

# Building THE KEPT-ON WORKFORCE OF 2009: Options OR Bummmed

By Beverly Kaye

“Waiting for the other shoe to drop” is often the refrain after the dust of downsizing settles. Those employees who have managed to retain their jobs often find that they feel worse about their work lives than those who were forced out. Just as laid-off workers are struggling to reclaim their professional lives, kept-on workers are suffering from the stress of losing organizational life as they once knew it. Others seem to be adjusting quicker. They find themselves, though not thrilled with the new work environment, surviving and even thriving.

The bad news is that downsizing, restructuring, and their cousins have caused companies to lose many loyal, talented, and hardworking employees. Many did not leave their organizations easily or without great distress.

However, data has shown that many laid-off workers are reporting that their terminations caused great difficulty in the short term, but eventually created opportunities that resulted in changes for the better. Those layoff victims, now resuscitated, are “Pushed Out, But Better Off” (POBBOs). This article is not about them.



The range of employee needs after a layoff is broad and complex. Organizations can move toward several specific requirements that help create a motivated, connected, and energetic kept-on workforce.

#### Viral attitudes

The people who remain are often called “survivors,” and we’re told that they’re the debilitated members of the workforce. Not true for all of them. One group of survivors offers an

encouraging example for themselves and their downsized organizations.

They are people who managed to overcome the fear and anger over the downsizing of their peers. They are able to move past the backlash of mistrust and loss. They have learned valuable lessons about the reality of contemporary employee-employer relationships. They have productively retooled their ideas and plans about their current jobs and professional futures. They are valuable contributors who actively seek a match between the contributions they make and the futures they carve for themselves. They are “Staying On, But Building Options” (SOBBOs).

The third group—due to survivor guilt, low morale, or the fatigue that comes from doing more with less—does not function as well as the SOBBOs. Whatever the label, an identifiable syndrome exists among those who remain. They experience the sadness, anger, mistrust, and psychological uncoupling from their organizations that most survivors experience. But, they get stuck in it. Because they can’t move beyond those emotions,

they feel trapped in jobs that no longer engage their energy, interest, or talent.

They're angry at the company or frightened of the future and feel disconnected and no longer part of a team. This group doesn't see a way out. They know that the ax could fall again. They mourn the loss of what used to be, and they feel mistreated and unrecognized. These suffering survivors are "Hanging On, But Bummed Out" (HOBBOs).

To capitalize fully on the talent remaining, managers and leaders need to address and motivate both groups continually. HOBBOs aren't (yet) poor performers, but they could be headed that way. SOBBOs need to keep their SOBBO positive mindset. Managers need tips and techniques to influence the negative impact of HOBBOs. This must be diffused before their virus infects others who are on the fence.

### **Then and now: 50 years of change**

To understand the current circumstances of downsized organizations and their employees, it's useful to revisit the history of changes that have occurred in relationships between organizations and their employees. Not only have the products and processes of the American workforce changed vastly throughout the 21st century, but so have the ways that employees view their work and the ways that organizations view their employees.

The most evident change can be seen in the growing number of jobs, employers, and careers that people typically average in a lifetime. Workers are likely to average eight to 12 jobs in their lifetime, instead of the four or five of the previous era. Organizations now often see employees as payroll costs rather than long-term resources, with cost efficiency taking precedence over developing and building a stable workforce. Employees often see their organizations as places to go to work rather than to develop long-term careers.

Workers have learned much by experiencing the stress and pain of their parents. The baby boomer generation was advised to "get a job with a big company and stay there forever. They'll take care of you, and you'll get a great pension."

So much for the 1950s perspective. The end of the 1960s brought a recession, and in the 1970s, we saw layoffs—massive and painful. An important social contract got ditched in favor of survival, global competitiveness, and technology. Nothing was forever. A career became fluid, and workers became career-independent and not tied to one company for life, but instead loyal to their own goals, dreams, and talent, and flexible about where they sold their wares. They learned well.

Now, in the wake of economic, organizational, and career shakeups, the employment pattern is more about a person than a position or path. With ongoing uncertainty concerning the future of various jobs and industries, people find they need to control their own career destinies with personal responses to a wide variety of possible organizational events. When an event equals a reduction in the workforce, employees will respond differently.

### **Crucial differences: coping or moping?**

Organizational health depends on the continued commitment of layoff survivors, but they—both HOBBOs and SOBBOs—sense that they can't count on the continued commitment of their companies. In the short term, however, they share common concerns and complaints about the new circumstances within their organizations, including

- increased workload
- stalled salary increases
- reduced benefits, status, and titles
- fewer opportunities for mobility
- limited staff resources

- greater organizational uncertainty
- less career-oriented training and development.

Though both SOBBOs and HOBBOs recognize those unfavorable consequences of downsized organizations, they deal with them quite differently. SOBBOs are action-oriented in their current positions and actively seeking future possibilities. HOBBOs vacillate between denial regarding the long-term realities of an unsettled situation and a sense of powerlessness about influencing the future. They see themselves as victims, unable to change their circumstances.

Not unlike people who survive the death of a spouse, corporate survivors work through stages of mourning that can range from coming apart with grief to coming to terms and recovering. A crucial difference between HOBBOs and SOBBOs concerns how they journey through those stages. Though they experience some common reactions to downsizing, they begin to diverge in their responses once the reality of new organizational life sets in.

