a money perspective but also in contact with us – making sure they got whatever they needed ... We respected the people we were seeing with an absolute understanding it's not easy and that they have our support during their period of leave. [Organisation 14]*

Conversely, the same organisation chose to close one of its business sites using a strategy and process very similar to what is described above as typical for the public sector. The eleven hundred employees on the site in question were mostly union members and because the site had to be kept operational for a number of months after the closure was announced the Company negotiated with the trade unions before and after the announcement. The Company also did whatever it could to minimise the number of compulsory redundancies by offering redeployment and so forth. For the HR envoy describing this downsizing event it meant one to one meetings with more than one hundred employees over a considerable period and prompted a different assessment of the experience from that of his colleague referred to above:

*It was a really long few weeks. I was working ridiculous hours ... I remember I didn't sleep particularly well. [Organisation 14]*

Clearly, the choice of downsizing approach was made on the basis of strategic factors and the nature of the workforce being affected and both of the HR envoys believed that the correct approach was adopted for the given situation. Ultimately, strategic considerations are likely to override all others. In one private sector organisation participating in this research, a typical downsizing programme would take many months, often running into years, because the core business activity was such that things could not happen any quicker.

Nevertheless, the extent of personal experience of downsizing activity plays a part in how long the process takes and most of the private sector envoys had considerably more experience of it than those in the public sector. One HR envoy from the private sector gave a summation of what he had learned.

*Typically the redundancy exercises that I conduct these days, with regard to any statutory requirements, take about two weeks to get all the consultation done. Going back six years ago I was on this for seven weeks, so that just tells you a little bit about some of the difficulties that we faced when I first approached this. [Organisation 12]*

This envoy was at great pains to point out that the speed of the processes was in no way detrimental to the victims and that if they had needed more time he would take it, but ultimately he, along with many other envoys, felt that a quickly resolved process benefited everybody. Flint (2003) has argued that 'slow implementation' of downsizing processes is desirable, however, from the perspective of the envoys in this research there is a concern that slow paced implementation may extend the period across which they have to endure heightened emotions and increased workload.

### **3.2.5 Support**

The public sector research paper emphasises that the support available to envoys is a vital factor in how they are likely to experience and cope with the role. Support for envoys can come from a variety of sources including family and friends, trade union representatives (as discussed earlier) and some envoys reported receiving sympathy and support from victims too. However, what appears to be most important is that backing for envoys, especially emotional support, is deeply embedded in downsizing management. In practice this means support from senior management, the HR function and quite possibly other envoys. Support may be manifest in terms of the availability of resources to the downsizing process, perhaps to help manage workload, the preparation of envoys

and the provision of legal and technical guidance. However, the evidence gathered here indicates that what envoys need most is understanding and recognition.

The private sector organisations in this study appear to be much better at providing such support for their envoys than those from the public sector. In large part this is undoubtedly down to the fact that the depth of experience of downsizing in the private sector meant that there were many more people available to envoys, either formally or informally, that were familiar with the envoy role and could, therefore, impart know-how and empathy. Also, involvement in downsizing activity seemed to extend further up the organisational hierarchy of private sector organisations, compared with public organisations, which helped in terms of reward and recognition for envoys.

In public sector organisations the non HR envoys were particularly vulnerable to feeling isolated and unrewarded in their role, but this was not a situation encountered among non HR envoys from the private sector. The following comments are quite typical.

*At any point did I feel isolation? In terms of the [envoy role] definitely not, I had somebody at the end of the phone 24/7 and happy to talk to me at any point, so a tremendous amount of support. [Non HR envoy, organisation 16]*

*There was somebody around ... maybe junior HR advisors, so those people supported me day in and day out to deliver [the downsizing] and they supported all of the consultation and negotiation sessions. They managed all of the queries and people concerns through the whole journey ... We built up a load of experience [through various events] ... and it was the same team of people that were interfacing and talking through those restructures. So I had that support all the time and if I hadn't had that support, and the strong support from my direct team, despite the fact that they were all affected, it would have been extremely difficult. [Non HR envoy, organisation 14]*

Earlier it was noted that there was evidence of tension between line managers and the HR function in some public sector organisations part of which was a consequence of the emphasis that HR practitioners often place on procedure, for instance, the provision of scripts for consultations, being interpreted by non HR envoys as a form of policing. Non HR envoys in the private sector were just as likely to be provided with scripts for meetings but for reasons that are not readily apparent their interpretation was more positive.

