

# *Reconciling Perceptions of Career Advancement with Organizational Change: A Case from General Motors*

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Little attention has been given in the literature to the effects of corporate restructuring on the career mobility and career perceptions of organizational "survivors." Employees remaining with the firm typically exhibit career mobility concerns since they anticipate that fewer job opportunities will exist, particularly within the managerial tier. Past research has neither compared actual career moves with employee perceptions of those moves, nor adequately emphasized perceptions of career mobility. This report examines the effects of a mid 1980s downsizing on sales and service employees in one General Motors division. Our results suggest that employee perceptions were rooted in past career path patterns. Because of this reliance on past behavior and the accuracy of their perceptions of past career movement, the majority continued to believe that they would advance in their careers. We discovered the longer an employee was associated with any given position, the less likely he/she was to anticipate future career movement ( $p < 0.01$ ). Perceptions of career mobility change only when employees are personally affected by the restructuring; ideological change for the majority of organizational members not only follows change in organizational structure, but actually lags behind it.

**Key words:** organizational change, career advancement, career perceptions, General Motors; USA

For American corporations, strategies such as corporate "reorganization," "downsizing," or "resizing" have been particularly popular in coping with national and international competition. While reorganization usually refers to changes in unit structure and its associated reporting relationships, downsizing most often refers to changes in the size and composition of the work force through the enactment of policy initiatives in employee hiring, firing, reassignment, and retirement options. Downsizing often is associated with two other phenomena: "plateauing" or remaining in a given position or classification level for the duration of one's career, and "flattening," a reduction in the number of leadership or managerial levels. Using these vari-

ous means of restructuring, the firm anticipates significant cost savings, greater efficiency, and improved effectiveness in conducting its day-to-day operations, thus enabling it to compete better in the global economy (Tomasko 1993; Dertouzos *et al.* 1989).

While any combination of these corporate strategies may be used, much of the scholarly and popular business literature emphasizes the secondary effects of these strategies, including declining productivity and morale. Much less attention has been devoted to the primary effects of corporate restructuring strategies on the career mobility of organizational "survivors" (Isabella 1989). The work of these organizational survivors — including their roles, tasks, and career paths — will be altered in some way, redefined according to the new corporate goals and operating procedures. Employee attitudinal and behavioral data associated with the periods prior to, during, and following a corporate restructuring can furnish an understanding of the evolutionary processes of change within organizations and suggest opportunities to assist in the change process.

Thus, our interests lie in employee concerns related to organizational change in general, and career development issues in particular. Past career research has explored the relationship between career mobility and individual attributes, education, and generational differences in social status. It also has examined organizational structure and its associated career patterns, and the degree of fit or match between individual characteristics and organizational requirements on career attainment.

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However, little importance has been placed on individual perceptions of career mobility. Those researchers who have examined employee perceptions have focused on "psychological contracts" (Schein 1978), newcomer "sense-making" (Louis 1980), or reaction to transfer and turnover requests (Portwood and Price 1987; Hall 1976). White (1970) has dismissed the value of employee perceptions altogether as "impractical and possibly misleading," and Rosenbaum (1989) emphasizes the general inaccuracy of employee perceptions. These studies have not systematically explored the content of employee perceptions as a way of understanding the effects of restructuring on employees and their collective interpretation of the accompanying changes. Furthermore, although studies of career path mobility have been conducted (Gaertner 1980), to our knowledge, there are no studies linking actual career path data with employee career path perceptions.

Our initial theoretical framework grew from our knowledge base and leanings towards cultural materialism, cultural ecology, and practice theory. According to our approach at the outset of the study, the external environment had the potential to exert pressure on the cultural system and the cultural system would adapt accordingly. One of the central assumptions of cultural materialism, for example, is that "most of sociocultural reality is determined by and thus predictable from a knowledge of the material infrastructure" (Westen 1984:639). But our interests were focused less on the material conditions and technology in the organization which led to the changes (e.g., downsizing, career path restructuring), and more on the structural, behavioral, and ideological components of the organization's cultural system. The cultural ecology model as expressed by Steward (1955) and Bateson (1972) interested us because of its broad definition of the environment and the feedback model of change it espouses.

Because our research linked employee perceptions and interpretations (i.e., ideology) with actual career path data (i.e., actions), we felt that the practice theory perspective could provide us with a greater understanding of the links between career structure and employee belief patterns. The action or practice theorists direct their attention toward behavior or "enactment" (Morgan 1986; Weick 1979) which, in their view, leads to the creation of both structure and ideology (Barley 1990; Bourdieu 1972). Action is viewed as occurring at the individual level, while ideology typically is discussed in collective terms (Barley 1990; Crozier 1984; Finnegan 1989) or "handled methodologically as a single subject" (Ortner 1984:150). However, while Bourdieu (1972) describes the dialectic between "habitus" (i.e., an underlying system of principles shared by a collective) and individual practice, our inclination was to view action as occurring on the collective level and to examine ideology on both individual and collective levels. Bourdieu also mentions an ideological lag (i.e., a "hysteresis of habitus"), after environmental change, but neither explains the process associated with that lag, nor its effect on individuals.

We propose a dual focus in this article: an examination of employees' actual career moves over time, and their perceptions of those moves during a period of downsizing at a General Motors Corporation (GM) sales and service division (i.e., an operating unit concerned with the sales, service and marketing of vehicles). Our questions were targeted at the relationship between the division's changing structure and its implications for careers and career perceptions. Additionally, we also were in-

terested in employee evaluations of the division's changing mode of operations related to career development. By combining both actual and perceived career behavior, we hope to bring to bear a more holistic approach to the evolution of organizational culture under conditions of organizational change.

### *Data and Methods*

The data are based largely on semi-structured interviews with sales and service employees from one of GM's sales and marketing divisions. Fourteen of the 28 interviews were conducted face-to-face in the Detroit-area zone offices of these employees; the remaining fourteen were telephone interviews with employees located in six other divisional zones (i.e., administrative units for the purpose of conducting sales and service with U.S. dealerships). Both the face-to-face and telephone interviews averaged 75 minutes in length and were carried out between February and August, 1990. The sample of 28 was composed of a cross-section of sales and service employees holding jobs ranging from entry level to managerial positions (i.e., sixth to eighth level in GM's job classification system).<sup>1</sup> Sales and service employees are the division's link with car dealership personnel. These employees typically work alone, interfacing with the dealership on a face-to-face basis. They assist in the procurement of vehicles, car financing and advertising, incentive programs, warranty concerns, and technical product issues.

