Worker Response to Change in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how workers react to changes in everyday work procedures. Employees in an on-campus administrative unit were surveyed for their responses to the change from a Macintosh to a PC computing system. Three underlying themes were extracted from the employee responses. These themes consisted of: 1) variations in learning time; 2) a false consensus bias; and, 3) complexity issues. Implications for management are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Our world is in a state of constant change. As changes occur, those affected must learn to adapt. There are many aspects of one’s life that can change. One very critical concern to social and behavioral scientists is the impact of change on one’s career or job. When a worker deals with change in the workplace, there is an inevitable reaction both in the workplace and other areas of one’s life. Regardless of its nature, and whether the response is positive or negative, it is automatic.

Reactions to change have been of interest to researchers for many years. Holmes and Rahe (1967) studied the effects of change in life events on individuals. Events examined ranged from the death of a spouse, to marriage and divorce, to minor violations of the law. These are all events that somehow cause a range of physical and psychological reactions on the part of the individual. Holmes and Rahe found that different levels of life events, such as divorce and vacation, induce different levels of stress. Later, Folkman and Lazarus (1988) divided the larger events examined by Holmes and Rahe into daily living events to study the impact of daily hassles. By creating scales for these events, they were able to identify their subjects’ stressors and pleasures. Items such as “time with family,” “physical appearance,” and “workload” were included. It is evident from these studies that change often has a major impact on these every day tasks. What is still not clear are the effects on an individual when dealing with more mundane tasks such as procedural changes in the workplace.

The overwhelming extent of downsizing and technological advances that currently characterize most workplaces means that it is not unusual for workers to have to adapt to change. More specifically, it is not unusual for the scope of a worker’s duties to increase or decrease depending upon the nature of planned change in the work setting. When this occurs, there are, no doubt, both psychological and physiological effects. Although consideration of both is important, the focus of this study will be limited to an examination of the psychological effects individuals encounter when dealing with change in the workplace.
RESEARCH PROBLEM

Understanding the psychological effects of changes in the workplace is of great importance for two very simple reasons. First, careers are a large part of daily living and it is important that the workplace remains a comfortable environment. In order to have healthy employees, both mentally and physically, the job must be a place with as little disruption as possible. When disruption in normal routines does occur, workers often become uneasy. Being aware of possible reactions before they happen is beneficial both to the worker and the employer. Second, as an employer, knowing how to help workers through transitional periods allows for worker performance to be maintained. This also keeps employees happy which, should, in turn, strengthen worker loyalty and increase worker productivity.

This study is based on a survey of workers in an administrative unit in a large university. Within this setting, workers recently changed from working with Macintosh computing systems, to PC computing systems. This change was made so that the unit would be compatible with other units within the university. The focus of this study is on how this workplace change affected the performance, reactions, and perceptions of employees in the unit. Thus, the results should provide reactions to look for when procedures within the workplace are changed and resources are redistributed. This may help identify warning signs for both the employees and employer.

METHODS

Participants. The subjects in this study are employees within an on-campus administrative unit. The employees within this unit range in tenure from one to twenty-three years. Seven employees were surveyed for this study.

Materials. Data were derived from two questionnaires. One questionnaire was designed specifically for this study to survey worker reactions, feelings, and interpretations of the change made within the administrative unit (see Appendix A-1). The second questionnaire is a daily hassles and uplifts scale created by Folkman and Lazarus (1988) (see Appendix A-2) to determine which specific daily events were either uplifts or hassles for each worker. Consent forms were included with the surveys to ensure permission to use the written responses. Once the questionnaires were collected, a debriefing sheet was provided to explain to the employees why they were asked to complete the survey.

Procedure. The questionnaires were distributed in the subjects’ workplace. The worker questionnaire, the daily hassles and uplift scale, and the consent forms were given to each worker. Subjects were instructed that this survey was to be completed by choice. The completed questionnaires were collected two days later, along with the signed consent forms. The debriefing sheets were then distributed.

Data Analysis. The data for this study were analyzed by using content analysis techniques. This method was used to extract patterns of response from the employees. Once the study was completed, the data were given to the supervisor upon request.