Nevertheless, perhaps the most salutary example of support failure came from an HR envoy in the private sector and it is worth describing in a little detail. This envoy was asked by her company executive to close a rundown facility and put all of the business into a purpose built unit already operating just a mile from it. The site comprised one hundred and twenty employees of which only forty could be relocated to the newer facility with the job to be done inside two months. She concentrated on establishing the legal and procedural aspects of the closure on the assumption that she and her HR advisor would be there to support the managers of the facility in closing it down – discounting any psychological aspects of the event. As the two HR envoys had no experience of downsizing that is not surprising, but the site general manager had no experience either and the HR envoys ended up leading the process and being seen as the face of the Company and so responsible for the closure decision.

Immediately there were culture and language difficulties as the workforce was largely of Asian ethnic origin (save for just three technicians) and entirely male.

*Honestly, it was quite frightening, in fact that whole face to face process was frightening for me – I'm a white woman in an Asian man's world and that was difficult. [HR envoy, organisation 13]*

Problems centred on the gender of the envoys and their emphasis on procedure when the employees were used to resolving issues informally. There were a lot of raised voices and some aggression during face to face meetings. Fortunately for the envoys the general manager and trade union representative were protective but there appeared to be a complete absence of support from the Company executive. When additional resources were requested they were turned down and ultimately the reward for doing a good job was to be given more closures to deal with (that reportedly were nothing like as traumatic). However, when asked what she would like to see her executive do differently it was the absence of emotional support that she berated.

*Just an appreciation that it does affect us – that it's very hard work ... I don't think I came across anybody who would sit there and say 'I know this has been really difficult but, you know, I'm making this decision in the best interests of the business'. [HR envoy, organisation 13]*

Clearly, some forethought from Company decision makers and a more understanding attitude towards the plight of envoys would have made a great difference to this person's initiation into downsizing management. Interestingly, on a point that links to the next subject, the HR envoy, a qualified professional, claimed that all the preparation she undertook, in terms of researching downsizing through authoritative sources, lulled her into a false sense of security.

*Because I thought I was going to sit there and just deliver a message, and yes there was talk about employees and how we can use assistance programmes to make them feel better and to support them, but did anybody ever say I would come out of it feeling like I'd been through the wringer? Never. [HR envoy, organisation 13]*

### **3.2.6 Preparation (the selection and training of envoys)**

Whilst selection based on suitability and training for the envoy role was not widespread there was more evidence of it in the private sector than the public sector. In the latter only one incidence of an envoy being selected on the basis of their ability (rather than simply because they occupied a particular position) was recorded and training for the role was almost as rare. Any training that was provided concentrated only on the legal and procedural aspects of downsizing activity with no guidance on dealing with the psychological aspects of the task.

There was more evidence among the private sector than the public sector organisations of envoys being selected for the role on the basis of past success or because they possessed particular abilities. This could be very senior envoys that were, in effect, parachuted in to oversee the whole downsizing process, although the danger is that the reward for doing a good job in difficult circumstances becomes more difficult circumstances to deal with.

*Unfortunately, I have got a reputation for handling these things successfully in terms of keeping the performance of the business unit up to speed, while trying to look after the people - so that's why I was asked. At the moment it became clear ... that we were going into a HR1 I was asked pick up responsibility. [Non HR envoy, organisation 17]*

Alternatively, it could be a line manager that had been promoted into the envoy role on the basis of transferable skills demonstrated under other conditions. It may seem tough that the first job for the envoy quoted below was to deliver news of redundancies but he saw it as a sensible decision for him and his new subordinates.