We supplemented the data from the semi-structured interviews with other data sources. We conducted several interviews with divisional management to gain an overview of the history of sales and service in the division and perceptions of career development issues facing the division. We participated in several project reviews and updates with divisional management in which we received feedback on our study. We had access to field and archival data from a study in the late 1980s (Briody *et al.* 1995) that was conducted with other divisional employees.

### *Background to Corporate Change*

In recent years, GM has faced increasing competition in both the national and international arenas. GM held 47% of the U.S. market share in 1978. GM's market share<sup>2</sup> declined to 43% in 1983 and to 34% by the first half of 1991 (Hu 1991: Tables 19, 22). Corporate restructuring was the initial response to this declining market share.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the GM sales and service division that we studied, along with other GM divisions, experienced a dramatic reduction in personnel. Prior to 1985, this division's headcount exceeded 17,000 employees whereas in 1985, its headcount dropped to 974. Although some of this dramatic reduction in headcount can be accounted for by downsizing, most of it was due to the reorganization since many of the jobs traditionally associated with the division were retained elsewhere within the company.

Following the 1984-1985 reorganization and downsizing, GM continued to shrink its operations (Table 1). GM lost a larger proportion of its employees (13%) between 1986 and 1987 than between any other years. This 13% decrease for GM's U.S. work force parallels the division's 11% decrease. The percent change data from 1986-1987 indicates a sharp downsizing within a broader, longer lived, more extensive corporate reduction plan.

Table 1 GM Domestic and Divisional Employment by Year: 1985 – 1990

Year	Domestic	Sales and Service Division
1985	564,685	974
1986	518,988	935
1987	451,571	832
1988	430,687	834
1989	414,211	819
1990	402,964	780

Source: Personal communication with GM manager and GM researcher; corporate data refer to year-end and include both salaried and hourly employees, and active employees along with those on short term leave and temporary lay-off.

Based on both this demographic and policy information, we divided our data into two periods for the purpose of analysis: a Pre-downsizing Period (1968-1986) and a Post-downsizing Period (1987-1990). Within each period, we discuss both the actual career moves and employees' perceptions of those moves. We also compare the Pre- and Post-downsizing data to identify and explain differences in career mobility. We anticipated that fewer overall positions in the division would translate into fewer opportunities for broadened work experience and upward career mobility.<sup>6</sup>

Although it would be theoretically possible to eliminate fewer leadership positions relative to all other positions in the division, thus maintaining options for managerial career mobility, our conversations with divisional management suggested that such a strategy was unlikely. Over the course of several meetings with divisional leaders, we learned of their understanding and interpretation of some of the organizational changes which had occurred. Most agreed that opportunities throughout the division were evaporating. One manager stated, "Plateauing is a new phenomenon at [the division]. The organization is slimming down." Another indicated, "There are 230 DMs (district sales manager) and DSMs (district service manager) at the sixth level, and in a year, ten will have upward possibilities. It's the 220 that are left that we're concerned with." That these managers chose to emphasize the reduction in career options related to the downsizing, rather than focus on the advantages of long-term job holding (whether from an individual or organizational perspective), suggests the importance of career movement and, in particular, the positive attribution of upward mobility within this division.

Indeed, these managers expressed frustration about the apparent misalignment between the ongoing structural changes related to the downsizing and the seemingly strong employee belief in career mobility. One manager stated, "The whole aura of GM has identified success as promotion." Manager comments ranged from, "What job assignments will get them to the top is the main concern of the people" to "We want them to understand the value of going horizontally, not vertically, in the organization. There is something to be gotten out of life, even if I am not a zone manager. I can be satisfied with coming to work." We believed that the separation of the career movement and perceptual data into Pre- and Post-downsizing Periods would enable us to trace both structural and ideological changes in this changing organization.

### The Pre-Downsizing Period

We begin this data section by focusing on self-reported job assignment changes by each member of the sample. Our intention was to collect this type of work history information so that we would have some baseline with which to compare perceptions of job assignment changes made by sales and service personnel as a group. In this section, we examine the actual structure of the job assignments of our sample between 1968 and 1987, the direction of these job changes, and the pace of these changes. We compare this actual data with data on the structure, direction, and pace of movement for what our respondents consider to be the "typical" pattern of job assignment changes. Next, we describe employee rules for movement within the organization. Finally, we introduce the concept of career advancement, based on these career mobility rules, as a concept guiding career-based decision making within the division.

#### ACTUAL CAREER PATH MOVEMENT

*Career Path Structure.* In this analysis, we utilized job assignment data from 23 employees.<sup>7</sup> These individuals had been with the division on average eleven years, with a range of four to 22 years. They occupied jobs ranging in classification level from the sixth to eighth levels, beginning with the sixth level district sales manager (DM) and district service manager (DSM) positions to the eighth level assistant zone manager positions. Although the 23 employees were grouped formally into only three classification levels, we discovered a more detailed, employee-based classification system which emerged from our interviews.

Our respondents identified eighteen different job assignments within the three formal classification levels associated with GM's organizational structure. Each of these job assignments enabled an individual to acquire particular skills or to solidify and expand previously acquired knowledge and experience within the sales and service area. Consequently, employees evaluated each job assignment in terms of its responsibilities and its status relative to all other job assignments. For example, one employee stated, "...the larger the zone, the more exposure and more chance for promotion." Another commented, "Larger metropolitan areas are better for your career. They're more challenging districts and dealers." When employees described the differences across job assignments, the terms they used included "variety," "experience and learning," and "challenge."

We rank ordered these assignments into eight steps as depicted in Figure 1. The steps are numbered from one (the lowest) to eight (the highest) according to our sample's evaluation of each assignment's responsibilities and status.<sup>8</sup> Thus, this rank ordering reflects employees' views of the relative status on the divisional job assignments; we used this ranking as the basis of our career mobility analysis.

