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# How change information influences attitudes toward change and turnover intention

## The role of engagement, psychological contract fulfillment, and trust

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to examine how the quality of change information influences employees' attitude toward organizational change and turnover intention. Additionally, the role of engagement, psychological contract fulfillment and trust in the relationship between change information and attitude toward change is assessed.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In a technology services organization that was implementing a “new way of working,” questionnaire data of 669 employees were gathered. The organizational change in question sought to increase employees' autonomy by increasing management support and improving IT support to facilitate working at other locations (e.g. at home) or at hours outside of regular working hours (e.g. in evening).

**Findings** – The results showed that change information was positively related to psychological contract fulfillment and attitude toward change. Engagement and psychological contract fulfillment were positively related to attitude toward change and negatively related to turnover intention. Contrary to what was expected, trust did not influence attitude toward change but was negatively related to turnover intention.

**Practical implications** – The study presents a model that can help management to foster positive affective, behavioral, and cognitive responses to change, as well as to reduce employee turnover. Fulfilling employees' psychological contracts and cultivating engagement is important in this respect, as well as continuously considering whether information about the organizational change is received in good time, is useful, is adequate and satisfies employees' questions about the change.

**Originality/value** – As one of the first studies in its field, attitude toward change was conceptualized and operationalized as a multidimensional construct, comprising an affective, a behavioral and a cognitive dimension.

**Keywords** Trust, Engagement, Attitude towards change, Turnover intention, Change information, Psychological contract fulfillment

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

Technological advances such as cloud and mobile computing, big data and machine learning, sensors and intelligent manufacturing, and advanced robotics and drones are increasingly transforming the very foundations of organizations (Murray, 2015). Typically, the introduction of new technologies impacts the sort and amount of jobs available, how and where we work, and the role that management has in organizations



(Cascio and Montealegre, 2016). For example, 47 percent of the total employment in the USA is at risk, because of the great number of specific jobs that are susceptible to computerization (Frey and Osborne, 2013).

This technological acceleration consequently leads to an acceleration of changes in the business environment. After all, the many technical, technological and process innovations cause “numerous changes in the behaviours and expectations of employees, customers and other market players” (Pluta and Rudawska, 2016, p. 294). These two types of acceleration consequently lead to acceleration of the pace of competition, and even hyper-competition (Pluta and Rudawska, 2016).

In order to survive in this rapidly changing context, organizations need to implement both anticipatory and adaptive changes (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; Huy and Mintzberg, 2003). Moreover, organizations experience the pressure to increase the frequency, extent and impact of organizational changes (Johnson, 2016). In other words, excessive change is becoming the norm (Johnson, 2016). In this context of excessive change, we should realize that “the frequency and severity of the various changes have a cumulative effect on individuals in the organization” (Herold *et al.*, 2007, p. 949), causing for example cynicism and burnout (Abrahamson, 2004). Following demand-resource theory, “organizational change may become excessive when its demands exceed the employees’ resources to cope the frequency, extent, and impact of organizational changes, and therefore provoking negative reactions to change” (Johnson, 2016). And this imbalance seems to be occurring increasingly.

Meanwhile, the attitudes and behaviors of these individuals can make or break the success of change initiatives (Bartunek *et al.*, 2006). Business leaders and change agents need to take account of the consequences of the increasing amount of organizational changes for the employment relationship. Although many approaches to change management have been introduced in the last decades, successful application of these approaches is limited (Dietz *et al.*, 2013). In fact, based on an extensive literature research, Keller and Price (2011) conclude that “no progress has been made since Kotter’s (1996) publication” *Leading Change* in which he explains why transformation efforts fail (in Dietz *et al.*, 2013, p. 92). More insight on how change management can address employees’ reactions to the change process in a positive way is needed.

Starting from the notion that successful organizational change “is increasingly reliant on generating employee support and enthusiasm for proposed changes, rather than merely overcoming resistance” (Piderit, 2000, p. 783), we concentrate our study around the concept of attitude toward change. We argue that business leaders and change agents can considerably improve the success rate of their (strategic) change initiatives by having insight into key antecedents of employees’ attitudes toward organizational change in the contemporary context, characterized by an increasing number of – often overlapping – organizational changes.

In an effort to identify these antecedents, most research to date has focused on “the manner in which change was implemented” (Oreg *et al.*, 2011, p. 31), and examined antecedents such as managerial support for the change, managerial change competence and participation by employees. Such a perspective may evoke a rather mechanistic perspective on managing organizational change, assuming that during organizational changes certain buttons can be pushed, causing positive employee responses to the change. Today’s reality, however, is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to send an unequivocal message to employees. Conventional governance structures of change initiatives, in which separate project organizations manage the various changes while a steering committee high up in the hierarchy maintains an overview, make it hard for organizations to make promises that are not broken “the next day” when a new change presents itself (Van den Heuvel and Timmerman, 2011). Dietz *et al.* (2013) argue that “a plethora of literature indicates that the key reason for strategic failures is the lack of coherence and consistency” (p. 92), as also

reported by, for example Beer *et al.* (1990) in their seminal work “Why change programs don’t produce change.” Thus, instead of focusing on change-specific drivers of employee attitudes toward change, a careful consideration of the internal context in which the organizational change occurs is required to assure the success of change implementation (Herold *et al.*, 2007). In other words, the pre-change internal context is becoming increasingly important in fostering constructive employee responses to organizational changes.

Such a pre-change internal context can be described in terms of, for example, trust, commitment, culture and job characteristics (Oreg *et al.*, 2011). Bouckenoghe *et al.* (2009) refer to this internal context as a change climate, which is conceived in terms of “general context characteristics conducive to change. It refers to employees’ perceptions of the internal circumstances under which change occurs” (p. 562). The importance of this internal context was highlighted in a recent study by Van den Heuvel *et al.* (2016) among change and business leaders in eight European countries. They illustrate that in situations where the change initiative is perceived as positive, negative reactions to the change may still occur if the state of the employee-organization relationship is perceived as negative (e.g. low level of trust, or low fulfillment of psychological contract).

