"Your Job No Longer Exists!": From Expectations of Flexibility to Experiences of Alienation - A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

We have entered the age of the contingent or temporary worker, the consultant and the subcontractor. Workers are expected to be pliable and tractable; to “fit in”. The latest managerialist trend heralded to assist workers is, in reality, one that helps organisations at the expense of workers. Being made redundant is one area where workers are expected to be flexible and resilient. However, when these so-called “flexible” workers are told their job no longer exists, the accompanying sense of rejection and alienation can be excruciating. Stories of being made redundant were collected during an exploratory, qualitative study, using Heideggerian phenomenology as the methodological vehicle to capture the lived experiences of these individuals. Focused in-depth interviews were conducted with the ten respondents; nine men and one woman. The stories shared in this study suggest that being made redundant is a harrowing, alienating, painful and emotional experience. Respondents’ experiences revealed feelings of powerlessness, as well as shock, betrayal and shame. This is not an experience that people can bounce back from, unchanged. Respondents spoke of significant personal outcomes, including a resulting fear for the future. They also spoke of the adverse impact on their careers and an erosion of trust in organisations.

The Putative "Flexible" Worker

Flexible: 1. Able to be bent easily without breaking; pliable. 2. Adaptable or variable: flexible working hours. 3. Able to be persuaded easily; tractable. (Wilkes, 1979, p. 555)

We have entered the age of the contingent or temporary worker, the consultant and the subcontractor. This is the "just-in-time workforce" - 'fluid, flexible and disposable' (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996, p. 212). Organisations are reducing the size of their workforces, moving work to part-time or temporary staff, and transferring various tasks and functions to contractors (Johnson, 2004, p. 723). Workers are expected to be pliable and tractable; to "fit in" with the latest managerialist trend heralded to assist workers while, in reality, this trend helps organisations at the expense of workers.

The emphasis on flexible employees and temporary workforces has arisen among the continuing trend in the West towards worsening job security and conditions of service. The last twenty years have seen an escalation of organisational restructuring, downsizing and outsourcing. Responsibility for career development is being shifted back to employees (Illes, Forster &
Tinline, 1996), with the expectation that they will be able to deal with constant change and develop skills which are “transferable” from one position to another (Woodd, 2000, p. 99). A rosy picture has been presented of the “boundaryless career” (Arthur, 1994; Thomas & Dunkerley, 1999), particularly for middle and senior managers, where individuals undertake their own self-development and move on regularly to new opportunities and challenges in different organisations. However, these images of the employee being in control of their own career and working life ignore the fact that the provision of jobs, in whatever form, is still determined by organisations.

Being made redundant is one area where workers are expected to be flexible and resilient. Downsizing and other restructuring which results in redundancies are now often seen as normal practice for organisations (Orlando, 1999). However, when these so-called “flexible” workers are told their job no longer exists, the accompanying sense of rejection and alienation can be excruciating. The notion that they are in control of their working life is shattered. Furthermore, with continued employment commonly attributed to an individual’s efforts and achievements in the workplace (Ackah & Heaton, 2004), workers are left reeling from the blow. It is a mistake to assume that workers are axiomatically resilient and pliable, and that they can bounce back unchanged - from such an event (Vickers & Kouzmin, 2001). This paper considers individuals’ experiences of being made redundant – moving from expectations of flexibility to experiences of alienation, and questioning the notion that they can recover unscathed from the experience.

**Being Made Redundant: An Increasing Phenomenon**

Our focus in this paper is the personal experience of being made redundant in response to some form of organisational change. Whatever term is used to describe this change – downsizing, rightsizing, delayering, restructuring – redundancy involves the removal of positions (and, despite the rhetoric, people) from the organisation. Much of the literature focuses on the downsizing of organisations, as opposed to the experience of being made redundant.

Downsizing is defined here as the intentional or planned elimination of positions or jobs (Cascio, 1993, p. 96; Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1997, p. 11; Palmer, Kabanoff and Dunford, 1997, p. 623; Clarke, 1999). The distinction is made here between those who are laid off voluntarily and those who are not. The voluntary nature of redundancy that is accompanied with a financial incentive package is not generally associated with lay offs without choice (Clarke, 1999, p. 2) and is not included here in discussions about those being made redundant. Downsizing, in this context, also does not include the discharge of individuals for cause (Cascio, 1993, p. 96), although it is acknowledged that downsizing may remain a convenient managerial approach for dealing with "problem" workers.