RESULTS

The responses from the workers clearly showed that the change from Macintosh to PC systems in the workplace had a significant impact on everyday work procedures. Three important underlying themes were extracted from the worker responses. First, there was a time factor because employees were still learning the new computing system after one year. This seemed to be related to frustration among some workers. The responses clearly showed differences in levels
of frustration between those who were still learning compared to those who were becoming experts with the new computing system. Second, a strong false consensus bias was apparent. This means that employees believed that other employees shared their views. Third, there is a complexity issue because the PC computing system uses more steps than the Macintosh. Using more steps added to the level of negativity and frustration on the part of the employees. However, the daily hassles and uplifts scale revealed no apparent correlation between the frustrations that arose as a result of changing the computing system and the workers’ daily hassles.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

The three issues extracted from the employee responses included evidence that long periods of time were required to learn how to use a new computing system and that, for some, this apparently caused considerable frustrations. Further, there was a strong false consensus bias, as well as complexity issues.

Several issues surround the idea that long periods of time learning how to operate a new system created increased frustration for some. It is obvious that when it has taken over a year to learn a computing system that outputs the same results as the old system, workers can become frustrated. The responses suggest, then, that frustration is most definitely linked to the amount of time spent learning the new system. Further, if an employee is given an estimate of the amount of time it should take to learn the system and it takes longer, that too is likely to be a source of frustration. This issue is very important and relevant to workflow because when employees become frustrated, their level of productivity decreases. This is exactly what workers and management do not want to happen when implementing a new work procedure. It is important, then, that employers be aware of such a response and do what they can to support their staff during transitional periods.

There was also evidence of a strong false consensus bias in the workers’ responses. These results suggest that some who responded felt that their coworkers were experiencing similar feelings. In other words, if an employee was frustrated about the change, they felt that their coworkers were too. On the other hand, if an employee was satisfied with the change, they felt their coworkers were satisfied as well. When employees count on others sharing their same views and then find out that the opposite is true, this can be a dangerous set-back for an organization. For example, workplace morale may suffer when an employee is frustrated and that employee thinks others are too, but then learns that others are not because it may have an impact on interpersonal relations among coworkers. Rather than feel that they are frustrated because of a procedural change, those frustrations become displaced onto their coworkers. Again, this may produce outcomes that are not desired in an effectively run administrative unit. It is in the best interests of workers and management to be aware of the false consensus bias during times of transition.

The complexity issue is also of interest. For example, it takes a lot more steps to use the PC than it does to use the Macintosh to produce the same end result. Yet we know that the major reason for the change was to be more compatible with the larger university. Thus, the reason for the change was not disputed. The responses suggest that negativity and frustration are products of the more complex procedures, especially for individuals who are still learning. However, for those individuals who responded that they have a good grasp on the system, there were no complaints about the extra number of steps that it takes to complete a task. We know from prior research that people prefer to do things the simplest way possible (Dawes, 1988). This raises a question about why there was no universal negative reaction to having to perform several steps. If people desire to expend minimal effort, then why is it that those individuals who have a grasp
on the system not mention the desire for fewer steps? Perhaps individuals who have an easier time with the new system do not pay attention to what comes naturally, whereas those employees who are struggling pay attention to every aspect that they do not understand. Further research in similar administrative units is required to determine the general importance of the complexity issue.

Certainly there are other areas to be explored within the realm of procedural change. As noted above, it would be interesting to pursue the complexity issue. It would be interesting to observe workers in a real setting to measure the frequencies of positive and negative effects associated with a more immediate procedural change in the workplace. From passive observations along with personal interviews, it would be possible to determine the psychological aspects of work that may possibly be affected by change. This would provide a greater understanding on how workers are affected by procedural changes in the workplace. Greater understanding of these processes would, then, allow for planned change resulting in a more enjoyable and productive workplace for everyone.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A-1

Workplace Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability.

1. Compared to the previous computer program, what are the benefits of using the new computer program?

2. Compared to the previous computer program, what are the drawbacks of using the new computer program?

3. How easy has it been to learn the new program?

4. How long did it take for you to successfully learn the new computer program?

5. Do you feel that the new program is more effective than the old program?

6. What do you think your coworkers think of the new program?
7. Are you aware of why the new computer program was implemented?

8. How many years has this office employed you?

9. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your views on implementing the new computer program in this office?

APPENDIX A-2

Daily Hassles and Uplifts

Please fill out this scale at the end of the day. Fill it out in terms of what degree to which each item below was a HASSLE or an UPLIFT for you today (0 = Low and 4 = High).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HASSLE</th>
<th>UPLIFT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How much of a HASSLE was this item for you today?</td>
<td>How much of an UPLIFT was this item for you today?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 Your child(ren)</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 Time with family</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 Sex</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 Fellow Workers</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 Your Workload</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 Meeting Deadlines</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 Having enough money</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 Your physical appearance</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 The weather</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 Your neighborhood</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 Cooking</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 Home entertainment</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 Amount of free time</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>