

# Change at work linked to employee stress, distrust and intent to quit, new survey finds

24 May 2017



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At a time of change and uncertainty across the country, American adults who have been affected by change at work are more likely to report chronic work stress, less likely to trust their employer and more likely to say they plan to leave the organization within the next year compared with those who haven't been affected by organizational change, according to a survey released by the American Psychological Association.

Half of American workers (50 percent) say they have been affected by organizational changes in the last year, are currently being affected by organizational changes or expect to be affected by organizational changes in the next year, according to APA's 2017 Work and Well-Being Survey. The survey was conducted online in March by Harris Poll among more than 1,500 U.S. adults who were employed full time, part time or self-employed. Workers experiencing recent or current change were more than twice as likely to report chronic [work](#) stress compared with employees who reported no recent, current or anticipated change (55 percent vs. 22 percent), and more than four times as likely to report experiencing physical health symptoms at work (34 percent vs. 8

percent).

Working Americans who reported recent or current change were more likely to say they experienced work-life conflict (39 percent vs. 12 percent for job interfering with non-work responsibilities and 32 percent vs. 7 percent for home and family responsibilities interfering with work), felt cynical and negative toward others during the workday (35 percent vs. 11 percent) and ate or smoked more during the workday than they did outside of work (29 percent vs. 8 percent).

The survey findings also show how workplace changes may affect employees' attitudes and experiences on the job. Workers who reported being affected by organizational change currently or within the past year reported lower levels of job satisfaction compared with employees who reported no recent, current or anticipated changes (71 percent vs. 81 percent). Working Americans who reported recent or current change were almost three times more likely to say they don't trust their employer (34 percent vs. 12 percent) and more than three times as likely to say they intend to seek employment outside the organization within the next year (46 percent vs. 15 percent) compared with those with no recent, current or anticipated change.

Underlying employee reactions to [organizational change](#) may be their perceptions of the motivation behind those changes and the likelihood of success, according to the survey. Almost a third of U.S. workers said they were cynical when it comes to changes, reporting that they believed management had a hidden agenda (29 percent), that their motives and intentions were different from what they said (31 percent) and that they tried to cover up the real reasons for the changes (28 percent). Working Americans also appeared skeptical when it comes to the outcomes of organizational changes. Only 4 in 10 employees (43 percent) had confidence that changes would

have the desired effects and almost 3 in 10 doubted that changes would work as intended and achieve their goals (28 percent each).

"Change is inevitable in organizations, and when it happens, leadership often underestimates the impact those changes have on employees," said David W. Ballard, PsyD, MBA, head of APA's Center for Organizational Excellence. "If they damage their relationship with employees, ratchet up stress levels and create a climate of negativity and cynicism in the process, managers can wind up undermining the very change efforts they're trying to promote."

APA's annual Work and Well-Being Survey provides a snapshot of the U.S. workforce, including employee well-being and attitudes and opinions related to workplace policies and practices. Other key findings of the 2017 survey include:

- Contrary to popular belief, more than three-quarters of U.S. workers (78 percent) reported average or better levels of [work engagement](#), as characterized by high levels of energy, being strongly involved in their work and feeling happily engrossed in what they do, with the largest group (47 percent) having an average level of work engagement.
- One in 5 employees (22 percent) reported low or very low levels of engagement at work, yet workers who felt they were treated fairly by their employers were more than five times as likely to report high or very high levels of work engagement, compared with employees who didn't feel treated fairly (39 percent vs. 7 percent).
- Although most employed adults (71 percent) felt that their organization treats them fairly, 1 in 5 (21 percent) said they did not trust their employer.
- Employees who said they don't trust their employer were more than three times as likely to say they're typically tense and stressed out at work compared with those who trust their employer (70 percent vs. 23 percent), and more than four times as likely to indicate that they plan to look for a new

job within the next year (65 percent vs. 16 percent).

- Trust and engagement play important roles in the workplace, accounting for more than half of the variance in employee well-being. In predicting well-being, engagement and trust accounted for 53 percent of the variance.
- Workers reported having more trust in their companies when the organization recognizes employees for their contributions, provides opportunities for involvement and communicates effectively. In predicting trust, employee involvement, recognition and communication predicted 43 percent of the variance.
- Employees experienced higher engagement when they had more positive perceptions of their employer's involvement, growth and development and health and safety practices. In predicting work engagement, [employee involvement](#), growth and development opportunities, and health and safety efforts accounted for 28 percent of the variance.

"For organizations to successfully navigate turbulent times, they need resilient employees who can adapt to change," Ballard said. "Disillusioned workers who are frustrated with change efforts, however, may begin to question leaders' motives and resist further changes. To build [trust](#) and engagement, employers need to focus on building a psychologically healthy workplace where employees are actively involved in shaping the future and confident in their ability to succeed."

Provided by American Psychological Association

APA citation: Change at work linked to employee stress, distrust and intent to quit, new survey finds (2017, May 24) retrieved 23 January 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-05-linked-employee-stress-distrust-intent.html>

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