

HOW TENSIONS IN VALORIZING TIME INFLUENCE PLANNED ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

Despite the importance of employees' worktime for the implementation of organizational change, studies on how employees value and reallocate their worktime during change remain rare. To illuminate this important but underexplored issue, we investigated how employees responded to the time requirements of an organizational change initiative in a multidivisional engineering company. Our analysis revealed that the ways in which employees responded to the reallocation of their time – required to implement organizational change – reflected different ways in which they (and their organization) valued time in economic and symbolic terms. Tensions among the time requirements and the valuation of time explain variations in the degree to which employees felt energized in allocating their worktime to the initiative, and more or less influenced the evolution of the planned organizational change.

INTRODUCTION

Strategy and organization scholars have long argued that effective implementation of organizational change requires the mobilization and reallocation of organizational resources (e.g., Barney, 2001; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997). One such valuable and scarce resource is employees' worktime (Bluedorn & Denhardt, 1988). Scholars have posited that how employees reallocate their worktime to change activities influences the timing and pace of the planned change (Kunisch, Bartunek, Mueller, & Huy, 2017). Along these lines, current research has suggested that organizational-level temporal structures (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002), and the way change agents temporally frame planned change (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013) may influence how employees use their worktime during change implementation. Temporal structures are institutionalized time-related frames of reference with which employees interact to relate to time (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002).

Although scholars have started to highlight the importance of temporal structures in organizational change, we still know little about whether and how employees, as change *recipients*, are influenced by temporal structures with regard to allocating their worktime to implement organizational change. Additionally, we know little about how these recipients' behaviors impact change processes and outcomes. Recent reviews of the organizational change literature suggest that more research has focused on how change agents construe and use temporal structures than on how change recipients also engage in this process (Bartunek & Woodman, 2015; Kunisch et al., 2017).

To illuminate these issues, we carried out a real-time, longitudinal case study of the implementation of a planned organizational change initiative at AlphaCorp (a pseudonym). We conducted 77 interviews between March 2018 and September 2019, supplemented with extensive secondary data. Our analysis unpacks the process by which the implementation of a change initiative triggered employees to make sense of how the worktime they reallocated to

support the initiative could generate value for them. The employees considered the impact of change on the economic, social-symbolic, and personal-symbolic value of their worktime. The economic value of time reflects the organizational-level temporal structures that incentivize how employees allocate their time, either through monetary reward or workload allocation. The social- and personal-symbolic values of time reflect temporal structures that employees use to evaluate how their use of time fits with their current or aspirational social role, or with their professional status, respectively. Our study shows how misalignment between the initiative's time requirements and construals of value of time created tensions for employees. Employees who construed that reallocating their worktime to implement the initiative was consistent with their professional status motives displayed change-supporting behaviors. By contrast, employees who construed that reallocating their worktime to implement the initiative was inconsistent with their professional status motives *covertly* did not allocate much time to implement the proposed change. For the organization, variations in the employees' responses led to modification of the time-delivery goals of the proposed change and slowed the pace of its implementation.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Planned organizational change describes the deliberate evolution of an organization "from its present state to a desired future state" (Stouten, Rousseau, & De Cremer, 2018: 752). While planned change is often necessary, its meaningful and sustained implementation remains challenging (Bartunek, Balogun, & Do, 2011; Stouten et al., 2018). Achieving organizational change requires the mobilization and reallocation of resources, including time (Bluedorn & Denhardt, 1988; Das, 1991). Conceiving of time as a scarce resource (Zerubavel, 1981) implies that how employees use their worktime is critical for organizations (Perlow, 1999).

Along these lines, sociologists of time suggest that organizations can control how employees use their worktime (Lewis & Weigert, 1981). First, organizations can do so by producing and reproducing temporal structures (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002) to control how employees "comprehend, orient toward, and coordinate practices" (Rowell, Gustafsson, & Clemente, 2016: 304). Organizational-level temporal structures include "weekly meeting schedules, project deadlines, academic calendars, financial reporting periods, tenure clocks, and seasonal harvests" (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002: 685), among others.

