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**HRM AND ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE UNDER CLOSURE
CONDITIONS: EVIDENCE FROM A CASE STUDY**

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Abstract

Little has been published which analyses the performance of a workforce after the announcement that their organisation is to be closed. Of the few published cases analysing closure, in a small number of instances it has been reported that substantial improvements occurred in the organisation's performance during the period from the announcement until the final day. Such improvements were generally contrary to the predictions of the downsizing literature and the instinctive expectations of the managers who were involved. Using a case study analysis of the closure of a steelworks in Australia in which very significant improvements in performance were recorded, this paper examines the role of the company's human resource management interventions as an explanatory factor for these improvements.

Introduction

For the last three decades the management of both the public and private sectors have relentlessly pursued the cost-cutting potential inherent in downsizing. Firms and government entities have restructured, outsourced, shifted economic activity offshore and intensified worker effort sometimes, but not always, through productivity bargaining. At its most extreme, downsizing occurs when either part of or a whole organisation is closed. The patent commonality of all closure events, irrespective of the form or function of the unit being shut down, is that a temporary (or dying) organisation is created. This fundamentally reorders the organisation's pre-existing social relations.

Managers who have planned closures have reported their expectations that the performance of the workforce would decline during the closedown period i.e. the time period from the announcement of the closure decision to the workforce and other stakeholders, until the operation's final day. This was because workers, their collective agencies and possibly the wider community were dealing with resentment, future uncertainty and concerns over job loss (Hansson and Wigblad, 2005). These expectations were consistent with the downsizing literature which shows that organisational performance is often affected as a result of the survivor syndrome – employees' manifest their lowered commitment through greater absenteeism, scepticism, resistance to change, injuries and lower productivity (Brockner, 1988; Cameron, 1994; Feldman and Leana, 1994). However, in a few published cases, counterintuitive improvements have been recorded. Bergman and Wigblad (1999: 343) refer to this 'unexpected, puzzling social

phenomenon' as the 'closedown effect' for which a final explanation, they surmised, was yet to be found.

Using a single case study methodology, this paper analyses the closedown effect which occurred when Broken Hill Propriety Limited (BHP) closed its 84 year old integrated steelworks located at Newcastle, on Australia's eastern seaboard. The closure was the largest single deindustrialisation event in Australia's economic history. In the two and a half year period between the closure announcement in April, 1997 until the Work's final day (as it was known colloquially in the Newcastle community), many production, quality and human resource management (HRM) performance records were set by the highly unionised workforce.

Explanations of the closedown effect

Very little has been published which specially reports on the closedown effect – perhaps not more than six studies. Sutton's (1987) analysis of the closure of eight firms was, arguably, the first. He concluded that 'psychological factors' experienced by the affected workers, principally, that they were motivated by a hope that improved performance would persuade management to rescind the closure decision, was an important explanatory factor. Later work by Bergman and Wigblad (1999) assessed Sutton's explanations as too psychologically focused. They argued that (*ibid.*: 348) 'analysing the causes of the closedown effect solely on the 'employees' mental states is not satisfying. Collective actions in declining organisations obviously have social aspects related to the context in which they take place which must be considered in any serious explanation.'

Their research did not dismiss the employees' psychological reactions outright though; accepting that falls in productivity after a closure is announced may be recovered when the initial anxiety, stress and anger are lowered. However, Bergman and Wigblad (1999: 365) claimed from their case studies that productivity improvements experienced during closedown periods may be best attributed to management 'surrendering' significant levels of workplace control:

A common feature in the 'declining organisations' studied was that productivity increased in a situation where management control over daily operations was diminishing. Management's interest in keeping traditional patterns of control intact was rather absent in organisations they perceived as temporary.

Another way to characterise this process is as a shift in the 'frontier of control'; managers providing greater autonomy to those that they supervise, empowering them both formally and informally to make decisions over work.

