



Editorial: Employee Responses to Changing Work Practices

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The landscape of changing work practices

This online special issue brings together articles addressing employee responses to changes in work practices and conditions of work.

Widespread and profound changes in the ways that work is carried out have occurred across recent decades, resulting in a cumulative revolution in the ways that employees are treated. The pervasiveness of these changes was noted at the end of 20th century. They were seen as affecting every aspect of the employment relationship; temporary, part-time and a wide range of irregular patterns of work had already moved from the periphery and become far less 'atypical' than hitherto (Cooper, 1999). Increasingly, many of those performing work for large organizations are not employed directly by them; new forms of contracting organizations which expose workers directly to their markets and decrease employer–employee interdependence are increasingly common (Whitley, 2006). Work intensity has increased across the world, associated not least with the spread of such practices as multi-tasking and a revival in performance-based pay (Green, 2005; Kalleberg, 2011).

Moreover, some argue that a consequence of these changes is that work has been 'de-bordered' from the rest of life, meaning that previously well-defined borders between work and non-work (or paid work and personal life) have become fluid. Bauman (2012) builds on these arguments to argue that the employment relationship has moved 'from marriage to cohabitation'; by this account, the 'liquidity' that he noted in employment primarily caused by de-regulation had accelerated between the 2000 and 2012 editions of his seminal work. A number of recent papers in *British Journal of Management* have provided strong empirical evidence of both positive and negative spillovers between work and non-work domains (Georgellis and Lange, 2012; Sok *et al.*, 2014; Stavrou and Ierodikonou, 2011; Wolfram and Gratton, 2014), perhaps most notably, Sok *et al.* (2014) demonstrate in this special issue that organizational culture has a significant influence on work-home interference.

Papers in this special issue relate to various aspects of employee responses to changes in work practices and conditions of work, ranging from empowered leadership, through workplace flexibility practices, to unpaid overtime. They assess employee reactions when faced with positive factors such as perceived fairness at work and negative factors such as psychological contract breach.

In very different ways, the papers help towards a better understanding of the impact of changing work practices across recent decades. Conway *et al.* (2014) demonstrate how increases in organizational change predicted psychological contract breach in public organizations, which in turn predicted decreased employee contributions to those organizations. Conway and Sturges (2014) suggest that part-time workers often work more overtime partly as a result of a changing organizational context in

which flexible working practices have become more the norm. Beauregard (2014) shows how workers may develop negative emotions and deteriorating interpersonal relationships in response to the introduction of work–life balance initiatives when such initiatives are perceived as unfairly implemented, while Sok *et al.* (2014) show how the introduction of flexible work–life balance arrangements may lead to positive outcomes for the employee as a result of a supportive organizational culture. Fong and Snape (2015) explore the impact of the onset of empowering leadership on workers’ psychological empowerment. Richardson and McKenna (2014) investigate how workers reorder their interactions with work colleagues and family members in response to the introduction of flexible working. Finally, van Prooijen and Ellemers (2014) show how, in a world where organizations increasingly compete for talent, enhancing an organization’s perceived morality contributes to positive responses from prospective workers and thus more effective recruitment of highly educated applicants.

Theoretical foundations of employee responses

The selected papers demonstrate the great diversity of theoretical frameworks used to explain employee responses to changing work practices. Beauregard (2014) applies social exchange theory. Conway *et al.* (2014) use psychological contract theory. Fong and Snape (2015) apply leadership theory. Van Prooijen and Ellemers (2014) opt for social identity theory. Conway and Sturges (2014) make reference to congruency theory. Richardson and McKenna (2014) utilize actor network theory, while Sok *et al.* (2014) utilize spillover theory. Indeed, scholars are confronted with an even wider selection of helpful theories of individuals in organizations.

Table 1 provides an overview of theories credited with making ground-breaking contributions to management studies (Smith and Hitt, 2005; Cornelissen and Durand, 2014) which help to explain employee responses to changing work practices at micro level. The list of micro-level theories in Smith and Hitt (2005) is useful but is supplemented here by including further theories directly concerned with employee perspectives and employee voice since we see these as fundamental to shaping the practices themselves; at some level and however minimally, the employment relationship is interdependent and subject to negotiation. This in turn conditions worker experience of changing work practices themselves. The list in Table 1 could still be further expanded.

Table 1. Applications of landmark theories for explaining employee responses to management-initiated changes in the nature of work, how it is done and working conditions (alphabetical order)

Theory	Rationale of employee responses	Illustrative contribution
Attribution theory	Employees more likely to resist changes where problems attributed to management	Hewstone, 1989
Capabilities theory	Employee responses to work practices depend on the employees’ capability to convert resources into valued activities	Miles, 2014
Employee commitment theory	Employee responses to work practices depend on their commitment to the organization	Porter, Steers, Mowday and Boulian, 1974