There is a strong focus in the studies to date on employer concerns. For example, there are those that extol the costs and benefits of downsizing (eg. Cascio, 1993; Mathews & Duran, 1999; Pollock et al, 1999). Others consider
the effectiveness of different downsizing approaches (eg. Marlowe, Hoffman & Bordelon, 1992; Freeman, 1999), and how one might best manage the performance of those left behind (eg. Thornhill, Saunders & Stead, 1997; Layden & Harrington, 1998; Wright & Barling, 1998; Minnick & Ireland, 2005). However, there is far less consideration of the personal experience of those being made redundant and, especially, of the emotional impact and aftermath this experience may have.

Those studies that do take a more humanistic approach tend to be centred on three groups: the “survivors”, the “executioners”, and the “victims”. Of particular interest here, attention has been paid to the survivors of downsizing, that is, those who remain with the organisation. The psychological impact of downsizing has primarily been assessed from their perspective (Clarke, 1999, p. 3), considering their experience of what has been termed survivor syndrome (Horsted & Doherty, 1994; Gottlieb & Conkling, 1995; Tal, 1996; Bedeian & Armenakis, 1998). Workers are often left emotionally damaged from watching others lose their jobs and feeling that their own positions are tenuous for a time (Appelbaum, Close & Klasa, 1999).

There has, however, still been limited focus on those who do not survive the process - the countless numbers of former employees who have simply faded into obscurity (Applebaum et al, 1999, p. 458). Those who lose their jobs are generally labelled the “victim” (Kets de Vries & Balaza, 1997, p. 23). We choose not to use that term, focusing on what has happened, rather than any personal attributes of the individual concerned, especially when considering the possibly negative connotations the term “victim” might evoke. We are concerned with reporting the experience of being made redundant, of revealing and understanding the stories of these workers.

**A Heideggerian Phenomenological Study**

Individuals’ stories of being made redundant were collected during an exploratory study, where Heideggerian phenomenology was the chosen methodology. This interpretive phenomenological approach was selected for its emphasis on lived experience (Oiler, 1982, p. 178), and the meaning that experience holds for the individual (Drew, 1989, p. 431). The value of this methodological approach is that learning about the phenomenon of interest comes from the participant’s perspective – by capturing the experience as it has been lived and sharing it with others (Vickers, 2001, p. 33).

Sampling was purposive, aimed at illuminating the richness of the individual experience of those having lived the phenomenon (Baker, Wuest & Stern, 1992, p. 1358). The ten respondents to the study were middle- and senior-level executives - nine men and one woman. Of these, three had been made redundant once, five had experienced redundancy twice, and the remaining two spoke of being made redundant three times. Focused, in-depth interviews were conducted with each respondent, and these were transcribed verbatim. Interpretive content analysis was conducted, seeking subjectively experienced ‘themes’ or ‘structures of experience’ (van Manen 1990, p. 79) that emerged from a comparison of the stories, while recognising that each case had its own
unique characteristics (Swanson-Kaufman 1986, p. 65). This discussion considers the respondents’ stories of the alienating experience of being made redundant and the idea that they did not bounce back unaffected or unchanged from their experience. Respondents have all been given pseudonyms to maintain their privacy and confidentiality.

“Your Job No Longer Exists”: Experiences of Being Made Redundant

The Moment of Redundancy: Experiences of Alienation

The argument that redundancy is a common occurrence brings with it an implication that individuals should be able to deal with the situation, to “roll with the punches” and be flexible when these circumstances arise. However, this is not the case. For the respondents in this study, experiences of alienation were apparent. Alienated workers can be recognised through feelings of powerlessness and social isolation (Blauner, 1964). Feelings of powerlessness were depicted by respondents, as were feelings of shock, betrayal and shame.