Other explanations for the closedown effect may be found in the wider downsizing literature. The empirical evidence demonstrates that HRM interventions such as counselling, job search skills and retraining and engaging employees in decision-making over the downsizing process ameliorates the survivor syndrome and thereby heightens the likelihood the firm's restructuring objectives will be achieved (Dawkins and Littler, 2001). Hardy (1990) for instance recommended a number of steps to ease the process of the implementation of redundancies and to minimise the impact of the 'survivor syndrome'. The steps, summarised below, parallel much of the 'good downsizer' literature including that by Brockner, (1992), Littler *et al* (1994), Cameron (1994) and Mishra, Spreitzer and Mishra (1998). Briefly, Hardy's steps are:

- achieving awareness (ensuring senior management recognise the importance of the social and political implications arising from the downsizing);
- managing the alternatives (being flexible, say by adopting early retirement, work sharing and voluntary retrenchments);
- being supportive (use outsourcing, severance pay to reduce employee insecurity);
- managing disclosure (widely promulgating realistic and up-to-date information);
- building understanding (information should lead to employees and union officials 'to accept the cuts') and
- managing blame (making sure the reasons given for the retrenchments can stand close scrutiny).

In addition to the 'best practice' downsizing literature, whether the closure is resisted by trade unions, possibly in concert with community agencies such as local government, may also explain the closedown effect. Corporations have sought to assuage the workforce by making industrial relations concessions and by providing new business start up capital and the like when they have forecast that the closure may be susceptible to industrial action, picketing and consumer boycotts (Nissen, 1999). However, compliance with firms' closure decisions is the norm. Typically, as Hyman (1987: 51) observed, feeling 'unable to resist', union representatives have abandoned principles which were once regarded as vital to negotiate how the plant closure and workforce layoffs will be managed. He argued that a new regime of labour control emerged in response to the downsizing crisis experienced since the 1980s. Whereas market despotism relied on the vulnerability of the individual worker, '... today it is the collective worker that is

vulnerable. The fear of being fired is replaced by the fear of capital flight, plant closure, the transfer of operations, and disinvestment' (*ibid.*: 52). Nevertheless, in circumstances in which where unresolved conflict and resistance persist, the closedown effect can not be anticipated. Indeed, Bergman and Wigblad (1999: 364) noted that 'our cases of closure suggest that conflict over resources as well as workers' collective actions are important factors to take into account.'

Methodology

With the approval of the University of Newcastle's Ethics Committee, data for this qualitative case study methodology was gathered over four years, starting initially during the final months of the steelworks' operation. Over twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with BHP's senior line and HRM managers, key union officials and members of the steelworks' joint consultative body - the Transition Steering Team (TST). Very extensive primary and secondary documentary sources were also accessed. These included minutes, resolutions, campaign materials, personal notes held by the steel unions and BHP's voluminous materials such as internal memorandum, news releases, reports and speeches. Federal and state government documents, awards, decisions and transcripts of the NSW industrial tribunals as well stories carried in the print and broadcast media, were accessed. This facilitated data triangulation.

It is acknowledged that as a single case study there are limitations in the general application of its findings. However, as Yin (2003) Clyde Mitchell (1983) have noted case study findings are capable of generalisation, not to populations though as may be

available to quantitative methods, but to theoretical propositions. It is suggested therefore that this case study, while not having the power of statistical inference, does inform the analysis of the closedown effect.

The steelworks' closure

Since the early 1980s, in a cycle that commenced with the federal Labor government's mini-corporatist Steel Industry Plan (SIP), the Newcastle steelworks had undergone very significant workplace restructuring (Kelly and Underhill, 1997). The SIP had been initiated in response to the international crisis which had severely affected the steel industry from the late 1970s. As shown in figure 1, successive waves of technological and workplace change had seen the workforce at the steelworks downsized from over 11,000 to 2,800 employees (with 1,000 contract workers) by the late 1990s. As a result, labour productivity steeply had climbed from 300 tonnes per person per annum (tepa) in 1987 to upwards of 700 tepa in 1997 (Macdonald and Burgess, 1998). Uncertainty though over the long-run future of the business, despite the apparent success of the restructuring and downsizing, persisted into the 1990s.

