

# **Character, Conformity, or the Bottom Line?**

## **How and Why Downsizing Affected Corporate Reputation**

E. Geoffrey Love

Matthew S. Kraatz

College of Business  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
Champaign, IL 61820  
Tel: (217) 333-2194

[glove@uiuc.edu](mailto:glove@uiuc.edu)

[kraatz@uiuc.edu](mailto:kraatz@uiuc.edu)

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to illuminate processes of reputational change and to identify the theoretical mechanisms underlying it. We draw upon extant literature to develop three distinct explanations for reputational change, which emphasize criteria of organizational “character,” symbolic conformity, and technical efficacy, respectively. We evaluate these explanations by examining the reputational consequences of corporate downsizing. Our results show that downsizing exerted a strong negative effect on reputation, consistent with the character mechanism. However, this negative effect was significantly moderated by other factors including stock market reactions and downsizing’s overall prevalence, indicating the need for a multi-theoretical approach to understanding reputational change.

Corporate reputation is an important asset (or liability) which is bestowed upon a firm by external audiences (Fombrun, 1996). Observers form opinions that coalesce and adhere to organizations, affecting their future outcomes for better or worse (Roberts & Dowling, 2002). Much prior research has noted that these reputational ascriptions are enduring and “sticky” (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004; Schultz, Mouritsen, & Gabrielsen, 2001). It is because of this stickiness that reputation (which can be defined as a subjective evaluation of a firm’s overall quality relative to its peers) is widely seen as a valuable resource (Fombrun, 1996; Roberts & Dowling, 2002). However, reputation, like other “stock” variables, is amassed and depleted through temporal “flow” sequences. While audiences do tend to reproduce a firm’s reputation over time, they also change their evaluations, sometimes quite significantly. This study focuses on these changes and firm actions that may precipitate them. In so doing, it seeks to identify the underlying *mechanisms* that are responsible for reputational change.

Because of reputation’s asset-like qualities, much theory has focused on its sociological or economic foundations, and empirical studies have tended to examine its relationship with other “stock-like” variables (Davies, Chun, Da Silva, & Roper, 2003; Dowling, 2001; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004; Fryxell & Wang, 1994; Rindova, Williamson, Petkova, & Sever, 2005). Relatively less work has considered important and at least partially distinct theoretical questions about reputational ebbs and flows, and the actions that may cause them (for exceptions see Flanagan & O’Shaughnessy, 2005; Staw & Epstein, 2000; Williams & Barrett, 2000). Important issues also remain open on the “audience side” of reputational change processes. While reputation is in an important sense *possessed* by an organization, the reality of reputational change reminds us that it must be *granted* by external

audiences on an ongoing basis. However, existing research provides incomplete and sometimes conflicting insights about what might lead people to change their opinions of a firm's overall quality. While we know that audiences grant reputation in response to various "signals" that firms send, we do not know which of the many (and sometimes conflicting) signals that a firm conveys are most likely to be received and to enhance or damage its existing reputation. We also do not clearly understand the basic evaluative logic that people use in interpreting these signals and adjusting reputations. For instance, do they reward firms whose actions favor their parochial interests and values, or do they tend to apply more universalistic criteria? We believe that these issues are practically, as well as theoretically, important ones. While constructing a good reputation is no doubt a critical strategic problem, firms also need to find ways to improve their existing reputations, and to avoid unintentionally damaging them. Research that examines "reputational flows," identifies corporate actions that precipitate those flows, and probes the underlying mechanisms responsible for reputational change can help provide such knowledge.

In response to this perceived need, this study identifies and examines three distinct explanations for reputational change. Each suggests that reputation granters will tend to respond to particular signals and will tend to employ a distinct evaluative logic as they encode a firm's actions into its reputation. We distill these explanations from three overarching perspectives that exist within the broader literature on reputation. One of these sees corporate reputation as a reflection of organizational "character" (Davies et al., 2003; Dowling, 2001; Fombrun, 1996). A second emphasizes the importance of symbolic conformity with cultural expectations (Rao, 1994; Staw & Epstein, 2000). The third suggests that reputation is largely reducible to "technical efficacy" concerns (e.g. financial performance) (Brown & Perry, 1994; Fryxell & Wang, 1994; Shapiro, 1982, 1983). While these three perspectives have been used primarily as

accounts of reputation's foundations (consistent with the central tendency in the literature), each also suggests a possible mechanism through which reputational change may occur.

We look for evidence of these three proposed mechanisms by examining the reputational consequences of corporate downsizing among Fortune 100 firms across the period from 1985 to 1994. We look in particular at how firms' adoption of this practice affected their standing in *Fortune* magazine's "Most Admired Company" rankings. This context is a particularly appropriate one to address the questions raised above, for at least three reasons. First, downsizing was a controversial practice that sent multiple and conflicting signals to reputation-granting audiences. It conveyed, for instance, an obvious concern with efficiency and shareholder value creation. But it also signaled opportunism. Firms that violated commitments to employees might not be trusted to keep their commitments to other constituencies in the future. Both of these signals are highly consequential within the alternative accounts of reputational change that we distill. Second, the audiences who ascribe *Fortune* reputations (stock analysts and peer firm executives) are known to share economic interests and cultural beliefs that distinguish them from other firm constituencies and may lead them to approve of downsizing firms. Their actual responses to the practice may thus provide valuable insight as to how (and how much) people's parochial interests and beliefs color their reputational judgments. Finally, we are able to examine downsizing in conjunction with other signals that also have strong and theoretically-founded effects on reputational change. In particular, our analysis includes powerful measures of contemporaneous change in firm performance and performance prospects (e.g. annual changes in profitability, changes in market capitalization, changes in analysts' earnings forecasts). This allows us to assess the degree to which downsizing's effects

on reputation are distinct from those of performance change, and to examine how downsizing interacted with performance factors in producing reputational change across the study period.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, we elaborate the three aforementioned explanations for reputational change. Second, we use these three accounts in developing two sets of hypotheses about downsizing's overall effect on reputation. The first set posits competing predictions about downsizing's main effect (positive, negative, null). These three hypotheses (H1a, H1b and H1c) are in one-to-one correspondence with the three theoretical explanations themselves. Our purpose in testing these hypotheses is to identify the "dominant mechanism" most responsible for explaining downsizing's reputational consequences. The second set of hypotheses identifies factors that may moderate downsizing's main effect, regardless of its direction or strength. Though reputation granters may be primarily attentive to a particular signal that downsizing sends, they may also respond to other "secondary" signals that accompany it and employ multiple evaluative logics in ascribing reputations. Having developed our theoretical arguments and hypotheses, we describe our sample, data, and methods and present our results. We conclude by discussing our findings' implications for reputation scholarship and related literatures.

## **THEORY**

Looking into the literature, we can identify at least three distinct perspectives on reputation. While these perspectives have been primarily developed as accounts of reputation's foundations (consistent with the core focus of the literature), each can also be used to generate predictions about reputational change and the mechanisms through which it occurs. More specifically, these perspectives suggest distinct insights about the types of actions that are likely to enhance (and damage) reputations, about the types of signals that reputation-granting

audiences attend to, and about the basic evaluative logic that audiences use in updating their reputational assessments. In this section, we articulate these alternative perspectives and draw out their implications for understanding reputational dynamics.

*Organizational Character.* One central theme in the reputation literature is the idea that audiences assign positive reputations to firms that appear to possess desirable character traits (Davies et al., 2003; Dowling, 2001; Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004; Markham, 1972). Two key premises appear to underlie this influential account of reputation. The first is that people tend to engage in anthropomorphization and to attribute human character traits to organizations (Davies et al., 2003; Dowling, 2001). That is, they view organizations as coherent and purposive social entities (i.e. as “actors” or “wholes”) rather than mere social aggregates or collectivities (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). The second premise is that constituencies are especially concerned with the organization’s suitability as an exchange partner, and thus tend to admire firms that appear to possess character traits such as trustworthiness and reliability (Fombrun, 1996). These traits are particularly valued because they provide a basis for predicting the firm’s future behavior (i.e. the likelihood that it will honor its obligations) (Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004). From this perspective, organizational actors that make clear commitments and uphold them over time are expected to garner admiration and reciprocal commitment. In contrast, firms that appear opportunistic or unreliable are expected to be less well reputed. The idea that constituencies strongly value trustworthiness and reliability also figures prominently in several other literatures. These include social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958), the old institutionalism (Selznick, 1957, 1969), stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984; Jones, 1995), organizational ecology (Hannan & Freeman, 1984), and game theory (Weigelt & Camerer, 1988). Micro-level research also

emphasizes the positive effects of displayed commitment and the negative reactions that can be provoked by opportunism. Scholars have argued that individuals react to such displays at an emotional and preconscious level (Frank, 1988; Haidt, 2007; Hauser, 2006; Nesse, 2001).

This perspective points to one specific mechanism through which reputations may change. Specifically, it suggests that audiences will tend to evaluate corporate actions as indicators of a firm's underlying character. In other words, they will view actions as occasions for attributing traits to the organization, and for revising their existing character attributions. Corporate actions that send signals regarding the firm's trustworthiness and credibility are likely to be particularly germane to these revisions. For example, when firms make critical decisions that are consistent with their espoused values and historical commitments, audiences should hold them in higher esteem. Conversely, corporate decisions that connote opportunism, unreliability, or a lack of integrity should damage reputations to the extent that this "organizational character mechanism" drives reputational change.<sup>1</sup>

*Symbolic Conformity.* A second perspective offers a very different way to think about the sources and dynamics of reputation. In this view, reputational assessments are shaped by the organization's symbolic conformity with external, socially constructed standards and categories that are less universal and more context-specific than those featured in the character perspective (Rao, 1994; Staw & Epstein, 2000). Scholars employing this perspective see organizations and evaluators as mutually embedded within larger cultural systems (Rao, 1994:31). Accordingly, they come to share understandings and expectations about the structures and practices that are

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<sup>1</sup> Importantly, this line of argument does not imply that corporate actions provide a window into a firm's essential traits (or even that firms possess essential traits). Anthropomorphizing organizations may be an irrational approach to judgment, and audiences may fall victim to the fundamental attribution error in applying it (Ross, 1977). They may also read too much into actions that provide little indication of the firm's real propensities and predispositions (Ross, 1977; Winter & Uleman, 1984). The point here is that people tend to apply these criteria and to look for such traits, regardless of whether firms actually "possess" them.

locally appropriate and culturally desirable. These shared understandings are thought to lead firms to adopt culturally correct practices and to affect constituent audiences' evaluations, as well. Specifically, audiences are expected to confer good reputations on firms that exemplify cultural stipulations and ideals, and to penalize firms that fail to display appropriate symbols. In this perspective, an organization's cultural fitness (rather than its apparent traits as a social actor) is the primary criterion for audience approval and esteem.