*Direction and Pace of the Moves.* Of the 23 employees in the sample, 20 had a career move in the Pre-downsizing Period; no employee moved more than once in any given year.<sup>9</sup> These 20 employees made a total of 57 moves whether they were perceived to be upward, lateral, or downward. Of these moves, 40 (70%) were considered by employees to be "upward" moves within the organizational structure. Employee evaluations of upward movement always were based on perceived gains in status and responsibility and did not necessarily entail a change in classification level. For example, DMs and DSMs can and do

Job Assignment Steps	Job Assignments
1	Purchaser Service Group
2	Telemarketing Assistance Group
3	District Manager – rural District Service Manager – rural
4	District Manager – mid-size District Service Manager – mid-size
5	District Manager – metro District Service Manager – metro
6	Service Engineering Planning – Design Staff Liaison Assistant Car Distributor
7	Zone Organization Manager Car Distributor Manager Zone Service Operations Dealer Organization Manager
8	Assistant Zone Manager of Sales Assistant Zone Manager of Service Branch Manager

FIGURE 1. EMPLOYEE RANKINGS OF JOB ASSIGNMENTS

move from rural, low volume districts to mid-size, larger volume districts, to metro districts with a very high volume of vehicles. These moves were steps to districts of increasing volume, and thus higher status and responsibility, and were considered upward moves. Indeed, all 20 employees indicated that they had experienced at least one upward move during their careers with the division prior to 1987. And, during the Pre-downsizing Period, there were ten employees whose upward moves were three times more numerous than their other moves, or whose only moves were upward moves.

Employees also participated in two other types of movement. They experienced nine lateral moves which accounted for 16% of all moves; the lateral move was defined as a change to a new position perceived to be the same rank as their former position. Lateral moves were concentrated within steps seven and eight in Figure 1. Finally, employees reported experiencing downward moves in which they indicated that their new positions were associated with a loss in status or responsibility. The eight downward moves in analysis accounted for 14% of all moves. Some of these moves involved transfers to training programs, others to the newly established telemarketing unit. Five of the eight downward moves were to steps three or four (Figure 1). During their Pre-downsizing careers, eleven of the 20 employees reported at least one lateral or downward move.

While the terms upward, lateral, and downward express the movement within the reported career paths, employees did not always move. We defined this lack of movement as “staying,” with the number of “stays” equivalent to the number of years during which an employee did not move. On average, employees moved at a pace of 2.6 years, computed by dividing the total number of years in which employees either moved or stayed

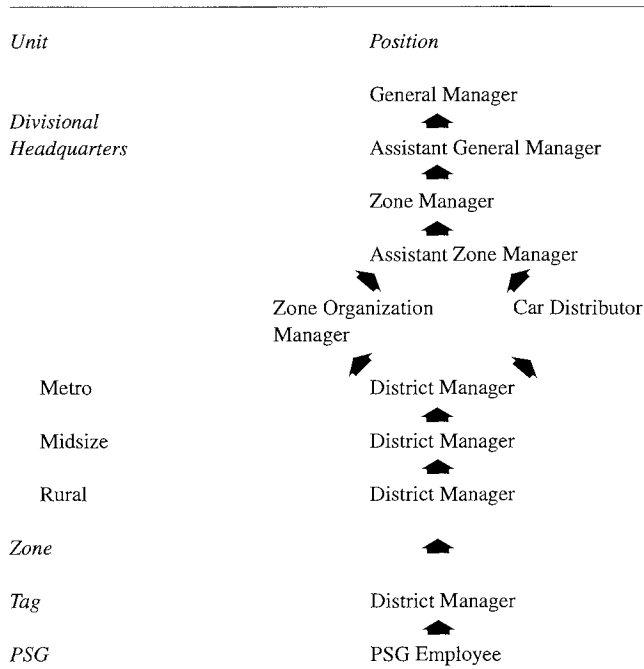


FIGURE 2. THE “TYPICAL” CAREER PATH

(N=148) by the number of moves (i.e., years in which a move took place) (N=57).

#### PERCEIVED “TYPICAL” CAREER PATH MOVEMENT

*Structure of the “Typical” Career Path.* In addition to employees’ actual career path movement through the division, we also collected data on their perceptions of this movement. Employees talked about their job position changes by relating them to their view of the “typical” career path (i.e., their view of the most characteristic type of career movement within sales and service). Indeed, 21 employees described a career path that was commonly referred to as the “typical” career path (Figure 2). None of the 23 actual career paths mentioned above follow this typical depiction exactly. Nevertheless, many actual career paths show a strong resemblance to it. In short, the typical career path seems to be more of a generally perceived assessment of what sometimes happens and what most would like to happen, rather than some collectively averaged actual career path. One employee discusses<sup>10</sup> this typical career path in the following way:

The typical path goes from district manager in a small district, to a larger district, to a third district, to car distributor, to zone organizational manager or car distributor or merchandising specialist, to zone organization manager, to assistant zone manager, to zone manager.

*Direction and Pace of the “Typical” Career Path.* The overwhelming majority of moves in this conceptually identified typical career path are moves to steps of increasing status and responsibility. For example, a change in step from a district manager in a small district to a district manager in a larger district would be considered a typical career path move, as would a change from car distributor to assistant zone manager. Although most of the moves associated with the typical path are perceived to be upward moves, some employees also indicated that lateral

moves were common or expected as well; these individuals included one or two lateral moves in their version of the typical career path. No one suggested that downward moves were associated with the typical path.

When asked how long employees remained in a typical job position, most respondents indicated that pace of movement was approximately two to three years. Any period of time longer than three years was considered to be an aberration from the typical pace of movement.

#### EMPLOYEE RULES FOR CAREER PATH MOVEMENT

Closely related to employee perceptions of career path movement are their collectively shared “rules” or guidelines for understanding movement within the organization. These rules<sup>11</sup> cover a number of aspects of career mobility including the direction of the movement, the pace of the movement, and factors believed to influence movement within the system. Employees also make judgments about career mobility issues generally, indicating the relative merits of individual career outcomes. These rules can be utilized or accessed as employees plan for their future career moves. Together with their associated evaluations,<sup>12</sup> these rules provide insight into the ways in which employees conceptualize their career paths. They also serve as a data source which can be compared with both actual and typical career path movement.

*Rules Pertaining to Direction and Pace.* The first type of rule focuses on the *direction* of an individual’s career: move up. Employees clearly stressed their preference for moving up over alternative forms of career movement. Fourteen members of the sample freely indicated that moving up is best. For example, one employee stated,

The mindset of most of the employees is still that up is the way to go, and everyone wants to go up. It’s even compounded by the way you’re evaluated. You don’t get a significant pay increase unless you move up...it makes upward movement the way to go, a part of the culture.

Another commented, “I don’t think I’ll ever be happy without moving up.”