In 1995 BHP's corporate head office determined that Primary Operations (the 'front-end' of the steelworks which smelts the steel and casts it into ingot-like billets) would close in 2002 and be replaced by an electric arc furnace (EAF). This would further downsize the total workforce to an estimated 1,000 employees. However, less than two years later, following a strategic review of the performance of all its steel business units, BHP broke its undertaking to retain steelmaking in Newcastle (on which the unions' accommodation

of the massive restructuring had been attained) when the firm announced in April 1997 that, as part of its ‘Pacific-Rim’ strategy, steelmaking would be phased out by September 1999. BHP gave such a lengthy period of notice, not from altruism, indeed one managers who was interviewed stated that a much shorter period was preferred, but because this was the amount of time which was required to upgrade the firm’s steelworks in Whyalla (South Australia) to replace the production from Newcastle.

Figure 1 Newcastle steelworks: number of employees and production 1981 - 1999*

Year	Number of Employees	Raw Steel Tonnes	Year	Number of Employees	Raw Steel Tonnes
1981	11,139	2,158,366	1991	4,795	1,703,000
1982	10,668	2,158,612	1992	4,159	1,728,000
1983	6,871	1,522,277	1993	3,803	1,739,000
1984	6,575	1,544,039	1994	3,548	1,539,000
1985	6,172	1,619,378	1995	3,054	1,642,000
1986	5,972	1,908,394	1996	2,910	1,716,470
1987	5,801	1,833,568	1997	2,805	1,679,538
1988	5,490	1,674,000	1998	2,376	1,692,437
1989	5,348	1,692,541	1999	2,422	1,582,542
1990	5,325	1,658,717			

*Data are for the year ending May

Source: Jay (1999a)

Without releasing the report on which the closure decision was based (an embargo the company has steadfastly maintained) BHP argued that shifts in the product market, falling prices, the need for further cost-cutting and fundamental worldwide technological changes put the ageing Newcastle plant beyond economic viability. In what they described as a ‘very hard’ decision, BHP’s senior managers claimed the ‘line-ball’ plant had lost \$30 million in 1997 despite the downsizing and cost reduction programs

(Kirkwood, 1997b). The unions disputed the claims that the Works' was not viable and argued that BHP should be required to offer the business for sale.

Given the Works' long-standing economic significance and the intertwined social and cultural space it held within the 'folk lore' of the city, BHP management anticipated the news of the closure of steelmaking encompassed considerable risks in how the workforce, their unions and other stakeholders, including the three tiers of government, would respond.

On hearing the announcement, workers and their unions were 'extremely angry', used analogies such as 'death in the family' and spoke of their difficulty in accepting the reasons given by the company: 'They had worked hard, increasing production by half, on the understanding if they "put in" the steelworks would remain. It's a betrayal of the whole cit.' (Mulley, 1997). The Secretary of the major steelworkers' union, the Australian Workers' Union, Maurie Rudd, believed 'The real downside is that there will be actual suicides . . .' (Vass, 1997). Bob Carr, the Premier of New South Wales, called the announcement 'a boardroom betrayal of working class Australia' (Kirkwood: 1997a). The extent to which the unions and their members had shored up the long-term viability of the steelworks by accepting the workplace reform agenda was a dominant response.

This heightened the anger. Macdonald and Burgess (1998: 17) commented:

Ultimately, however such efforts did nothing but delay the closure and the associated, highly traumatic adjustment process. . . Co-operative industrial relations, for example, on which much store was placed in the 1980's by the trade union movement, both in the region and beyond, do not seem to exert much influence on the critical decisions concerning investment and plant location. One wonders whether a

more militant defence of wages and conditions and greater resistance to work intensification and job loss would have resulted, ultimately in a very different scenario.

