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## **The silent and shameful suffering of bosses: layoffs in SME**

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**Abstract:** Of all the decisions that managers of SME have to make, laying off someone is the most difficult as well as the hardest to live with. Layoffs are often seen as a personal failure with mental and psychological consequences that can be disastrous for both the person laid off and the employer responsible. Curiously, the suffering experienced by the employer is never mentioned in the SME context. The works in human resources management that deals with layoffs tend to focus on the employees laid off and on employees who escape layoff. There are also studies of the 'blues' felt by human resources managers (HRM) when they have to implement a downsizing policy. But few studies on SME (not to say none at all) take any interest in the psychological impact this decision has from the point of view of the employer, the SME owner.

**Keywords:** layoff; suffering; SME owner; human resource manager; proximity.

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### **1 Introduction**

This paper has two aims. First, we will try to explain the reason why there are so few studies on this subject. It may indeed seem rather curious, or even incredible, that after more than 50 years of research into SME within the ICSB, with almost 40 journals specialising in business management and SME, analysis of this phenomenon should be so disregarded and neglected. Secondly, we will show to what extent proximity, for us the founding principle of SME management (Torrès, 2004a, 2004b), is a characteristic that amplifies feelings of suffering in a layoff context. We will also evoke the fundamental

difference with large companies, in which layoffs are made in the context of the division of tasks which allow the decision-makers to protect themselves.

## **2 The lack of research into the suffering of employers in SME: towards an explanation**

Why has this subject never been covered in research? All researchers know that it is surprising when a subject has never been covered in research, but in this case the surprise is that much greater given that laying people off is almost certainly the hardest decision to make and the hardest to live with for the owner of an SME. How can it be that until now, no one (to our knowledge) has had the idea of investigating this question?

There are two research communities that should have been interested in this question. The first is the community that focuses on Human Resources Management. In this field, there are many studies on the subject of layoff. If we look at those that focus more specifically on the suffering, or even traumatic, aspect of layoff, two main areas are covered.

The *first area* is the trauma experienced by the employees laid off. Research shows that these employees suffer not just from the loss of their job, and thus the loss of their salary, but also from their loss of status. In certain cases, being laid off is the first stage in a descent into hell where the employee who loses his job subsequently loses his wife, his family and his home. This type of spiral is all too real and many researchers use the term 'victim' (Brockner et al., 1994; Skarlicki et al., 1998). Similarly, many works insist on the feelings of trauma experienced by those who escape downsizing policies. This is what US authors refer to as the survivor theory (Brockner et al., 1992, 1994; Noer, 1993; Fabre, 1997; Armstrong-Stassen, 2004). This theory shows that employees who remain with a company also suffer from guilt complexes ("why him and not me?"). Like survivors of accidents, employees can experience considerable suffering following the layoff of a colleague (Noer, 1993; Hughes, 2000). Other works show that efficacy and motivation at work tend to decline following layoffs.

The *second area* plus rarement evoked in HR literature is the blues felt by the human resources managers (HRM), the person most often considered to be responsible for implementing the layoff decision (the 'downsizing agents'). These studies are the closest to the subject of our research (the suffering experienced by employers). Some articles (Clair et al., 2006) and books (Pivert, 2004; Courpasson, 2006; Palpacuer et al., 2007) provide accounts of the profound distress sometimes felt by certain HRM when confronted with layoff policies. According to Noer (1993, p.11), "human resource people often seem to exhibit a 'Judas complex'". But these works have one serious limitation with regard to our viewpoint. HRM are rarely those who make the decisions. At most, they participate collectively in the decision-making process when they are allowed to sit on the group's board of directors or executive board. They are never, however, entirely responsible for the decision. This is a key difference with SME. In SME, it is generally the owner himself who both makes the decision and implements it. This, in our opinion, is a specificity that deserves another approach and which justifies analysis of the suffering felt by the person laying someone off, when this person is the owner of an SME.