This second perspective draws on neo-institutional theory, which holds that organizations are situated within broader institutional environments, and focuses especially on the cultural processes that operate within such environments (or "fields") (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2001). This perspective emphasizes that organizations often adopt structures and practices in response to field-level pressures, and suggests that they gain legitimacy and support in return for this conformity (Ruef & Scott, 1998; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983; Westphal, Gulati, & Shortell, 1997). While the concepts of legitimacy and reputation can not be equated, scholars have productively used this perspective to study reputational processes (cf. Deephouse & Carter, 2005; King & Whetten, (Forthcoming); Rao, 1994; Staw & Epstein, 2000).

A specific implication of this perspective is that audiences will tend to evaluate corporate actions as symbolic indicators of a firm's cultural fitness and adjust their reputational assessments accordingly. Staw and Epstein's (2000) recent study provides a compelling example of this proposed 'symbolic conformity' mechanism. They found that firms enhanced their reputations by adopting various popular management practices (e.g., Total Quality Management, employee empowerment, and teams). They argued that this effect occurred because these practices embodied the normative values and cultural beliefs of the audiences who

ascribed the reputations. Interestingly, this reputational enhancement occurred even though the practices did not appear to improve corporate financial performance.

*Technical Efficacy.* A third distinct argument holds that reputations are much more tightly coupled to consequences and tangible organizational outputs. At the core of this view is the idea that reputation reflects a firm's ability to fulfill evaluating audiences' material needs. The perspective thus predicts that strong reputations will accrue to firms that, for example, produce superior products and services or deliver superior financial results (Shapiro, 1982, 1983). Within this view, firms are seen not as anthropomorphized social actors or as inhabitants of a shared culture, but more as a means to audiences' parochial ends. This perspective is supported by empirical research which finds that perceptions of product quality strongly affect consumers' reputational assessments (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004). It is even more strongly supported by studies which have shown that financial performance exerts a powerful (perhaps overwhelming) influence on reputational judgments made by stock analysts and peer executives (Brown & Perry, 1994; Fryxell & Wang, 1994).

This third perspective implies a "technical efficacy" mechanism which may account for reputational change. Specifically, it suggests that audiences will alter reputations in response to observed changes in valued organizational outputs. The direction and degree of reputational change should correspond with these performance changes. A "strong form" version of this argument predicts that reputational change effectively reduces to performance change, and that firm actions (like downsizing) are actually epiphenomenal to the process. In empirical terms, these actions' reputational effects should be null once relevant, observable outcome changes are adequately accounted for. A "weak" form of this argument holds that actions may themselves affect reputation, but only because of their (believed) implications for technical efficacy. This

argument converges with the strong form view in assuming that reputation-granters are fundamentally concerned with performance, broadly defined. But, it suggests that audiences are likely to view some firm actions as signals of expected future performance in their own right, and to respond to them accordingly. As such, their reputational judgments are expected to be more loosely coupled to the observable performance changes which either accompany or result from a given firm action.<sup>2</sup>

These three accounts of reputational change are summarized in Table 1.<sup>3</sup>

## STUDY CONTEXT AND HYPOTHESES

Downsizing has been defined as the intentional reduction of personnel in the effort to improve efficiency or effectiveness (Freeman & Cameron, 1993). Downsizing gained notice in the early 1980s as large U.S. industrial firms began to reduce personnel in ways that were clearly distinct from traditional practices such as furloughs and layoffs (Kiechel, 1985; Nielsen, 1985; Tomasko, 1987). Historically, personnel reductions had been capacity-balancing actions most often taken in response to lowered demand during business downturns (Freeman & Cameron, 1993; McKinley, Mone, & Barker, 1998). Though such reductions often affected many employees, they were typically temporary and predominantly affected production personnel at specific sites (Thurow, 1986). In contrast, downsizing efforts often had a more strategic intent, aiming to “permanently” improve company-wide efficiency and effectiveness through changes such as reducing bureaucracy and layers of management (Budros, 2002; McKinley et al., 1998).

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<sup>2</sup>While this weak-form technical efficacy argument is theoretically distinct, it becomes entangled with the other two mechanisms we have posited when we attempt to move it into the empirical realm. Audiences who are “ultimately” concerned with performance may still visibly react to displays of trustworthiness and/or symbolic conformity.

<sup>3</sup>The reputation literature also describes other perspectives and mechanisms, notably those that emphasize the quality of a firm’s *external associations* and those that suggest *prominence* and *visibility* are important components of reputation (Deephouse, 2000; Rindova et al., 2005). We have elaborated on the character, conformity and efficacy perspectives because of their prominence in the literature and their direct relevance to our specific study context.

Many downsizings were of unprecedented scope and scale, involving thousands of employees, including managers (Baumol, Blinder, & Wolff, 2003).

While the downsizing trend started among heavy manufacturing firms, it subsequently spread widely and rapidly. By the beginning of our study period in 1985, downsizing had already been implemented in hundreds of firms (*Fortune*, 1985), including 24% of the firms in our sample. By the end of the study period in 1994, most large firms reported that they had downsized at least once during the past five years (AMA, 1994). Overall, the *Fortune* 100 firms we study downsized millions of employees during the 1980s and 1990s (Nohria, Dyer, & Dalzell, 2002). Downsizing decisions were explained with reference to a variety of specific circumstances and general logics. Notable among these were the need to respond to increasing global competition (Lamertz & Baum, 1998; Useem, 1993) and the accompanying characterization of large U.S. firms as “fat” and overstaffed (Thurow, 1986; Tomasko, 1987). While early downsizings were most often initiated in reaction to performance declines, proactive downsizings became common by the end of the 1980s (Budros, 2004; McKinley et al., 1998).

### **Downsizing’s Overall Effects on Reputation: Competing Hypotheses**

*Organizational Character Mechanism.* The organizational character explanation for reputational change suggests that audiences will view downsizing as an occasion for trait attribution. The question they are likely to ask is what downsizing says about the character of the firm as a whole, particularly its trustworthiness and reliability. Downsizing should have a negative effect on reputational change to the extent that this perspective’s proposed mechanism is dominant. By downsizing, firms broke commitments and reneged on implicit psychological contracts with their employees (see Cappelli et al., 1997; De Meuse & Tornow, 1990; Heckscher, 1995; Noer, 1993). Though downsizing was perfectly legal and widely advocated as an efficient

business practice, it connoted opportunism and signaled that the firm was an untrustworthy actor that might not be counted on to meet its commitments in the future. Employees clearly interpreted downsizing as a betrayal, and characterized downsizers as untrustworthy (see Brockner, Grover, Reed, DeWitt, and O'Malley, 1987; Gordon, 1996; New York Times, 1996; Noer, 1993). Many writers, critics and politicians shared this interpretation and broadcast the same message (see De Meuse & Tornow, 1990; New York Times, 1996; Gordon, 1996). Downsizing also conveyed many other signals, of course, and it is possible that the analysts and peer executives who ascribe *Fortune* reputations were more responsive to those signals. Nonetheless, to the extent the organizational character considerations drive people's reputational evaluations, we should expect even these audiences to negatively react to downsizing firms. Analysts and executives were not personally betrayed by downsizing, and they may have had little empathy for displaced employees. But, a firm's dealings with that particular constituency may have sent an important signal concerning its likely behavior in future dealings with them. There is also some empirical support for the proposition that downsizing might negatively affect reputation. Specifically, Flanagan & O'Shaughnessy (2005) showed that layoffs (rather than downsizings) had negative effect on reputation, in an analysis of a different sample across a later time period than the one we examine here. We discuss their study in more detail below, and also elaborate its differences from our own. Thus:

*H1a: Downsizing will negatively affect a firm's ascribed reputation.*

*Symbolic Conformity Mechanism.* If the symbolic conformity mechanism is dominant, reputation-granting audiences will likely attend to different signals, and thus respond quite differently to downsizing firms. Specifically, they should evaluate the practice based upon its consistency with their own culture values and beliefs, and reward the firm to the extent that it

conforms with those sector-specific prescriptions (Staw & Epstein, 2000). This mechanism is also a plausible one, because downsizing was deeply consistent with the expressed and revealed beliefs of the analysts and peer executives who ascribe *Fortune* reputations. Downsizing decisions were uniformly presented as efforts to improve the corporate bottom line, and it is known that these two audiences particularly value efficiency and financial performance. More importantly, members of these audiences vocally advocated downsizing and publicly praised downsizing firms during our study period (Kiechel, 1985; Useem, 1993). Analysts and institutional investors were particularly vocal in their support, with some even pressuring corporate boards to replace executives who resisted their entreaties to downsize (Nohria et al., 2002; Useem, 1993, 1996). Additionally, several prominent executives (notably Jack Welch at General Electric and Al Dunlap at Scott Paper) publicly sung downsizing's praises, portraying it as a crucial to improving large American firms' competitiveness (see Tichy & Sherman, 1993).