Despite this emphasis on upward mobility, there were ten respondents who acknowledged that lateral movement is often beneficial to one’s career. Such moves have the potential for broadening an individual’s work experience base, thus contribute to one’s career development. One individual commented, “Some of the experiences I had, and the different jobs I had, enabled me to move on to the next step easier.” A wide variety of lateral moves were cited — none of which was associated with any negative connotations from the employees’ perspective. For a DM, for example, lateral moves tended to involve a job assignment in service; a DSM might be assigned to a sales position. One employee remarked, “You should have crossover; it’s good because you get more experience.”

However, according to the rules, not all moves are perceived as “good” moves. Eleven employees described moves which have negative connotations, that is, are considered to be detrimental to one’s career path. A downward move in which there is a reduction in status and responsibility is believed to have a negative effect on a career. One employee’s comment offers a reason for this perception of downward career progression. He indicated that an employee’s abilities are called into question when they are involved in a downward move: “When someone gets

transferred to a lower volume area, people know why. It’s because they’re not good at what they do.” Indeed, such low volume districts are reputed to “get the worst workers — people who have plateaued, or stepped back in their careers.”

Plateauing also is evaluated negatively. One employee’s statement reflects the prevalence of this attitude: “In GM, the perception of plateauing is a person stuck at a single level ... If they have a lateral move at [that] level, they still consider themselves and others plateaued.” Another reveals how critical employees are about their own abilities: “Those that don’t wind up in the typical seventh level progression ask, ‘Why?’ ‘How,’ and ‘Why not me?’ There are a lot of frustrated people.”

A second type of employee rule about career movement focuses on *pace*: move about every two years. Career progression is closely linked with pace of movement. One employee asserted, “You can figure in six years you’ll be in a metro district because you’re only in a district for two to two and a half years maximum.” Pace is “a measure of success. If a person is somewhere for two years, he or she better move soon because if you don’t, something is wrong.”

*Rules About What Affects Career Mobility.* Employees also have several rules about the factors believed to influence career movement: politics, location, education, and job performance. The first of these rules focuses on the *political dimensions* of the organization: exposure, popularity, and political contacts are important for upward career movement. Fifteen (53%) of the 28 respondents mentioned this factor. One employee stated, “If the supervisor knows you and you’re good at brown-nosing, you get advancements.” Another, also focused on promotion choices, said, “It’s my philosophy that it’s [a promotion] extremely political, extremely bureaucratic...exposure is important.”

The second of these rules is related to the first and emphasizes the *geographic location* for job assignments: moving to large volume, metro zones enhances career mobility. Fourteen employees (50%) commented on this factor. For example, one employee stated,

There is a perception that Chicago is a strong market, and it’s seen as the zone they filter the A players through; L.A. is becoming that way. People from these places bring more to management in the way of knowledge and experience — Detroit, too.

A third rule is related to *educational background*: the higher the educational degree, the higher the classification level one can reach. Ten employees (36%) mentioned this factor. One individual asserted, “Education is a major factor. I don’t have a college degree and management told me that this could be a hindrance in my upward mobility.”

Seventeen employees also mentioned one additional factor related to career mobility: *job performance*. However, there was disagreement within the sample on the relative importance of job performance. Only four of the 17 respondents who mentioned job performance asserted that hard work and good performance contributed to career advancement. The remaining 13 indicated that there was not necessarily any relationship between performance and mobility. For example, one stated, “There are certain managers who get a good team and don’t want to promote them because they want to keep themselves looking good.” Another commented, “It’s easier to get a poor worker promoted than fired.” From these and other similar statements, we identify the following rules: 1) good performance is insufficient for

upward movement and may result in plateauing, 2) poor performance may result in upward movement.

#### CAREER ADVANCEMENT AS A GUIDING PRINCIPLE

Taken as a whole, there is a high degree of consistency associated with employees' career histories during the Pre-downsizing Period, the perceived typical career pattern, and employee rules for career mobility. Perception and practice for both direction and pace of career movement are closely aligned. Employee rules — “move up” and “keep moving up” — and their historical validation through actual employee experience led us to the formulation of a career advancement principle. A *career advancement principle* guides employee career-related decisions within the division.

*Definition and Characteristics.* We define career advancement as moving forward, progressing, or rising in rank and value within the career path structure of the organization. Career advancement assumes a system of ranking on the basis of selected characteristics. Our sample was associated with a hierarchically-structured organization, both in terms of its formal system of job classification (i.e., GM-wide employee classification levels) and its informal system of employee rankings of job assignments into steps (i.e., as reported in Figure 1). The general direction of actual career movement is up and is reflected in employee understandings of the “typical” career path. Certain careers and occupations do not conform to the notion of advancement within a hierarchy, emphasizing instead a “steady state” (Driver 1980) in which careers are viewed as a lifelong commitment to a job or field or a movement towards centrality or inclusion within the “inner circle or core” of an organization or occupation (Schein 1971). However, our sample clearly indicate a preference for vertical movement within the organization.

In addition to the structural and behavioral foundations of this advancement principle, we note a correlation with career mobility perceptions. We found the frequent use of phrases such as “advance my promotability,” “upward mobility ladder,” “move on to the next step,” and “direct your own promotion,” in describing the desired upward career movement. We also noted corollaries of advancement within their statements. First, there was a strong interest in successive career moves to “bigger,” “larger,” and “higher volume” jobs. Second, employee statements revealed that broadened work experience within sales and service positioned employees for future moves. In essence, they viewed lateral moves as necessary in the acquisition of work experience. Finally, their career rules not only specify the appropriate directionality of career mobility, but its pace as well. Thus, there is a strong relationship between actual behavior and perceived typical behavior, as well as the rules for career mobility in the Pre-downsizing Period.

#### *The Post-Downsizing Period*

Changes in career path movement data are an important indicator of a corporate restructuring. They enable the identification of structural changes resulting from both downsizings and reorganizations, and those dimensions of the career mobility system most directly affected. By categorizing data into more than one time period, it is possible to capture a more dynamic view of the change process generally. As in the Pre-downsizing Period, we now present both the actual and perceptual data on career development between 1987 and 1990. We also examine differences in actual and perceptual data across the two periods.

Table 2 Effect of Downsizing on Type of Employee Movement

Period	Type of Employee Movement			Total
	Up	Lateral	Down	
Post-downsizing	17	3	4	24
Pre-downsizing	40	9	8	57
Total	57	12	12	81

#### ACTUAL CAREER PATH MOVEMENT

*Direction of the Moves.* The 23 employees in our sample engaged in a total of 24 moves between 1987 and 1990. Of these moves, 17 (71%) were upward, 3 (12%) were lateral, and 4 (17%) were downward. These proportions do not differ significantly from the Pre-downsizing Period in which 70% of the moves were upward, 16% were lateral moves, and 14% were downward moves (Table 2).