Under these conditions, another research community could have taken an interest in this question. This is the community specialising precisely in research into SME. There

are many SME-based journals, and several research networks (ICSB, ECSB, AIREPME...) (Torrès, 2007). If we take the example of the review of doctoral theses presented in France in the period 1975–2006, we have been able to identify only 26 theses with the field of HRM as their subject out of a total of 383. But of these 26 theses, the question of layoff is not mentioned once, or at least not in the title. As the purpose of a title is to inform the reader of the main subject of the doctoral research, this means that at best the question of layoff is mentioned only in a secondary and/or indirect manner. This gives rise to two remarks: on the one hand, theses alone do not make it possible to establish a review of the literature on a given subject. It is necessary to extend the research to journals. Secondly, this lack concerns only France. It is thus necessary to extend the research to work from other countries. Nevertheless, despite these two limitations, we remain greatly surprised by the total absence on this subject, given the considerable mass of theses presented (383 in 30 years). Another interesting source is the *RIPME*. This journal dates back to 1988. Once again, we observe a total lack of articles on the subject of layoff. This fact is more disturbing than the first for two reasons: first, the *RIPME* has a resolutely international readership. Despite being written in French, this review published by the Université de Québec à Trois Rivières has always been capable of considerable internationality. This aspect thus makes it possible to observe that the lack of work focusing on layoff is not particular to the French scientific community. The second is that journals publish articles by young yet confirmed researchers. This means that this aspect is also ignored by experienced researchers, which is even more surprising.

In the end, the HRM community does take an interest in layoffs, but rarely in the context of SME<sup>1</sup> and the community specialising in studying SME obviously takes an interest in SME but rarely studies the question of layoffs. It is this intersection that justifies our research aim and our surprise in equal measure. How has the SMEist community been able to develop over so many decades without evoking this essential question of employer suffering during layoff policies in SME? Could it be because of the psychologising nature of the concept of suffering? Is this perhaps the most valid explanation, given that it is true that the work done on SME is essentially anchored in the fields of management and economic science? The summary of the doctoral theses presented in France shows that of the 383 theses, 233 were presented in management and 90 in economics. Psychology enters into only five theses, which corresponds to barely more than 1% of all theses. Veciana (2008) shows that the importance of psychology in research into entrepreneurship/SME developed within the European Council for Small Business (ECSB) has declined considerably and now corresponds to only 3% of all current approaches. The SMEist community has few ties with psychological issues and has thus never approached this question.

“Although the question of domination and suffering is a key aspect in human sciences, within the field of management we are obliged to note that it has often been pushed to the periphery, if not totally removed, in favour of more harmonious conceptions of interests and highly functional visions of power. From a historical point of view, it is essentially researchers from outside the world of management who have focused on this type of issue”. [Chanlat, (1999), p.52]

The question of suffering in SME nevertheless remains essential. Many conferences within the business owner community have taught me that laying someone off is the single most difficult decision for the owner of an SME to make<sup>2</sup>. Obviously, it is often difficult for an employer to innovate, open up at the international level, hire new

employees, borrow money, invest in new machinery and so on. But none of these issues imply the same emotional impact as the decision to make layoffs. A layoff is the equivalent of a broken link. In SME, interpersonal links are much stronger than in large companies for reasons associated with the proximity of those involved. In SME, people see each other more often than in large companies. People work together, often on a daily basis, whilst in large companies, even if the same types of link can be found within a single department or factory, the reasoning is that of the group as a whole. Most employees do not see each other and do not even know each other. The degree of intimacy of their human relations is not the same. And this is precisely why these aspects make all the difference.

### **3 Proximity as a factor that amplifies the suffering of an employer in times of layoff**

In order to understand how SME function, it is necessary to abandon the agentic-state in which SME are based on the agency theory or the agentic-state described by Stanley Milgram. Although the agentic-state model corresponds to large companies, where there are strong divisions of work, it is considerably less valid in SME.

The owner of an SME who makes the decision to make layoffs cannot use the “it’s not my fault” discourse. It is precisely in SME that the principle of responsibility is total, and wholly assumed by a single person: the director-owner. The lack of dissociation between the function of owner and that of director is what gives SME their particularity. It also gives the decision to make layoffs a much more personal, and, as a result, much more traumatic, aspect. Directors of SME cannot hide behind disempowering arguments. Of course, they can always, and often do, invoke their impotence with regard to a given economic climate, but what they cannot do is say or insinuate that the decision to make layoffs comes from someone else.