BHP's worse case forecast was for an instantaneous mass walkout threatening the plant's 24 hour continuous operations, poor safety, high absenteeism and the loss of skilled employees (Hockridge, 1999). The company was concerned that even if the more overt manifestations of resistance were contained, at a minimum, the performance of the plant would significantly suffer from 'survivor syndrome' in the two and a half year closedown period. Additionally, the company wanted to progressively downsize the Works, thereby not replacing those employees who left, an objective that they were unlikely to achieve given the hostility over the breach of the EAF undertaking.

A 24 hour strike and mass meeting was held five days after the announcement and resolved that further industrial action be co-ordinated by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and that federal government intervention be sought to protect the steel industry. Ultimately, the initial resistance by unions and the Newcastle community dissipated, in part, as a result of a negotiated agreement with the unions which, *inter alia*, markedly improved redundancy payments supported by extensive retraining opportunities. BHP also undertook to resource a number of job replacement schemes including an 105 hectare industrial park known as Steel River.

The Newcastle steelworks' performance post-closure announcement

After an initial downturn following the closure announcement, the workforce went on to sustain not only pre-existing efforts but often, and remarkably, bettered many of the

Works' production and human resource management key performance indicators (KPIs). For example in 1998, the annual prime billet production of 1,576 million tonnes set a new record from the earlier mark established 1993. At the same time the Works increased the smelting of premium priced leaded steel, which involves more complex production processes, from 5% to 10% of total output. This exemplifies the significance of the production record set post-closure announcement. Using 1994/5 as the base, real production cost per tonne fell by 7%. Furnace heats rose from 26 to 32 per day. BHP used a number of measures to evaluate product quality including the amount of product returned by customers. Average monthly returns reduced by 30% in 1998 against 1994/95 data. The company estimated this represented an ongoing dollar saving of up to \$24 million per annum, depending on the nature of the product returned (BHP, 1998).

HRM KPIs measured equally dramatic improvements in performance. Safety data showed the lost time injury (LTI) rate fell by 93% from 40 LTIs in 1993/94 to just 3 in 1997/98. The medical treatment injury (MTI) rate went down by 79% to 23 MTIs (from 109 in 1993/94). In a number of months in the closedown period, no injuries occurred, a result not previously experienced since the mill opened in 1915. Absenteeism was estimated to generally be at least 20% lower than that experienced before the closure announcement. No demarcation disputes occurred, especially over the distinction between managerial and non-managerial work. No working days were lost to industrial disputes post the initial 'protest' strikes (BHP, 1998).

These improvements in the performance at the Works are explainable as a continuation of the restructuring 'reforms' under the earlier Steel Industry Plan and later workplace restructuring. Equally, the performance is contrary to the expectation of a decline in worker effort associated with the 'survivor syndrome'.

When the plant closed, Jim Fitzpatrick, Vice President Primary Operations (in effect, the Works' plant manager) reflected in the final edition of *Rodbar* (1999) – the Works' internal employee newsletter - that the effort during this time had 'been a time of extraordinary achievement. Production records set in every department; improvements in reliability throughout the plant; improvements in quality; and an 80 per cent drop in lost time injury rate . . .' Even, and astonishingly, that 'the plant is probably better and safer today than it was the day it was built'. *Rodbar's* editor was equally effusive (*ibid.*): 'A great and historic steelworks is closing, with output running at near record levels . . . Has anyone, anywhere in the world, ever done what we have done these last two years? I doubt it'.

Managing the steelworks' transition to closure

In October 1997 the steel unions and BHP announced the finalisation of a transition agreement which had been negotiated locally by the TST with some input from the ACTU. It determined, as the principles which would guide the run-down to the Works' closure, that 'people would be treated fairly and feel well prepared for the future, the business would run safely and efficiently and that the restructured business would be "world class" in the eyes of all stakeholders' (BHP, 1998). Also, under the agreement an

additional 40 per cent ‘completion bonus’ calculated ‘on top’ of the other redundancy monies was conceded by BHP designed as a ‘golden hand-cuff’ strategy to retain those employees regarded as critical up to the final day.