From a social exchange perspective (Homans, 1958) it can be argued that organizational changes provide an opportunity to strengthen the employment relationship. Since organizational change becomes a structural element in organizations’ DNA, the social exchange in contemporary employment relationships is characterized by risk and uncertainty about if and how the other party will restore the balance in the exchange. Persuasion in times of organizational change depends largely on implicit bargaining and non-binding deals, and especially under these conditions “the risk and uncertainty of exchange provide the opportunity for partners to demonstrate their trustworthiness” (Molm *et al.*, 2000, p. 1396). The delivery on promises in times of change can thus create trust and cultivate engagement in the general employment relationship.

In the philosophy of social exchange theory, and in line with Oreg *et al.*’s (2011) description of the internal context, we focus on the concepts of engagement, psychological contract fulfillment and trust to describe the internal context in which an organizational change takes place. Some empirical evidence suggests the importance of these concepts in explaining employee responses to changes. Devos *et al.* (2007) for example found that when employment relationships are characterized by high levels of engagement and mutual trust, employees are more open to organizational change. Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1999) indicated that in such trust relations, the reasons for the change require less explanation (Rousseau and Tijoriwala, 1999). By contrast, if organizational leaders have a track record of psychological contract breach, the trust underlying the employment relationship will erode, causing employees to doubt whether the reasons for the change are well-intentioned and constructive (Rousseau and Tijoriwala, 1999).

As discussed by Van den Heuvel *et al.* (2016), there is a tension between the employee’s evaluation of the internal context (i.e. engagement, psychological contract fulfillment and trust) and his/her evaluation of the organizational change itself. Proper change information is a prerequisite for constructive responses to organizational change among employees, and therefore needs to be useful, timely and adequate (Wanberg and Banas, 2000). Moreover, one of the main reasons why organizational changes fail is inadequate communication, for example concerning the vision on the change (Kotter, 1995). However, a positive evaluation of the organizational change does not automatically lead to positive responses to the change, as a lack of engagement, psychological contract fulfillment or trust may interfere.

In the current study we address this tension, examining how the quality of change information influences change recipients’ attitude toward change and how the engagement, psychological contract fulfillment and trust mediate this relationship. Additionally, we examine how engagement, psychological contract fulfillment, trust and the change

recipient's attitude toward change influence an employee's intention to turnover. The latter is especially relevant since the retention of key contributors during and after organizational change is becoming increasingly important for organizations, if they are to maintain their competitive advantage in labor markets characterized by scarcity and fierce competition for talented individuals.

### Attitude toward change

According to Bouckenoghe (2010), scholarly articles on employee responses to change appeared from the late 1940s on, which conceptualized the responses in terms of resistance to change (Coch and French, 1948) or readiness to change (Jacobson, 1957). These conceptualizations mark the beginning of the still ongoing debate about whether responses to change should be conceptualized in either negative or positive terms. A range of positively and negatively phrased concepts has emerged thus far. However, the present study conceptualizes change recipients' responses to organizational change as an attitude, which is a more neutral label for responses and in addition has the potential to hold both negative and positive responses to the attitude object, i.e. an organizational change.

Early attitude literature already proposed considering an attitude as a multifaceted construct comprising an affective, a behavioral and a cognitive component (Rosenberg and Hovland, 1960), in which affect concerns feelings, behavior concerns actions or intentions to act, and cognition concerns thoughts and beliefs regarding the attitude object. Because a change recipient's feelings, behaviors and thoughts concerning a change are not necessarily in line with each other, Piderit (2000) advocated the adoption of this multidimensional attitude construct to represent an employee's responses to an organization change. This study adopts Piderit's (2000) perspective and defines as well as operationalizes attitude toward change as a tridimensional state composed of affective, behavioral and cognitive responses to change (Bouckenoghe, 2010).

Thus far, quantitative research has primarily focused on intentional and behavioral responses to change (Bouckenoghe, 2010), and only a few empirical studies operationalized employee responses to organizational change as a tridimensional construct. A decade ago, Oreg (2006) developed the first three-dimensional attitude to change scale. Although his study has been cited more than 150 times, a systematic review of all these studies revealed that research operationalizing attitude toward change in the three-dimensional way, as advocated by Piderit (2000) and Oreg (2006), is scarce. Van Dam *et al.* (2008) for example do measure all three attitude toward change dimensions in a study on the influence of daily work characteristics on resistance to change, but they subsequently include the measurement as a unidimensional construct in their analysis, and thus ignore its multidimensional composition. Van der Smissen *et al.* (2013) acknowledge the importance of the separate dimensions, but only include the affective and cognitive dimensions in their study. In a study on "grumbling" as a form of employee resistance to IS implementation, Laumer *et al.* (2014) include all three dimensions. The behavioral dimension, however, is referred to as "grumbling," while the items to measure grumbling come from Oreg's (2006) original attitude toward change scale with only minor modifications. Only a handful of studies have actually conceptualized, operationalized and analyzed attitude toward change as a tridimensional construct comprising an affective, a behavioral and a cognitive dimension. Van den Heuvel and Schalk (2009) and Van den Heuvel *et al.* (2015) for example explore the influence of antecedents as trust, psychological contract fulfillment and perceived need for change on the three dimensions. Chung *et al.* (2012), who studied the influence of cognitive personality traits on resistance to change, even explored the interrelatedness between the separate dimensions. Finally, a recent study by Johnson (2016) incorporated element of excessive change. He studied how change frequency, change impact, and change extent (dimensions of excessive change) influenced emotional exhaustion, and support for change

and cognitive uncertainty (representing the affective, behavioral and cognitive dimensions of attitude toward change). Nevertheless, a broad application of the three-dimensional attitude toward change construct in empirical research remains scarce. The next section discusses the antecedents and the consequences of attitude toward change examined in the present study.