*All I could think is I've only been given this job for one reason and that's because they know that, as far as making people redundant, I'm probably the best person for the job ... As far as the business is concerned one of my main skills is building good teams. [Non HR envoy, organisation 16]*

This particular envoy was in no sense mercenary but because he believed he had been selected for the role on the basis of his abilities, alongside the fact that he saw it as a *definite personal advancement*, it clearly made a positive difference to the state of mind in which he approached the task.

The depth of experience among the envoys in the private sector meant that their first involvement with downsizing had often happened many years ago and some found it difficult to recollect exactly how they encountered the role at first, perhaps clouded by subsequent events, which indicated that for a number of participants downsizing had been an almost constant organisational presence. Nevertheless, more than half of the private sector envoys stated explicitly that they were quite unprepared for the effects of the role on their first encounter. What they did have available to them, though, was colleagues that had been through it and could pass on reassurance and practical advice. This type of mentoring, whether formal or informal, that connects with the issue of support mentioned above, was mostly absent from the public sector context and the difference between the two sectors in terms of envoy attitudes to downsizing was marked. In general, the envoys in the private sector seemed somewhat more confident and, perhaps, more comfortable in the role (which is not to say they found it easy) than their public sector counterparts.

Some private sector organisations had been through a number of downsizing activities over recent times and so for many of the HR envoys, in particular, there was the possibility of a gradual introduction to the role, perhaps through observation or undertaking only a small number of consultations with victims, or alternatively go for total immersion. One HR envoy explained how she was presented with the 'opportunity' to undertake some intensive development.

*I remember we were in here and I was finalising the timing plan and [the HR Director] was with me. Against all the action points I had his initials and he said to me 'why have you got my initials against those?' 'They need to be yours' and I turned around and said 'what?' At that stage it dawned on me 'God! How am I going to do this?' Looking back on it now I am glad I handled it and did it from beginning through to the end because as a result ... going forward ... it has probably made me stronger. [Organisation 11]*

It was certainly the case that the envoys in the private sector generally saw involvement in downsizing events as an inevitable aspect of the business cycle and so were more likely to view it as an opportunity (albeit not a pleasant one) to gain insight and experience than those in the public sector. However, the advantage of the private sector organisation described by the HR envoy above is that they possessed what might be described as 'corporate memory' so that even in the above, rather dramatic scenario, the envoy had at least one very experienced individual to refer to when needed.

Another envoy described how he had set out to initiate a colleague rather more gradually into the role, but this can only happen where downsizing events occur on a regular basis<sup>1</sup>.

*I've got somebody in my team that is capable of doing it and wants to develop in that area and has worked with me on two or three of these before – note taking, getting involved in the decisions, that sort of thing – and then I have gradually handed the reins over to them. So I have nurtured them along the way basically. [HR envoy, organisation 12]*

It is perhaps worth noting, once again, that this type of induction, whether immersive or gradual, may be feasible for HR professionals but logically is more difficult to plan for envoys from elsewhere in an organisation.

There was some evidence from all of the private sector organisations that they put their managers, who were the likely people to find their self in the envoy role, through generic management development programmes that may prepare and help them, although some of those interviewed said they found such programmes rather abstract and a popular refrain was that 'you have to experience the job first hand' to appreciate fully the demands. Nevertheless, in the largest organisations in particular, quite sophisticated management development programmes were ongoing that dealt with so-called 'soft skills' and the procedural and legal aspects of downsizing were generally provided by HR staff on a need-to-know basis. One non HR envoy claimed that even inexperienced managers were well prepared for such events because development schemes involving role playing on negotiating and having 'difficult conversations' were run periodically as well as psychological testing and personal development planning to enhance self-knowledge.

It was the largest organisation participating in this study that showed what was possible regarding the handling of envoys having instituted for a particular downsizing event what was referred to by one respondent as *the Rolls Royce service of redundancy*. This involved comprehensive procedures, practices and facilities for the benefit of victims but also up-front and bespoke training for envoys in the emotional as well as the procedural and legal aspects of the role. Additionally, the Company chose to carry out redundancy consultations in a facility especially set up off site, ostensibly to save victims from what was referred to as *the walk of shame*, but had the additional benefit of creating a situation where the envoys were gathered in the same place and so could share their experiences more or less immediately with one another and provide moral support as events unfolded. It was this proximity that enabled the opportunity, as mentioned earlier, for envoys to opt out of a consultation if, for instance, there

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<sup>1</sup> It was the nature of the business in this case that meant that changes in local demographics and the regular need to close run down premises and open up new developments (rather than economic pressures) lead to staff reductions and in these circumstances, employees that were unwilling or unable to relocate would become redundant.

was difficult situation or conflict of interest (say, if the victim was a relative of the envoy).