Many of the respondents shared their shock at the news of their redundancy. The moment of being made redundant was completely unexpected and, for some, even came in the wake of very positive reactions regarding their performance at their workplace. Both Alice and Ben had received glowing feedback in the days leading up to their redundancies; she on her role in the organisation of a highly successful company conference, and he to the point that his colleagues believed he was about to receive a promotion. Jake had been in a new position for eleven days—a position which he had been involved in creating—when he was told the role no longer existed due to financial constraints. He shared his response:

Jake: I had no idea that was going to happen. I immediately went into shock. … I actually nearly broke down in tears, effectively, because I’d -, I was that motivated to the new job. … [sigh] So they gave me a letter with my entitlements and all that type of thing, and then moved me into the office for the outplacement. … I’d only had a catch-up the previous day and we’d set objectives and when I had to deliver them by. I was already working towards delivering some of those. So it was just a big façade. You know, you don’t go from moving someone into a job, and then the second week into the new job basically tell them it’s not there. (Jake, #1, pp. 13-14)

The shock and disbelief that respondents described can be likened to the early stages of the grief response (Kubler-Ross, 1969). They often spoke of a lack of comprehension of how this could be happening to them, and of feeling numbness and an inability to determine just what to do next. Even when there was some prior indication of approaching change in the organisation, the shock they experienced at the time of being made redundant was vivid and compelling. Nor was this shock lessened by having previously been through the redundancy process. When describing his third experience of
being made redundant, Ben stated: ‘And again I was shocked’ (Ben, #1, p. 27).

The move to the expectation of flexibility in work and careers brings with it the argument that employees must also take responsibility for their skill development and performance. One implication posited by this apportionment of responsibility is that workers should attribute their continued employment to their own efforts and achievements in the workplace (Ackah & Heaton, 2004, p. 143). This could provide one potential explanation of the shock and dismay felt by these respondents. These executives had believed they were taking responsibility for their careers and being flexible in their development within the organisation. Yet they are then told that they are no longer to be a part of the organisation they have endeavoured to fit in with. Their shock can manifest as an inability to comprehend new information about themselves and their circumstances. When they had previously received an especially encouraging response to their workplace efforts, just prior to their redundancy, respondents’ feelings of shock were intensified. This contrast effect might also enhance their feelings of betrayal by other members of the organisation, particularly those more senior to them. Alice shared her experience of sharing news of her redundancy to a close colleague:

Alice: I actually did the rounds and said goodbye to a few key people. And the thing that was really upsetting was that I went into senior people such as the chief executive officer; I went into his office, and he just came out and saw me talking to his secretary and said, ‘What is wrong?’ Because he saw my face. And I said, ‘I’ve just been retrenched.’ … So he basically said, ‘I’m really sorry.’ … And that was really disappointing that the CEO can be slapping you on the back one day, and then … you know, ‘See you later. There’s nothing I can do.’ (Alice, #1, p. 9)

A number of researchers into downsizing and other organisational restructuring have considered the notion of the psychological contract for affected employees (eg. Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1997; Morrison & Robinson, 1997). The psychological contract between employers and employees has been argued to involve employees providing effort and loyalty in exchange for pay and job security (Newell and Dopson, 1996; Dopson and Neumann, 1998). The perceived breaking of this contract has been proposed as one reason for employees to feel a sense of betrayal (Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1997, p. 18). However, as Alice’s story portrays, her sense of betrayal is also towards individuals within the organisation. While senior members of the organisation, in particular, may be seen as party to the psychological contract due to their senior roles, it is the personal nature of the relationships that is of significance for her. In the context of these relationships, betrayal can be seen in these people acting in a way which respondents felt violated the norms of their relationship (Finkel et al, 2002). Whether through a feeling of guilt or just being unsure of how to interact with the person being made redundant, other employees often stepped back, becoming distant and impersonal. This left respondents feeling isolated and betrayed, further heightening the alienation of the process.
Most respondents spoke with a mix of anger and sadness about the process in which they were asked to leave the workplace. In a majority of cases, respondents were “escorted” from the building with little time to speak to their staff. They saw this as an attack on their integrity and their professional identities, and a humiliating experience. Anthony, for example, spoke of the indignity involved, while Lewis described being both humiliated and demeaned. Ben’s example highlighted the sense of shame that was imposed by this process:

Ben: I was asked to clear my desk that afternoon and I said, ‘Well, it’s impossible to clear your desk just like that.’ Because I wasn’t actually in the building. So they agreed that I could come back the following day to finish it off. … I phoned in the morning and was told that, once I was coming, could I let security know when I came in. I got in there, and you felt like a thief. You know, you felt as if you’d done something fraudulent. (Ben, #1, p. 6)

Many organisations cite concerns with security and confidentiality as their motive for operationalising this swift and chaperoned departure from the workplace. However, we argue that this often has more to do with a wish to quickly remove these individuals from the presence of the remaining employees. The speed at which desks are cleared, phone numbers redirected, and organisational charts changed, all point to the idea of an “out of sight, out of mind” situation being created for survivors. Yet again, the experience for those being made redundant is considered of least importance, if acknowledged at all. In particular, the executives in this study frequently spoke of not having the opportunity to explain the situation to their staff before being “frogmarched” (Kamal, #1, p. 16) out of the building. Along with their sense of shame, their experience of alienation was intensified by having limited contact with others who they might still have trusted.

In all these stories, the indicators of shock, betrayal and shame, as well as the respondents’ sense of powerlessness is evident. Through often having no prior warning of their upcoming redundancy, to their humiliating treatment by various people in the organisation, there is a sense of alienation and isolation. They felt no longer to be in control of the situation or of their career. One question looms: “What do I do now?” Ben’s feelings of shock impacted him both physically and emotionally, as he shared:

Ben: I drove to work and … I used to bring a colleague in each day. I was that shocked that my passenger said, ‘Look, perhaps I should drive.’ And I think that’s the smartest thing he could possibly have done, because I just -, I was that shocked that I would not have been thinking properly driving. I got home and I remember standing on our porch way – and this is my clearest memory of this, of anything that happened really – of standing on my porch way thinking, ‘How in the hell am I going to tell my wife? What on earth am I going to say to her?’ And I just stood there for
I don’t know, it seemed a long time but probably wasn’t that long in actual time, but it seemed a long time. Just trying to think, ‘How the hell do I walk in and say, “I walked out this morning employed and doing well at the company. Well, I’m no longer employed.”’ (Ben, #1, p. 5)

Here, again, we see the experience of not being in control of the situation and of not knowing just what to do next. The power has been removed from these individuals’ hands. Ben’s experience portrays the abruptness of the process: From heading off for work that morning, he has now departed the organisation, permanently, and is on his own. The journey from expectations of flexibility to experiences of alienation is rapid and abrupt. In light of the range of strong emotions expressed by respondents, it should not be surprising that they may not bounce back unaltered from their experience.

*The Aftermath of Redundancy: Not Bouncing Back*

The pain and emotion these individuals experienced left an impression. The experience of being made redundant was not one that people can routinely bounce back from unchanged. Respondents spoke of significant personal outcomes and a resulting fear for the future. They also spoke of the adverse impacts on their careers, and an erosion of trust in organisations.

Many respondents also spoke of the impact on their self-esteem. While noting that they still had confidence in their abilities, the experience left many questioning why this had happened to them. Jake described his feelings in the first weeks after his redundancy:

*Jake:* It was sort of very hard to pick myself up again after that. … It’s hard because, you know, I didn’t really want to tell my parents or my wife’s family or anything like that, because I thought I would have been seen as less a person or not really the person – the executive working in the company – that I had been put up on a pedestal, so to speak. Yes, that was quite hard. And managing the expectations of people with, ‘What are you going to do?’ … You know, the whole process you go through of, ‘Do I want to stay in the industry? Do I want to do something else? What else could I do?’ It’s all these questions that you don’t have the answers for, so it does start knocking you around. (Jake, #1, p. 26)

We can see here Jake feeling the loss of connection with a job and a workplace. Particularly for the men in this study, respondents’ stories revealed how being made redundant represented a blow to how they saw themselves as a person, their self esteem and their self-efficacy. This can be seen to correspond with the idea that the social creation and validation of male identity is related to such qualities as success and self-reliance in the workplace (Rees & Garnsey, 2003; McCarthy & Holliday, 2004). Being made redundant, therefore, can strike at the core of an individual’s sense of identity. Some respondents felt they had “failed” in their responsibilities to themselves and their families. Although financial considerations were also often a
concern, a swift return to working was an imperative in order to regain their sense of identity and accomplishment.

