

There is more to organisational change than strain, hazard, and harm

*Organisational change doesn't always have to bring distress and ill health to employees. **Anniken Grønstad** writes that many types of changes can lead to positive experiences, including improved job quality, skill development, and the provision of and access to challenges and opportunities for job promotion.*

“Danger: change at work can damage your health” says the Nuffield [Trust](#), explaining that rapid change and macho management drive poor(er) health among NHS employees. A large body of [research](#) has shown that organisational change is linked to adverse health outcomes and increased risk of sickness absence, often attributed to taxing elements in the work environment being fuelled by the change.

Earlier research has often focused on **large-scale changes** taking place at the organisational level. Less is known about how smaller changes (e.g., at department – or unit-level) influence the risk of health impairment and sickness absence. This constitutes a critical evidence gap possibly hindering the smooth and successful implementation of change because smaller-scale change takes place more often than major ones. Organisational change is a massive concept that can assume any shape, form and [size](#). It is unlikely that all of them are experienced similarly, which clearly suggests that we need to know more about the specific effects of each type of change. Indeed, while certain types are more demanding and exhausting, others arguably act as “business-boosters”, powering job satisfaction and employee motivation.

We are interested not only in the diversity of change types taking place in organisations, but also in their effects on employee health. We [separated](#) and compared six specific types of change taking place at the unit-level (upsizing, downsizing, merger, spin-off, outsourcing and insourcing) and measured their associations with sickness absence before, during and after the change was implemented. Overall, our results demonstrate the complexity embedded in the relationship between organisational change and employee health.

While we found that change is related to sickness absence, we also revealed that whether the risk of sickness absence increases or decreases is dependent upon the type and stage of change. For example, upsizing is a type of change found to correlate with lower risk of sickness absence during and after the change. In similar veins, both outsourcing (prior) and insourcing (during and after) relate to reduced risk of sickness absence. Downsizing, by contrast, was associated with higher risk of sickness absence during and after the change and a reduced risk of sickness absence prior to change.

Earlier research has often focused on the darker aspects of change, the ones with greater potential to induce sickness absence. Our results find that sickness absence increases in relation to downsizing. This particular effect may reflect employee feelings of distress and can also mirror a higher workload, which, in turn, generate feelings of being less in control over one’s work situation and foster a work atmosphere characterised by instability and transience. A straining work environment develops, possibly hazardous to employee health. Indeed, the adverse effects on employee health stemming from downsizing are [well-documented](#).

However, there is more to organisational change than strain, hazard, and harm. The pervasiveness and top priority of change in organisations today continue to increase and change efforts may trump many other organisational tasks. The “age of change” depicting today’s work environment thus suggests that we also need to consider the brighter side of change. Undergoing change may afford employees several positive experiences including, but not limited to, improved job quality, skill-development, and the provision of and access to challenges and opportunities that facilitate job promotions.

In addition, change can be a driver of employee motivation and commitment and stimulate progress, enthusiasm and a sense of going [places](#). Our research provides strong support for the understanding that organisational change not necessarily leads to health impairments and more sickness absence and puts the spotlight on its potential for rewards and health promotion. Certain types of change such as upsizing and insourcing might bring about positive employee experiences that may raise employee health and insulate against sickness absence. Such experiences encompass reinforcing job security, facilitating an appropriate workload, opportunities, and new responsibilities and encouraging employee participation – all of which are important ingredients for healthy and successful changes at work.

A better understanding of the factors that help or hinder successful change constitutes an important bank of knowledge for those tasked with change implementation. Getting access to such knowledge can help CEOs to source the right resources and capabilities for realisation and represents an important tool for improving and governing practitioners' delivery of change. Such insight is crucial because change implementation is likely to cost less and provide greater benefits and return on investments if critical ingredients can be retained and reinforced, and ineffective components can be removed.

For managers concerned with occupational health and the prevention of (unnecessary) sickness absence and health impairments, accumulating knowledge of the positive and health promoting aspects of change is critical. Executives dealing with change management must develop awareness of both the type and stage of change relating to increased or decreased risk of sickness absence. That will afford them the chance to identify salient properties and determinants of specific change types and stages that may prevent or promote healthy and successful change processes in the organisation, in the end increasing their chances of becoming successful leaders of organisational change.



Notes:

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