Downsizing's symbolic value appears to have been further increased by popular models of corporate management that pervaded American business culture during the 1985-1994 study period. In particular, the *shareholder value model* (Davis, Diekmann, & Tinsley, 1994; Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Useem, 1993) and the "*lean and mean*" model (cf. Budros, 2002; Kiechel, 1985; Peters & Waterman, 1982) both portrayed the practice as central to effective management in general, and to improved efficiency and effectiveness specifically. The former did so by emphasizing that downsizing, through reducing purportedly excessive managerial overhead, was an important technique to align corporate staffing levels with shareholder interests (Thurow, 1986; Useem, 1993, 1996). The latter did so by suggesting that downsizing, as a core part of efforts to flatten the corporate pyramid and eliminate bureaucratic work, was a powerful means

towards the metaphorically appealing end of a “healthy” and “lean” organization (Budros, 2002; McKinley et al., 1998).

A final, supporting indicator of downsizing’s cultural standing is its widespread (and growing) use during the study period. As noted, hundreds of firms (including 24% of our sample) had downsized at the outset of our study period (1985), and the vast majority of the sample downsized in the subsequent decade. The notion that the prevalence of a practice reflects its cultural appropriateness is widely accepted within neo-institutionalism, from which the symbolic conformity mechanism is drawn (Edelman, 1992; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983; Westphal et al., 1997). Indeed, previous research on downsizing itself has concluded that the practice acquired legitimacy as it spread (Lamertz & Baum, 1998; Love, 2000; McKinley et al., 1998). While these prior studies have not specifically shown that downsizing *firms* gained increased approval by employing the practice, this prediction is quite consistent with their basic logic. It is also consistent with prior research which has directly shown that firms can improve their reputations by adopting popular management practices (Staw & Epstein, 2000). Taken together, these diverse indicators provide powerful evidence concerning downsizings’ symbolic appropriateness within the particular cultural milieu of analysts and executives, despite the controversy that surrounded the practice in the broader popular discourse. To the extent that the symbolic conformity mechanism is dominant, we should thus expect downsizing to positively affect firm reputation:

*H1b: Downsizing will positively affect a firm’s ascribed reputation.*

*Technical Efficacy Mechanism.* The technical efficacy explanation also provides insights about downsizing’s likely effects. The “strong form” of this account, which we articulated above, posits that reputational change effectively reduces to performance change. In other

words, it implies that downsizing will have no independent effect on reputational change after contemporaneous, observable measures of performance change are sufficiently accounted for. This prediction is buttressed by prior research which has argued that corporate reputations (particularly *Fortune* reputations) are dominantly driven by financial performance (Brown & Perry, 1994; Fryxell & Wang, 1994). This research provides no obvious reason to predict that downsizing and like actions would, in themselves, affect a firm's reputation. Thus:

*H1c: Downsizing will have no effect on a firm's ascribed reputation after contemporaneous performance changes are accounted for.*<sup>4</sup>

### **Moderating Effects: Complementary Hypotheses**

Though tensions clearly exist between the three explanations we have posited, there is no reason to presume a zero-sum relationship between them. While reputation granters may be primarily attentive to a particular signal that downsizing sends, they are also likely to respond to other "secondary" signals which accompany it and may employ multiple evaluative logics in ascribing reputations. With this in mind, we also develop hypotheses which explore the three mechanisms' conjoint operation and seek to identify complementarities among them.

*Moderating effect of market reactions.* Even if reputational change does not reduce to changes in technical efficacy as H1c posits (i.e even if audiences respond to actions that signal trustworthiness and/or cultural conformity), there is still reason to predict that the technical efficacy of such actions will be consequential in determining their reputational consequences.

One particular performance measure that seems quite likely to moderate a downsizing's

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<sup>4</sup> The weak form of the technical efficacy argument might also be used to predict a direct effect of downsizing on reputational change. However, it is not possible to develop such a hypothesis without first making strong assumptions concerning audiences' beliefs about downsizing's technical efficacy (i.e whether they *believe* it is performance-enhancing or not). Developing a weak form hypothesis also clearly requires one to assume that audiences look beyond available performance data in ascribing reputation. Thus, any hypothesis developed from this argument would be significantly entangled with those flowing from the prior two perspectives. Therefore, we focus exclusively upon the strong form argument in testing the technical efficacy perspective. We reconsider the weak form as we interpret and discuss our results at the end of the paper.

reputational effect is the stock market's initial reaction to it (i.e. the "excess returns" (Brown & Warner, 1985) associated with it). The reputation-granting audiences in our study are known to be highly attentive to the short-term movements in stock prices, and research has established that equity market valuations strongly influence reputations in general (Brown & Perry, 1994; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Thus, excess returns associated with downsizing may condition whatever independent effects the practice has on reputation. Market reactions may be important moderators not only because they are an important outcome (i.e. because they create and destroy wealth), but also because they serve as a summary judgment of a firm's decisions. In other words, the stock market may act as a sort of "information intermediary" (Pollock & Rindova, 2003) that helps reputation-granting audiences interpret and evaluate various corporate actions.

*H2: Short term market reactions to downsizing will positively moderate its effects on a firm's ascribed reputation.*

*Moderating Effect of Recent Firm Performance.* As we mentioned earlier, a salient and controversial feature of downsizing was that firms often cut personnel during good financial times (McKinley et al., 1998). If the organizational character mechanism is operative, we should expect these "pro-active" downsizings to be less well-received (even if the character mechanism is not dominant overall). Firms that downsized without apparent financial need (e.g., while performance was improving) may have appeared to be particularly opportunistic and untrustworthy (Gordon, 1996). In contrast, downsizing firms that were manifestly "in trouble" may have been partially exempted from their implied commitments to their employees and thus less likely to incur reputational damage. Declining performance may have made their obligations to financial constituencies more salient. Two observations made by corporate executives during the study period lend substantial plausibility to this prediction. One longtime

Ford executive stated, “When you’ve just reported a \$1.5 billion net loss, nobody wonders why you have to cut back.” In contrast, another executive noted that “the toughest thing to explain is why you see a need to trim your sails [i.e., downsize] when your markets are booming,” (Both from Fisher, 1988:42). This hypothesis is also supported by research on organizational trust itself, which has found that extenuating circumstances can justify actions which normally connote opportunism (Kramer & Tyler, 1996).

*H3: Recent changes in firm performance will negatively moderate downsizing’s effects on a firm’s ascribed reputation.*

*Moderating Effect of Prior Reputation.* An additional implication of the organizational character perspective is that a firm’s prior reputation should affect audiences’ interpretations of its actions. To the extent that good reputations are sticky and enduring assets amassed through a history of making and meeting commitments, we should expect them to mitigate any reputational damage that downsizing may otherwise cause. People should be inclined to give the benefit of the doubt to firms with a record of “good behavior” and to be less quick to attribute opportunism based upon a single strategic decision. The same logic predicts that marginal firms lacking a strong history of reliability may suffer greater reputational damage from downsizing. This prediction would not seem to follow from the conformity or efficacy perspectives, both of which see reputation as somewhat more tightly coupled to recent signals and less affected by a particular firm’s historical pattern of behavior.

*H4: Prior reputation will positively moderate downsizing’s effects on a firm’s ascribed reputation.*

*Moderating Effect of Downsizing’s Prevalence.* Downsizing’s growing cultural appropriateness may have also moderated its reputational consequences, even if the symbolic conformity mechanism did not dominate overall. Downsizing was not uncommon at the outset

of our study and it enjoyed significant cultural support even then (Kiechel, 1985; Love, 2000). However, the practice diffused widely and gained increasing cultural standing and acceptance across our study period (McKinley et al., 1998). The idea that a practice's prevalence is a telling indicator of its symbolic appropriateness is well established in previous reputational scholarship (Staw & Epstein, 2000) and in the broader body of neo-institutional research (cf. DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983, 1996). Building on this logic, we should expect audiences to respond more favorably (or less negatively) to downsizing firms as a function of the practice's increasing prevalence over time:

*H5: Downsizings' prevalence will positively moderate its effects on a firm's ascribed reputation.*

A close corollary of H5 is that downsizing's growing prevalence will make local performance contingencies less consequential as moderators of its reputational effects. As the practice spreads and acquires growing symbolic value, it should be seen as more universally appropriate, and audiences should attend less to the firm-specific factors that initially justified its use (Tolbert & Zucker, 1983; Westphal et al., 1997). Therefore, the moderating effects discussed in H2 and H3 (stock market reactions and recent performance changes) should dissipate as the number of sample firms which have previously downsized increases. Thus:

*H6: Downsizing's prevalence will weaken the moderating effects of the performance contingencies specified in H2 and H3.*

*Cultural Differences Between Audiences.* Downsizing's reputational consequences may be moderated not only by cross-temporal variation in its cultural appropriateness, but also by cultural variation across audiences. In the larger scheme, executives and analysts are remarkably similar audiences (when compared to consumers, labor groups, the media, political organizations, academic observers, etc.). They are clearly within the same field or cultural

milieu. For this reason, it makes much sense to group them together, as we have done thus far and as other reputation researchers have also done (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Staw & Epstein, 2000). Nonetheless, there are potentially important cultural differences between these audience groups. We have noted that many analysts vocally advocated downsizing and even publicly celebrated downsizing firms. While the practice also enjoyed cultural support from many prominent executives, there was much expressed ambivalence within this group (Nohria et al., 2002; Useem, 1996). Further, the financial community appeared to embrace the shareholder value model (which legitimated downsizing) more rapidly and unequivocally than managers (Useem, 1996). This is perhaps to be expected, given that analysts' roles culturally constitute them as shareholder representatives (Zuckerman, 1999). In contrast, executives' roles are much more complex. They are simultaneously embedded in multiple institutional domains and must answer to both investors and a range of non-financial stakeholders. For these reasons, downsizing should be seen as a more unambiguously appropriate symbol from the cultural perspective of stock analysts. Therefore, analysts should react more positively (or less negatively) to the firms employing the practice:

*H7: Downsizing will have a more positive (less negative) effect on a firm's reputation as ascribed by stock analysts than on reputation as ascribed by peer firm executives.*

## **METHOD AND DATA**

### **Sample and Study Period**

Our sample is the 100 largest industrial firms in the United States as identified by *Fortune* magazine. This sample is particularly appropriate because these highly visible firms are closely monitored by corporate audiences and were among those most affected by downsizing (Baumol et al., 2003). We sampled the *Fortune* 100 as of 1977 because this year clearly predated the start of the downsizing trend. We subsequently collected comprehensive data on all

downsizings conducted by these firms through 1994. The *Fortune* “Most Admired Companies” survey was not initiated until 1983 and full data necessary for testing our hypotheses did not become available until 1985. Thus, our study examines downsizing’s effects on reputation over the period from 1985 to 1994. This period incorporates much of downsizing’s diffusion. In 1985, 24% of our sample firms had downsized and by 1994 over 70% had done so. Within this sample and time frame, the *Fortune* survey data were available for an average of 71 firms each year, and data for all variables was available for 616 firm-years.<sup>5</sup> Our analytical approach, described just below, enables us to treat the rankings of analysts and peer firm executives independently within the same dataset. Thus, our final dataset contains two distinct observations in each firm year for a total of 1232 observations.