The NSW Industrial Relations Commission ratified the agreement, giving it a legal life as the *BHP Steel (Transition Arrangements) Award* (1998). In his judgement, Hill J. (1998: 2) was laudatory of the parties for having ‘hammered out, but in a spirit of co-operation’, a unique agreement which reflected ‘great credit’ on their contribution. He concluded;

The agreement was described . . . by all advocates as a landmark agreement . . . It is certainly well ahead of anything that I have encountered in my long experience in this industry and others . . . It is perhaps a model to which other employers, including Governments . . . should aspire. But I have serious doubts about the capacities of most other employers, other than one of capacity and standing equivalent to BHP to achieve a result similar to it . . . The companies and their representatives and officers of the ACTU and the unions involved can, I think, rest comfortable in the knowledge that they have secured for employees, both award and staff, the best transition and severance benefits possible.

The Human Resource Management Group (HRMG) at the steelworks had the principal role in designing and implementing the transition arrangements to closure. Prior to the announcement and based on the earlier EAF decision, the HRMG had developed a exit model, named *Pathways*, which aimed to assist employees to decide on their future direction (path). This strategy was important because, on average, a steelworks’ employee was 44 years of age and had had 21 years service. Interviewees stated that workers had a very considerable dependency on the BHP. This heightened expectations about the need for effective management interventions during the closedown period (Gageler, 1999).

In addition to the conventional strategies such as counselling, financial planning and outplacement services, *Pathways* took account of the alternative directions employees may wish to follow e.g. small business 'start-up', further education and training, other employment in the BHP group, or externally, or transferring to the nearby rod and bar mills. Tailored support services were designed for each of these routes. A line manager saw the scheme as 'a symbol of hope and light on a gloomy landscape.' Three hundred and fifty employees (and partners) attended retirement seminars. Over 1,200 employees undertook retraining through a variety of training providers. For example, a 'special' teacher training program was negotiated with the University of Newcastle to facilitate the retraining of technicians to acquire secondary school teaching qualifications. Others retained for heavy vehicle driving, into computing and small business feasibility courses and management programs.

Pathways was highly individualised, perhaps reflecting a strategy to shift from more collectivist management union relationships. Each employee was invited to develop their own Personal Action Plan (PAP) which involved discussions with their supervisor and/or a HR staff member to help them to identify and decide on future career options and to plan desired services and retraining. Through this process employees were supported to undertake any education, training and work experience they chose provided they could demonstrate a serious interest and show how it realistically fitted into their future plans.

HR and line managers believed *Pathways* proved crucial as a means to shift the employee' mindset to take responsibility, especially for those who had not worked

anywhere else and who had expected to retire from BHP (Trinca, 1999 28/9). For instance Hockridge (1999: 7), the most senior manager at the Works, said that:

Pathways has taught us about the merits of taking an interest in our people in a very personal, individual way. *Pathways* focuses very much on one-on-one discussions. The process also encourages people to take responsibility for their own careers and future. It invites people to broadly develop and grow themselves. The result has been a more active and motivated workforce . . . Our company must get away from the paternalistic job for life syndrome that exists and we have found that *Pathways* (and our personal action planning processes) make it possible to discuss this in a constructive manner.

The company implemented highly developed communication channels as a mechanism to facilitate the transition. For example, after each TST meeting, a personally addressed newsletter would be distributed via their intranet to each employee. Over 1,200 hours of presentations were made to employee groups (and in some departments, their partners) by human resources staff across the site beginning two months before the announcement and continuing for many months after to discuss the future of the ‘front-end’ and its implications. Focus groups were held with groups of supervisors and delegates to provide opportunities for two-way communication on issues and initiatives.