Second, through their 'subjective' temporal perspectives, top managers can also influence employees' temporal practices (Chen & Nadkarni, 2017; Crilly, 2017; Nadkarni, Pan, & Chen, 2019; Souitaris & Maestro, 2010). Top managers can do so by drawing on their own temporal perspectives when they engage in temporal work to link "their interpretations of the past, present, and future so as to construct a strategic account" that enables strategic choice and action (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013: 965). Top managers' temporal work could take various forms, including the specification of an initiative's timeline (Chen & Nadkarni, 2017) and the temporal framing of their organization's competitive announcements (Nadkarni et al., 2019). By employing similar practices, top managers may strategically organize employees' worktime to implement change by mandating employees to reallocate their worktime to new activities (Bluedorn & Denhardt, 1998) or change the temporal patterns of their work (Huy, 2001).

The ability of organizations and top managers to control the use of employees' worktime assumes that the employees' temporal perspectives are aligned with those encapsulated in the organization's temporal structures and with those expressed by top managers (Crossan et al., 2005). However, considering that organizational change unfolds over time (Tsoukas & Chia,

2002), such alignment is likely to be continuously challenged. While organizations can negotiate and resolve conflicts among competing temporal structures (Reinecke & Ansari, 2015), we know little about how employees experience the presence of competing temporal structures during change. Relatedly, employees may equally perceive time allocated to work-related activities as their individual resource (Perlow, 1999) that they can use to serve personal interests (Fine, 1990). Building on this agentic view of how employees perceive and use their time, studies on how employees make “temporal sense” of change initiatives have only just started to emerge (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Wieber, 2010). However, empirical research has been scarce on how employees draw on the organization’s temporal structures and on top managers’ temporal structuring efforts to value their worktime, and how these perceptions influence employees’ receptivity to organizational change (Kunisch et al., 2017).

METHODS

To illuminate these issues, we carried out a real-time, longitudinal case study of the implementation of a planned organizational change initiative at AlphaCorp (a pseudonym) – a multidivisional engineering company headquartered in Europe, employing about 10,000 people. The planned change was initiated in early 2016 and aimed at the full adoption of Design Thinking (DT henceforth) practices by all employees across the business by mid-2019. The change aimed at improving the organization’s innovative capability and increase its strategic differentiation in an increasingly commoditized industry. For this study, we focused on the factors influencing the modification of the time-delivery goals and pace of the planned change.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were our main data source. We interviewed executives who acted as change agents, employees at various managerial levels who were the change recipients, and clients. In total, we conducted 77 interviews in four rounds of data collection between March 2018 and September 2019. We supplemented the interview data with extensive secondary data, including videos, presentations, press articles, web content, forum discussions, and social media content.

Our analysis combined and iterated between procedures for inductive (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and abductive theorizing (Fisher & Aguinis, 2017). We began our analysis by creating a historical account of the change initiative. We then turned to the open coding of textual data from the interviews with the AlphaCorp managers and employees to produce a grounded analysis of the change initiative’s implementation process. During this analytical process, we assigned first-order codes to data that referred to worktime-related issues, including “billable hours,” the time commitment required to adopt DT, and how busy employees were to do so. We further grouped these codes into second-order codes, some of which emerged from the data, such as the “value of time,” while others derived from theory, such as “time as resource.” While iterating extensively among multiple rounds of coding and the relevant literature, we moved toward axial coding to explore the relationships among the second-order codes. We finally used selective coding to combine the emergent constructs and the constructs drawn from the existing literature in a theoretical model.

FINDINGS

The planned change mandating the adoption of DT within AlphaCorp unfolded over three broad phases: initiation, enforcement, and modification. During each phase, we observed

variation in the actions managers took to implement the change initiative, as well as variation in how the employees made sense of and responded to these actions.