### **Theoretical Variables**

*Dependent Measure.* We used the *Fortune* magazine “Most Admired Company” survey to assess reputational change. *Fortune* magazine annually surveys several thousand securities analysts and executives who rate firms in the industries that they cover or work in. Respondents evaluate the ten largest firms in their industry on eight disparate dimensions. The dimensions are *management quality, product quality, innovativeness, value as a long-term investment, financial soundness, ability to attract, develop and retain personnel, community and environmental responsibility, and use of corporate assets.* *Fortune* averages these eight items into a single reputation score for each firm and publishes these scores in their annual “Most Admired Companies” rankings. These rankings reflect observers’ beliefs about a firm’s overall, subjective appeal relative to its peers, consistent with the definition of reputation we use

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<sup>5</sup> The number of 1977 *Fortune* 100 firms that existed as independent entities ranged from 87 in 1985 to 79 in 1994. The number of usable firm-year observations was further reduced because *Fortune* did not rank all sample firms in all years and because financial data were unavailable for a small number of firm-years.

(Fombrun, 1996). While *Fortune* reputations do not capture the opinions of all relevant publics, the audiences who ascribe them are knowledgeable and influential ones. Much prior research has employed the *Fortune* survey in studying corporate reputation (e.g., Brown & Perry, 1994; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Roberts & Dowling, 2002; Staw & Epstein, 2000). Our theory has taken explicit account of its known idiosyncrasies (e.g., the specific audiences it surveys and its well-known association with financial performance).

While prior research on *Fortune* reputations has focused on observers' *ratings* of firms (raw scores), we use within-industry *rankings* of firms as our dependent measure. This approach is particularly advantageous given that *Fortune*-ascribed reputations are highly relational in nature, as is the broader concept of reputation itself. In its annual reputation issue, *Fortune* uses firms' raw reputation scores to create reputational hierarchies within industries. Further, the rating process itself also has a relational character, in that respondents are only given the opportunity to rate comparable firms (i.e. the ten largest firms in a given industry). To facilitate interpretation, we created inverted ranking scores that range from 10 for the top-ranked firm in the industry in a particular year, to 1 for the lowest. Thus, covariates that enhance reputation have positive signs. Because of our interest in possible differences between audiences, we disaggregated analysts' and executives' rankings and included each group's ranking as a separate observation. Given our core concern with reputational flows, we included the prior year's ranking in all models. Consequently, the coefficients in our models reflect independent variables' effects on year-to-year reputational change.

*Independent Variables.* We constructed a dichotomous indicator of *Downsizing*, which is our main independent variable. Large publicly held firms typically announce significant personnel reductions and describe their key features. Accordingly, we searched full-text articles

of the *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and several wire services for announcements of company-wide personnel reductions that aimed to improve efficiency or effectiveness, consistent with the definition and distinctive features of downsizing introduced earlier. To avoid including announcements affecting very small numbers of employees, we required that the personnel reductions affect at least 1% of employees. After applying this screen, we found qualifying downsizing events in 103 of the firm-years for which *Fortune* survey and other data were available. We subsequently dropped 12 events that were announced in December, as these appeared to have occurred after the annual (late autumn) *Fortune* survey. This left us with 91 firm-years wherein downsizings were announced.

All subsequent hypotheses (H2-H7) posited moderating relationships and were therefore tested using interaction terms. To assess whether short-term stock market reactions to downsizing moderated its effects on reputation (H2), we interacted the downsizing indicator with a measure of market reactions (labeled *Downsizing\*Stock Mkt React*). We assessed market reactions using the standard excess market returns approach (Brown & Warner, 1985). This approach measures the change in a specific firm's stock price, net of broader market movements, during a short event window of a few days surrounding an event (here the downsizing announcement). We constructed a beta-adjusted measure of excess returns as described by Brown & Warner (1985:28), using data from the Center for Research in Security Prices (CRSP) and an eleven-day event window (day -5 to +5) around the downsizing announcement. Excess returns measured across other windows (3 day and 1 day) produced similar results.

To examine whether recent firm performance changes moderated downsizing's effect on reputation (H3), we interacted the downsizing indicator with a measure of change in profitability (labeled *Downsizing \* Profitability Change*). Change in profitability was measured as the

difference between return on book assets in the downsizing year (t) and in the prior year (t-1). H3 predicts a negative coefficient based on the idea that declines in profitability would provide a justification for downsizing. It posited that increasing profitability would have the opposite effect, as observers would see the practice as less necessary for financially healthy firms.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that prior reputation would ameliorate downsizing's effect on firm reputation. We tested this hypothesis with the interaction term labeled *Downsizing \* Prior Ranking*, where prior ranking is measured in the previous year.

To assess whether the prevalence of downsizing moderated its reputational consequences (H5), we constructed the interaction term *Downsizing \* Prevalence*. Prevalence is the percentage of firms in the sample that had downsized in prior years (including downsizings that occurred between 1977 and 1985). To aid interpretation, we centered the prevalence variable before multiplying it by the downsizing indicator (Jaccard, Turrisi, & Wan, 1990). To assess the corollaries of the prevalence hypothesis described in H6, we used triple interaction terms labeled *Downsizing \* Profitability Change \* Prevalence*, and *Downsizing \* Stock Mkt React \* Prevalence*, respectively. H6 predicts that the moderating effects in H2 and H3 will dissipate as prevalence increases. Therefore, it predicts a positive coefficient for the first triple interaction term and a negative coefficient for the second.

To assess whether analysts and executives responded differently to downsizing firms (H7), we constructed an indicator variable (*Analysts*). We multiplied this binary term by the downsizing indicator (*Downsizing \* Analysts*).

## **Control Variables**

*Prior Ranking.* Because of our central concern with how observers change their reputational rankings from one year to the next, we included the prior year's ranking in all models. This has the effect of specifying the model itself as one of reputational change.

*Contemporaneous Performance Change Measures.* The strong form of the technical efficacy argument suggests reputational change effectively reduces to performance change. This argument was the basis for H1c, which predicts that downsizing will have a null effect on reputational change after contemporaneous performance changes are adequately accounted for. To test H1c, we include three measures of contemporaneous performance change. The first measure, *Market Capitalization Change* $_{t-1 to t}$ , captures changes in the firm's total market valuation in the current year. More specifically, it reflects the annual percentage change in the market value of equity and the book value of debt ( $t-1$  to  $t$ ). The second measure, *Profitability Change* $_{t-1 to t}$ , captures change in return on assets between the current and the prior year. This variable is also the base term for the *Downsizing \* Profitability Change* term (H3). The third measure, *Earnings Expectations Change* $_{t-1 to t}$ , captures changes in analysts' estimates of the firm's next fiscal year performance. We constructed this measure using the IBES (Institutional Broker's Estimate System) database. Using all earnings estimates which analysts provided during a specific year, we tallied the number of upward revisions, subtracted the number of downward revisions, and divided the resulting number by the total number of earnings estimates provided. This measure varies between 1 (if all earnings estimates are upward revisions) and -1 (if all estimates are downward revisions). While changes in earnings expectations do not reflect performance, per se, they are particularly meaningful because they reflect analysts' changing beliefs about a firm's future technical efficacy and thus go beyond directly observable measures

of current performance. Financial theory similarly suggests that changes in market capitalization reflect future performance expectations, in addition to being outcomes in their own right.

*Performance Change Measures in prior year.* We included the same three measures of performance change for the *prior* year, on the assumption that changes in reputation may lag performance increases or decreases. These measures allow us to account more completely for the effects of performance change in producing reputational change. This is necessary in testing H1c. These measures are *Market Capitalization Change*  $_{t-2 \text{ to } t-1}$ , *Change in ROA*  $_{t-2 \text{ to } t-1}$ , and *Earnings Expectations Change*  $_{t-2 \text{ to } t-1}$ .

*Additional Performance Measures.* We included three other performance measures that have been found to be important predictors of *Fortune* reputation in prior studies (Brown & Perry, 1994; Fombrun and Shanley, 1990). Specifically, we controlled for 1) average ROA across the current and two preceding years (*Average ROA 3 yrs*), 2) average sales growth across the same period (*Average Sales Growth 3 yrs*), and 3) a logged measure of *Firm Size* (sales-based). Though these measures do not directly or exclusively capture performance change, we included them in order to provide the strongest possible test of H1c.

*Other Control Variables.* A final control variable, *Announcement in prior Dec.* is a dummy variable set to one for firm-years in which the firm announced a downsizing in the prior December. As noted above, we excluded December events from our downsizing indicator.

## ANALYSIS

We used rank-ordered logistic regression to test our hypotheses (see Allison & Christakis, 1994; Beggs, Cardell, & Hausman, 1981). This analytic technique has two advantages. First, it is specifically designed for situations like ours, in which the dependent variable is raters' *relative ranking* of objects within a group (firms in an industry, in our case).

