Repeated structural reform linked to employee absenteeism

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Video Abstract

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Abstract

Change, as they say, is good. But can repeated structural change be bad? New research says that for public organizations, that could be the case. A look at the structural reform history of public organizations in Belgium reveals that repetitive reorganization is linked to employee absenteeism—possibly due to stress and anxiety bred by a culture of constant change. Over the past decade, reforms in the public sector have become exceedingly common—whether through mergers or acquisitions, the adoption of new tasks, or changes in legal status. The trend, it appears, is a response to increasing demands on public sector performance. But while an organizational pivot can often be beneficial, repeated change could actually do more harm than good. Experts have warned [organizations swamped with repetitive structural reforms] that staff could suffer from high levels of stress and anxiety—a process dubbed “repetitive change injury”. Given recent trends in their practices, public organizations would seem to be nurturing an environment conducive to this condition. But no empirical evidence had previously been established—until now. For the region of Flanders in Belgium, researchers created a database of all structural reforms undergone by public sector organizations. They then examined that data against rates of absenteeism in those same organizations over a five-year period—ensuring that change indeed affected absenteeism and not the other way around. As expected, their results showed that employee absences increased in proportion to the number of structural reforms experienced by their organizations. The finding appears to build on a model for how organizations react under threat or crisis. According to the model, threatening conditions prompt organizations to exert more top-down control. The results on employee absence suggest that in such an environment, structural reforms generally heighten an employee’s sense of uncertainty and lack of control. As turmoil builds, employees experience increasing stress levels, prompting them to adopt negative coping behaviors—like missing work. Of course, not all change is bad—even if it does happen with some regularity. The danger, the researchers note, is when employees aren’t given enough time to recover from one change to the next. More work is needed to uncover the full range of factors and circumstances that lead to repetitive change injury—certainly beyond the small region covered by the study. But the current findings could prove instructive, especially for the numerous public organizations around the world facing structural change.