### Antecedents of attitude toward change

For decades, business leaders and change agents have been interested in the determinants of employee responses to organizational changes. Bouckenoghe (2010), who reviewed attitude toward change literature published between 1993 and 2007 concluded that these antecedents could be clustered into three main categories, namely, the environment in which the change occurs, the way the change is dealt with and the type of change. Put differently, the three categories concern the context, the process and the content of a change. Oreg *et al.* (2011) distinguished two additional categories after reviewing 60 years of quantitative literature on attitude toward change published before 2007. These categories relate to the characteristics of change recipients and the perceived benefit or harm caused by the change. Moreover, Oreg *et al.* (2011) made a higher order distinction between pre-change antecedents and change antecedents. Pre-change antecedents “constitute conditions that are independent of the organizational change that existed prior to the introduction of the change” (Oreg *et al.*, 2011, p. 26). Pre-change antecedents include change recipient characteristics and internal context variables. Change antecedents on the other hand “involve aspects of the change itself that influence change recipients’ explicit reactions” (Oreg *et al.*, 2011, p. 26), and include variables relating to the change process, the perceived benefit or harm caused by the change and the change content. As discussed before, in the present study three pre-change antecedents (i.e. engagement, psychological contract fulfillment and trust) and one change antecedent (i.e. change information) are studied.

#### *Pre-change antecedents*

*Engagement.* The first pre-change variable addressed by this study is engagement. Although the related and often interchangeably used (yet different) concept of organizational commitment has frequently been studied as an antecedent of employee responses to organizational change (see e.g. Coyle-Shapiro and Morrow, 2003; Madsen *et al.*, 2005), empirical research on the influence of engagement on change recipients’ attitudes toward change is scarce. Engagement, which can be conceptualized as a positive work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli and Salanova, 2007; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2009), did not feature in the large-scale literature review conducted by Oreg *et al.* (2011). However, “work engagement has been shown to be contagious and may therefore be of special importance during change, as a counterforce for possible change cynicism” (Van den Heuvel *et al.*, 2010, p. 136). Engaged workers go the extra mile (Van den Heuvel *et al.*, 2010), and such organizational citizenship behavior, which contributes to the effective functioning of the organization but not necessarily to one’s individual performance or appraisal (Organ, 1988), may well be expected to carry much weight in times of organizational change. Engagement is therefore predicted to be positively related to attitude toward change.

*Psychological contract fulfillment.* The second pre-change variable is the fulfillment of the psychological contract. The psychological contract concerns an individual’s beliefs about mutual obligations in the context of the relationship between an employee and an employer (Rousseau, 1990). While already introduced in the 1960s (see e.g. Argyris, 1960; Schein, 1965) the concept gained increasing interest in the 1990s because of its perceived value “in explaining employees’ responses to the significant changes to employment relationships

caused by increased global competition and consequent organizational changes such as cost-cutting initiatives (e.g. redundancies) and restructuring” (Conway *et al.*, 2014, p. 737). As a result of these organizational changes, organizations were not able or willing to live up to promises made before, causing breaches of these promises and thus breaches of employees’ psychological contracts. Since the 1990s a vast amount of empirical research has been conducted on the outcomes of psychological contract breaches, demonstrating that under-fulfillment (i.e. breach) of the psychological contract results in negative affective, behavioral and cognitive work-related outcomes (Zhao *et al.*, 2007). These outcomes include emotional exhaustion (Gakovic and Tetrick, 2003), lower work engagement (Bal *et al.*, 2013), higher turnover intentions (Chi and Chen, 2007; Parzefall and Hakanen, 2010; Bal *et al.*, 2013) and lower job satisfaction (Sutton and Griffin, 2004; Conway *et al.*, 2011; Tomprou *et al.*, 2012). However, although the increased interest in the psychological contract can be attributed largely to the massive amount of organizational changes since the 1980s (Morrison, 1994), psychological contract research actually conducted in the context of a particular organizational change is scarce. Most research to date exploring the psychological contract in the context of specific organizational changes examined how organizational changes impact the psychological contract’s content (i.e. the promises perceived by the employee) or state (i.e. the degree of fulfillment of these promises) (see e.g. Schalk and Freese, 2000; Schalk and Roe, 2007; Chaudhry *et al.*, 2011; Freese *et al.*, 2011; Tomprou *et al.*, 2012; Van der Smissen *et al.*, 2013; Conway *et al.*, 2014). Only a handful of studies has yet explored how the (under)fulfillment of the psychological contract influences affective, behavioral and cognitive responses to the particular organizational changes. In a longitudinal case study of a Scottish textiles firm undergoing cost-reductions and downsizing, Pate *et al.* (2000) for example found that breaches of the psychological contract resulted in a deterioration of trust relations, leading to increased cynicism toward the organizational change and its change agents, as well as unwillingness to cooperate with future organizational changes. A study of Van den Heuvel and Schalk (2009) showed that psychological contract fulfillment was negatively related to affective resistance to change, and Van den Heuvel *et al.* (2015) found that psychological contract fulfillment was positively related to the affective, behavioral and cognitive dimensions of attitude toward change.

The lack of research on change-specific outcomes of the psychological contract is not only remarkable, but also problematic. While the speed and flexibility of organizations’ response to their changing environment becomes an increasingly important contributor to their competitive advantage (Guest, 2004), “the question is not whether organizations will change but rather how fast and who will thrive” (Herold *et al.*, 2007, p. 950). The decline in average survival rate among the 500 biggest US-based companies, from 61 years in 1958, and 35 years in 1980, to only 18 years today, illustrates that a growing number of businesses are “unable to withstand the increased pace of change” (Albach *et al.*, 2015). And it is precisely these organizational changes that can make the employee aware of the content of the psychological contract and of the extent to which the organization has lived up to its promises (Guzzo *et al.*, 1994). These re-evaluations of the psychological contract trigger affective, behavioral and cognitive responses among employees. Not studying the outcomes of psychological contract fulfillment during organizational changes therefore yields an incomplete picture of the role of psychological contracts during organizational change. This study therefore examines whether psychological contract fulfillment indeed predicts positive affective, behavioral and cognitive responses to organizational change.