*Comparison of the Pre- and Post-downsizing Structure and Pace.* The similarity in the proportion of upward, downward, and lateral moves across the Pre- and Post-downsizing Periods seemed puzzling at first since we expected to see a reduction in the proportion of upward moves and an increase in lateral moves. It was only when we began analyzing the structure of the career system that we were able to explain our unexpected findings. We examined both the career moves and stays of the 23 employees over the course of the four year period between 1987 and 1990. It was possible for an employee to have moved as many as four times or as few as no times; an employee never moved more than once in any given year. During the Post-downsizing Period, our 23 employees had 24 moves and 68 stays. The pace of movement had increased to 3.8 years, computed by dividing the total number of years in which employees either moved or stayed (N=92) by the number of moves (N=24). In a Chi Square test, the relationship between moves and stays by period was significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) (Table 3).

We also were interested in the locus of the moves and stays within the career structure. For this analysis we divided the sample into two groups on the basis of the eight steps in the employee rankings of job assignments (as identified in Figure 2) and compared them across the downsizing periods (Table 4). The first group consisted of those in the five lower steps worked directly with specific dealerships, while the second group consisted of those in steps six through eight who were either technical specialists or managers. There was no difference in the proportion of upward moves across the two periods for the lower ranking group; the proportion of upward moves to total moves and stays was 22% (11/50) in the Post-downsizing Period and 24% (22/90) during the Pre-downsizing Period. By contrast, we found a marked difference across the two periods for the higher ranking group; the proportion of upward moves to total moves and stays was 14% (6/42) in the Post-downsizing Period and 31% (18/58) in the Pre-downsizing Period. Thus, while the career structure continued to hold similar opportunities for movement for the lower ranking group across the two periods, these opportunities seemed to be disappearing for the higher ranking group by the Post-downsizing Period.

Taken as a whole, the Post-downsizing findings illustrate the way in which the career structure within the sales and service

Table 3 Effect of Downsizing on Probability of Employee Movement

Period	Moves	Stays	Total
Post-downsizing	24	68	92
Pre-downsizing	57	91	148
Total	81	159	240

division has been altered. For those employees who continued to experience career mobility, upward moves predominated — a finding which does not differ from the Pre-downsizing pattern. However, the division’s career structure seems to have more upward movement potential for lower ranking sales and service employees than for those holding technical specialist or managerial positions — a marked contrast with the Pre-downsizing Period. This evidence lends support to perceptions of a “flattened” career structure. A second change to the career structure concerns the pace of career movement. Employees are remaining in their job assignments longer, suggesting a much slower pace of change and thus, a reduction in the dynamic quality of organizational movement. The combination of the slower pace of change and more limited career opportunities within the managerial ranks also is reflected in employee statements about plateauing.

PERCEIVED CAREER PATH MOVEMENT

Employee interpretation of events involves both an intellectual understanding or recognition of the downsizing’s existence, followed by a sometimes extended period of making sense out of the organizational changes and discerning the impact of those changes on their own careers. As with the sharing of work rules and norms, the interpretation of the downsizing involves the interaction of co-workers who bring their knowledge, intuitions, and experience base to bear on the discussions. When such employee reactions to or perceptions of a restructuring are combined with actual career movement data, they provide us with clues about the relative significance of organizational events and actions and help us to understand the complex reactions to the downsizing process.

*Recognition of the Restructuring.* Statements by zone employees reflected knowledge of various changes associated with the divisional downsizing including flattening and plateauing. Eighteen respondents (64%) freely commented on the limited career opportunities once these divisional changes were set in motion. For example, one employee stated, “Unfortunately, they’re eliminating positions so it’s harder to get to the top positions...over the last few years the career track has shrunk.” Another remarked, “...because the number of jobs are decreasing, it’s no longer possible to move as fast as before.” Thus, employees clearly express their knowledge of the downsizing phenomenon and often comment on its effects on other organizational members.

*Interpretation of the Restructuring.* At some point after the downsizing has been in motion, employees direct significantly more attention to the personal effects of the downsizing, although they may not experience the actual effects immediately. Consequently, there may be time-based differences among organizational members in reckoning with the changes. Both during and

Table 4 Effect of Downsizing on Probability of Upward Movement for Job Assignment Steps

Period	Job Assignment Steps	Moves Upward	Percent of Total Moves and Stays
Post-downsizing	1-5	11	22%
	6-8	6	14%
Pre-downsizing	1-5	22	24%
	6-8	18	31%
Total		57	24%

following a corporate restructuring, organizational members attempt to understand the changes within their own career context.

We were able to categorize employee reaction to the downsizing into three types: the “optimists,” the “uncertains,” and the “pessimists.” The optimists indicated that their careers would not suffer any negative effects of the changes. They anticipated that their career paths would continue uninterrupted. One employee stated, “In five years, I’d like to be at the seventh level. I really think there are a lot of opportunities out there, even though people have told me that there’s only a limited number.” A second individual remarked,

In five years, I hope to be in upper management...and in the next ten years, I expect to have a very high level corporate management position...If I invest 20-25 years in the organization, then I will have paid my dues to get to the upper level.

The uncertain expressed some doubt about future career opportunities for themselves. They were not sure what turns their career path might take. For example, one employee stated, “Where’s next? I used to think I knew...” Another indicated,

Right now, I’m personally trying to expand my promotability by telling [the division] where I want to go, what I want to do... No one sits down and tells anyone else where they can go. It’s all hush-hush.

The pessimists expressed yet a third viewpoint: that their own careers had been or would be affected by the various organizational changes. For example, one zone employee commenting about both the reorganization and downsizing stated, “Career opportunities are getting narrower and narrower. They’ve gone from 26 to 15 zones, reduced [downsized] significantly. Therefore, my opportunities are reduced.” Another stated, “I’ll probably always be a district service manager.”