To reiterate, the above case provides an illustration of what is possible and such an approach may be out of reach or unrealistic for many organisations. This particular company had the resources to invest in what was a large scale redundancy process (although it is understood that it was considered money well spent for a variety of reasons moving forwards), but perhaps more significant is the length of time taken to complete a downsizing programme, which, for strategic reasons, could run into a number of years. The upside of the extended duration is that it allows plenty of time for appropriate training for envoys to be undertaken (the timing or even possibility of training is a major difficulty when downsizing has to be done quickly), the downside, as reflected in the public sector paper, is that it can extend the emotional tension.

There seems no doubt that downsizing envoys in the private sector were generally better suited and better prepared for their role (which does not mean to say they performed it better as that cannot be known from this research) than their public sector counterparts.

#### **4. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

The evidence presented from across the public and private sectors indicates that the downsizing envoy role is a demanding one wherever it occurs. However, clearly the context in which the role is situated is crucial in determining the extent of those demands. It is not possible or appropriate to suggest that organisations in one sector manage downsizing and the experiences of envoys better than the other, but most of the lessons to be learned (whether positive or negative) are to be drawn from the private sector simply because the variety of approaches to downsizing are greater in number. Those lessons are reflected in the recommendations made below.

Some private sector organisations may handle downsizing in similar ways to those in the public sector, but ultimately, the finding of the first envoy research paper is confirmed – public sector organisations are different. This may change as public organisations evolve under current fiscal pressures but at the moment they experience political (rather than market) uncertainty and from the envoy perspective suffer from a lack of clear rationale and an absence of downsizing experience. Nevertheless, actions can be taken to improve the situation of envoys across both public and private sectors.

The suggestions for good practice made below are based on the evidence from envoys provided in this paper and the earlier public sector research paper, and as such re-emphasises a number of the ‘issues for further consideration’ in the latter.

- Organisations should make every effort to include envoys in decisions that affect their role and impact upon their understanding of the downsizing rationale. It may be unrealistic for all envoys to be involved in strategic decision making, but should be possible with regard to procedural and operational matters such as the allocation of resources and availability of support. The rationale for the downsizing must be communicated clearly to envoys at the earliest opportunity and from senior decision makers in order to maximise the opportunity for buy-in.
- Envoys should not feel forced into the role. The evidence here indicates that there is no need to coerce managers, HR or line, as they are willing generally to take on the responsibility in the interests of the victims, but it is important that they perceive a sense of choice and control, perhaps by providing the possibility of an opt out.
- Experience is a very important factor in determining how an envoy performs and understands their role but there has always to be a first time and the way in which individuals are initiated into the task requires careful consideration.
- Bespoke training for envoys may be problematic for many organisations particularly with regard to its timing, but the evidence presented indicates that it is possible and when coupled with appropriate mentoring is worthwhile, particularly in dealing with the emotional aspects of the role. Perhaps a more realistic approach is to pay more attention to dealing with the negative psychology of certain aspects of management into existing development programmes.
- Many HR envoys complained that their professional training did not prepare them for what Redman and Wilkinson (2006 p357) call ‘the more unpalatable aspects of downsizing and redundancy’. HR professional development programmes need to give more consideration to more emotionally challenging aspects of the job.

- Perhaps the most important recommendation here is for organisations to ensure that envoys are supported in dealing with the emotional stresses and strains of the role. Support from the HR function (where it exists) may be valuable but crucially support needs to come from senior managers and peers (i.e. other envoys who can share their experiences). If an organisation lacks experienced envoys with whom issues can be shared there is an argument for attempting to establish networks beyond the organisation.

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