*Trust.* Trust, which is the third pre-change variable in this research, can be defined as one’s “expectations or beliefs regarding the likelihood that another’s future actions will be favorable, or at least not detrimental, to one’s interests” (Morrison and Robinson, 1997, p. 238). Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1999) found that trust in management was positively related to the perceived legitimacy of reasons for the change and, as demonstrated by Oreg (2006), trust in

management is related to lower levels of affective, behavioral and cognitive resistance to a change. Additionally, Devos *et al.* (2007) found that trust in executive management as well as in the direct supervisor significantly contributed to the openness of employees to organizational change. This study therefore predicts that change recipients' trust in their organization and its representatives is positively related to an employee's attitude toward a specific organizational change.

By operationalizing attitude toward change as a multidimensional construct, and examining engagement, psychological contract fulfillment and trust to represent the pre-change internal context, we will address the following hypothesis:

- H1.* Engagement (a), psychological contract fulfillment (b) and trust (c) are positively related to the affective, behavioral and cognitive dimensions of attitude toward change.

The perceived obligations that constitute the psychological contract are based on promises (Rousseau, 2001) that are made either explicitly or implicitly (Rousseau, 1989). Violations of perceived promises diminish the trust of employees in their employer (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994; Robinson, 1996). Because trust lies at the heart of the employment relationship (Guest, 2004), the effects of an under-fulfillment of the psychological contract can be detrimental for the performance of individual employees, and thus for the organization as a whole. By contrast, psychological contract fulfillment may create commitment (Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler, 2000) and employee satisfaction (Tekleab *et al.*, 2005). Although limited, there is also support for the positive relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and engagement (Chambel and Oliveira-Cruz, 2010), so that the present study expects that:

- H2.* Psychological contract fulfillment is positively related to engagement (a) and trust (b).

#### *Change antecedents*

Unlike pre-change antecedents, change antecedents are related to a specific change. The most frequently studied change antecedents concern the change process (Oreg *et al.*, 2011) and include variables such as participation, procedural justice, principal support (i.e. support from change agents and opinion leaders) and change management competency. Especially communication and information appear to be important, since organizational changes often fail due to a lack of a sense of urgency and because the vision behind the change is insufficiently communicated (Kotter, 1995). Poor change communication gives rise to widespread rumors that reinforce resistance to the change (Bordia *et al.*, 2004). Following Wanberg and Banas (2000) who built on Miller *et al.* (1994), change information is conceptualized here as the extent to which the employee perceives that information about the change is timely, useful and adequate, and that it answers his or her questions about the change. There is empirical evidence that proper change information results in more openness to change (Wanberg and Banas, 2000; Axtell *et al.*, 2002) and in less behavioral and cognitive resistance to change (Oreg, 2006). Because proper change information answers questions held by an individual employee and therefore reduces uncertainty (Schweiger and DeNisi, 1991), this study expects that:

- H3.* Change information is positively related to the affective, behavioral and cognitive dimensions of attitude toward change.

Organizational changes by definition alter the employment relationship to a certain extent. The manner in which a change is implemented is likely to impact the employee's general perceptions about the employment relationship, and thus to influence factors such as engagement, psychological contract fulfillment and trust. Indeed, Freese (2007) found that employees who received clear change information evaluated their psychological contract more positively than less well-informed employees. Likewise, "trust in another is reduced



when that other engages in outright lying or distortions of the truth” (Mishra, 1996, p. 273). Change information is therefore expected to influence the three pre-change variables addressed in this study:

*H4.* Change information is positively related to engagement (a), psychological contract fulfillment (b) and trust (c).

### Consequences of attitude toward change

A wide range of personal as well as work-related consequences of the affective, behavioral and cognitive responses of employees to organizational change have been identified by empirical research. After organizational commitment and job satisfaction, most studies have examined turnover or intention to leave the organization as consequences of an organizational change (Oreg *et al.*, 2011). From a practical point of view, unwanted turnover is one of the most undesirable consequences of organizational change, primarily because of the high costs associated with replacement. As demonstrated by Dalessio *et al.* (1986), turnover intention is often shown to precede actual turnover (Tekleab *et al.*, 2005). The present study therefore adopts the concept of turnover intention, which is conceptualized as “the subjective probability that an individual will leave his or her organization within a certain period of time” (Zhao *et al.*, 2007, p. 651).

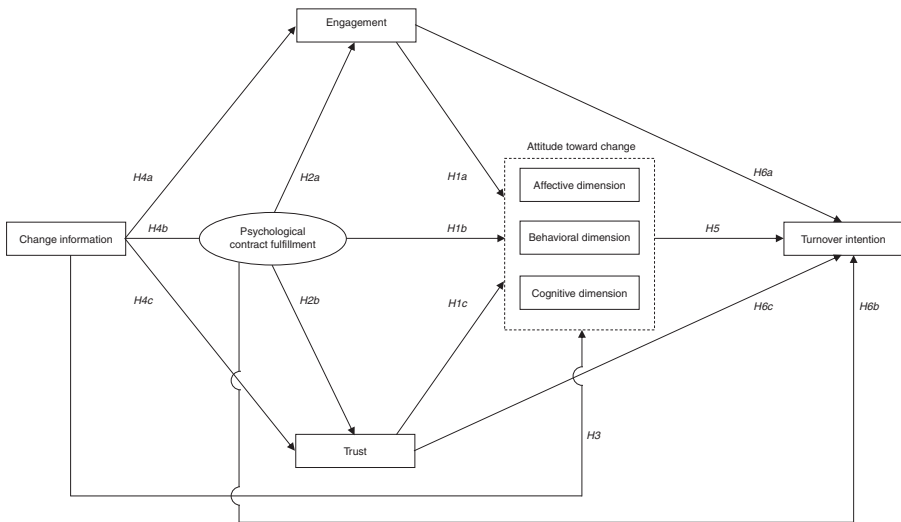
Factors such as commitment to change, coping behaviors (Cunningham, 2006) and uncertainty caused by the change (Bordia *et al.*, 2004; Rafferty and Griffin, 2006) determine an employee’s intention to turnover. Furthermore, Fried *et al.* (1996) found in a study among middle-level managers whose organization was acquired through hostile takeover that psychological withdrawal resulted in intentions to leave the organization. Oreg (2006), who assessed the work-related consequences of all three dimension of change attitude, demonstrated that behavioral resistance was positively related to intention to quit. Because turnover intention is found to be determined by affective, behavioral and cognitive factors, it is expected that:

*H5.* The affective, behavioral and cognitive dimensions of attitude toward change are negatively related to turnover intention.

Obviously, pre-change variables such as engagement, psychological contract fulfillment and trust can influence an employee’s turnover intention as well. An organizational change or some other radical shift in the status quo of the employment relationship does not necessarily need to be the trigger to evoke turnover intentions. In a study among 1698 respondents from four independent samples, Schaufeli and Bakker (2004a) found that engagement was negatively related to turnover intention, and recently Alarcon and Edwards (2011) demonstrated that the absorption dimension of engagement was negatively related to turnover intention. Additionally, a vast number of empirical studies demonstrate the positive relationship between psychological contract breach and turnover intention (Kickul *et al.*, 2002; Sutton and Griffin, 2004; Collins, 2010). Trust has also been found to be related to turnover intention, either indirectly via organizational commitment (DeConinck, 2010) or unit commitment (Tremblay, 2010), or directly. In a study conducted in the USA, Poland and Russia, trust was found to be directly and negatively related to turnover intentions. Interestingly, this relationship was stronger for trust in the CEO and top management than for trust in one’s supervisor (Costigan *et al.*, 2011). In line with these empirical findings, this study predicts that:

*H6.* Engagement (a), psychological contract fulfillment (b) and trust (c) are negatively related to turnover intention.

Figure 1 depicts the hypothesized model of the study.



**Figure 1.**  
Conceptual model  
of the study  
with hypotheses

**Method**

*Organizational and change context*

The study was conducted at three divisions within the Dutch subsidiary of a multinational organization providing technology services. In this organization, most employees hold a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree and work for and often at the site of client organizations. At the time of the survey the organization was in the middle of a change toward a new way of working aimed at enabling employees to organize their work more flexibly, thereby creating a better fit with their individual situation. This flexibility primarily concerned the hours and the location at which the employees want to work. The change therefore sought to increase employees’ autonomy by increasing management support and improving IT support to facilitate working at other locations (e.g. at home, at clients or at other establishments of the organization) or at hours outside of regular working hours (e.g. in the evening or weekends). The respondents were requested to keep this specific change in mind when answering the “change information” and “attitude towards change” questions.

*Procedure and participants*

In an e-mail from the internal communications department, a total of 3,909 employees were invited to complete the online survey. After three weeks 669 respondents had completed the survey, which means a response rate of 17 percent. Although the survey was available in Dutch and English, the majority (95 percent) of the respondents opted for the Dutch version. The final sample consisted of 536 (80 percent) men and 133 (20 percent) women and the average age was 43.16 (SD = 9.54). Concerning the family situation, 18 percent of the respondents were single, 79 percent were married or cohabited and 3 percent lived with family, parents or friends. Almost 56 percent of the respondents had one or more children living at home. The mean tenure was 11.39 years (SD = 8.79) and the average number of working hours a week was 38.37 (SD = 3.89).

*Measurements*

For all scales except psychological contract fulfillment, a five-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5) was used. All scales used in the survey were

available in English beforehand. The scales for which no Dutch version was available were translated by a group of native Dutch speaking researchers in the field of HR studies.

*Change information.* The change information scale was based on Wanberg and Banas' (2000) scale and included the four items "The information I have received about the change was timely," "The information I have received about the change was useful," "The information I have received has adequately answered my questions about the change" and "I have received adequate information about the change." The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) of the change information scale was 0.93.

*Engagement.* To measure engagement, the shortened nine-item version of Schaufeli and Bakker's work engagement scale was used (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004b; Schaufeli and Salanova, 2007). The items included in the research were "At my work, I feel bursting with energy," "At my job, I feel strong and vigorous," "I am enthusiastic about my job," "My job inspires me," "When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work," "I feel happy when I am working intensely," "I am proud of the work I do," "I am immersed in my work" and "I get carried away when I am working." The reliability coefficient of the scale was 0.89.

*Psychological contract fulfillment.* To measure psychological contract fulfillment, the scale developed by Freese *et al.* (2008) was used. This scale consists of the six dimensions of job content, career development, social atmosphere, organization policies, work-life balance and rewards. Per dimension the respondents were presented with four potential organizational obligations, for which they needed to indicate to what extent they felt that their employer was obliged to offer these aspects. The main purpose of these items was to properly frame each dimension, and the items were therefore not included in the analysis. After each set of obligations, the respondents were asked to indicate to what extent the organization had fulfilled its obligations with regard to the particular dimension. This was done on a five-point scale, ranging from "much less than expected" (1) to "much more than expected" (5). Six items measuring psychological contract fulfillment (one for each dimension) were included in the analysis.