However, even after a return to work, the negative effects on their confidence remained for many respondents. They did not bounce back into working with the same level of confidence and comfort they had previously. There was often a sense of uncertainty and a fear for the future of their new roles. Lewis described how this effected him:

**Lewis:** I became very conscious that I would have to do certain things to make sure I kept a job. ... I was working longer hours. I became very hard-nosed about doing things, a little bit clinical about things. ... I really wanted to ensure that I did enough to make sure that I was never considered.

**MV:** So, you would have been really working then?

**Lewis:** Oh, God, when I was with [his new company], especially when I was up here on my own, I was getting into the office before seven [in the morning] and I wasn't leaving until seven or eight o'clock at night. Yes. I'd turn the lights on in the morning and turn them off at night. (Lewis, #1, pp. 44-45)

Lewis talked about making sure he was “never considered” for redundancy within his organisation. He was working long hours and putting in high effort to try to position himself in such a way that his new employers would not consider him as a potential candidate for redundancy in the future. This striving to create a “safe” position within the organisation is of particular interest. For many of the respondents, as previously discussed, being made redundant was an experience that happened to them more than once. It also came despite positive responses to their work by the organisation. It could be argued that the long hours that Lewis was working were not likely to be making his job any more secure, while concurrently having potentially very damaging effects to his health and well-being.

Employers may mistake this actual response to uncertainty and fear as something quite different; as organisational commitment, demonstrated in their desire to exert extra effort towards achievement of the organisation’s goals (eg. Hunt & Morgan, 1994). However, in this case, we argue that this may have little to do with affective commitment, which is identification with the organisation and a sense of loyalty to it (Iverson & Buttigieg, 1999). Rather, the apparently diligent workplace behaviour is more likely to be associated with a sense of having few alternatives or options available (Iles, Forster & Tinline, 1996, p. 19). Certainly, Lewis’ story presents little sense of enjoyment in his role and pleasure in his achievements, and definitely does not depict a return to his state of mind before being made redundant.

This altered view of how respondents saw their jobs was also apparent when considered within their broader career development. Some respondents spoke of how, fortuitously, they were able to secure better workplace positions after various lengths of time. However, many others had to take a step backwards in order to re-enter the workforce. Importantly, even if they were
receiving a similar level of financial compensation, this was not a part of their planned career. Anthony explained:

**Anthony:** It *is* frustrating, I suppose, because I’m not as intellectually stimulated as I was. Because the role’s a bit more tactical and strategic, and it’s a lot more hands-on and there’s a lot of client contact at the implementation and tactical level, where I used to like to be more in strategic relationship management, driving strategy of the business, managing the P&L. I find sometimes I get really cranky, and I think that mainly derives from … I’m probably a little bit bored. … The greatest loss for me is probably being recognised in the industry for what I think I should be recognised for. As being somebody that has strategic leadership, and is ahead of the game in terms of putting processes and structures in place to meet the market. I know that sounds like something out of a textbook, but I’m fairly passionate about that sort of stuff, and I know how to fit it all together. (Anthony, #1, pp. 32-33)

Anthony shared his experience of having to *settle* for a position with reduced intellectual challenges, and reduced recognition for his skills and competence in the workplace. When considering individuals having to take a lesser position after redundancy, this is most often regarded within the context of a reduced rate of pay or at a lower level in the organisation. However, *underemployment* (Feldman, 1996) can also involve a reduced level of skill utilisation, as Anthony described. This facet of underemployment requires further consideration (Feldman, Leana & Bolino, 2002), especially considering the negative impacts on well-being that it can present. Studies have indicated that the psychological and emotional effects of underemployment can be just as harmful and profound as those of unemployment (Winefield, 2002).