EXPLAINING THE DIFFERENCES IN EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS

We proposed some potential explanations to account for the varying interpretations of the downsizing by individual employees. We examined employee classification level, gender, and attitudes related to various questions posed during the interview; none was significant. However, it occurred to us that tenure in current position might explain differences in expectation of career movement. In large organizations, there may be variation in the effects of headcount reduction and reorganization on job functions, work flow, job assignments, and supervisory roles,

among others. Consequently, the immediacy of these changes may not necessarily be experienced by all organizational members simultaneously. If employees recently participated in a change in a job position or assignment, they might assume that their career path, at least in the short run, had not been negatively affected by the organizational restructuring. On the other hand, if employees had not changed positions recently, they might attribute their lack of career movement to the restructuring and assume that they had reached a plateau in their careers. We hypothesized that the shorter an employee's tenure in his/her current position, the more likely that the employee would continue to expect career movement.

We examined the relationship between tenure in current position and expectations of career movement. Of the 28 employees, the 16 in the optimist group expected future career movement and had been in their current positions 14 months on average with a standard deviation of 11 months. There were six employees in the uncertain group who were unsure about their future career movement and who had been in their positions 28 months with a standard deviation of 7 months. Finally, there were an additional six employees in the pessimist group who did not expect future career movement; they had been in their current positions 85 months with a standard deviation of 59 months. In Fisher's exact test (i.e., a Chi Square test for small samples), these results yielded a statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Our findings suggest that position tenure and attitudes about one's future career progression are related: the shorter the position tenure, the more likely an employee expects continued career movement. Our hypothesis, that changing attitudes about career mobility only occur after a downsizing affects employees directly, is supported. Those with less tenure in their current jobs expect the rapid career movement to continue, while those who have been in their current positions far longer come to acknowledge that their own career mobility patterns have changed. We further hypothesize that these three types of employee reactions to the downsizing represent three stages in the slowing of career mobility in an organizational environment of significantly reduced opportunities. Although this stage hypothesis can not be tested with this data set, we suspect that those who fail to advance over the course of several years will fall from the optimist group into the ranks of the uncertain group and finally join the group of pessimists.

#### A NEW CAREER MOBILITY MODEL?

Given the Post-downsizing career structure which afforded at least some advancement opportunities, and the perceptions of the majority of the sample that the career advancement principle was still operating, it seems fair to assume that this principle continued to be relevant for some organizational members. While its applicability to specific careers may have been more limited in the Post-downsizing Period, it continued to be identified as a viable cultural concept around which some employees organized their career mobility plans and interpreted their own career success. Furthermore, few structured options for lateral career movement existed within the division — other than those viewed as stepping stones to the next upward move. Since no formal career planning effort had been developed to broaden employee knowledge and skills beyond sales and service, it was not surprising that divisional employees did not perceive opportunities beyond the sales and service functional area. On the other

hand, there was a growing body of evidence that as the division experienced the structural effects of the downsizing, the ideological component of the division had begun changing, taking two forms: employee perceptions and divisional policy changes.

*Changing Employee Perceptions.* Seventeen employees (61%) commented that the division had, or was currently undergoing, a "cultural change" — although this change was far from complete. Almost all of these individuals indicated that the division's managerial group had become more people-oriented. For example, one individual stated, "A serious culture change has taken place and they get an 'A' for effort...they work with the employees." In addition, five employees freely stated that promotion decisions were better than in the past. For example, one individual remarked, "The HRM [Human Resource Management] Committee...makes decisions based on politics and qualifications. They're trying harder to go on qualifications now." Another commented, "In the past 12 months, I've seen more correlation between performance and transfers and promotions, but they still have to be aggressive when looking at performance."

*Changing Divisional Policies.* Divisional policy changes related to career development seemed to be aligned with these views. In particular, there appeared to be an increasing focus on "objectivity" in career mobility decisions; the perception seemed to be that competence had largely replaced politics as the basis for career movement. For example, the Personal Development Plan process now emphasizes career planning, counseling, and performance review. In selecting employees for a new position, a process of "targeted interviewing" entails the comparison of job characteristics with candidate skills. Finally, career decisions now involve zone managers who work in the same zone office as the employee; they are more familiar with the employee's job tasks and performance than are higher ranking managers located at the divisional headquarters.

A perception of career equity appears to be on the rise in the division. This equity has been identified both with individual competence and performance, and a stronger voice in day-to-day work assignments and the organization of work. As of the Post-downsizing Period, employees expressed a desire for greater input into local level decision making and career moves on the basis of excellence in job performance. The new policies, while not thoroughly assessed in terms of their effectiveness, are consistent with this new view. Furthermore, this emerging career image is not inconsistent with the traditional career advancement principle. Indeed, it seems quite likely that it may encompass the career advancement principle, if only by specifying the "objective" conditions under which employees can expect to advance within the career system.

### Discussion

#### THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

We believe our study adds to the literature in several important ways. First, from a cultural materialist and cultural ecology standpoint, our analysis contributes to a broader understanding of the processes of change — particularly with respect to organizations. Our data strongly indicate ideological change among employees is a result of structural change, the mechanics of which are initiated by top management. In this sequence, the act of downsizing precedes employee acknowledgment of the downsizing effects. We note further that ideological change actually lags behind structural change, that is, employee accep-



tance of the downsizing is a function of their direct personal association with it. This evidence indicates that the change process is both complex and internally diverse in that organizational members perceive structural changes differently at different points in their own career development.

We also hypothesize that employees appear to pass through stages (i.e., expressed in the aforementioned employee groups of optimists, uncertain, and pessimists) in response to structural change in the organization. First, they acknowledge that the downsizing is occurring but deny that their careers will be affected by it. Second, employees become less sure of the effects of the downsizing on their careers, as their beliefs about future career movement are called into question. Ultimately, they admit that their careers have been affected when their career mobility is slowed significantly, or perhaps halted. Thus, after an organizational downsizing, employees continue to anticipate career movement, especially career advancement, and only eventually resign themselves to much lower expectations including far more limited career mobility, if any at all. This stage hypothesis suggests a direction for future research.

Second, we drew on the work of the practice theorists since their primary emphasis is on behavior or action — a focus that cultural materialism does not emphasize. Practice theory also addresses the reproduction of, and change in, structure and ideology, and as such provided us with the means to explore the process of organizational change. Our data illustrated a strong alignment between action, structure, and ideology: actual career movements between job assignments (past and present) are closely linked with the perceived typical structure of the career and the rules for understanding career movement. Yet, one of the problems in understanding the link between structure and ideology involves a behavioral component: action that constitutes a career structure is fundamentally an individual phenomenon, while the perceived “typical” structure is a collective phenomenon. Thus, the question became: how does individual action become collective ideology?