A confirmatory factor analysis was performed to assess the fit of a general, second-order factor of psychological contract fulfillment, using AMOS 19. The hypotheses of perfect fit ( $\chi^2 = 60.23$ ,  $df = 9$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and good fit (RMSEA = 0.092,  $p = 0.001$ ) were rejected. The model's modification indices indicated that two items – the fulfillment of social atmosphere and the fulfillment of organization policies – covaried stronger than predicted by the model ( $MI = 27.461$ ). We added the covariance of these two items to ensure that the second-order factor represented all variance common to the six items and to improve the fit of the measurement model. This final measurement model also did not fit the data perfectly ( $\chi^2 = 23.28$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), but the hypothesis that the model fitted the data good could not be rejected (RMSEA = 0.053,  $p = 0.369$ ). Other fit measures also indicated good fit (root mean square residual (RMR) = 0.015, goodness of fit index (GFI) = 0.989, adjust goodness of fit index (AGFI) = 0.971, TLI = 0.954, CFI = 0.976). Hence we used this second-order factor in further analyses rather than the six items of psychological contract fulfillment.

*Trust.* The trust scale was based on Psycones (2006) and included the three items "I trust senior management to look after my best interests," "In general, I trust [organization] to keep its promises or commitments to me and other employees" and "I trust my immediate line manager to look after my best interests." The scale's reliability was 0.81.

*Attitude toward change.* To measure the three dimensions of attitude toward change Oreg's (2006) scale was used, which consisted of five items per dimension. The original items were rephrased into the present tense, which resulted in items such as "I am afraid of the change" for the affective dimension, "I look for ways to prevent the change from taking place" for the behavioral dimension and "I think that it's a negative thing that we are going through this change" for the cognitive dimension. All negatively phrased items were reverse coded, so that higher scores indicate a more positive attitude toward change.

A confirmatory factor analysis was performed to assess the three-dimensional composition of the attitude toward change construct on the 15 items (five items for each of the three dimensions). Analyses on a model in which the three latent factors were assumed to be correlated (as well as error terms between the observed variables) demonstrated a satisfactory fit with the empirical data (CFI = 0.92; TLI = 0.88). These scores were comparable to the scores that Oreg (2006) found in his pilot study (CFI = 0.92; TLI = 0.90) and the actual study he reported on (CFI = 0.93; TLI = 0.90). Additionally, a  $\chi^2$  difference test was performed to determine whether the three-dimensional composition fitted the empirical data better than a unidimensional structure. The results demonstrated a significantly better fit with the empirical data for the three-dimensional model ( $\chi^2 = 48.3$ ;  $df = 3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), which justifies the adoption of the three-dimensional attitude toward change structure for further analyses. The reliability coefficients of the affective, behavioral and cognitive subscale were 0.86, 0.82 and 0.80, respectively.

*Turnover intention.* The scale to measure turnover intention was based on Freese (2007) and included the six items "I plan to continue to work at [organization] until I retire," "I often think about quitting," "I intend to stay working at [organization] for the next few years," "I am looking for an opportunity to find a job in another organization," "I am actively searching for a job at another department within [organization]" and "In the past three months I have applied for a job in another organization." Items one and three were reverse coded. The reliability coefficient of the scale was 0.81.

## Results

The descriptive statistics and inter-correlations of the eight variables included in the study are presented in Table I.

The hypothesized model was fitted using structural equation modeling. The model, which includes covariances between the errors of engagement and trust, and three covariances between the errors of the attitude toward change dimensions, is displayed in Figure 2. Standardized regression weights and their significance, and coefficients of determination (i.e. explained variances) are presented. The hypothesis of perfect fit was rejected ( $\chi^2 = 135.717$ ,  $df = 44$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), but the hypothesis of good fit was not (RMSEA = 0.056,  $p = 0.173$ ). The other indices also indicated good fit of the model (RMR = 0.020, GFI = 0.969, AGFI = 0.936, TLI = 0.936, CFI = 0.964).

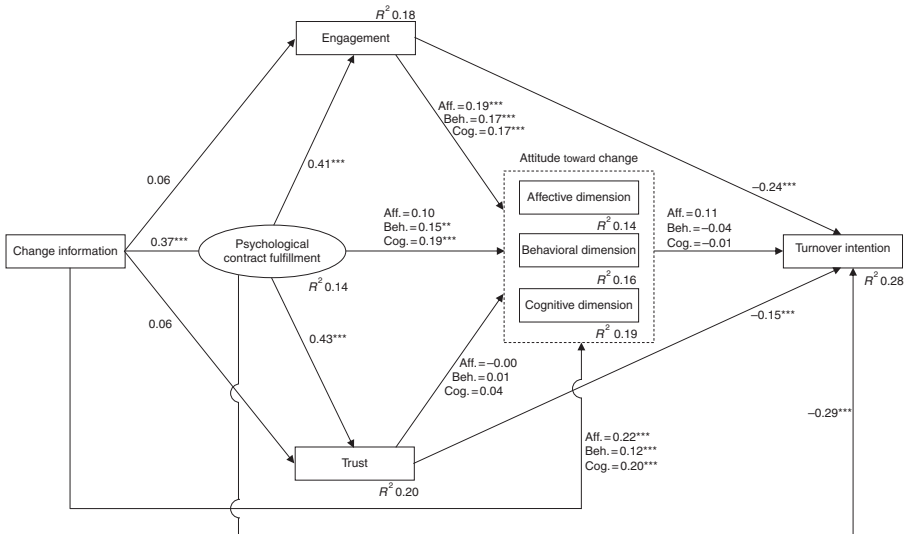
*H1* suggested that engagement, psychological contract fulfillment and trust would be positively related to the affective, behavioral and cognitive dimension of attitude toward change. Although no support was found for the relationship between trust and attitude toward change, the hypothesis was fully accepted for the antecedent of engagement. Higher levels of engagement were related to more positive affective ( $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), behavioral ( $\beta = 0.17$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and cognitive responses to change ( $\beta = 0.17$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Similarly, the more the psychological contract was fulfilled, the more positive the scores on the behavioral ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and cognitive ( $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) dimension of attitude toward change were. No significant relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and the affective dimension of attitude toward change was found though.

*H2*, which postulated that psychological contract fulfillment would be positively related to engagement and trust, was fully confirmed. The more the psychological contract of employees was fulfilled, the higher their engagement ( $\beta = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and trust in the organization and its representatives ( $\beta = 0.43$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) were.