Phase 1: Initiation of the Planned Organizational Change

The mandated adoption of DT required that engineers reallocate worktime away from their current engineering work toward DT-related training and practices. Informants consistently and extensively explained that all AlphaCorp's employees were required to undertake DT-related training. While top managers monitored the uptake of DT training, they were flexible with respect to the pace of employees' uptake. In parallel, a group of engineers were upskilled to act as DT facilitators in meetings with clients, and to "embed the design-led approach and process" into all projects. The duration of these workshops ranged from a few hours to a whole week.

The top managers engaged in an array of symbolic and discursive actions to mandate the tight time-delivery goals and the fast pace at which DT needed to be adopted by employees. These goals were set by the CEO who firmly believed that the organization needed to change urgently and that the adoption of DT was fundamental to AlphaCorp's long-term future.

Our analysis revealed that the initiation of the change implementation triggered three significant time-reallocation considerations among employees: the extent to which reallocating their time to the change initiative was consistent with (a) the organization's temporal structures for valuing worktime, (b) their perceived availability of slack time, and (c) their professional status motives.

Specifically, two temporal structures shaped how employees made "temporal sense of the change initiative" (Wiebe, 2010: 235) over and above the executives' sensegiving efforts: AlphaCorp's worktime utilization system and its punctuality system of tight project deadlines and financial reporting periods. These structures reflected AlphaCorp's business and ownership model, as well as the temporal norms characterizing project-based work. First, whereas the organization's temporal structures mandated the allocation of worktime toward "billable hours," allocating time to DT-related activities was widely perceived as "non-billable hours." Furthermore, employees were driven by a high degree of urgency to prioritize the project's short-term needs over the organization's long-term goals. Second, while the executives perceived that there was sufficient slack time to resource the adoption of DT, employees perceived that the executives had not created the required slack time to do so. Third, the salience of the organization's temporal structures over the years had shaped how employees allocated their worktime to serve their professional status motives.

When considering the consistency between the mandated reallocation of employees' worktime to DT and the way they made sense of this demand, employees faced significant tensions in valorizing the extent to which the reallocation of their time to the change initiative would influence the economic, social-symbolic, and personal-symbolic value of their worktime. The economic value of the employees' worktime referred to how each reallocated workhour could generate economic capital for the individual and for AlphaCorp (e.g., "invest our time in getting margin on a project ... in winning work"). By assigning a social-symbolic value to their time, employees treated each reallocated workhour as a means of enhancing their current or aspirational social roles within the organization (e.g., "value goes back to the value of the person or their role" or "the senior people are expensive"). Lastly, by assigning a personal-symbolic value to their time, employees treated each reallocated workhour as a means of enhancing their

current or anticipated professional status or personal identity (e.g., “invest our time in growing ourselves as individuals” or “in working on something in support of the strategy”).

The employees assessed the extent to which time reallocated to the change initiative would increase or decrease the economic, social-symbolic, and personal-symbolic value of their worktime. Moreover, they compared the total value produced by the current allocation of their worktime to the potential value that they anticipated from reallocating their worktime to the change initiative. Our findings indicate that one of the main sources of tension among employees was in valorizing the current reallocation (or non-reallocation) of their worktime to DT in relation to the anticipated benefits or threats to their professional status. This is because employees perceived that their professional status could change (upwards or downwards) by reallocating (or not) their worktime to the change initiative. Potential changes in their professional status included gaining/losing a “promotion or a raise,” scoring well/badly in the organization’s “grading system,” or ensuring/threatening the “safety” of their position.

Phase 2: Enforcement of the Planned Organizational Change

By late 2017, the executives were aware of variations in the full adoption of DT across the business. To enforce the adoption of DT, they introduced a standing requirement for project managers to report on a monthly basis the extent to which DT workshops were being utilized in each project. The establishment of these innovation reporting periods had direct implications for the review of each project, and project managers took this seriously. In parallel, the top managers intensified the development and circulation of stories through AlphaCorp’s internal communication channels showcasing how DT was being employed in well-performing projects. More importantly, by early 2018, the cases of employees being dismissed because they were less receptive to adopting DT had been widely shared within AlphaCorp. Engineers started to fear losing their positions for not visibly demonstrating their engagement in adopting DT.