Departments were required to develop a Workforce Resources Plan that identified methods of allowing employees to leave prior to closure if they were successful in obtaining another job. These were supported by departmental level Transition Steering Teams. The employees and management also agreed to implement much greater workplace flexibility especially to allow people to leave and to undertake retraining. This resulted in both more efficient work practices and better outcomes for individuals. By September 1997 of the 625 who had left since the closure announcement, 519 had taken a

severance package, 23 had transferred to another BHP facility. Progressive downsizing meant that these workers were not replaced (Gageler, 1999).

Also heightening efficiency were the changes agreed to by the unions under Part N of the Transition award. The unions had agreed, essentially, to abandon the remaining restrictive work practices, subject to the safety and other requirements, as a *quid pro quo* for the various redundancy and assistance concessions made by the company. The award cited as examples the limitations on staff work, inter-union demarcation barriers and the performance of non-essential work. Also, the unions saw their willingness to adopt greater workplace flexibility as providing opportunities for those workers who wished to leave before the plant closed. To do otherwise would have inhibited employees from taking employment either elsewhere in BHP or in the wider labour market; plainly a sub optimising outcome. Of course, the unions, anxious not to create an unwarranted precedent for its members at BHP's remaining steelworks in Port Kembla and Whyalla, quarantined the arrangements to apply only to Newcastle during the closedown period. So, for example, in the Tonnage Oxygen department flexible work practices were established which reduced shift manning levels from three to two. This scheme allowed operators to be seconded to other departments at the Works and to 'outside' organisations, leading to job offers. Similarly, Rail Traffic operators, normally unwavering adherents to strict demarcations allowed non-union staff to fill in as shunters while operators did training (Rodbar, 1998).

Internal staff largely resourced the HR interventions and *Pathways* program. Apart from the use of a number of contracted external specialists, who assisted with services such as counselling and financial planning, less staff worked in HR in the countdown period than in the year before the closure was announced. Internal BHP sources estimate the cost of *Pathways* at not more than 1.5 per cent of total wages cost for the period. Over 500 employees exited the company prior to the final day, which amounted to wage ‘savings’ valued at three times the cost of the *Pathways* interventions. It follows that, if a strong causal relationship could be demonstrated between the company’s interventions and workforce performance to the closure, then a cost/benefit analysis may well demonstrate *Pathways* was very cost effective. This may be especially important given the rise in practitioner discourse for HRM to better establish its legitimacy by its contribution to ‘bottom-line’ organisational performance (Nankervis *et al.*, 1999).

Conclusion

To some extent the albeit limited explanations of the closedown effect have tended to emphasise the importance of psychological factors for the changed workforce performance. This study found that, beyond the psychological factors, other institutional variables, principally the changing frontier of control, trade union compliance and the firm’s human resource management interventions represent the key explanations for the phenomenon. Building on the studies of plant closures in Sweden conducted by Wigblad and others, this case study does demonstrates that much of the changed performance of the Works in the closedown period can be attributed to the strategies which were implemented by the firm and endorsed by the steel unions. Most importantly, the

considerable productivity gains made at the Works despite the impending closure can be attributed to the agreement which BHP management was able to achieve with the unions to remove restrictive work practices; traded for improved retrenchment payments and other benefits. This facilitated a shift in the 'frontier of control' as managers allowed the workforce greater autonomy. In this environment, the changing character of work heightened worker creativity and control. Of course, these conditions were only secured after the initial trade union and community protests were resolved. The case study confirms that the resolution of collective resistance is conducive to emergence of the closedown effect.

Through the individualised Personal Action Planning process workers were encouraged to think strategically about their future after the closure and to access resources to achieve their plans. At a more macro-level the adoption of the Transition Steering Team ensured high level communication between the workforce and the management. These strategies are consistent with the considerable empirical evidence in the downsizing literature which shows that the negative impact of downsizing will be moderated with appropriate HRM approaches. These are efficacious because the interventions focus on fairness (both distributive and procedural) and securing employee 'voice' in the downsizing process.

Finally, that these interventions were cost effective strongly inform those with power over closure decisions to adopt an evidenced-based business case for the better management of the process.

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