We have explained the theoretical advantages of focusing on rankings. The technique is also advantageous because it allows separate rankings from multiple raters (in our case analyst and executive groups) to be incorporated into the same model. It has been used, for example, to explore multiple human resource managers' relative rankings of the same job candidates (vanBeek, Koopmans, & vanPraag, 1997), and to explain different consumers' relative rankings of competing products (e.g., Hausman & Ruud, 1987).

While we are confident of the appropriateness of this somewhat novel approach, its use presents some issues which require brief discussion. Since the dependent variable is a relative ranking *within a group*, variables that are invariant within groups (e.g. those that define the groups) are controlled for by construction. It is neither necessary nor possible to include such variables in rank-ordered logistic regression models. In our analysis, a "group" is a particular industry, as assessed by a particular audience in a particular year (e.g. firms in the automobile industry as assessed by analysts in 1987). Thus, all of our models implicitly control for industry, year and rater. The result is quite similar to that which occurs in fixed-effect models, wherein between-group variance is "fixed" in the intercept term. The group structure of the data has important implications for testing interactions in rank-ordered logistic regression models. Specifically, base terms for some interactions cannot (and need not) be included because they are controlled for by construction of the groups (see Allison & Christakis, 1994; Beggs et al., 1981 for further discussion).<sup>6</sup> Given the relative novelty of the rank-ordered logistic regression technique, we also tested our hypotheses using more conventional fixed-effect models. These models are presented in the paper's Appendix and reveal substantively identical results.

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<sup>6</sup> Consider the *Downsizing \* Analysts* interaction used to test H7 as one example. *Analysts* does not vary within a given industry-rater-year group - it is always one or zero for any such group. Thus constructing the rankings implicitly controls for this variable, and its independent effect on rankings cannot be modeled. However, it is possible to examine its interactive effects because the *Downsizing \* Analysts* term *does* vary within groups (as a result of variance in the downsizing variable itself).

Because of the panel structure of our data, there also exists the possibility that within-industry rankings for firms may not be independent across years. We compensate for this by estimating standard errors using the Huber / White sandwich (robust) technique, and by adjusting the standard errors for correlations within industry-year groups using STATA's cluster option.

## RESULTS

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and correlations. Table 3 presents results from the rank-ordered logistic regressions. Model 1 of Table 3 examines downsizing's main effect on reputational rankings. The *Downsizing* coefficient in Model 1 is significant ( $p < .001$ ) and negative. This supports H1a. The  $-.71$  coefficient indicates that downsizing firms lost more than two-thirds of a position in the *Fortune* rankings on average.

While this finding is clearly supportive of H1a and directly at odds with H1b (which predicted a positive effect), its implications for H1c (which predicted a null effect after accounting for contemporaneous performance change) requires more discussion. First, it is important to note that Model 1 includes all the measures of contemporaneous performance change that we described above (changes in market capitalization, profitability, and earnings expectations). We included these measures for both the current and prior year. Model 1 also includes other performance measures featured in prior reputation research. Our finding of a strong downsizing effect net of these factors casts serious doubt upon the argument that reputational change effectively reduces to performance change and upon the related idea that the audiences who ascribe *Fortune* reputations are single-mindedly concerned with financial outcomes. These findings also cast doubt upon the weak-form of the technical efficacy argument, though they cannot rule it out. It remains possible to argue that evaluators penalized downsizing firms because they believed downsizing would ultimately harm performance, or

because they saw it as a signal of looming financial problems. However, changes in their beliefs about firms' future performance prospects should have been well-reflected in earnings expectations changes and stock price changes. This is particularly true for analysts.<sup>7</sup>

Models 2 through 6 in Table 3 test hypotheses subsequent to H1 by separately adding interaction terms to Model 1. Model 2 examines whether stock market reactions to downsizing positively moderated the practice's main effect on firm reputation, as was posited in H2. The *Downsizing\*Stock Mkt React* coefficient is highly significant ( $p < .001$ ) and positive, supporting H2. This moderating effect is substantial. A market reaction to a downsizing that is one standard deviation above the mean (+5.3%) is associated with a ranking loss of only 0.30, whereas a market reaction one standard deviation more negative than the mean (-8.6%) is associated with a much larger a ranking loss of 1.11. The *Downsizing* coefficient (-.61) is the practices' estimated main effect when the stock market reaction to the downsizing is zero. This coefficient is only slightly reduced from its -.71 value in Model 1. Thus, while our test of H2 affirms the idea that downsizing's technical efficacy moderated its reputational consequences, it simultaneously provides further evidence that its effects cannot be *reduced* to performance concerns.

Model 3 examines whether downsizings' reputational impact is moderated by recent changes in the firm's performance. The coefficient for the *Downsizing \* Performance Change*

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<sup>7</sup> We conducted two additional analyses which also speak to the potential validity of the weak-form technical efficacy argument. First, we analyzed downsizing's effect in the absence of performance controls and found a coefficient of -.86. The relatively modest decrease in the size of this coefficient which results when we add financial controls (to -.71) suggests that performance factors did not dominate audiences' evaluations of downsizing firms. Second, we also ran supplementary models which actually controlled for the firm's *future* (i.e. post-downsizing) performance in addition to prior and contemporaneous performance. If downsizing firms as a group had relatively poor economic prospects that were not sufficiently accounted for by our other controls, we reasoned that these prospects would be realized in future years. We included measures of firm performance in each of the three years following the downsizing year and found no significant effects on reputation. The main effect of downsizing remained essentially unchanged. This finding also undermines the idea that performance expectations can explain downsizing's overall effect on reputation.

term is negative and highly significant ( $p < .001$ ). This strongly supports H3, which predicted that reputation-granting audiences would evaluate a downsizing firm less negatively if its recent performance was declining, and vice versa. The size of the coefficient indicates that a one standard deviation drop in ROA during the downsizing year (i.e., an ROA decline of 3.5%) is associated with a .42 ( $= 11.9 * 3.5\%$ ) *reduction* in downsizing's impact. Thus, a firm whose ROA change is one standard deviation below the mean will experience less than half the ranking loss ( $.71 - .42 = .29$ ) of the average downsizing firm in the sample.

Model 4 examines whether the firm's prior reputational ranking conditioned the main effect of downsizing. The coefficient for the *Downsizing\*Prior Ranking* variable supports H4, which posited a positive moderating effect. Highly ranked firms experienced less reputational damage from downsizing. Each one position increase in prior ranking was associated with a .23 reduction in ranking loss. Thus a downsizing firm ranked two positions above the mean in its industry is predicted to experience a .25 loss in reputation ( $.71 - .46 = .25$ ) while a firm ranked two positions below the mean will experience a 1.17 loss ( $.71 + .46 = 1.17$ ). While the magnitude of this effect is considerable, its direction is also noteworthy. The simple logic of regression to the mean might predict that high ranked firms would experience greater loss merely because they have farther to fall. Model 4 does not support this prediction.

Model 5 assesses whether downsizing's prevalence moderated its reputational impact. The coefficient for the *Downsizing\*Prevalence* term is both positive and significant, supporting H5. Downsizing's effects on corporate reputation became strikingly less negative as the practice spread over time, with the predicted ranking loss changing from -1.33 ( $p < .001$ ) in 1985 to only -.25 (n.s.) in 1994. Figure 1 presents a graphical representation of this shift.

Model 6 tests H7, which predicts that analysts' evaluations of downsizing firms will be more positive than executives.' The *Downsizing \* Analysts* coefficient (-.42) indicates that, contrary to prediction, analysts' reactions were *more* negative than executives' were. The *Downsizing* coefficient in Model 6 (at -.51) now represents the average post-downsizing change in executives' rankings (as they are the omitted class), whereas the average change in analysts' rankings is the sum of the two coefficients (-.42+-.51= -.93). It is necessary to be cautious in interpreting these results as this effect was not hypothesized and as the -.42 coefficient is only marginally significant ( $p < .09$  when we apply the appropriate *post hoc* two-tailed test). However, given analysts' vocal advocacy of downsizing, the fact that they were marginally more negative than executives is perhaps less important than the fact that they were negative, *in general*.<sup>8</sup>

Model 7 simultaneously incorporates the five interaction variables from Models 2 through 6. The results change little when these interactions are simultaneously estimated. This model also serves as a baseline for Models 8 and 9. These two models incorporate triple interaction terms in order to test H6's prediction that the moderating effects of stock market reactions and recent firm performance changes will dissipate as downsizing grows more prevalent. Model 8 shows an insignificant coefficient for the *Downsizing \* Mkt React \* Prevalence* term, indicating no support for H6 where stock market reactions are concerned. Audiences apparently continued to incorporate stock market reactions into their evaluations, even as downsizing became widespread. However, Model 9 shows a positive and significant coefficient for the triple interaction term *Downsizing \* Profit Chg \* Prevalence*, supporting H6. Figure 2 graphically illustrates this finding. It shows that recent performance changes strongly

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<sup>8</sup> In an effort to further explore this counterintuitive finding, we ran additional models that looked for differences between the analyst and executive rater groups. We found that the two groups were not differentially responsive to stock market reactions (H2) or recent firm performance changes (H3). We revisit these findings in the discussion.

moderated downsizing's reputational impact early in the study period, but had essentially no moderating effect by 1994 when downsizing had become widespread.

## DISCUSSION

Our purpose in this paper was threefold. We set out to examine reputational flows, to identify firm actions that precipitate them, and to elucidate the underlying theoretical mechanisms responsible for reputational change. We identified three prominent perspectives in the literature (reputation as character, as symbolic conformity, and as technical efficacy), and used them to develop distinct explanations for reputational change. Each of the three accounts offered its own insights about the types of actions likely to enhance or damage reputation, about the types of signals reputation-granting audiences attend to, and about the core evaluative logic they use in evaluating a firm and encoding its actions into its reputation. We used these three explanations to develop both competing and complementary hypotheses about downsizing's effects on reputation. The competing hypotheses (H1a, H1b, H1c) sought to identify the "dominant mechanism" behind downsizing's reputational consequences. Subsequent integrative hypotheses posited moderating relationships and drew upon multiple theoretical explanations, based on the idea that audiences may attend to secondary signals and employ multiple logics.