In the context of large companies or groups, the justification process is completely different, and it is this difference that, in our opinion, is the real basis for the true nature of SME in relation to large companies. In two interviews with layoff decision-makers, Pivert (2004) highlights the layoff management mechanism. Here, we retrace several comments that show how the degree of proximity modifies the perceptions and practices of layoffs: in one of these comments, the layoff decision-maker shows clearly that the way of approaching the question is different depending on whether there is proximity or distance in relation to the person being laid off:

“The closer we are to the work in the field, the more we have to act in an operational manner. When we remain at a certain distance, the dimensions and implications are not the same. That is, when we are at the head office and have to work on a layoff plan that concerns decentralised factories, we have distance and we can act much more dogmatically. It is not the same when you are working in the field and you have, right in front of you, both employee representatives and the employees themselves or the local administrations, that is, all the people involved in a layoff policy.” [Pivert, (2004), p.29]

Proximity, which is here taken in terms of face-to-face contact, seems to be much more painful than distance. If the group’s strategy is justified, it is nevertheless difficult to transpose it into actions, particularly when you are familiar with the people concerned.

“The most difficult thing is the human aspect. This is a factory where I have become very involved with the employees. It is in the country, I know all the people, they are my neighbours, people from the same village as me... it is the whole human dimension. And it is difficult to tell yourself that by applying the criteria for choice in layoffs, it will be so-and-so who has to go because there will inevitably be a time when the decision we have to make becomes completely personalised, even if it is collective....” [Pivert, (2004), p.33]

Yet, the most basic of life skills is the ability to face reality, that is, to meet physically with the people who are being laid off. Those who have laid people off almost always describe this moment as painful:

“The decision made with the director of the factory was that I should see each person we were intending to lay off. The idea was that we did not want the foreman or the shop foreman to be the one who broke the news. This was a choice that we made in relation to the people involved. It was more honourable that the person facing them, the one breaking the news, its consequences and its context, be someone who had been involved in the decision-making process. What we wanted to avoid at all costs was a situation in which someone told them, ‘OK, so I have to tell you, you are going to be laid off, but you have to understand, it is not my decision, it comes from the bosses’. We really wanted them to have the chance to meet – even if we were not totally responsible for the decision-making process as the layoff plan was imposed on us – with those who were closest to them in the factory, who had been involved in the decision-making process and who would be following through with the layoff plan until its conclusion.” [Pivert, (2004), p.36]

This comment reveals the whole ambivalence of the layoff process in large companies. On the one hand, the person who lays others off seems to take responsibility for the decision in association with the directors, by refusing that the foremen or shop foremen (the proximity managers) be those who deal with the process. This process makes provision for a meeting with someone ‘who participated in the decision’ so as to avoid any type of evasive technique. The person making the layoff decision says that his aim is to avoid situations where someone says, “I have to break the news of your layoff to you, but it wasn’t my decision, it was the big bosses”. Yet, just a few phrases later, this same person recognises that he was not “really responsible for the decision-making process” himself. The fact is that even if we are willing to accept responsibility for the decision-making, this acceptance is never more than partial. And it is this partial nature that eases one’s conscience and makes it possible to face up to harsh reality. If we draw analogies with the military sphere, it could be said that those who lay people off are like the members of a firing squad who know that they are going to kill someone but who also know that the decision that caused the situation in which they find themselves is not of their making. Better (or worse) still, they also know, because it is a common practice found in armies all over the world, that certain members of the squad have blanks in their rifles without anyone knowing who has real bullets and who has blanks. That blank bullet eases the conscience of the poor soldier enlisted in the firing squad.

None of these mechanisms (evasion, circumvention...) can be used in the case of SME. The person who manages the layoff programme is also the decision-maker. “Management of employment (hiring, promotions, layoffs) is a priority matter for HRM, regardless of the size of the SME” (Mahé de Boislandelle, 1988). This type of management is in most cases the responsibility of the owner himself, who has, on principle, rather centralised decision-making powers in this field [Fabre, (1994), p.151]. In SME, it is generally the owner, and the owner alone, who makes this decision. We can