In our initial examination of the data, we discovered what appeared to be a lag between overall structural change (indicated by a collective change in action) and a change in collective ideology surrounding the career path. To understand this apparent lag, we had to analyze both action and ideology at the individual level. Our approach was different from that of Bourdieu (1972), Finnegan (1989), and others who, for the most part, do not focus on individual perceptions. According to our data, employees must “practice” or experience the effects of a particular event or situation (e.g., staying as an outcome of downsizing) before their perception of change becomes full individual acceptance and incorporation of change — and thus part of the collective ideology. In actuality, there seems to be very little or no lag at the individual level, once change is “experienced.” However, at the collective level, there appears to be an ideological lag because neither the organizational changes nor the effects of those changes are experienced immediately by all employees.

Third, throughout our research, we found evidence that the evolution of organizational culture involves structural, ideological and behavioral changes. Career mobility studies have treated employees in the aggregate, or focused on only one group or type of employee, making a discussion of the individual mechanisms of organizational culture change impossible. The importance of individual perceptions and interpretations in the change

process has ramifications for the empirical literature on careers. This literature has tended to give little regard to the perceptions and interpretations of individual employees, or has even labeled them as “misperceptions” (Rosenbaum 1989) — largely because employees have been asked to comment on expected or future behavior, not past or current behavior. Our data shows that employees accurately perceived what actually happened and what actually is happening. Employee perceptions of the “typical” career path are accurate in approximating history, and employee perceptions of the current situation have been found to be accurate as well. Furthermore, even those who still expect to move up in the more limited career path structure view the situation fairly accurately, for they themselves have moved recently. At least some employees have not slowed down, or “stayed” longer in any given position, since the downsizing began.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICAN CULTURE

Definitions of success have changed in focus throughout American history — sometimes reflecting material wealth and interests, sometimes reflecting the importance of personal experience and self expression. At the core of these definitions seems to be the commitment to the pursuit of one’s self interest, influenced by the day-to-day conditions operating as constraints on the individual. Within the divisional environment, the degree to which an employee advances within the divisional and/or corporate hierarchy is an important indicator of career success. Sales and service employees learn that career aspirations should parallel the organizational structure, with continued movement to positions of greater responsibility and status. Career advancement, as a dimension of culture guiding employee behavior, continues to be upheld as an operating principle even during conditions of downsizing. Even when this principle is “corrected by daily experience” (Tocqueville {1840} 1990:138) (e.g., individuals experience what appears to be long-term staying in any given position), we find that it has not been altered dramatically in substance; some employees such as those from the optimist group continue to exemplify “success” and as such represent evidence that the career advancement principle continues to be relevant in the division’s work life. The definition of success based on career advancement seems to be slow in adjusting to changing circumstances (Bellah *et al.* 1985).

In an organizational environment in which the changing structure is no longer consistent with either the divisional ideology surrounding career mobility or American ideology concerning the significance of career success, noticeable effects on both individuals and the division are evident. Statements from employees associated with both the uncertain and pessimist groups attest to the level of personal conflict that the downsizing has wrought. Employees seem to be trying to reconcile the old rules for career movement with the new divisional circumstances, expressing their deep personal concerns about the division’s apparent negative assessment of their future potential. They are attempting to come to terms with their increasingly less optimistic perceptions of career mobility, and more broadly, social mobility.

We suggest further that these changing circumstances also take their toll at the organizational level. With the downsizing following on the heels of the 1984-85 reorganization within GM generally, the division’s (and the corporation’s) public image was seriously affected. No longer viewed as a healthy, expanding organization either by those internal to it or by external ob-

servers, the division engaged in some additional restructuring measures. And indeed, the personal and organizational pain associated with the downsizing seemed to be partially offset by the division's newly established progressive personnel policies. Nevertheless, regaining the confidence of both employees and other company stakeholders is often a difficult, protracted process, one which requires sustained excellence in job performance and work output, among other factors.

### *Summary and Conclusion*

Our reports examines both the perceived and actual career path moves of zone employees prior to and following a significant downsizing in their division. We were interested in their reactions to the downsizing and, in particular, the ways in which they responded to the effects of downsizing on their career paths. We found that employees accurately perceived past and current career path mobility within the division. We also found that played a more important role in the career structure by the Post-downsizing Period, and that employees recognized, at least at an intellectual level, the downsizing had led to longer job position tenure and increasingly limited upward career movement. Nevertheless, employee belief in the necessity of continuous and rapid career advancement as a critical indicator of work-related success persisted, exemplifying the importance of promotion and accompanying material rewards as an indicator of success in GM and American culture. Only when individual careers were affected directly and negatively by the downsizing did employees come to recognize that their chances of achieving upward career mobility had been reduced.

Employee participation in and interpretations of a downsizing provided us with information into the structure and process of organizational change. First, by comparing career movement data both before and after the downsizing, we were able to observe the direct adjustments required by the organizational structure as the changes (e.g., headcount, job assignment) proceeded. Second, we were able to identify and categorize reactions to the organizational changes as those changes affected specific individuals. Employees were not monolithic in their interpretations of events or situations, but rather exhibited variation based on their own individual experiences within the downsizing organization. Future research projects could be designed to investigate how perceptions surrounding organizational change are linked with issues such as morale, job performance, productivity, and turnover.

### *Recommendations*

Corporate downsizing presents significant challenges for organizations they attempt to redefine objectives and restructure the work of a work force in flux. A downsizing organization is one in crisis. To meet the crisis, attention has to be directed towards improving work output through innovative products, higher quality, and efficient and effective service, and improving profitability. However, such efforts must be consistent with, and leverage, the changing size and composition of the employee pool. In addition, organizations undergoing downsizing are typically characterized by knowledge and experience gaps, increased work load and lower morale for "survivors," and uncertainty about the future stability of the organization. Developing a career development system aligned with the organizational changes

is one important way of addressing many of these work and personnel issues. We focus our attention on the employee experience base and the creation of alternate career paths as important dimensions of a career development system. We believe that attention to these issues will lead to enhanced productivity and improved morale.

