EXPERIENCING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AT UNIVERSITY: THE ROLE OF PERSONAL AND JOB RESOURCES

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Abstract

Globalization, emigration, demographic decline, national reforms of higher education and other factors often lead to changes in universities. University employees inevitably experience anxiety due to uncertainty related to those changes. It is suggested that negative personal and work-related outcomes could be buffered by positive characteristics, both work-related and personal. Therefore, it is very important to find out the safety factors that could help to deal with large-scale organizational changes, here both job and personal resources of employees should be considered. The purpose of this paper is to identify personal and work-related factors that have significant predictive value for university employees' anxiety about organizational change. 451 Lithuanian university employees (31% males and 67% females) filled up a self-administered questionnaire. Using a variety of world-recognized measurement tools, the employees' personal and job resources were assessed. For this study the anxiety about change scale was developed by the authors (Cronbach alpha = .84). The study was conducted at a time when researched universities experienced significant organizational changes (integration of several universities) related to national reform of higher education. The results of the study revealed that job resources (such as influence at work) and personal resources (such as employee optimism and professional identity) significantly predicted university employees' anxiety about organizational change. Having more influence at his/her work and being more optimistic was related to less anxiety about organizational change. Conversely, more expressed professional identity was related to higher concerns about the changes that are taking place at the university. The results of the study also revealed that employees' work experience and position (academic or non-academic) were also associated with their anxiety about organizational change. Recommendations regarding strengths as well as improvements for universities during the period of organizational change are proposed.

Keywords: Organizational change, anxiety, university, personal resources, job resources.

1. Introduction

In nowadays, universities are facing many significant changes (Mäkikangas, Mauno, Selenko, Kinnunen, & Mäkikangas, 2019; Stage & Aagaard, 2019). Universities require to exhibit organizational change for adapting the rapid changes around them (Eroğlu & Alga, 2019), because internal and external factors affect their longer-term financial sustainability (Rogers, 2019).

When dealing with large-scale changes in an organization, employees inevitably experience anxiety due to the uncertainty associated with those changes. When encountering crisis, confusion, and difficulties, both individuals and organizations can suffer from anxiety-related problems (Baruch & Lambert, 2007). Marshak (2016) emphasizes that implication of too much anxiety to organization change leads to psychological threats of anxiety condition, and plays the role in the organization development. Moreover, change within a university is further complicated by context (Usunier & Squires, 2019). Thus, it is very important to find out factors that could help to reduce anxiety regarding organizational change.

According to the Job Demands–Resources theory, it is suggested that negative outcomes could be buffered by positive characteristics, both work-related and personal (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018; Tremblay & Messervey, 2011). This study aims to identify personal and job resources that have significant predictive value for university employees' anxiety about organizational change.

Job resources are defined as certain (social, psychological, organizational) aspects of work that promote employee development, reduce the negative impact of high work demands, and help achieve goals within the unit or organization (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007; Bakker

& Demerouti, 2018). Research findings indicate that job resources are related to employee well-being and have an impact on performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018; Huang, Yin, & Lv, 2019). In the scientific literature, job resources are generally divided into three levels: work/task-related, interpersonal relationships, and organization-related. Therefore, in order to evaluate job resources, those levels were chosen and more detailed in the next section.

Personal resources refer to positive characteristics what an employee brings to the organization and develops through their work tasks and being a member of the organization. Resent findings in university context emphasizes that personal resource factors influence university employees' perceptions and reactions to organizational changes (Mäkikangas et al., 2019). Personal resources are an important element determining the result of the change process (Eroğlu & Alga, 2019). As personal resources, psychological capital components, such as self-efficacy and optimism, are the most frequently mentioned in the literature and most relevant to the various work processes and outcomes (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010; Yin, Huang, & Lv, 2018). Also, basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) satisfaction at work is necessary to achieve and maintain autonomous motivation, high-quality performance and well-being (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017). Furthermore, context-specific personal resource is the professional identity phenomenon which is related with various positive processes and outcomes in higher education, as quality of teaching, work efficiency, job satisfaction, self-confidence, motivation, occupational commitment, psychological well-being, etc. (Canrinus, Helms-Lorenz, Beijaard, Buitink, & Hofman, 2012; Skinner, Leavey, & Rothi, 2019; Xu, 2019).