thus understand, at that moment and in that situation, the full burden on the decision-maker and its corollary, his isolation and solitude. For sure, it can be imagined that there is a learning curve. The first layoff decision is apparently the one that is the most disturbing. With experience, we can imagine that owners develop a certain familiarity. Although this familiarity is quite real, it is nevertheless not an antidote to the suffering caused by having to lay off someone close. And this is precisely the theory that we are putting forward (Torrès, 2004a, 2004b): everyone is close to everyone in SME. In other words, the smaller the company, the more common the ties between the members of the company, and thus the stronger. It is when such a tie is broken that there is trauma on both sides. Or, whether you are the person laid off or the person who made the layoff decision, dealing with layoff in SME is in all cases more traumatic for both parties. The feeling of betrayal may be stronger. Employees are never really surprised when their factory is sold to another industrialist in the context of a multinational takeover. But when an owner sells his company to another owner, the employees often have feelings of abandonment and thus betrayal. Several SME owners have told us that they cut all ties with their former employees once the company had been sold to someone else. This phenomenon is even more obvious (and unsurprising) in cases where the relationships were very good. And it is precisely because the relationships were good that the feeling of betrayal is stronger.

Proximity between those involved thus makes layoff management more traumatic than in large companies. Although the trauma theory for those laid off is common (almost all the literature in HRM on this subject is from this point of view), on the contrary the trauma suffered by the one who lays people off has never (to our knowledge, at least) been covered. This aspect nevertheless seems to us to be a particularly useful avenue for research, at several levels. In human terms, it would be a shame to let it be believed that the decision-makers for layoffs are people incapable of feeling any type of symbolic or psychological suffering. It is essential that we take leave of the executioner/victim metaphor, or, if not, that we at least consider that the executioner is nevertheless a living and breathing human being, full of feelings, emotions, remorse and regret.

It is absolutely not our intention to suggest that there is no suffering involved in layoff decisions in large companies. Both of the comments made to Pivert (2004) are highly eloquent on this subject. One of the layoff managers stated that, "the hardest part is the actual departure of the person, when the facts are announced" [Pivert, (2004), p.79]. The second comment is even clearer. In response to the question, "Humanly speaking, how does it feel the very first time?", the answer is crystal clear: "For me, it is simple: I spent night after night going through the list of people in my mind. I could not sleep. It was a terrible experience...". But unlike the owner, whose role is to develop his company in every respect, the role of the HRM is more limited and circumscribed. In the context of layoff,

"the role of the HRM is effectively to respond to the requirements of the company that have led to this need to suppress jobs, but it is also to respond to the needs of the people concerned, their expectations, their worries, by searching for everything possible to help them reclassify themselves, everything that may help them materially and psychologically to get through the difficult moment". [Pivert, (2004), p.43]

In other words, although layoff is an inhabitual management situation for a company owner (at least this is what we hope), it can become a somewhat common task for the

HRM in a large group. And this, to such an extent that groups use space to do the 'dirty deeds'. Palpacuer et al. (2007) evokes a mechanism that is particular to large companies:

"Today in businesses, there is management of the managers (top managers) but there is no longer management of the executive managers. So yes, the management of the top managers is very well done. Much thought is given to where they should go. A director for X that goes abroad will certainly have a brilliant career when he comes back to France (...). The same is true for directors who arrive in satellite companies. When they arrive, everyone says, OK, this guy will be here for a couple of years, he will do some spring cleaning and then he will be gone. But they know that behind this, they have no need to worry about him. In other words, he has been sent there to get rid of people and will then move on to his next place." [Palpacuer et al., (2007), p.187]

Finally, let us take the account made by a HR executive who was sent by a group to Toulouse to put into action a layoff plan. As he knew no one, he did his job to the best of his ability until he could take it no longer (his nickname was 'the cleaner') and sent in his resignation after six months. It has to be said that by that time, the employees were no longer unknown to him. The group's reaction was to refuse to accept his resignation and instead transfer him somewhere else. Another place, another custom! By making use of localisation tactics for executive layoff managers, groups can use geographical space to play a decisive role in the implementation of layoff policies<sup>3</sup>.

In the same register, the owner of an SME has confessed to me that he was unable to find the strength to tell his secretary that she was being laid off. He took advantage of her annual holiday leave to send her a letter informing her of the news. We are not here to analyse this act at the moral level. We will simply show that this was a trick to avoid an unpleasant face-to-face encounter. Once again, space, proximity and distancing can be used to explain these situations. Another account tells the story of a secretary that two associate managers wanted to lay off. In order to make the act psycho-compatible with their own consciences, they looked for a job for her and found one at the general council. The secretary, however, refused the job. It was then that the managers asked one of their colleagues to lay off the secretary because the colleague did not know her as well as the other two. In this case, it was resorting to a third party that made the layoff process easier.