Our study's core finding is that downsizing exerted a significant negative effect on year-to-year reputational change. Downsizing firms lost an average of over two-thirds of a position (.71) in intra-industry rankings, net of all control variables. This core finding is strongly supportive of the character explanation, which posits that audiences highly value trustworthiness and respond negatively to opportunistic acts. At one level, this effect is not particularly surprising or noteworthy. The reputation as character perspective is well established in the literature and it clearly predicts this result. However, this central finding is more remarkable

when we observe it through the lens of the other two perspectives we elaborated. While downsizing fairly clearly signaled a lack of commitment to constituencies, this was neither the only message it conveyed nor the most obviously relevant one. Similarly, while it is not theoretically surprising that some people attributed opportunism to downsizing firms, it is quite surprising that these particular evaluators appeared to. Downsizing enjoyed a very high level of symbolic appropriateness within the cultural milieu of analysts and executives, and many prominent figures in this field explicitly advocated it. Nonetheless, members of this field lowered their opinions about the overall quality of the firms that adopted the practice. As our results show, this effect cannot be attributed to downsizings' observable performance antecedents or consequences. It appears to be largely independent of performance factors.

Our study's overall pattern of results also suggests a theoretical contribution which belies the simplicity and intuitiveness of its main finding. While analysts and executives clearly took character into account in adjusting the reputations of downsizing firms, it was not the only signal they considered, and they did not weight it equally in all times and all cases. As Figure 1 shows, while downsizing had a strongly negative effect at the outset of the study period, this effect almost completely dissipated by 1994. This suggests that changing cultural norms may play a key role in determining what counts as an opportunistic act. Though downsizing never acquired the positive reputational valence posited by the symbolic conformity explanation, it did appear to shed its negative connotations as it became more and more ubiquitous. Pro-active downsizings also appeared to become more acceptable over time, consistent with the symbolic conformity logic of H6. Stock market reactions to downsizing events also strongly conditioned their effects on reputation. Downsizers with excess returns that were one standard deviation above the mean lost only .30 places in their intra-industry rankings on average. In contrast, those with excess

returns one standard deviation below the mean lost an average of 1.11 positions. Downsizing's growing increasing symbolic appropriateness did not mitigate this effect, contrary to H6. Thus, it is evident that our audiences did take downsizing's technical efficacy into account, if only as a secondary criterion. This finding suggests that the reputational damage that results from violating commitments may be substantially meliorated provided that the violation produces valued results for evaluators. But, it is important to note that this mitigation is far from complete. The main effect of downsizing on reputation is only slightly reduced by controlling for market reactions. Further, negative performance consequences appear to exacerbate reputational damage from opportunism.

Our tests of moderating hypotheses also revealed additional support for the character account of reputational change. Notably, we found that "pro-active" downsizings exerted a more negative effect on reputation, while declining performance mitigated damage. This is consistent with the character perspective, which suggests that violating commitments is more permissible in the presence of a clear need, but particularly problematic in its absence. Our finding that downsizing exerted less damage on highly reputed firms is also consistent with the character perspective, as articulated in the rationale for H4. Finally, the character perspective is also at least implicitly bolstered by the observed lack of support for H7, which posited that the idiosyncratic cultural beliefs and parochial interests of analysts would cause them to react more favorably to downsizers. This finding seems to suggest that our two audiences applied similar logics and responded to the same signals. This interpretation is further supported by the aforementioned supplementary analyses we conducted (see footnote 8).

It is necessary to give separate attention to the technical efficacy account in interpreting our study's overall pattern of results. The strong form of this perspective holds that reputational

change effectively reduces to performance change. This argument implies that downsizing and other like actions are themselves epiphenomenal. Their effects on reputation should be null once observable measures of performance change are accounted for. We believe our results very effectively refute this argument. We found that downsizing exerted a strong and independent effect after controlling for the powerful measures of performance change discussed above.

The weak form of this argument is considerably more difficult to evaluate. It merely implies that audiences will respond positively to actions that they *believe* will enhance future performance. We neither claim nor aspire to refute this interpretation. However, we do wish to make two important comments about it. First, it hinges on the notion that audiences have beliefs about the efficacy of particular practices that are, at least to some extent, independent of observable performance data. Second, it becomes deeply entangled with other explanations when we attempt to apply it empirically. Evaluators who are “ultimately concerned” with performance may form their beliefs about the efficacy of a practice as a direct result of the cultural processes featured in the symbolic conformity perspective. Similarly, they may revile opportunistic firms because they believe they are likely to be bad investments or business partners. It is because of these complexities that we focused on the strong form argument in developing our competing hypotheses. That argument has clear empirical implications that are readily separable from the other two. Some of our results might be interpreted as consistent with the weak form explanation. However, we are reluctant to embrace it, because it says nothing about the ultimate source of beliefs regarding downsizing’s efficacy, and because it makes assumptions about actors’ motivations that we cannot directly verify. Neither of the other two explanations denies that evaluators are concerned with technical efficacy. But, they do not

reduce reputational judgments to narrow self-interest, and they have the added advantage of providing insights about why audiences might believe downsizing is or is not efficacious.

While our study is clearly aimed at the reputation literature, it may also have some significant implications for the large literature on downsizing and personnel reductions more generally. Several prior studies have concluded that firms often downsized in order to gain financial constituents' support (Useem, 1993, 1996) and have further emphasized that the practice gained substantial legitimacy as it spread (Lamertz & Baum, 1998; McKinley et al., 1998). Our findings seem to introduce an interesting and ironic wrinkle into this account. Specifically, they suggest that while firms may have *offered* downsizing as a symbol of their cultural conformity and propriety, it was typically *received* in a very different spirit. Flanagan & O'Shaughnessy's (2005) recent study of the (negative) reputational effects of personnel reductions may provide further evidence of this irony. They studied a different sample of firms over a later time period and focused on layoffs, rather than the more specific phenomena of downsizing. Nonetheless, their results were similar in some basic ways to ours, further supporting the idea that audiences may react negatively to actions undertaken with the apparent intention of winning their favor.<sup>9</sup>

Our study's findings may be significantly context-bound. Downsizing was obviously a controversial practice and a somewhat unique one. While other firm decisions may also evoke strong emotional responses, it is likely that technical efficacy and symbolic conformity concerns

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<sup>9</sup> Flanagan and O'Shaughnessy (2005) did not explicitly engage the institutional literature on downsizing's diffusion and legitimation, and they also did not consider the reputation as character perspective that our study centrally features and supports. Rather, they offered an explanation that approximates the weak form technical efficacy view. Specifically, they suggested that audiences responded negatively to layoffs because they believed they typically had negative performance results. It is also important to emphasize the critical distinction between downsizing and layoffs. We identified over 1000 layoff events in collecting data for this study. Fewer than 10% of these met our criteria for a downsizing (firm-wide, permanent, affecting >1% of employees, strategically oriented vs. capacity balancing). Our theoretical and empirical efforts have focused specifically on this narrower category of events, and would not apply to layoffs, in general.

play a more central role in determining the reputational consequences of many organizational actions. Future research might productively examine how changes in corporate governance, mergers, new product launches and/or the formation of strategic alliances affect reputational change. Such studies could shed further light upon reputational flows, the actions that precipitate them, and the mechanisms underlying reputational change. We believe that our study may provide a useful methodological and theoretical template for such research. It highlights the benefits of fully dynamic designs that examine the time-contingent effects of particular actions. It also demonstrates the gains to be realized by bringing distinct perspectives on reputational change to bear in the effort to explain the effects of a given action. Future studies employing this template may substantially further reputation scholarship and help bridge the gap between reputation theory and related theoretical perspectives, most notably the institutional analysis of organizational legitimacy.

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**Table 1: Summary of Different Accounts of Reputational Change**

<b>Mechanism</b>	<b>Organizational Character</b>	<b>Symbolic Conformity</b>	<b>Technical Efficacy</b>
<b>Basis of Organizational Appeal / Esteem</b>	Perceived trustworthiness and reliability	Conformity to cultural rules, norms and beliefs that exist at the field level	Delivery of outputs valued by audiences (products, services, financial performance)
<b>Assumptions about Audience</b>	Prospective exchange partner looking forward into uncertain future.	Co-participant in larger cultural system or “field.”	“Needy” + narrowly focused on quality and quantity of desired organizational outputs.
<b>Evaluative Logic Used</b>	Firm anthropomorphized and judged on attributed character.	Evaluators employ logic of cultural appropriateness; piecewise evaluation of firm’s actions.	Evaluators employ instrumental logic; firm evaluated based on outputs produced
<b>Attributes of Reputation Enhancing Actions (Signals)</b>	Reveal and affirm character; signal trustworthiness, reliability, commitment	Symbolize conformity with cultural rules, norms and beliefs	Strong Form: Actions are epiphenomenal; Weak Form: Beliefs that actions increase technical efficacy on dimensions valued by audience
<b>Attributes of Reputation Damaging Actions (Signals)</b>	Apparent opportunism; inconsistency with past commitments	Deviate from cultural rules, norms and beliefs	Strong Form: Actions are epiphenomenal; Weak Form: Beliefs that actions decrease technical efficacy on dimensions valued by audience
<b>Theoretical Roots and Relationships</b>	“Old” institutionalism, stakeholder theory, game theory; attribution theory; evolutionary psychology	Neo-institutionalism, symbolic interactionism.	Utilitarian theories in economics and other social sciences