When considering individuals’ resilience in the wake of being made redundant, Anthony’s experience shows that he has not emerged unaffected or unchanged. He reports being often bored and frustrated in his new position, and without receiving the challenges and recognition he previously enjoyed. Not only does this impact his self-identity and self-efficacy, but his enjoyment of his work. He has not bounced back to the same person he was before being made redundant, nor is his experience of his worklife the same.

Finally, the impacts on respondents can also been seen in an erosion of their trust in organisations and in their managers. Alongside their fear for the future, many respondents spoke about how they were less likely to accept issues at face value, or willingly embrace positive feedback. There was evidence of a cynicism pervading their worklives that had not been present prior to redundancy. Again, as Ben explained, this was not necessarily connected to their confidence in their abilities, but in how these abilities might be being seen by the organisation:

**Ben:** I am less trusting. To give you an example with the new CEO, he had been here close to six months and said, ‘Look...
guys, I have been here six months. I would like to sit down with you and give you my views about you, et cetera.’ And I thought, ‘Great’, because I would like to know those. Anyhow, he is not actually very good at implementing things that he says, and this dragged on. In the end, I demanded that I had mine and, in fact, I ended up as the only senior manager that actually had it; he never got around to the others. But that, I think, was because of my retrenchment situation. The fact that I had been retrenched, I wanted to know where I stood with the company. … I am not doubting my ability. But certainly, I have doubted the security of my working environment. Which is unfortunate, because I think it does take the icing off the cake. (Ben, #1, pp. 37-38)

Earlier in this paper, we spoke about the concept of psychological contracts, and how the breaking of these may contribute to an employee’s sense of betrayal. Certainly, being made redundant would constitute, in the employees view, a breach of that contract. When considering the issue of trust between employees and employers, psychological contracts are relevant. It has been argued that the move towards a flexible workforce has also involved a move from a relational contract, based on an ongoing relationship between the employee and organisation involving both monetary and non-monetary benefits, to a transactional contract, based solely on a monetary exchange as compensation for the employee’s skill and performance (Ackah & Heaton, 2004, p. 142). This could explain some of the responses seen here. For instance, where they show strong concern for how their performance is viewed and the importance they confirm of being “seen” to be making an appropriate contribution. However, the shifts in expectations as a result of redundancy can have important, long term, personal impacts for these individuals. As Ben’s statement concludes: ‘It does take the icing off the cake.’ There is evidence of reduced enthusiasm and enjoyment in the job. Much of the respondents’ time and energy is now spent worrying about the security of their current positions and how others perceive them in the organisation. The memory of being made redundant remains indelibly printed on their minds, and has a strong influence in much of their decision-making and behaviour.

**Conclusion: The Putative "Flexible" Worker and Redundancy**

The stories shared in this study suggest that being made redundant is a harrowing, alienating, painful and emotional experience. Respondents spoke of their feelings of shock and betrayal when being made redundant, particularly when they had been given positive feedback and support from others in the organisation in recent memory, prior to the redundancy. They also spoke of their sense of humiliation and embarrassment, and their feelings of powerlessness and lack of control during the actual process of being marched out the door. They reported the experience as one of alienation and isolation. In the aftermath of redundancy, people cannot be expected to bounce back, unchanged. While expectations continue that workers will be flexible, fit in, and bounce back – unchanged – from whatever the organisation throws at them, being made redundant is a blow to people’s self-esteem and identity. Their
confidence, in themselves, organisations and the world as being a reasonably safe place, is shaken. Their resulting fear for the future can lead to less enjoyment, less confidence and, possibly, less competence in their work. Respondents spoke of the erosion of their trust in organisations and other people, and the often-detrimental impacts that redundancy and the personal changes they had experienced had had on their careers. Expectations that workers are "flexible" are unreasonable. Being made redundant can leave permanent emotional scars, and affect employees' behaviour, both at work and home. At a time when redundancies still remain a primary management "tool" to reduce costs and increase shareholder wealth, the routine assumption that workers can recover unscathed from such an event needs to be challenged.

References


Interview Transcripts:

Alice, *Interview #1*, Wednesday, 12 November 2003.