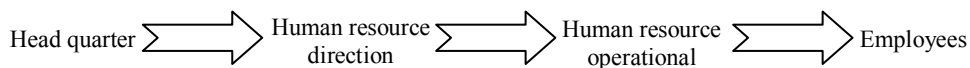
Let us now risk a metaphor that is well known in military circles: it is always more traumatic to kill someone with blade than with a rifle. The fundamental difference lies precisely in the degree of proximity between the victim and his executioner. In the case of a rifle, the target is a certain distance away. It is probably not possible to hear the victim's voice. If you stand back a little, the victim's face is probably not very clear and he becomes more or less anonymous... In the case of a blade, contact is necessary. You must touch your victim, surround him, listen to him, sense him... and in the end you see the face of the person you have killed! This makes all the difference because it is precisely the victim's face that will ceaselessly haunt the nights of his killer. Soldiers have known this for a long, long time<sup>4</sup>. Killing someone with a blade during hand-to-hand combat is the most difficult and the most traumatising act. If we look at the work by Milgram (1974) on obedience to authority, the author clearly showed that the degree of physical proximity between the victim and the participant played a considerable part in the participant's ability to obey the orders given by the experimenter. The closer the participant was to the victim, the stronger the probability that he would refuse to inject the electricity. By varying the number of senses called upon (physical contact, sight, hearing...), Milgram showed that the degree of consciousness of the act's

seriousness lessens with distance. The parallel with layoffs in SME or in large companies seems defensible here. Laying people off in a large company is never an easy thing to do, but doing so in an SME, given the proximity between those involved, has consequences similar to those of having to stab someone to death!

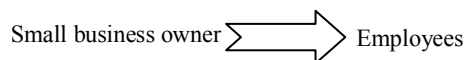
Let us now look at some examples of the trauma experienced by those obliged to lay people off in the context of SME. Mr. Jacky V. is the founder and director of a small printing company in Montpellier in the south of France. Today, the company has around 20 employees. In the course of an interview, Mr. V. recounted his first experience of laying off someone:

“I had a handicapped employee. On two occasions, I lent him money because his son had drug problems (20,000 French francs, twice, a total of around 6,000 Euros). A few days after I lent him the second sum of money, he arrived at work with a brand new motorbike! I have to say I was very surprised. Another time, I offered to take all my staff to Courchevel on a ski trip. In general, I pay for everything for my employees. I have even bought them gloves sometimes, if they did not have any. For one such trip, one of my employees could not come, so I decided to give him a bonus of the amount spent per head on the trip for the others. Just then, my handicapped employee came and asked me to pay him the same amount. This employee had always had an opportunistic streak, in fact. Until the day I found out that he had been stealing from the company. After sacking him, the employee in question went to the unfair dismissal tribunal, which sentenced me to a fine of 14,000 Euros because I had not sent a letter to the social organisations to try and reclassify his post, which was a handicapped person’s post. On appeal, the fine was brought down to 7,000 Euros. But the truth of the matter is that the day I sacked him, I went back into my office, closed the door (which I normally leave open) and I started to cry.”

A director who cries is a rare sight and is the sign of trauma. Today, Jacky V. is a member of the Confédération Générale des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises (CGPME, a French trade union for SME owners) and states that thanks to his contact with the union, he is able to ‘subcontract’ layoff policies as a means of protecting himself. Another account goes in the sense of trauma caused by the decision to lay off someone. Didier D. is a journalist and managing director of a business economics monthly magazine in the Rhone-Alps region. He stated that he had to consult a doctor after making his first layoff decision. He was told his heart rate was 150–160 beats per minute. Two months later, he had to have heart surgery. He personally believes that there is a cause and effect relationship. Although several works show that the health of people laid off tends to worsen (Hughes, 2000), we suggest that the health of a director of an SME who has to lay someone off can also worsen following the decision, often experienced as something difficult.