**Table 2: Mean, Standard Deviation and Correlations (n=1232)**

#	Variable	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1	Within-industry ranking (Dep Var)	5.70	2.94																			
2	H1 Downsize (indicator)	.148	.355	-.05																		
3	H2 Downsize * Stock Mkt React	-.241	2.72	.06	-.21																	
4	H3 Downsize * Profitability Change	-.002	.029	-.03	-.24	.09																
5	H4 Downsize * Prior Ranking	.000	1.07	.35	.00	.00	-.13															
6	H5 Downsize * Prevalence	.000	.045	.01	.18	-.25	.06	.03														
7	H6 Downsize * Mkt React * Prevalence	-.030	.284	-.01	-.27	.03	.04	-.08	-.07													
8	H6 Downsize * Profit Chg * Prevalence	.000	.002	.02	.06	.05	-.09	.03	-.27	.08												
9	H7 Downsize * Analysts	.074	.262	-.06	.68	-.14	-.16	-.05	.13	-.18	.04											
10	Prior reputational ranking	5.73	2.93	.88	.05	-.01	-.06	.37	.02	-.04	.02	.02										
11	Profitability Change (t-1 to t)	-.002	.035	.01	-.11	.04	.46	-.06	.03	.01	-.04	-.07	-.07									
12	Profitability Change (t-2 to t)	-.002	.035	.00	-.15	.06	-.21	.03	-.10	.12	.03	-.10	-.04	-.16								
13	Market Capitalization Change (t-1 to t)	.070	.224	.13	-.06	.06	.04	.01	-.06	.01	.04	-.04	.09	.01	.04							
14	Market Capitalization Change (t-2 to t-1)	.070	.241	.15	-.09	-.01	.05	.04	-.05	.05	-.03	-.06	.10	.17	-.01	-.05						
15	Earnings Estimate Change (t-1 to t)	-.065	.169	.12	-.25	.07	.22	-.05	-.02	.07	-.03	-.17	.00	.45	.14	.27	.21					
16	Earnings Estimate Change (t-2 to t-1)	-.072	.163	.16	-.16	.01	.00	.02	-.08	.09	-.01	-.11	.09	-.05	.41	.09	.28	.33				
17	Average ROA 3 yrs	.146	.058	.33	-.07	.06	-.03	.09	-.02	.00	-.03	-.04	.31	-.13	.00	.08	.06	.12	.28			
18	Average Sales Growth 3 yrs	.012	.084	.26	-.17	.01	.10	.08	-.03	.08	-.04	-.11	.23	.02	.13	.18	.28	.18	.37	.26		
19	Firm Size	9.30	.854	.34	.08	-.04	-.03	.11	.04	-.06	.01	.06	.34	-.07	-.10	.04	.06	.07	.08	.13	.20	
20	Announcement prior December	.019	.135	.00	.01	-.02	-.01	-.01	.03	-.04	-.07	.03	.01	-.03	-.08	-.03	-.06	-.07	-.13	-.03	-.04	.10

**Table 3: Rank-Ordered Logistic Regression of influence of Downsizing on Within-Industry Fortune Rankings (n=1232)**

Model ->	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
H1 Downsize	-.71*** (.14)	-.61*** (.13)	-.76*** (.13)	-.83** (.18)	-.80*** (.17)	-.50** (.19)	-.62*** (.17)
H2 Downsize * Stock Market React <sup>10</sup>		.06*** (.02)					.08*** (.02)
H3 Downsize * Profitability Change			-11.9*** (3.5)				-11.9** (4.2)
H4 Downsize * Prior Ranking				.22*** (.04)			.20*** (.05)
H5 Downsize * Prevalence <sup>10</sup>					3.05* (1.71)		3.57* (1.75)
H7 Downsize * Analysts <sup>10</sup>						-.42† (.24)	-.42† (.25)
Prior ranking	.77*** (.04)	.77*** (.04)	.78*** (.04)	.75*** (.04)	.77*** (.04)	.77*** (.04)	.77*** (.04)
Profitability Change <sub>t-1 to t</sub>	.56 (2.17)	.53 (2.14)	3.18 (2.22)	.96 (2.20)	.77 (2.18)	.62 (2.13)	3.60 (2.26)
Profitability Change <sub>t-2 to t-1</sub>	.64 (1.56)	.27 (1.52)	-.18 (1.62)	.55 (1.52)	.51 (1.56)	.65 (1.59)	-1.05 (1.74)
Market Capitalization Change <sub>t-1 to t</sub>	.99** (.32)	.83* (.35)	1.04** (.33)	.98** (.32)	1.02** (.33)	.99** (.32)	.86* (.35)
Market Capitalization Change <sub>t-2 to t-1</sub>	.58 (.52)	.67 (.49)	.48 (.50)	.56 (.52)	.57 (.50)	.58 (.52)	.59 (.47)
Earnings Estimate Change <sub>t-1 to t</sub>	1.68* (.69)	1.62* (.68)	1.75** (.67)	1.70* (.68)	1.74** (.66)	1.70* (.68)	1.80** (.64)
Earnings Estimate Change <sub>t-2 to t-1</sub>	2.05*** (.44)	2.20*** (.43)	2.27*** (.49)	2.12*** (.48)	2.15*** (.44)	2.05*** (.46)	2.56*** (.55)
Average ROA 3 yrs	6.09*** (.96)	6.20*** (.91)	5.91*** (.95)	6.14*** (.95)	6.11*** (.97)	6.05*** (.99)	5.97*** (.88)
Average Sales Growth 3 yrs	.64 (1.01)	.52 (1.02)	.75 (1.03)	.68 (1.01)	.56 (1.00)	.59 (1.02)	.50 (1.03)
Firm Size	.31** (.10)	.34*** (.11)	.33** (.11)	.31** (.10)	.30** (.10)	.31** (.10)	.34*** (.10)
Announcement in prior Dec	-.24 (.67)	-.18 (.61)	-.25 (.64)	-.22 (.62)	-.31 (.69)	-.24 (.66)	-.22 (.55)
Log Likelihood	-492.49	-488.35	-488.26	-487.78	-490.42	-491.75	-476.07

† p < .10, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001, one tailed tests where hypothesis made and result in expected direction, two-tailed tests otherwise.

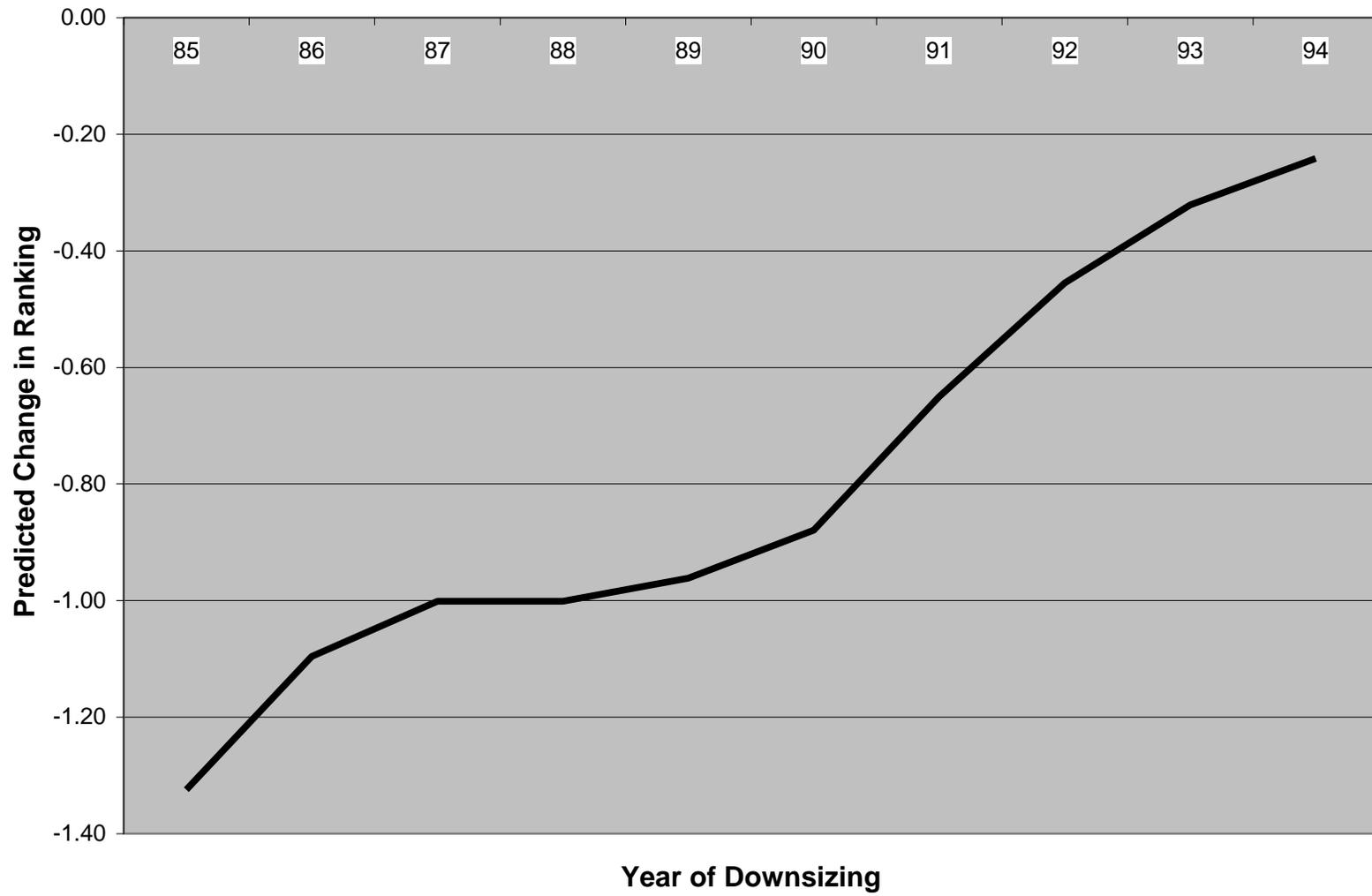
<sup>10</sup> The *Prevalence* and *Analyst* base terms are controlled for through the group structure of the data. Consequently, they (correctly) do not appear in these models. The Analysis section of the text discusses this in more detail. There is also no base term for *Stock Market Reaction*, as this term's definition implies the presence of a downsizing event.