Employee representation theory	Employees are less likely to resist management-initiated change when employee representatives have scope to negotiate implementation and 'latent conflict' does not become real conflict	Pondy, 1957
Expectancy theory	Employees respond to work practices through behaviours that they expect will eventually lead to valued rewards or outcomes	Scholl, 1981
Image theory	Employee responses to work practices depend on the framing of the situation (types of mental images) and current or proposed behaviour	Schepers and Beach, 1998
Job characteristics theory	Employee responses to work practices depend on the properties of the organizational tasks they perform	Hackman and Lawler, 1971
Personal initiative theory	Employees proactively develop knowledge and skills to deal with future task demands	Fay and Frese, 2000
Psychological contract theory	Employees' transactional and relational obligations are felt to decrease as a result of an employer's violation of the psychological contract	Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau, 1994
Referent cognitions theory	Employees react most negatively to work practices when the organization has failed to use equitable procedures and has conducted itself inappropriately	Folger, 1993
Sense-making theory	Employee responses depend on the employees' cognitive processes and subjective perceptions of management-initiated change	George and Jones, 2001
Social cognitive theory	Employee responses differ based on triadic reciprocal causality, an interaction of behaviours, personal factors and environmental events	Bandura, 1988
Social equity theory: Gift-exchange theory	Employees more willing to provide effort 'gifts' to the employer where they perceive their treatment to be better than that in other comparable workplaces	Akerlof, 1982
Social equity theory: Organizational justice theory	Employee responses and trust in management more widely conditioned by perceptions of procedural and distributive justice	Greenberg, 1982

The increasing diversity of approaches helps to advance our understanding of employee responses to changing work practices by highlighting different facets of employee responses. However, we note that scholarship on employee responses generally fails to explore in depth how diverse theories can build and complement each other beyond the occasional application of two or three different theoretical perspectives to address the same research question.

By the late 20th century, employee responses were increasingly analysed at the individual, psychological level, as illustrated by the currency of the ‘psychological contract’ type of explanation (e.g. Herriot *et al.*, 1997; Restubog *et al.*, 2007 and 2010 in this journal); despite the critique made of it (Cullinane and Dundon, 2006). As formalized collective relations have declined internationally, the collective level of explanation has become less common but, as Beauregard (2014) shows, this level of analysis nevertheless remains significant not least for managers and we note that informal collectives such as work groups remain important sites of employee identification and opinion-formation irrespective of whether they have formal representation (cf. Li and Cropanzano, 2009).

As Wood and Budhwar (2014, p.1) reminded us recently in this journal, the world is undergoing major structural changes and “these issues and challenges may be understood from a wide range of theoretical perspectives” and academic studies “need to take account of broader environmental forces”. Therefore, it is important to link micro-level explanations to meso- (involving relational issues among organizations) and macro-level (involving wider political, economic and societal dynamics) phenomena (cf. Bies *et al.*, 2007; Hitt *et al.*, 2007), in order to locate employee responses to changing work practices within wider economic, social, political and technological processes.

A few good examples of these fruitful linkages may be discerned in this special issue. The paper by Conway *et al.* (2014) points out that many employee responses reacted to organizational changes stemming from the government’s austerity measures for public service organizations, linking psychological contract theory to macro-level phenomena. Linking congruency theory to macro-level phenomena, Conway and Sturges (2014) note that, despite the impact of the recession and the rise of part-time work, most part-timers work fewer hours to fulfil wider social commitments outside the workplace. Such linkages can help to paint a fuller picture of bi-directional causality whereby wider macro-level phenomena create the context within which employees react to their environments.

Directions for future research

Based on the brief discussion of theoretical foundations above, one direction for future studies on employee responses to management-initiated changes to the ways work is done and rewarded, could be to build on work linking leadership, work group and psychological reactions. Some of the best work by psychologists has linked management styles to work group and individual psychological reactions and then to employee voice. As several theoreticians cited in Table 1 suggest, this is an important determinant of employee responses (Walumbwa and Schaubroeck, 2009).

Another direction for future studies would be to link the micro-level to macro-level theories for explaining employee responses to changing workplace relations. At macro level, institutional theory could help to investigate to what extent employee responses, and indeed the work practices themselves, differ between different institutional contexts. The research in this special issue, just like comparative research by other prominent scholars in the field (e.g. Green, 2005; Green *et al.*, 2013; Olsen *et al.*, 2010), is biased towards the UK and other developed country institutional contexts. In this context, one would especially welcome future studies on the applicability of the ideas explored in this special issue (e.g. psychological contract breach or empowered leadership) in emerging/developing nations where there is at least some evidence of changing work practices akin to more developed countries but rather different historical and institutional development paths exist (e.g. Kim and Park, 2006; Croucher and Rizov, 2011).

Transcending the institutional perspective and the institutional duality in terms of the wide variations in the treatment of employees by companies in different locations (e.g. Wang, 2005), one promising avenue for future research will be to explore employee responses in ‘global teams’ in multinational enterprises (cf. Kirkman *et al.*, 2001) and responses of multicultural employees (cf. Fitzsimmons, 2013), to investigate to what extent national differences are transcended in new global working environments.

A recent paper in *British Journal of Management* reported an unexpected result in finding that the stress associated with cultural differences between team members in bi-cultural teams was greater than the stress related to high-pressure work (Pines and Zaidman, 2014), and one would welcome future research to extend such scholarship to investigate employee responses to changes in specific work practices and conditions of work.

The contributions brought together here themselves prefigure this expanded research agenda, though much remains to be done in integrating and linking the micro theories to each other and to other levels and bodies of theory. We believe that future research would greatly benefit from a synthesis of insights from different disciplines and perspectives. The progressive specialization of academic research into silos such as work–life balance or employee voice research, and the requirements of journal publishing in general, have made it much more difficult to get a holistic picture of employee responses to changing work practices. Indeed, even a given specialist research topic may suffer from a lack of integration of scholars from different disciplines. As one example, a recent review demonstrated how research on employee voice (one aspect of employee responses to working conditions) has been conducted in silos and would benefit from a greater exchange of ideas between HRM and OB scholars (Mowbray *et al.*, 2014). More cross-disciplinary collaboration would enable scholars to more effectively connect the micro level with the macro level and to consider employee responses as part of much broader global processes.

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