*H3* stated that change information would be positively related to the affective, behavioral and cognitive dimension of attitude toward change. This hypothesis was also confirmed. Thus, the better the change information (i.e. useful, timely, adequate and responsive to questions held by the employee), the more positive the employees' affective ( $\beta = 0.22$ ,

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Change information	3.28	0.75	1							
2. Engagement	3.64	0.54	0.214**	1						
3. Psychological contract fulfillment	2.69	0.47	0.324**	0.338**	1					
4. Trust	3.46	0.81	0.216**	0.266**	0.384**	1				
5. Attitude toward change (affective dimension)	4.09	0.63	0.293**	0.280**	0.229**	0.144**	1			
6. Attitude toward change (behavioral dimension)	4.08	0.61	0.300**	0.285**	0.259**	0.171**	0.777**	1		
7. Attitude toward change (cognitive dimension)	3.73	0.65	0.314**	0.301**	0.306**	0.209**	0.724**	0.714**	1	
8. Turnover intention	2.48	0.66	-0.141**	-0.393**	-0.381**	-0.340**	-0.090**	-0.141**	-0.164**	1

Notes:  $n = 669$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$  (one-tailed)



**Figure 2.** Estimated model of the study, including standardized regression weights and the coefficients of determination ( $R^2$ )

**Notes:** For presentation purposes, errors and covariances between errors are not depicted, and only a single path is drawn to and from the three attitude towards change dimensions (depicted in the dotted square). \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

$p < 0.001$ ), behavioral ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and cognitive responses ( $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) to the organizational change were.

*H4* suggested that change information would be positively related to engagement, psychological contract fulfillment and trust. This hypothesis was supported for the relationship with psychological contract fulfillment. Thus, the better the change information, the higher the respondents' psychological contract fulfillment ( $\beta = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

*H5* expected the affective, behavioral and cognitive dimension of attitude toward change to be negatively related to turnover intention. No significant relationship with turnover intention was found. The hypothesis is therefore fully rejected.

Finally, *H6* postulated that engagement, psychological contract fulfillment and trust would be negatively related to turnover intention. Indeed, higher levels of engagement ( $\beta = -0.24$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), psychological contract fulfillment ( $\beta = -0.29$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and trust ( $\beta = -0.15$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) were related to lower levels of turnover intention. *H6* is therefore fully confirmed.

## Discussion

This study examined the influence of the perceived quality of change information on change recipients' attitude toward change and turnover intention. Additionally, the mediating role of the pre-change variables engagement, psychological contract fulfillment and trust was assessed. The attitude of employees toward organizational change was operationalized as a multidimensional construct comprising an affective, a behavioral and a cognitive dimension.

Although no relationship between trust and attitude toward change was found, the results demonstrated that engagement and change information were directly and positively related to all three attitudes toward change dimensions, and that psychological contract fulfillment was directly and positively related to the behavioral and cognitive dimension of

attitude toward change. Research on the influence of engagement and psychological contract fulfillment on attitude toward change is scarce. A recommendation for future research therefore is to further explore these relationships while incorporating the affective, behavioral as well as cognitive responses of employees to organizational change.

Change information was found to be positively related to psychological contract fulfillment, meaning that the more useful, timely and adequate the information about the change was in the perception of the employees, the higher their psychological contract fulfillment. Contrary to our expectations, however, no such relationship was found with engagement and trust. An explanation for this may lie in the fact that both the provision of information about a change and the employees' evaluation of the mutual promises that were made in the employment relationship (i.e. psychological contract fulfillment) are primarily cognitive processes, while trust and engagement are more affective-oriented constructs. Another explanation may concern the nature of the specific change addressed in this study. The change in question sought to enable employees to organize their work more flexibly, to thus create a better fit with their individual situation. The specific change may therefore be affecting central elements of the psychological contract such as work-life balance, social atmosphere and organization policies. It could be argued that engagement and trust are largely influenced by factors that remain untouched by this specific change, such as who is the employees' direct supervisor, or the actual nature and tasks of one's specific job.

This nature of the change may also explain why trust was not found to influence attitude toward change. Employees might perceive the change to be of little importance, thus precluding any impact of trust on their attitude toward this insignificant change. This could also explain why no significant relationships were found between the behavioral and cognitive attitude toward change dimensions and the respondents' turnover intentions. From a theoretical perspective these results are hard to explain. Most likely, this organizational change did not have a large impact on the employment relationship and therefore did not considerably influence the employees' intentions to quit. By contrast, a merger that affects the core values of an organization and causes high levels of uncertainty as to whether one's position will become redundant is likely to cause stronger intentions to quit. This line of reasoning is also supported by the highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) relationships between the pre-change variables and turnover intention. As expected, engagement, psychological contract fulfillment and trust were negatively related to turnover intention. Although the cross-sectional character of this research makes it impossible to determine causality in these significant relationships, which is an obvious limitation of this study, the results are a clear signal that variables relating to the general employment relationship might be more important than change-related variables in predicting one's responses to change. Future research on employee responses to organizational changes could therefore benefit from the simultaneous inclusion of both pre-change and change variables, rather than focusing only on the process variables that dominate today's research on antecedents of attitude toward change (Oreg *et al.*, 2011).

Furthermore, future research in this field would benefit from longitudinal research designs. Such research would have the potential to confirm the causal relationships between the antecedents frequently found in cross-sectional research and the three attitudes toward change dimensions. Moreover, longitudinal research could yield more insight into the complex relationship between pre-change and change antecedents and their joint influence on attitude toward change. For example, as this study indicates, adequate change information is positively related to the perceived fulfillment of the psychological contract. Yet the psychological contract can in turn be expected to influence the way change information is perceived and the extent to which such information is judged to be trustworthy and responsive to the questions held by the employee. Another limitation of this study is that it solely relied on self-reported data. It would be interesting to assess the

actual complaints voiced about the change in informal and formal settings to colleagues and management, for example through observation. Similarly, the actual turnover of employees as well as the frequency of communication about the change might provide valuable insights.