Our analysis revealed that two broad time-reallocation behaviors emerged among employees, depending on how they valorized their worktime with respect to the planned change. On the one hand, low-status employees and employees who had slack time perceived the reallocation of their time to DT as an opportunity to gain personal-symbolic value and deliver economic value to AlphaCorp. In other words, they perceived the reallocation of their worktime to DT-related activities as a means to gain a promotion, while appearing productive and supportive of the change plan. By contrast, employees who enjoyed high status and who were short on slack time perceived that reallocating their time to DT-related activities would cause losses to their symbolic capital as eminent professionals, and undermine the efficiency and performance of AlphaCorp. Therefore, they avoided reallocating their worktime to DT training and activities, but sought to appear productive and focused on the organization’s goals.

Phase 3: Modification to the Planned Organizational Change

The employees’ uneven reallocation of worktime to adopting DT and the varying quality of their engagement in the DT-related activities caused significant divergence in the implementation of the planned change. Top managers realized that the DT workshops were leading to greater efficiencies and better opportunities to win work when scheduled in the early stages of project design, but not in all stages of a project. It was also becoming clear across the business that employees’ efforts to reallocate their worktime to DT activities when working on

larger projects, rather than on all projects as initially mandated, were creating greater efficiencies for the company. Lastly, the failure to convince senior, eminent engineers to reallocate their worktime to DT limited the institutionalization of DT as the new “status quo” in conducting engineering, as the organizational change plan had envisioned. In parallel, junior-level engineers’ greater reallocation of their worktime to the DT practices had not translated into a substantial generation of economic value.

By the beginning of 2019, the top managers had started to acknowledge employees’ feedback regarding the difficulties they were facing in “translating” DT at the project level. They were also becoming increasingly aware of delays in meeting the organizational change plan’s time-delivery goal and intended pace of implementation. Our analysis revealed that, by early 2019, top managers had begun to adopt a discourse that normalized the delays in implementing the plan, characterizing the delays as inevitable considering the scale and nature of the proposed change. Furthermore, the new discourse described the implementation of the organizational change plan as a “journey,” the temporal depth of which would be in the long-term future. This discourse was in direct contrast to the previously adopted understanding that the organizational change plan had a very specific deadline. Instead, it appeared to alleviate the need to meet the tight time-delivery goal of fully adopting DT by mid-2019, as the pace of implementing the planned change had slowed significantly.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Prior research on organizational change implementation has explored cognitive (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Sonenshein, 2010), political, and emotional (Huy, 2002; Huy, Corley, & Kraatz, 2014; Oreg, Bartunek, Lee, & Do, 2018) factors inhibiting planned change. To date, however, these studies have overlooked the “temporal dimensions of receptivity to and/or resistance to change” (Kunisch et al., 2017: 1043).

Drawing on a real-time, longitudinal case study of the implementation of a planned change initiative within an organization, our study illuminates two important temporal underpinnings of these cognitive, emotional, and political factors. First, we show how change recipients draw on organizational-level temporal structures to make sense of the proposed change in temporal terms. In effect, the organizational-level temporal structures serve as a schema guiding how change recipients evaluate a proposed change, operating over and above the temporal framing and sensegiving efforts of top managers. Second, our study is among the first empirical studies to reveal that variations in how employees make temporal sense of a planned change relate to variations in the intertemporal trade-offs change recipients consider when deciding how best to allocate their worktime in view of the planned change. Our research suggests that these intertemporal trade-offs become core issues around which change recipients focus their immediate attention when considering whether or not to support a proposed change.

Our study also enriches the sociology of time literature by showing how the use of time acquires meaning related to one's position in the stratification system and one's ability to control time (Lewis & Weigert, 1981). Our study shows how the ways employees perceive and use their worktime could distort how employees position the social- and personal-symbolic value of time as equal to, if not more important than, its economic value.

ⁱ Quy N. Huy (INSEAD) and Davide Ravasi (UCL) are acknowledged as co-authors of this paper.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR