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The Phenomenon of Employee Resistance to Change. Case Study of Alstom SA

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Abstract: The main goal of the research is to shed light on the topic of employee resistance to change, its sources and ways of minimizing it. The research was conducted in one of the production plants of Alstom SA, Alstom Wroclaw RSC, a Polish branch of a company specializing in rolling stock production. The method used to conduct research was a survey. The results of the survey show that the most significant factor influencing employee resistance to change in the researched organization is the large workload and employees' fear of increased workload resulting from the changes. Employees fear the consequences of reduced productivity after changes are implemented due to an organizational culture that focuses on productivity and results.

Keywords: resistance to change, change management, sources of resistance to change, minimizing resistance to change

1. Introduction

Since change is an essential part of company growth and resistance to change is an inevitable byproduct of implementing change, it is necessary for companies to manage it, as it can lead to long-term negative effects. Although it is impossible to completely eliminate employee resistance to change, without resulting to coercion, it is possible to minimise it. Also, resistance to change can be seen as a valuable indicator that provides insight into employees' opinions on the implemented changes and the entire process of transformation.

Since change has been recognised as an important part of an organization's development, a lot of models of the change management have been created to support the implementation of the change and, as a result, help minimise employee resistance to change. Despite that, in some cases, change management is still overlooked and seen as an unnecessary effort.

The research uses a case study as the main research method and a survey as the main data collection. Moreover, an analysis is used to interpret gathered data, with correlation calculated for the quantitative data. The survey was conducted with employees of various positions, but the main research group were production employees.

The research problem was formulated in the form of the following question: what are the signs and sources of employee resistance to change?

The research sought answers to the following questions:

1. How was the change implementation process carried out in the researched entity?
2. How was employee resistance to change manifested, and what were the main reasons for this resistance?
3. How the change management process affected employee satisfaction?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. The Concept and Causes of Employee Resistance to Change

Employees' resistance to change is a natural reaction resulting from the desire to maintain security associated with keeping what is familiar. While not beneficial to the organization, the *status quo* provides a basis for employees to function comfortably in a familiar environment and sets the patterns to which they are accustomed. While change can be the basis for growth, defence mechanisms seeking to avoid risk are a compulsive reaction.

When considering employee resistance to change, we can distinguish its following sources: relational, individual, and related to the change itself (Grabus, 2013, p. 43). It should be pointed out that many classifications of sources of resistance to change appear in the literature, however they are all similar, differing largely only in the nomenclature used and some details (Centkowska, 2015, p. 13).

Relational Sources of Employee Resistance to Change

Relational sources of resistance to change arise from an individual's relationship with their organization, other members of the organization, and the extent to which they share the organization's values and their position in the organizational context (Grabus, 2013, p. 45).

Snyder proposed a model for analysing the relationship between organizational culture and employee approach to change. The classification considers two dimensions (Snyder, 1990, as cited in Siewierski, 1999, p. 10):

- the company's orientation, distinguishing between technological and social orientation;

- dominant value approach, distinguishing between performance and achievement approach.

By combining these two dimensions, Snyder distinguishes four types of organizational culture, each affecting the approach to change differently:

- **Productive culture**, with a technological orientation, performance-oriented. Attachment to procedures and efficiency can be observed; causes resistance to change.
- **Quality-oriented culture**, with a technological orientation, achievement-oriented. Effective planning can be observed; results in acceptance of change.
- **Supportive culture**, with a social orientation, performance-oriented. Attachment to cooperation, teamwork, and development can be observed; results in acceptance of change.
- **Creative culture**, with a social orientation, achievement-oriented. Attachment to innovation, entrepreneurship, and acceptance of risk can be observed; results in the initiation of change.

Additionally, organizational culture can be categorized into two aspects: formal and informal. The first is the values and behaviours promoted by management. The second aspect has more impact on the actual functioning of an organization, these are the behaviours, patterns, and values transmitted in the social process (Siewierski, 1999, p. 9).

Individual Sources of Employee Resistance to Change

Individual sources of resistance to change are the result of a person's experience and personal characteristics and can be rational and emotional (Grabus, 2013, p. 43).

Oreg (2003, pp. 680, 681) distinguishes six of the most significant individual sources of resistance to change:

- fear of losing control,
- cognitive rigidity, particularly dogmatism,
- low resilience,
- adaptability related to the period of change,
- preference for low levels of stimulation and novelty,
- reluctance to let go of old habits.

Sources of Employee Resistance to Change Related to Change Itself

Sources related to change itself may be a result of a lack of trust in those managing the transformation process, a lack of open and ongoing communication, or a flawed change process in general (Grabus, 2013, p. 45). It is worth noting that sources related to change itself are not limited to the aforementioned factors, but they can be highlighted as the most common.

2.2. Classification of Employee Resistance to Change

Employee resistance to change takes many forms, allowing us to distinguish (Centkowska, 2015, p. 14):

- passive and active resistance,
- overt and covert resistance,
- immediate and delayed resistance,
- emotional, rational, and political resistance.

The most basic types of resistance to change can be categorized as passive and active resistance. Passive resistance is associated with refraining from engaging in the change implementation process, while active resistance is associated with obstructing or actively preventing change (Penc, 2000, p. 189).

Passive resistance to change is simultaneously hidden, making it much more difficult to identify and manage. It results in apathy, isolation, and a decline in the productivity of employees. Active resistance is much easier to identify, as it is simultaneously overt.

Immediate resistance occurs in employees as soon as the change process begins, while delayed resistance occurs only at later stages of implementation.

Emotional resistance involves only the emotions that the change evokes and ignores the substantive aspects of the change, while rational resistance involves employees presenting fact-based arguments to justify their dissatisfaction. Political resistance, on the other hand, involves employees taking action to maintain their position (Centkowska, 2015, p. 15).

It is worth noting that the sole fact that employees resist change does not mean that any mistakes have been made, as it is a natural reaction and will always occur in some form (Grabus, 2013, p. 46).

2.3. Selected Methods of Reducing Resistance to Change

The valuable insight into employee viewpoints provided by observing the sources of resistance does not mean that one should downplay the threat that resistance poses to the transformation process. Properly overcoming resistance can determine the success or failure of a change.

Open Communication Regarding Change

Management's soft skills play an incredibly important role in providing employees with adequate space to express their emotions and respond appropriately.

It is important not only to inform employees about the change, but also why it is necessary, what is the management's vision of change and what benefits it brings. Employees have to have an opportunity to share their views and propose their solutions. It is necessary to empower broad-based action between the

members of an organization and communicate about short-term wins in the change implementation process (Kotter, 2012, pp. 9-13).

In addition, managers responsible for implementing changes should resolve conflicts that may arise as a result of the transformation on an ongoing basis, reward employees and inform them about the results.

In addition, managers responsible for implementing changes should resolve conflicts that may arise as a result of the transformation on an ongoing basis, reward employees and keep them informed about the results (Leszczyńska, 2001, p. 273).

Creating an Organizational Culture that Supports Change

Established behavioural patterns translate into employees' reactions and the organization's ability to act accordingly during a crisis. Organizational culture and the approaches it promotes translate into employees' attitudes toward the implemented changes, and their tendency to resist or respond to innovations (Masłyk-Musiał, 2003, p. 119).

It is possible to build a culture that adequately supports change, although in the case of an organization with a previously formed culture, this forces a change process. Organizational culture is created by its members and it is impossible to impose a specific transformation (Czop, 2001, pp. 283, 284).

Cultural change can occur as a result of (Czop, 2001, p. 285):

- a long-term, gradual process of integrating new methods and values into the organization;
- a cultural revolution involving the complete abandonment of old cultural elements and their replacement by new ones;
- adding new values to those currently in place to erase those that currently exist.

Coercion

When no methods and techniques for breaking down resistance work, some managers may choose to use manipulation or coercion to achieve established goals. Coercion requires the initiator of change to have significant influence and power in the organization. It is an effective method and can reduce resistance of any source, but it involves risk and anger towards the initiator of change (Kosała & Pichur, 2009, p. 93). It is worth noting that such methods raise ethical issues and do not provide a long-term solution to the problem of resistance to change.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Goals and Methodology

The research problem was formulated in the form of the following question: what are the signs and sources of employee resistance to change?

The research sought answers to the following questions:

1. How was the change implementation process carried out in the researched entity?
2. How was employee resistance to change manifested, and what were the main reasons for this resistance?
3. How the change management process affected employee satisfaction?

The author used a case study as the main research method. Moreover, statistical analysis was used to interpret gathered data, with correlation calculated for the quantitative data.

Table 1. Questionnaire metrics

Sex (%)	Male 89		Female 9		Prefer to not say 2	
Age (%)	< 20 y/o 0	20-30 y/o 22	31-40 y/o 24	41-50 y/o 42	51-60 y/o 9	> 60 y/o 4
Education (%)	Primary 0		Vocational 33		High school 40	Higher 27
Position (%)	Intern 4	Production employee 69	Office employee 15	Production Team Leader 4	EPU Manager 7	Office Manager 2

Source: own elaboration.

The questionnaire was chosen as the main data-collecting technique to collect as much data as possible, both quantitative and qualitative. It was conducted in two ways: paper versions of the questionnaire were distributed to production employees, and electronic versions were distributed to office workers. The questionnaire contained 14 questions, with four of them being metrics (Tab. 1). 55 employees participated in the study. Anonymity was maintained throughout the research process.

3.2. Research Setting

The target company of the research was Alstom SA, a French manufacturer of rolling stock, specifically its factory in Wroclaw, Alstom Wroclaw RSC (Rolling Stock and Components). Headquartered in France, the company operates in 70 countries

and has over 74,000 employees. It has been operating in Poland for over 25 years, as Alstom Polska SA. Its main focus is manufacturing, servicing, and R&D work in rail transportation. In January 2021 Alstom announced the completion of its acquisition of Bombardier Transportation. The acquisition has increased Alstom's workforce from about 39,000 to about 72,000. In Poland, the expansion involved the acquisition of a plant in Katowice and the Pafawag plant in Wroclaw, now known as Alstom Wroclaw RSC. The plant in Wroclaw was a part of Bombardier Transportation for 20 years before the acquisition.

The most significant change in the last three years of operation of the Wroclaw plant was the takeover by Alstom. Employees had to get used to new procedures and methods that were significantly different from those used for 20 years.

Another significant change was the organizational structure change which began in the fall of 2023. The responsibilities of positions changed, and new positions were created. The change aimed at adapting the organizational structure to the standards in force at other Alstom plants.

A major change was the introduction of the Alstom Operation System (AOS) which was used to manage, supervise, and automate production. The purpose of this change was to standardize the IT tools used by the rest of the company's plants.

Decisions on major changes at divisions are made at Alstom headquarters. Plant directors and managers have no autonomy in strategic issues, and the corporation imposes decisions on changes. Headquarters communicates decisions in the form of a business case. It is important to mention that with the current focus on standardization and the introduction of universal solutions in all branches, the corporation does not allow plant managers to express concerns about the decisions being made. Afterward, each change has an individual action plan established, which defines the stages of transformation.

4. Research Findings and Data Analysis

4.1. Research Results

To determine the extent to which the changes implemented over the past year affected the employees' daily work, they were asked to grade the influence on a scale of 1-5, with 1 meaning that the changes had not affected their daily work at all and 5 meaning that their daily work had completely changed. The average score turned out to be 2.85. Roughly 35% of respondents rated the impact as significant (above 3).

At the end of the survey, the respondents were asked to rate their general impressions of the course of change implementation over the last year on a scale of 1-5, with 1 meaning definitely negative and 5 meaning definitely positive. The average response score was 2.4, while 46% of respondents rated their impressions as negative (below 3).

The two results combined indicate that while the recent changes have not had a significant impact on employees' daily work, they are still not satisfied with their implementation.

In order to study how the communication regarding changes in the organization is carried out, the respondents were asked to mark: the standard period between official and unofficial notification of respondents on planned changes and their implementation.

The results show that there is a large disproportion between the periods in the first criteria, as shown in Fig. 1. The largest group of respondents (33%) answered that they officially learned about the planned change six months in advance. At the same time, the second largest group of respondents (25%) answered that they learned about the planned change one month in advance. This creates a 5-month gap between the notification that the two largest groups of respondents received.

Informally, that is, for example, in a conversation with a co-worker or an informal conversation with a superior, the vast majority of respondents learned about planned changes six months in advance (40%).

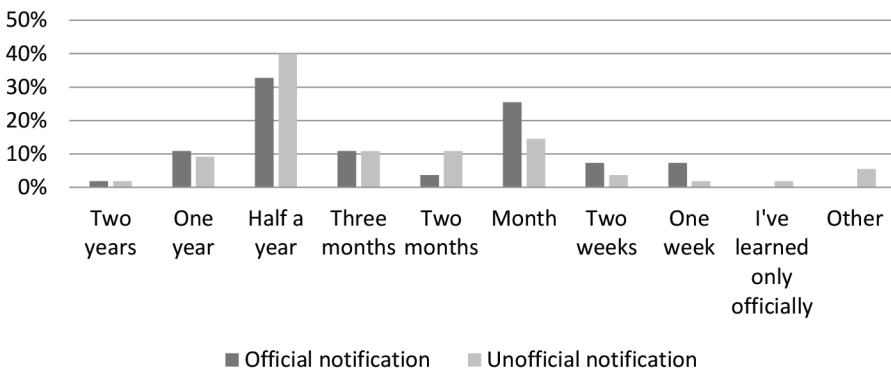


Fig. 1. The standard period between official and unofficial notification of respondents on planned changes and their implementation

Source: own elaboration.

To determine the main causes of sources of resistance to change, the respondents were asked to rate to what extent they agreed with the statements listed in the survey. Responses were rated using the 5-point Likert scale (1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – hard to say, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree). The following statements were listed:

1. "I am afraid of losing my position".
2. "I feel stress from the unknown".
3. "I am afraid of more work".
4. "I do not like newness".

5. "I do not like to give up old habits".
6. "I am concerned about lack of support from superiors".
7. "I had a bad experience with change at Alstom".
8. "I do not trust those in charge of change".
9. "I do not see the point in making changes".
10. "I am not afraid of change".

The three main sources of employee resistance to change highlighted in the responses were:

- "I am afraid of more work" with 52% of respondents agreeing with the statement, 15% of whom strongly agreeing;
- "I had a bad experience with change at Alstom" with 42% of respondents agreeing with the statement, 15% of whom strongly agreed;
- "I am concerned about lack of support from superiors" with 41% of respondents agreeing with the statement, 6% of whom strongly agreeing.

It is worth mentioning that as many as 38% of respondents agreed with the statement "I do not trust those in charge of change", 11% of whom strongly agreed, however the author did not consider it one of the main sources of resistance to change, as less than 40% of respondents agreed with it.

The four least popular statements were:

- "I do not like newness" with 55% of respondents disagreeing with the statement, 21% of whom strongly disagreeing;
- "I am afraid of losing my position" with 46% of respondents disagreeing with the statement, 16% of whom strongly disagreeing;
- "I feel stress from the unknown" with 44% of respondents disagreeing with the statement, 12% of whom strongly disagreeing;
- "I do not see the point in making changes" with 42% of respondents disagreeing with the statement, 13% of whom strongly disagreeing.

The total distribution of ratings for the given statements is shown in Fig. 2.

To learn about the measures taken to reduce concerns, and in effect alleviate employee resistance to change, respondents were asked what actions responding to their concerns they had noticed in the past. The question allowed respondents to choose more than one answer. 37% of respondents stated that they had not noticed any such actions, making it the most common response. 18% of respondents took part in training sessions. At the same time, surprisingly, the answer "periodic employee satisfaction surveys" accounted for only 16% of responses. Only 13% of respondents stated that they noticed that consultations with superiors were held. The distribution of responses is shown in Fig. 3.

To learn more about how the respondents perceived company culture, they were asked to mark one of four descriptions provided. The vast majority (69%) of respondents described the company culture as a culture in which there is an attachment to strict procedures and a focus on efficiency.



Fig. 2. Respondents' views on their feelings regarding change

Source: own elaboration.

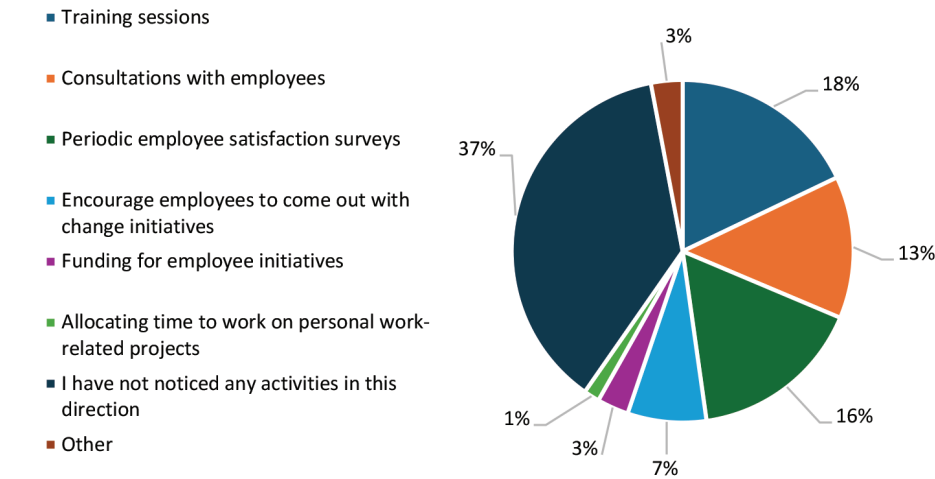


Fig. 3. Actions taken at the company to reduce employees' concerns about change

Source: own elaboration.

To find out more about the respondents' observations of the change implementation process they were asked to mark negative phenomena observed during this process. The most frequently noticed phenomenon was insufficient

information to employees about benefits they would gain from the changes (22%). A slightly less frequently noticed phenomenon was that employees were not made aware of the need for change (20%). The response “treating employees merely as contractors for change” was chosen by 16% of respondents. Slightly less frequently respondents observed the problem of assigning numerous informal tasks (14%). The distribution of responses is shown in Fig. 4.

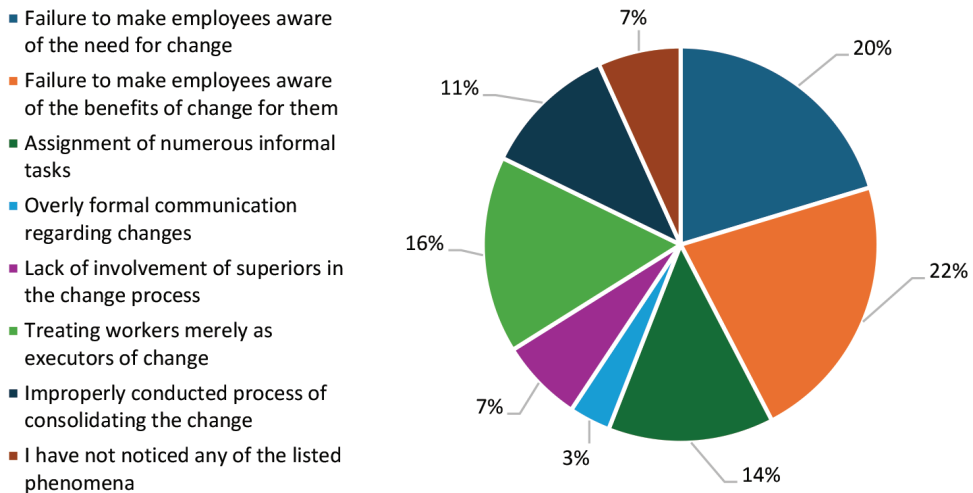


Fig. 4. Negative phenomena regarding change implementation in the organization observed by respondents

Source: own elaboration.

When asked about their reaction to a change with which the respondent disagreed, as many as 42% of respondents said that they have not overtly expressed their dissatisfaction with the change, but it affected the results of their work, 22% of them had not noticed that in such a case their dissatisfaction affected their effectiveness at work. 29% of respondents openly expressed their dissatisfaction.

4.2. Data Analysis and Discussion

Spearman's correlation coefficient r was calculated for all quantitative data, since most of the data are ranked on an ordinal scale or do not have a normal distribution. Selected results of the correlation test are described below, the threshold value of the significance level α , against which the p -value was compared, was set at 0.05. The correlation was counted in order to draw conclusions about important employee concerns that management should focus on minimising first.

The changes implemented at the plant in recent years have significantly affected the work of almost every employee at the plant. However, based on the survey, there was no statistically significant correlation between the impact of change on daily work and satisfaction ratings of the change implementation process (correlation coefficient $r = 0.12$).

As many as 47% of respondents who evaluated the course of change implementation negatively may represent the largest group of employees who will express their resistance to change in some way. This means that almost one in two employees may oppose the implementation of change. Knowing that as many as 42% of respondents admitted that their dissatisfaction with the changes affects their work efficiency, it can be assumed that improving the change implementation process would positively translate into the production capacity of the plant.

When considering the reasons for resistance to change, it is important to look at the company's organizational culture. The vast majority of respondents characterized the organization's culture as the presence of attachment to rigid procedures and a focus on efficiency. Using Siewierski's classification, these are characteristics of a productive culture, with a technological orientation that results in resistance to change. With a heavy emphasis on productivity and performance in the company's culture, employees may fear the consequences of reduced productivity and, as a result, resist change.

The survey showed that there is inconsistency in the advance notice with which employees are informed of changes. There is an interval of as much as five months between the two most frequently marked answers, differing by only 4 percentage points. This may indicate management's over-reliance on the flow of information between employees or the lack of a top-down advance notice with which employees should learn about the change.

However, there was no statistically significant correlation between the number of months in advance with which employees learned about the changes and the assessment of satisfaction with the transition process ($r = -0.12$ for official notice and $r = -0.21$ in the case of unofficial advance notice).

The problem most often noted by the respondents is the failure to make employees aware of the benefits they can derive from the changes and the purpose of the transformation being carried out. This indicates a poorly conducted 'unfreezing' stage and the adoption of a task-oriented strategy, which can translate into problems with consolidating the change. In addition, some employees noted that they are not involved in the change process. Both phenomena reinforce employee resistance to change.

The biggest concern of employees about change is the additional workload. One in two employees feared more workload after the implementation of the changes. There is a weak correlation between fear of more workload and employees' satisfaction rating of the change process ($r = -0.33$, $p = 0.012$). Considering that the assignment of numerous informal tasks during and after the implementation of

changes was observed by employees, it can be concluded that there is a problem with the proper organization of work during the transformation process. It is also worth noting that this is the only one of the statements evaluated by the respondents which is correlated with the evaluations of all other statements. This allows us to draw a conclusion that the concern of additional workload is the main source of employee resistance to change in the studied organization.

In addition, a statistically significant correlation between the evaluation of the statements provided in the survey and employee satisfaction rating was shown for the following statements:

- "I have a bad experience with change at Alstom" ($r = -0.32$, $p = 0.02$; weak correlation);
- "I do not trust the people responsible for the change" ($r = -0.42$, $p = 0.002$; moderate relationship);
- "I am not afraid of change" ($r = 0.39$, $p = 0.004$; weak correlation).

After adding up the answers given to the question about observed actions in this direction, the answer "I have not noticed any actions in this direction" was given by 37% of respondents, which clearly indicates that the awareness about the currently taken measures was still low. It may also mean that measures taken hardly translate into greater employee involvement in the transformation process, which is something the employees clearly want. This allows us to conclude that the measures currently being taken to address and minimize employees' concerns about change are either ineffective or do not involve sufficient number of employees. It is noteworthy that a significant number of employees see sense in implementing change, which means that employees notice problems in the company and believe that despite their concerns, change is needed.

5. Conclusions

The following conclusions are drawn from the research.

- Employee resistance can be characterized as passive resistance, as it is associated with reduced productivity.
- Currently, the 'unfreezing' stage is carried out incorrectly, which contributes to the increase in resistance to change expressed by employees.
- Employee resistance is largely influenced by poor work organization during the change process and employees are largely afraid of being assigned numerous informal tasks due to the transformation process.
- There is a problem of employees' trust in those responsible for the change.
- Employees are not sufficiently involved in the change process.
- Current measures to reduce fears, and thus employee resistance to change, are insufficient.

The low score of employee satisfaction regarding change implementation should always be an alarming signal to the management. All of the aforementioned conclusions can be also treated as sources of the low satisfaction score, which negatively translates into lowered effectiveness. Since employees are aware of the need for change and support its implementation, one can conclude that the problem in itself is not change, but the transformation process.

Results indicate that to minimize employee resistance to change it can be beneficial to reorganize work and take productivity losses into account during a transformation process when setting Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), as well as making changes to organizational culture to increase employee orientation. In addition, it may be beneficial to increase the involvement of willing employees in the transformation process, without increasing the workload and number of meetings.

Limitations

As the survey was the chosen method of research, there are some limitations. The low diversity of respondents' positions has limited learning the cross-section of employees' experiences and in effect may have limited the reliability of the results. Also, the as it is a case study of one company, the conclusions cannot be applied to all companies and their struggles with employees' resistance to change, but at the same time they provide a valuable insight into the phenomenon of employee resistance to change.

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Zjawisko oporu pracowników wobec zmian. Studium przypadku Alstom SA

Streszczenie: W artykule zbadano temat oporu pracowników wobec zmian, jego źródeł i sposobów jego minimalizowania. Badanie zostało przeprowadzone w jednym z zakładów produkcyjnych Alstom SA, Alstom Wrocław RSC, polskim oddziale firmy specjalizującej się w produkcji taboru kolejowego. Wykorzystaną metodą była ankieta. Wyniki pokazują, że najistotniejszym czynnikiem wpływającym na opór pracowników wobec zmian w badanej organizacji jest duże obciążenie pracą i obawa przed jego zwiększeniem wynikającym ze zmian. Pracownicy obawiają się konsekwencji zmniejszenia produktywności po wdrożeniu zmian ze względu na kulturę organizacyjną, która koncentruje się na produktywności i wynikach.

Słowa kluczowe: opór pracowników wobec zmian, zarządzanie zmianą, źródła oporu pracowników wobec zmian, minimalizowanie oporu pracowników wobec zmian