2. Methods

2.1. Sample and data collection

451 Lithuanian university employees (31% males and 67% females) participated in a cross-sectional on-line survey. The sample consisted of 257 (57%) academic staff, 99 (22.0%) non-academic staff, and 91 (20.2%) worked in both positions. The average age of participants was 45.32 years (SD = 11.39). The average of work experience at present organization was 14.81 (SD = 9.98). Respondents participated voluntarily and the confidentiality were guaranteed. The response rate was 23.31. The study was conducted at a time when researched universities experienced significant organizational change.

2.2. Measures

The employees' personal and job resources were measured using a variety of world-recognized measurement tools. Job resources included: peculiarities of work (influence, professional development, meaningfulness of work, clarity of role), interpersonal relationships (social support from colleagues, community, horizontal trust), and leadership/management (social support from manager, recognition, communication, vertical trust, justice). Personal resources included: occupational self-efficacy, professional identity (teacher, researcher, practitioner), optimism and basic psychological needs (competence, autonomy, connectivity). The anxiety about change scale was developed by the authors for this study. Detailed information about the instruments used in this study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Information about the survey instruments.

Variable	Instrument	Instrument's authors	Items	Cronbach alpha
JOB RESOURCES:				
Influence at work	Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ II)	National Centre for the Working Environment (2007)	4	.803
Professional development			4	.787
Meaningfulness of work			3	.848
Clarity of role			3	.827
Social support from colleagues			3	.866
Community			3	.908
Horizontal trust			3	.834
Quality of leadership	Short version of Managerial Practices Survey	Yukl (2012)	4	.938
Social support from manager	Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ II)	National Centre for the Working Environment (2007)	3	.938
Recognition from manager			2	.892
Vertical trust			3	.687
Communication			2	.804
Organizational justice			4	.878
PERSONAL RESOURCES:				

Self-efficacy at work	Occupational Self-efficacy Scale	Rigotti et al. (2008)	6	.843
Basic needs (competence, autonomy, connectivity) satisfaction at work	Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale – Work Domain	Chen et al. (2015)	12	competence – .847; autonomy – .798; connectivity – .887
Professional identity*	Short version of the Professional Identity Questionnaire*	Kovalcikiene (2014)	16	.846; researcher – .987; teacher – 0.846; practitioner – .979
Optimism	Life Orientation Test Revised	Herzberg, Glaesmer, and Hoyer (2006)	6	.743
ANXIETY ABOUT CHANGE:				
Anxiety about change in higher education	Anxiety about Change in Higher Education Scale	Genevičiūtė-Janonė, Gustainienė, Stelmokienė, and Kovalčikienė (2018)	5	.840

Note: * completed only by academic staff (N = 257).

Anxiety about change was assessed by asking respondents to respond on a 5-point Likert scale to how strongly they are concerned about certain aspects of organizational change in higher education, which include: ongoing educational reform in the country, integration of universities, structural change at the university (e.g., reorganization of units), changing job requirements (e.g., teaching quality, academic output, workload), and student-related change (e.g., student numbers, motivation, teaching expectations).

3. Results

This study aims to reveal whether and to what extent university employees are concerned about change at national and organizational levels, and what job and personal resources contribute to overcoming them. First of all, the analysis was carried out to determine the prevalence of anxiety about organizational change, as well as differences by socio-demographic characteristics among university employees in Lithuania. Finally, the results of regression analysis are presented.

The results revealed that university employees are experiencing strong anxiety about change (overall: M =3.95, SD = .81). They are most anxious about ongoing educational reform in the country (M = 4.12, SD = 1.01). Other aspects of anxiety include: structural change at the university (e.g., reorganization of units) (M = 3.94, SD = 1.03), integration of universities (M = 3.92, SD = 1.07), changing job requirements (e.g., teaching quality, academic output, workload) (M = 3.81, SD = 1.09), changes related to students (e.g., number of students, motivation, expectations for teaching) (M = 3.81, SD = 1.09).

In order to reveal the peculiarities of anxiety about organizational change among university employees, the differences according to the socio-demographic characteristics were analyzed. No gender differences were found. Significant differences were indicated between academic and non-academic staff. Using ANOVA analysis of variance, the research data revealed that academic staff are more concerned about changes in overall (F = 5.512, p <.01). When analyzing individual aspects of anxiety about change, academic staff were found to be significantly more worried about ongoing education reform in the country (F = 7.944, p <.001), as well as changing job demands (F = 8.720, p <.001) and changes related with students (F = 8.923, p <.001).