**Distance process of layoff  
in big business**



**Proximity process of layoff  
in small business**



#### **4 Isolation as a factor that amplifies an employer's suffering the face of layoffs**

One of the particularities of SME that we have mentioned is proximity. A second particularity associated with SME is the isolation, not to say solitude, of the owners (Gumpert and Boyd, 1987). Psychologists have shown that collective examination juries tend to give a wider range of marks than when there is just one corrector. It is said to be the obligation of assuming a decision that incites people who are isolated to minimise the risks. It can therefore be supposed that the same is true of decisions to lay off someone. An HR manager is rarely alone at the precise moment at which he must put the layoff into practice. He can talk to a number of colleagues with the same job and who can sympathise with any doubts he may have. Similarly, the director of a large company is covered by the collective nature of the decisions made by his board of directors or executive board. Big bosses are rarely isolated. They are surrounded by a multitude of other directors and senior executives who can help support them in the making of this type of decision. This collegial structure is not common in SME, and even less so in very small companies. Directors often find themselves alone when it comes to making layoff decisions and it is difficult for them to talk to their other employees given that their natural stance would be to unite behind the person being laid off rather than behind the one making the decision. It can thus be supposed that the decision to lay someone off is an extreme decision that is only envisaged as a last resort. We can thus then imagine quite well that there are SME that have gone out of business because the owner lacked the courage to lay employees off in time. This is why Boyd and Gumpert (1983, p.48) recommend "sharing experiences with other business owners. By listening to the successes and failures of others, we acquire greater objectivity, and this is eminently beneficial". Several members of the Centre for Young Managers (CJD), a French movement for business owners, emphasised the advantage of work groups organised by owner associations in the form of 'mirror commissions'. The question of layoff is often at the very heart of their discussions.

#### **5 Conclusions**

This article is a plea in favour of future research into the suffering of employers. The absence of work on the suffering of employers is a serious problem as it could allow us to believe that this absence means that the owners of SME have no feelings and do not suffer when they have to lay someone off. This could lead us to seeing owners as 'cold-hearted monsters' who have no compassion for the suffering of their now-redundant former employees. Even if no one has written anything of the kind, the total absence of research into the suffering felt by those obliged to lay people off nevertheless gives the impression that this is an aspect that simply does not exist.

There is, however, a certain truth that needs to be reestablished. Let us give justice to all the men and women, owners of SME, who, for reasons as varied as market pressure or the fact of serious professional malpractice on the part of an employee, have been obliged to make this difficult decision. For it is never easy to let go someone you have worked alongside for years, even decades. It is not easy to have to announce this decision face-to-face, looking the person right in the eyes. It is not easy to have to recognise your own failings, because laying off an employee also means changing your mind,

recognising that perhaps you made a mistake when you hired the person, or that you decided to hire someone despite insufficient progress in your turnover. Owners can have very strong feelings of guilt at the idea that they are the sole person responsible for the situation. It is not easy to have to face up to this type of event in a small company where all the other employees are sometimes even an audience that hears and sees all that goes on. It is difficult in the confined space of an SME to escape the presence of the other employees, who thus become spectators, perhaps even in the eyes of certain people, the accomplices of a difficult situation. Is the owner's social responsibility not at stake here? Let us not forget the suicide of Pierre Jallate, the founder of a small, family-run shoe factory, who could not bear to see the company, which had been sold to an US group a few years earlier, totally delocalise its production from the village of Saint Hippolyte du Fort in the south of France. This suicide shows to what extent the owners of SME are much more than merely company directors. They are sometimes also the main employer in a village. Even if this is not their aim, they become notable figures in their community. This symbolic status creates obligations and reinforces the social responsibility of the owners of small companies. In such circumstances, laying someone off brings this status into doubt. The ex-employer becomes a neo-layoff-maker. This changes the way others regard him. The smaller the village in which the SME is situated (a point that is very common in France, which has 36,000 towns and villages), the greater the shock wave provoked by the announcement that there will be layoffs. The shock wave can even result in dramatic events that are difficult to overcome. To what extent will the owner's children suffer at school as a result of this? Do the owner's children not now become the children of he-who-lays-people-off? The children of those laid off may perhaps be at school with the owner's children. How will these children react in the school playground? If the employee loses his status of employee, does he-who-lays-people-off not also lose his status of employer, given that he is no longer employing?