The key differences between HOBBOs and SOBBOs are related to their long-term coping responses.

#### **SOBBOs are**

- politically savvy, proactive, and self-managing
- realistic about the future
- development-minded about their skills and smartly networked and connected
- investment-oriented toward the future
- committed to growth and learning.

#### **HOBBOs are**

- reactive and victimized
- in denial about the future
- waiting for something to happen
- passive and disconnected
- anxious about the future
- committed only to employment and a paycheck.



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

Just as a smart investor looks beyond short-term losses, the smart SOBBO looks beyond existing skills to gain more competencies and become more masterful at skills that can be applied more widely. SOBBOs build portfolios that reflect a broad, long-term perspective with an eye toward long-term career gains. Flexibility and adaptability are the keys.

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

#### From HOBBO to SOBBO

HOBBOs aren’t necessarily in an inevitable state, nor are they necessarily in a permanent state of suspended animation. With support, commitment, and some specific dialogue between employers and employees, HOBBOs can begin a process of renewal aimed at re-establishing their productivity and personal satisfaction.

Layoff survivors may appear to be a group of employees who should consider themselves fortunate. In reality, they face a work world turned upside down. The contract of loyalty and trust between employees and their employer has been breached, and there’s little likelihood that a new contract can ever be established. That’s the breeding ground of HOBBOs—hanging on because they feel lucky to still have a job, but bummed out because they see a

future of limited career vigor or personal empowerment. HOBBOs respond naturally and intuitively. They lose faith, become self-protective, disengage from creative and enthusiastic involvement in their work, and slowly become entrenched. The essential task and challenge for organizations that have to cut back is to resuscitate remaining employees to full and creative contribution.

#### Career development for survivors

A first step is a reality check. Typically, HOBBOs are uncertain about the current reality of the workplace. The antidotes to HOBBO-ism are both educational and structural. The educational component must come first. HOBBOs need to learn the basics of career self-management so that they can reclaim their work lives. If we are to preserve their talent and maximize their contributions, both HOBBOs and SOBBOs need to take charge of their careers. This means that they need to

- 1 | articulate their skills, values, competencies, and interests, and consider their transferability
- 2 | be aware of their reputation
- 3 | understand the changing nature of the workplace and the implications for their profession, industry, and organization
- 4 | grow in place, and at the same time, seek development opportunities
- 5 | seek learning opportunities and create an ever-changing development plan.

When applied to HOBBOs, these five steps take on more meaning. HOBBOs feel like exhausted warriors and aren’t future-focused. Nevertheless, they can have a major turnaround by dealing head-on with each of the areas listed. They need to learn career development basics and answer some difficult questions.

Here are a few tough questions that HOBBOs need to ask themselves:

- Which of my skills and competencies are no longer vital to my current position?
- Which new skills, abilities, and competencies will I need to ensure a successful future? Do I

have the motivation to acquire them? What's stopping me?

- Have I studied my last performance appraisal to get a snapshot of how others view my contributions? What can I do to change any misconceptions?
- Do I know who my internal and external customers really are? Do they see me as a contributor? Am I willing to ask for feedback from them about my capacity to deliver? Am I willing to change or improve if their requests make sense to me?
- Who are my political allies? What can I learn from them about the ways in which my organization will change in the future?
- What professional groups or associations are important to my growth and development? Will my organization support my membership? If not, am I willing to invest in that myself?
- If I'm given the option to redeploy to another part of the organization, what are my choices? How can I begin to build alliances to make those choices viable?
- If I could create my own learning plan to prepare me to have more control over my own future, would I have the energy to commit to that agenda? What would it take? Am I willing to invest my own time and money?

HOBBOs have to commit to planning in a way that says, "My plan is an ongoing work-in-progress that requires continual input and adaptability." In other words, HOBBOs can move from being "bummed out" to "building options" if they understand that their current organizational experience isn't the end of their development but the beginning of a new opportunity for development. At each step, they need new, candid information and new, realistic thinking.

### An investment strategy, not a pep talk

Typically, organizations get caught up in the process and policies for executing layoffs and in the programs and activities for those laid-off workers. They commit extensive time and energy to determining the who and how

of cutbacks and to fashioning reorganized systems and units. Generally, little or no attention is paid to layoff survivors. After the cutbacks, candid conversations are essential to build on the investment in these survivors. Here are some practical reminders:

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

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

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

**Never stop investing.** It would be a mistake to stop investing in employee development. Maximize the contributions of all employees by providing them with skills, knowledge, and resources for now and the future.

**Strategize for mutual gain.** Survivors need their own investment strategies. They need to be candid with themselves about staying with their organizations. They should understand and think creatively about the wide range of skills and abilities they use now and have used in the past.

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

**Talk and listen.** What employees really want are two-way conversations with their managers to talk about their abilities, choices, and ideas. They want someone to listen. They may not expect someone to have all the answers, but they really want to have the

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dialogue. It is essential that managers hold a stay interview with every contributing member of their team.

### The road back to normal

Kept-on workers should ask others (leaders, managers, and peers) for advice and support. They should seek information from others in similar positions and find out how they managed to survive. In forward-thinking organizations, employees shouldn't have to come to their managers first; their managers should be seeking them out. Employees and employers can begin the long road back toward mutual trust and contribution. But they can't do it without new strategies for addressing the needs of cutback survivors. **T+D**

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