#### ASSESSING THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE BASE

We first suggest that the organization should develop ways of assessing employee skills and knowledge within the downsizing environment, and then compare that assessment with the revised objectives of the organization for the purpose of job placement; such an assessment also would be useful in planning for the firm's future business. The collective work experience of organizational members has been captured in phrases such as "occupational knowledge" (McCarl 1992), "local knowledge" (Baba 1990) or "community memory" (Orr 1990) and has been viewed as critical to day-to-day functioning and problem solving in the work context. When valuable information can no longer be accessed, organizational functioning is disrupted. A downsizing heightens the necessity of knowing the "surviving" availability of talents since losses in employee expertise result from employee departures. Knowing the experience base means knowing what valuable information left the organization and what remains, signaling potential areas on which to focus organizational attention. A systematic assessment of employee skills and knowledge would enable the organization to align work demands with the varied talents of organizational members who remain with the firm. Such an assessment also is advantageous employees in identifying the suitability of their current, as well as future, positions.

During the course of our research, the sales and service division already had begun grappling with aspects of their career development system. Divisional management was sending signals that competency, expertise, and ability to do the job — the employee experience base — would be valued more highly in career advancement decisions than factors such as the informal network and personal connections with higher-ranking organizational members. To complement this change in direction, other divisional actions would have been useful. For example, it would have been worthwhile to assess the degree of fit between divisional employees and the job positions they held. Knowing what experience base is needed for the organization to remain viable enables more informed decisions about the allocation of resources — whether to train existing personnel through such means as job rotation or lateral transfers, or to hire additional new personnel.

#### SOLICITING AND VALUING THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE BASE

Making use of the employee experience base also involves soliciting and valuing employee views and input. Successful implementation of change is dependent on the participation of constituencies throughout the entire organization. Divisional management might have considered engaging employees in discussions and other information exchanges concerning the changing conditions in the division — a recommendation consistent with the findings of the classic Hawthorne studies concerning the human dimensions of organizational functioning (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939). Such forms of communication would have addressed some of the uncertainty and ambiguity that all organizational members experienced, which likely

would have had some positive effect on morale, and lessened the propensity for divisional management to attempt to mandate attitudinal change. Furthermore, employees would have been able to provide insight into the locus, extent, and relative success of the organizational changes and/or offer suggestions for redesigning the work and facilitating the changes. In those ways, employees would have had opportunities to participate actively in the change process rather than simply react to the changing conditions around them.

#### CREATING AND VALUING ALTERNATIVE CAREER PATHS

Another aspect of the career development system is the planning and management of employee careers. There is no question that career planning is complicated and multifaceted, involving both individual and organizational efforts in assessing, selecting, and placing personnel in job positions. One factor in career development that we observed was the importance employees accorded rank within the organization. Career "success" was synonymous with promotions or career advancement: the higher the individual's rank within the organization, the more successful that individual was said to be. While many employees exhibited aspirations to climb the corporate ladder, and indeed engaged in that pursuit, career success was elusive. Because one's current position always was ranked lower than any number of other positions, one's own position was never quite high enough, and employees always aspired to reach the next highest position in the hierarchy. The sales and service division defined career success narrowly both during the Pre-downsizing and Post-downsizing Periods. Only selected organizational members — those tracked into senior managerial decision-making positions — were identified as successful. We found that creating alternate career paths based either on broadened career experiences or technical expertise did not occur frequently in either period. For example, lateral moves or rotational assignments *beyond* sales and service typically were not viable career options. Instead of viewing such options as ways to complement and build upon an employee's experience base, they were seen as mechanisms which might derail a sales and service career path. On the other hand, remaining a long-term job holder in a narrowly defined job function (e.g., district service manager) also was not valued as highly as gaining skills in related job positions (e.g., district sales manager) which might increase the chances of promotion to a generalist position (e.g., assistant zone manager). Thus, we note an overemphasis on career advancement by the division, and an undervaluing of the potential of lateral career moves or moves towards the "inner circle or core" of the function.

Creating and valuing a variety of generalist and specialist career paths not only allows the organization to take advantage of varied individual strengths, including an employee's increased knowledge of the organization, but also places the organization in a position to redefine career success. It is not optimal for either the organization or the employee to apply so much symbolic significance to the managerial track, career advancement, option. Such an emphasis diverts attention away from the contributions or potential contributions of both generalists with work experience in a variety of functional areas, and long-term job holders who have specialized in a particular field. In part because non-managerial track employees are not viewed (or yet viewed) as "successful," they are far less valued from the standpoint of material rewards (e.g., salary, perquisites) and organi-

zational recognition. This period immediately following dramatic organizational change, such as a downsizing, offers opportunities for reconstituting the career system and its associated rewards for employee experience and performance.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Our sample was not selected randomly. Because all of our research with the division was based on requests by divisional management, the division played an important role in establishing initial contacts for our interviews at regional sales and service offices around the country. We relied primarily on an employee of the division's Personnel Staff who served as our key resource person, as he did in an earlier study (Briody *et al.* 1995). There were no significant differences across divisional locations in analyzing our data.

<sup>2</sup> This market share refers to October to September "model year" sales for all GM passenger cars and light duty trucks.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the best known reorganization of the 1980s began in 1984 and required that car divisions (e.g., Chevrolet, Buick) specialize in sales, service, and marketing, rather than continue their direct involvement in engineering and manufacturing functions. Keller (1989), among others, has evaluated the effectiveness of this reorganization.

<sup>4</sup> Only the data from 23 of the 28 employees in the sample was appropriate for this analysis. The data from the remaining five employees either was insufficient or difficult to classify because of position changes outside of sales and service or because no moves had been made (i.e., new hires).

<sup>5</sup> Employee rankings generally corresponded with corporate classification levels. For example, most DMs and DSMs were classified as sixth level employees in the formal corporate classification system, reporting to those in higher managerial positions. The assistant zone managers and branch managers held the highest rank in both the corporate classification scheme and employees' own rankings of those job positions.

<sup>6</sup> In the few cases in which employees held two positions in any given year, the longer of the two positions was identified with that particular year.

<sup>7</sup> Employees' use of the present tense in the pre-downing period reflects the slowly changing organizational culture.

<sup>8</sup> The data on employee rules for career path movement were freely elicited from our sample and later categorized. Therefore, the number of respondents commenting on any given rule varied.

<sup>9</sup> That our respondents agreed on what the rules were during the Pre-downsizing Period were, that the career path and perceptual data were consistent with one another, and that employees' views were confirmed by divisional management, reinforce our confidence in the accuracy of our respondents' recall regarding their career path behavior and perceptions. Freeman *et al.* (1987:322) argue that, "What is recalled, then, is what is typical — whether it happened or not" and that "...memory bias is in the direction of some kind of norm."

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