The suffering of business owners is something they themselves rarely admit to and something that specialists ignore. As such, it is a terra incognita, at the intersection of many concerns that have never overlapped. This suffering, as ignored by researchers as it is disowned by business owners, is nevertheless a very real subject. The suffering of business owners exists, and to deny it would be a serious mistake. Stress, anxiety, pressure, fear of the future, the burden of responsibility, overwork... all these are symptoms generally considered by specialists in workplace medicine as factors that increase workplace risks. How is it possible to not take into account this reality in the context of business owners, where the directors of SME are constantly confronted by these risk factors? Recognising the existence of this form of suffering would be a first step, and would be of a certain comfort. After all, before being a social phenomenon, suffering is above all human.

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## Notes

- 1 With the notable exception of Fabre (1993, 1994) in France.
- 2 It should be noted that bankruptcy is nevertheless even more cruel.
- 3 This example alone shows how geographical space can be used as a resource for a company. It is quite rare for the 'resource-based' theory to take the spatial variable into account when analysing a company's resources.
- 4 Konrad Lorenz shows the importance of the dehumanising process with regard to the enemy in times of war. In order to make elimination of the enemy easier, all armies tend to assimilate the enemy with animals as, psychologically, this makes physical acts of elimination easier. Continuing in the same vein, Pierre André Julien, during a discussion in Halifax (Canada) at the *53rd International Council for Small Business (ICSB)*, remarked to me that it is often considered that the most terrible wars are civil wars as it is in such wars that brothers are pitted against brothers and fathers against sons. Can we not here notice once again that it is the proximity between those fighting that seems to make civil wars so hard to accept? Similarly, we should also highlight the spatial consequences of technological progress in weaponry. What remains constant is the search for weapons of increasingly long range. From primitive handheld weaponry for cavemen, to spears, the bows and arrows, then the catapult, rifles, canons, and finally missiles, with, as the climax, inter-continental missiles (the famous 'star wars' programme). The French sociologist, Georges Friedmann, in his analysis of the industrial society made a remark along similar lines: "Man was present in war, he could see his enemy, fought with him man-to-man, shot arrows at him, threw things at him from a limited distance. Fighting brings into play different trends, different psychomotor functions in modern wars where the individual, enclosed in machines either on or in the ground, in or on the water, in the air, must often fight from a great distance, against largely invisible enemies (or visible, or audible, only with the help of sophisticated equipment): trenches, tunnels, mines, long-range canons, long-distance explosions or time bombs, high altitude bombing, submarines and torpedos, atom bombs, and so on. As the technical war moves ever closer to total war, it has gone increasingly beyond the presence and the dimensions of man" [Friedmann, (1972), p.35–36]. Today, a considerable amount of military research is even concentrated on drones (aeroplanes with no pilot). On this subject, Laurent Zecchini (2008, p.23) wrote in the newspaper *Le Monde*: "Such technological prowess is not everything: the fact of being able to control a predator over Iraq or Afghanistan from a launch site on the ground situated in Nevada is not without consequence for the evolution of warfare. "Emotional distancing from the battle field certainly implies less stress for the pilot, but also perhaps less restraint in the use of violence", esteems Michel Asencio, a researcher at the Foundation for Strategic Research. He also observes that "the video game culture makes the executives and future decision-makers familiar with the dehumanisation of war". What will the future bring, when the enemy can no longer be seen except by using electronic sensors, that is, without being able to perceive the 'fog of war' so dear to Clausewitz?"

In his masterful analysis of aggression, Lorenz (1974) defends the idea that the appearance of weapons in the animal kingdom goes hand in hand with inhibited behaviour: "Why are dogs inhibited from biting the throat, or crows from pecking a friend's eye, and why is the wood pigeon not protected against dastardly crimes? We cannot give this question an answer of real causality. It would certainly be a historical explanation of the past during which these inhibitions were phylogenetically formed, as the dangerous weapons of the hunting animals developed" [Lorenz, (1974), p.150]. Hence, the fundamental point that Lorenz makes: Man has one specificity: he has invented weapons that are not part of his own body. And from this specificity, he has deduced another characteristic: the absence of the inhibition factor. Yet, "the power of these weapons increases ineluctably and has multiplied in just a few decades" [Lorenz, (1974), p.156]. "We have not received our weapons from nature, we have made them ourselves. What will be quicker: the development of these weapons or that of the feeling of responsibility, inhibition without which our species will be annihilated by its own creations? We must make this inhibition ourselves, because we absolutely cannot allow ourselves to trust our instincts" [Lorenz, (1974), p.156].