Correlation analysis (using Pearson coefficient) revealed that employees with higher work experience at university are more concerned about ongoing education reform (r = .193, p <.001) and university mergers (r = .176, p <.001). Also, employees with higher work experience feel more anxious about changing job demands (r = .107, p <.05) and changes related with students (r = .100, p <.05).

Linear regression analysis using Enter method was conducted to determine which factors predict anxiety about changes in university among employees. Job resources, personal resources and socio-demographics were entered the model as predictors. The regression analysis revealed that regression model was statistically significant (F = 3.368, p < .001), and all significant predictors together explained 15.8 percent of anxiety about organizational change variance. The analysis of the results shows that job resources and personal resources are important criteria in the case of organizational change. When employees feel more influenced in the performance of their work activities and are optimistic, their anxiety about change tends to decrease. Meanwhile, stronger identification with one's professional role as a lecturer, researcher or practitioner tends anxiety about change to increase (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Job and personal resources related to university employees' anxiety about change.
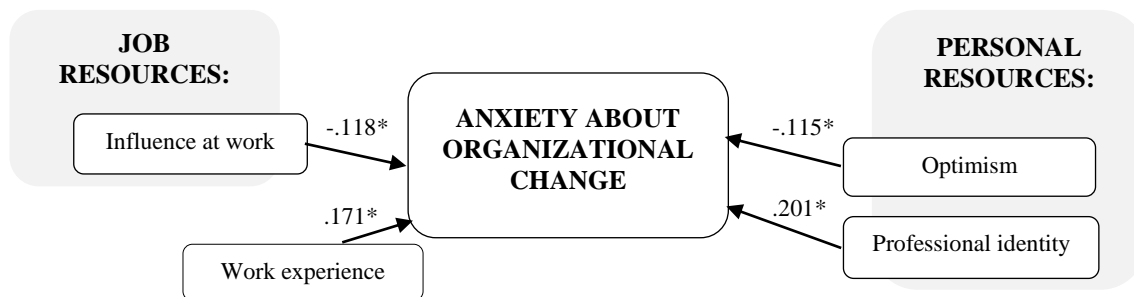
Note: numbers on the arrows indicate statistically significant standardized β coefficients; * p < .01.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Although organizational change is essential to all institutions, it is a complex and high-risk activity, thus organizations need to develop and implement capabilities to facilitate organizational change (Zhang, Wang, & O'Kane, 2019). Given the recent intense changes in higher education, it is important to look at what factors might reduce employee anxiety about change. Employees' anxiety is very closely related to their health, well-being and processes within the organization (Baruch & Lambert, 2007; Huang et al., 2019; Marshak, 2016; Tremblay & Messervey, 2011), so organizations should be interested in programs of personal and job resources development. As Baruch and Lambert (2007) emphasized, recognition of organizational anxiety is only advantageous if methods of prevention or treatment are possible and available.

It can be noted that anxiety about change could be attributed to areas that deserve more attention. Particular attention should be paid to members of the academic staff who are more concerned about changes at national level, i.e., ongoing education reform in the country, changing demands at work, and changes related to students. Anxiety about the changes could be facilitated by the effective dissemination of information provided by the university administration on current situation and future vision, as well as training on generational differences and the specificity of working with a new generation of students. Also, the analysis of the relationship between work experience and anxiety about change revealed that the uncertain situation regarding the future of higher education is more expressed for higher experienced employees than for less experienced. It may be thought that more experienced university employees might be more difficult to adapt to the labor market after losing their job at university. On the other hand, they may also have insufficient information about their future at university.

A few more recommendations regarding strengths as well as improvements for universities during the period of organizational change may be proposed. For example, optimistic employees could be invited to become ambassadors (e.g. public lectures, discussions, publications in university newsletters and websites). This not only brings recognition to the employees, but also makes possible to enhance the value of personal resources for the employees themselves. Besides, in order to decrease employee anxiety about organizational change, organizations should focus on workplace empowerment. Organizations are advised to give their employees greater freedom in the choice and performance of their work activities. Previous research confirmed that influence or empowerment is related with job satisfaction (Rana & Singh, 2016), and the results of this study revealed its significance in the tendency to reduce anxiety.

Summarizing, the results of this study revealed that university employees experience a great amount of anxiety about various changes occurring both at the organization and in the wider context. Reducing employee's anxiety about ongoing changes (and not only) should begin with a systematic interest by university administration on how university employees are feeling.

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