**Table 3 (cont.) : Rank-Ordered Logistic Reg. of influence of Downsizing on Within-Industry *Fortune* Rankings (n=1232)**

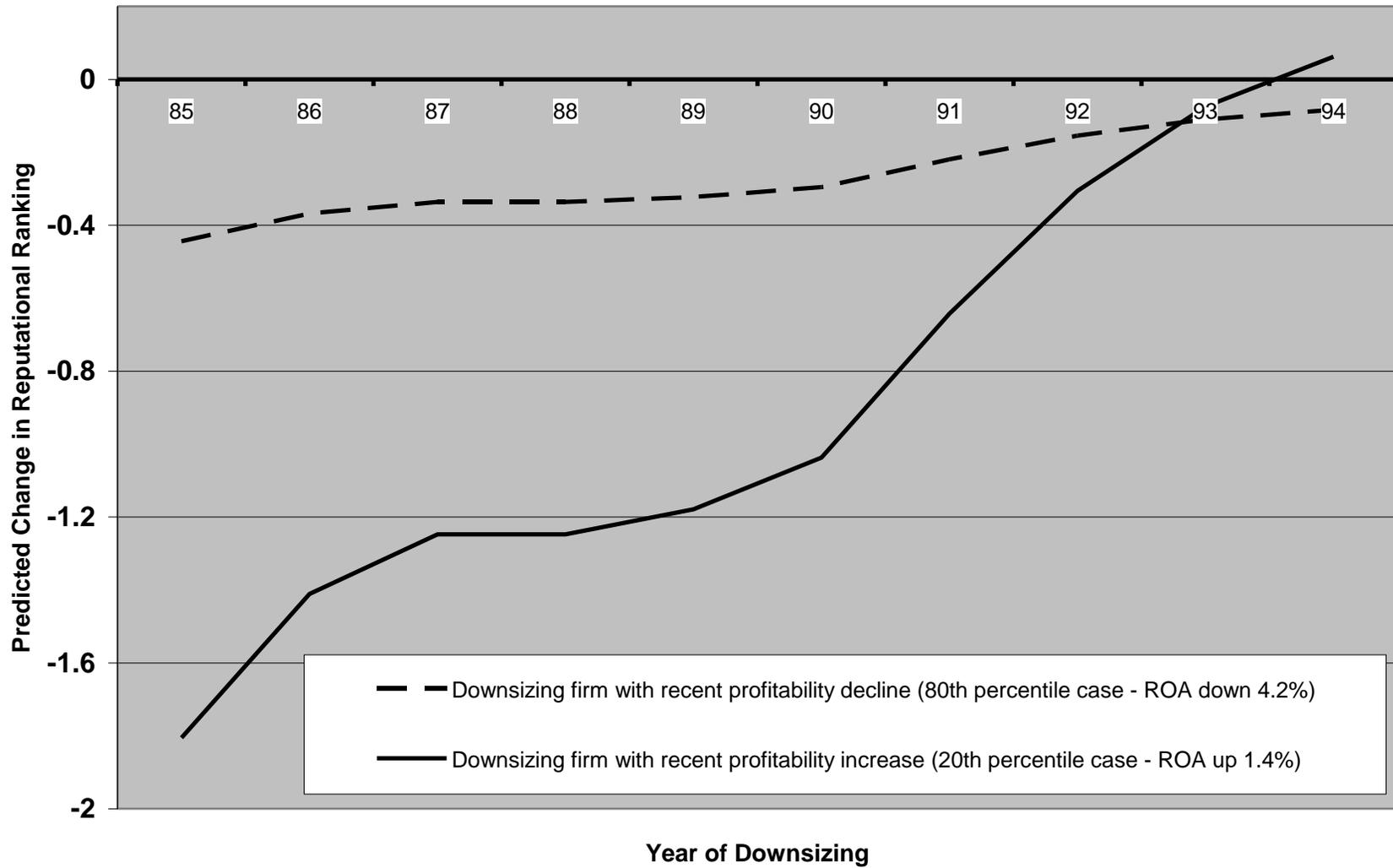
Model ->	7	8	9
H1 Downsize	-.62*** (.17)	-.57** (.19)	-.59*** (.18)
H2 Downsize * Stock Market React	.08*** (.02)	.09*** (.02)	.08*** (.02)
H3 Downsize * Profitability Change	-11.9** (4.2)	-11.5** (4.0)	-10.8*** (3.22)
H4 Downsize * Prior Ranking	.20*** (.05)	.22*** (.05)	.20*** (.06)
H5 Downsize * Prevalence	3.57* (1.75)	3.60* (1.80)	3.78** (1.64)
H7 Downsize * Analysts	-.42† (.25)	-.42† (.25)	-.44† (.26)
H6 Downsize * Mkt React * Prevalence		.21 (.21)	
H6 Downsize * Profit Chg * Prevalence			79.4* (46.6)
Prior ranking	.77*** (.04)	.77*** (.04)	.77*** (.04)
Profitability Change <sub>t-1 to t</sub>	3.60 (2.26)	3.44 (2.25)	3.33 (2.21)
Profitability Change <sub>t-2 to t-1</sub>	-1.05 (1.74)	-.96 (1.74)	-.90 (1.77)
Market Capitalization Change <sub>t-1 to t</sub>	.86* (.35)	.83* (.36)	.90** (.36)
Market Capitalization Change <sub>t-2 to t-1</sub>	.59 (.47)	.58 (.46)	.60 (.46)
Earnings Estimate Change <sub>t-1 to t</sub>	1.80** (.64)	1.81** (.65)	1.80** (.63)
Earnings Estimate Change <sub>t-2 to t-1</sub>	2.56*** (.55)	2.54*** (.54)	2.66*** (.58)
Average ROA 3 yrs	5.97*** (.88)	5.96*** (.88)	6.32*** (.94)
Average Sales Growth 3 yrs	.50 (1.03)	.51 (1.02)	.55 (1.04)
Firm Size	.34*** (.10)	.35*** (.10)	.34*** (.10)
Announcement in prior Dec	-.22 (.55)	-.15 (.53)	-.11 (.67)
Log Likelihood	-476.07	-475.55	-474.12

† p < .10, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001, one tailed tests where hypothesis made, two-tailed tests otherwise. Model 7 is duplicated from previous page for reference.

**Figure 1: Expected change in industry ranking after downsizing**



**Figure 2: Estimated Change in Within-Industry Reputational Ranking after Downsizing**



\* Note that the ROA percentage amounts reflect the 80<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> percentile case of downsizing firm-years within the sample, rather than across the sample as a whole.

## APPENDIX: ALTERNATIVE ANALYSIS

We conducted an alternative analysis in which the dependent variable was the raw *Fortune* ratings, rather than the intra-industry rankings that used in our main analyses. We used the conventional fixed-effects modeling approach in these analyses. The models include the same variables as the best-fitting model in Table 3 (Model 9), and also include dummy variables for each year. We model executives' and analysts' ratings separately in Models 1 and 2, and combine them into a single dependent variable in Model 3. This combined score is the one that *Fortune* actually publishes for each firm. Accordingly, the *n* in all three models is 616, rather than the 1232 in Table 3. The *Downsizing* \* *Analyst* interaction is also omitted, as it cannot be estimated without separate observations for the two groups.

All three models produce results very similar to the main analyses. All hypotheses that were supported in Table 3's analyses receive at least marginally significant support in the first two models of the Appendix. These same hypotheses were all supported at the  $p < .05$  level in the third (published ratings) model. The striking similarities between the two sets of analyses provide strong evidence that the findings of our rank-ordered logistic regression models are robust.

## Appendix Table: Cross-Sectional Time Series Fixed Effects Models of influence of Downsizing on *Fortune* Reputational Ratings

Model ->	1	2	3
Dependent Variable ->	Executives' Ratings Only	Analysts' Ratings only	Combined (Published) Ratings
H1 Downsize	-.18*** (.04)	-.30*** (.06)	-.21*** (.04)
H2 Downsize * Stock Market React	.009** (.005)	.010† (.007)	.011** (.005)
H3 Downsize * Profitability Change	-2.31** (.95)	-1.73† (1.33)	-2.27** (.95)
H4 Downsize * Prior Ranking	.07* (.04)	.12* (.05)	.20*** (.05)
H5 Downsize * Prevalence	.46† (.35)	.81* (.48)	.74* (.34)
H6 Downsize * Profit Chg * Prevalence	16.6* (8.3)	28.9** (11.4)	22.3** (8.1)
Prior ranking	.66*** (.03)	.49*** (.03)	.66*** (.03)
Profitability Change <sub>t-1 to t</sub>	1.36** (.52)	1.07 (.71)	1.25* (.51)
Profitability Change <sub>t-2 to t-1</sub>	-.14 (.47)	-.39 (.64)	-.04 (.46)
Market Capitalization Change <sub>t-1 to t</sub>	.17* (.07)	.28** (.10)	.18** (.07)
Market Capitalization Change <sub>t-2 to t-1</sub>	.27*** (.06)	.32*** (.09)	.27*** (.06)
Earnings Estimate Change <sub>t-1 to t</sub>	.28* (.11)	.81*** (.16)	.48*** (.11)
Earnings Estimate Change <sub>t-2 to t-1</sub>	.52*** (.12)	.48*** (.16)	.48*** (.11)
Average ROA 3 yrs	2.48*** (.57)	2.84*** (.77)	2.28*** (.56)
Average Sales Growth 3 yrs	.31 (.25)	-.19 (.34)	.06 (.25)
Firm Size	-.19* (.08)	-.04† (.11)	-.15† (.08)
Announcement in prior Dec	-.07 (.10)	.17 (.14)	.04 (.10)
n	616	616	616

† p < .10, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001, one tailed tests where hypothesis made and result in expected direction, two-tailed tests otherwise. Year dummies included but not shown.