A final limitation of the study is that – although the conceptualization and operationalization of attitude toward change as a multidimensional construct is one of the strengths of this study – the multidimensional change attitude scale developed by Oreg (2006) has not yet been tested extensively. As shown by the confirmatory factor analyses of the present study as well as that performed by Oreg (2006), there is room for improvement in the measurement of the three-dimensional attitude toward change construct. Examining Oreg's (2006) change attitude scale in various organizational contexts and during various types of organizational change would yield further insight into the reliability and validity of the scale. We would moreover encourage the development of new scales to measure all three attitudes toward change dimensions simultaneously. Valid measurements would improve our understanding of how emotions, behaviors and thoughts differ from each other in times of organizational change. It would also help researchers to understand whether affective responses influence the general attitude toward change as assumed by affective event theory, or that "variations in evaluation along the particular dimensions of an attitudinal response will cause variations in global attitude" (Piderit, 2000, p. 787), as the present study assumes.

The results of this study have several theoretical implications. Most importantly, the results indicate that the internal context as perceived by the change recipient may be a key determinant for employees' responses to organizational change, and therefore for the success of organizational change. Moreover, the contemporary organizational context is increasingly characterized by technological acceleration, acceleration of changes in the business environment and acceleration of the pace of competition (Pluta and Rudawska, 2016, p. 294), which result in a norm of excessive change (Johnson, 2016). Therefore, a change conducive internal organizational context is likely to become an even more important success factor in realizing organizational change. More specifically, we refer to a change conducive internal context which is perceived as such by the individual change recipient. After all, the truth is in the eye of the beholder.

However, current research on organizational change is mainly "focused on how *organizations* prepare for, implement, and react to organizational change" (Oreg *et al.*, 2011, p. 462). Also, issues of constant change and time pressure caused by organizational acceleration are most often analyzed from an organizational-level perspective (Pluta and Rudawska, 2016). Yet, "a surge of recent studies of organizational change demonstrated the meaningfulness of change recipients' attitudes toward change for understanding the organizational change process" (Oreg *et al.*, 2011, p. 462). To improve our understanding of the determinants of successful organizational change, we therefore propose to increasingly adopt the individual change recipient's perspective when studying the phenomenon of organizational change. Moreover, we suggest to deepen, broaden and extend research on change recipients' attitude toward change, and internal context variables as potential determinant of these attitudes. In line with these suggestions, we believe future research could benefit from the adoption of a multidimensional perspective on attitude toward, since such a perspective does more justice to the complexity of employee responses to change than the focus on either affective, behavioral or cognitive responses. Also, while exploring internal context variables as determinants of attitude toward change, we suggest to place emphasis on potential discrepancies between actual human resource management or change management practices, and how they are perceived by change recipients. Such an emphasize could provide us more insight in what (in)effective communication and change management approaches look like in the contemporary turbulent and accelerating context of organizational change.



We know that Lewin's (1951) process of freezing, unfreezing and refreezing of an organization in times of change no longer represents today's reality. Stable situations have simply become rare. But perhaps, we should even more fundamentally change our view on managing – and thus studying – organization change. For example, in today's context where organizational change has become the norm, we still often manage organization changes as if they are separate events that can be managed as such, often from a centrally positioned project team. From a psychological contract perspective, however, it then seems impossible to send univocal messages to employees. Moreover, "promises and deals made in good faith one day may be broken the next due to factors such as a change in the market, a new product, a change in manager, or a reorganization" (Guest, 2004, p. 543). So perhaps, careful and constant psychological contract management, which is organized and executed at a very decentral level in the organization, is the "new key" to successful organizational change (Van den Heuvel *et al.*, 2013). It would be worthwhile if academic research would at least further explore such innovative thoughts.

The results of this study also have implications for practitioners active in change management and human resources disciplines. Although the importance of proper information and communication within the regular working context, especially in times of organizational change, is broadly recognized, professionals are still struggling to devise an effective communication approach. Cascading high-level communication principles down to practical activities that contribute to these principles remains problematic, or at least a major challenge. This is further compounded by the fact that any attempt to flesh out such a change management approach and detailed activity calendar is often overtaken by actual developments, making reactive and ad hoc communication inevitable. The conceptualization presented in this research can help replace the commonly used and sometimes rather abstract, vague and ineffective communication principles. By continuously considering whether information about the change is received in good time, is useful, is adequate and satisfies employees' questions about the change, the effectiveness and quality of that information is likely to increase. A direct consequence of adopting these four communication principles is that the communication approach acquires a bi-directional and individually oriented character. Too often communication practices fail because change information is too general, is not segmented to the relevant stakeholder groups, or fails to consider unique individual situations.

Further, when seeking to achieve organizational change it is increasingly important to consider both pre-change and change determinants of attitude toward change. As this research demonstrates, proper change information remains crucial, but if the organization suffers from a history of unfulfilled promises and has a workforce that is not sufficiently engaged, organizational change is doomed to fail. The increasing frequency of organizational change puts pressure on the fulfillment of the psychological contract and the levels of engagement. Organizations that manage to fulfill the psychological contract and to cultivate engagement among their employees in relatively stable times are more likely to experience constructive responses by change recipients in times of organizational change, at least if this change goes hand in hand with proper change information.

To conclude, we should realize that successfully managing organizational change is not something that should only be of interest for organizations or business leaders. The World Health Organization and the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work recently acknowledged stress as one of the major dangers of the century: a danger that concerns millions of employees working in all sectors (Pluta and Rudawska, 2016). Because organizational change is a major cause of stress, a better understanding of how we can foster positive affective, behavioral and cognitive responses to organizational change, does not only benefit organizations, but also society as a whole. And most importantly: the individual employee.

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