The utility of the Theory of Planned Behavior to facilitate employee support for organisational change – communication and engagement strategy and proving return-on-investment

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Abstract
This paper reviews recent research utilising the Theory of Planned Behavior as a framework for understanding employee intentions to support organisational change. Examined is the extent to which employee beliefs and attitudes, social influence (subjective norm) and perceived control predicted employee intentions to carry out activities supportive of a specific change event, with respect to intentions being the most reliable indicator of future behavior. Also considered is how communication and employee participation strategies can foster employee intentions to engage in change-supportive behaviors. The predictive power of the model supports effective design and measurement of employee engagement interventions, targeted to align employee behavior toward organisational goals. An applied framework for practitioners to establish hard evidence of the value of their communication and engagement activities is also presented.

Key words
Organisational change, Change management, Employee, Engagement, Behaviour change, Communication, Participation, Benefits realisation, Return-on-investment
Introduction
Within today’s global business conditions, organisational change initiatives have clear objectives - deliver effective, sustainable organisational outcomes and demonstrate return-on-investment. The prevalence and cost of organisational change means that success of such initiatives is a predominant concern, however regardless of the fiscal environment, change budgets are frequently underestimated or deleteriously minimised (Dodge, 2003; Dubie, 2008; Kavis, 2008). Instead of being a luxury or project delivery add-on, change and communication solutions are crucial components for organisation development or change initiative success, yet the majority of internal or external change practitioners cannot prove the value of their work against the bottom-line to organisational purse-holders.

Organisational change management is usually undertaken with respect to modification of organisational systems, structures, and processes, with many research authors suggesting that employee support for the change is central as to whether these initiatives will succeed or fail (see Cummings & Worley, 2001). What is examined less frequently, is why and how such strategies influence employee support for the change. For example, why do communication and training efforts often fail to enable successful organisational transition? This review presents offers a parsimonious theoretical framework for practitioners to understand the complex relationships between change drivers, especially as they relate to employee beliefs, attitude and behaviour. Also discussed are recommendations for intervention design and measurement of change intervention.

The importance of effective communication and engagement in change management
Various strategies such as persuasive and active communication techniques, as well as using best practice guiding principles to share information and ensure two-way communication between stakeholders throughout change programs (Whelan-Barry, Gordon & Hining, 2003), have been strongly linked with positive organisational outcomes in research (Armenakis, Harris & Mossholder, 1993).

In a study conducted of 168 workers in a national insurance company who were about to undertake team-based methods of working, it was shown that employees who felt they had received high-quality information about the impending changes were also more likely to report high levels of readiness for the change (Miller, Johnson & Grau, 1994). Similarly, pre-implementation measures of information provision and active employee participation were predictive of employee readiness for change in a group of 130 employees undergoing large-scale restructuring within a public housing association (Wanberg & Banas, 2000).
information management, precise communication and data-based decision-making have also been investigated as sources of influence to foster positive organisational culture (see Quinn, 1988; Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1981; 1983).

Engaging employees as part of the change process is widely regarded as essential for change management success. This may occur through face-to-face meetings and discussions, modeling vital behaviors (Galpin, 1996), or formally providing opportunities for employee participation in decision-making forums as “change agents” (Piderit, 2000), where staff may provide recommendations or take action in response to employee concerns (Kennedy, 1994). These participation strategies have demonstrated robust effects on employee intentions to support or reject change (Sage & Koslowski, 1996; Latham, Winters & Locke, 1994).

Beckhard and Harris (1987) suggest that readiness for change is facilitated through the willingness, motives and aims that organisational members have about a proposed change, although others also highlight the influence that the organisational environment can have on an employee’s appraisal and reaction to change events (Dube, 1998; Hay & Hartel, 2000; Sadri and Lees, 2001). Successful organisational adaptation to a change event therefore relies upon generating employee support and enthusiasm for the proposed changes (Piderit, 2000) and therefore communication and engagement strategies can play a vital role in ensuring change success. As it is widely documented that perceptions underpin whether employees will undermine or facilitate change success (e.g. Armenakis, Harris & Mossholder, 1993; Eby, Adams, Russell & Gaby, 2000; Lewin, 1951), design of organisational change management and communication strategy would benefit from examination of this process as a psychological event (Hay & Hartel, 2000) due to employees responding to a change event, based on their perception of what is happening.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)
One of numerous cognitive decision-making models, the TPB, suggests that individuals make decisions rationally and systematically through information available to them (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Within this model, intention is the most proximal determinant of behavior and is determined through a logical sequence of cognitions. Intentions, in turn, are proposed to be a function of three independent determinants. The first determinant of intention is the person's attitude, conceptualised as the overall evaluation, either positive or negative, of performing the behavior of interest. The second determinant of intentions is subjective norm, which reflects perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the
behavior. The third determinant of intentions is perceived behavioral control, which reflects the extent to which the behavior is perceived to be under volitional control.

Meta-analytic reviews reveal that the TPB has been used extensively in a broad range of research areas to successfully predict behavior (e.g., Armitage & Conner, 2001). In corporate settings, the TPB has been used to understand technology adoption (Gentry & Calantone, 2002; Rei, Lang, & Welker, 2002), utilisation of structured interview techniques in staff selection (van der Zee, Bakker, & Bakker, 2002), the prediction of managers' intentions to improve their own skills following provision of feedback (Maurer & Palmer, 1999), worker intent towards an employee involvement program (e.g., Dawkins & Frass, 2005) and the extent to which managers undertake benchmarking within their organisation (Hill, Mann, & Wearing, 1996).

In addition to the direct determinants of intentions and behavior, the TPB identifies the beliefs underpinning each of the constructs of attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991).

![Figure 1. The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991)](image)

Specifically, an individual's attitude is proposed to be a function of salient behavioral beliefs, or the belief that certain outcomes (i.e., benefits and costs) associated with the behavior will occur (behavioral beliefs), weighted by evaluations of the pleasantness of each of the
outcomes (outcome evaluations). Subjective norms are proposed to be a function of the extent to which other people would want the person to perform the behavior (normative beliefs), weighted by his or her motivation to comply with each of these referents (motivation to comply). Perceived behavioral control is proposed to be a function of the beliefs concerning whether resources and opportunities are available to perform the behavior (control beliefs), weighted by the expected impact that these factors would have if they were to occur/be present (perceived power). The TPB proposes that an examination of the beliefs underlying these direct behavioral determinants improves understanding of the relationship between beliefs, intentions and behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Madden, 1986).

In an organisational change context, the identification of beliefs that underlie the attitudes of employees towards a change initiative, as well as their feelings of normative pressure and perceived behavioral control, may help change and communications managers to develop a greater understanding of the psychological factors that determine whether and why employees intend to support the change. On this basis, it is argued that the TPB provides an organising framework – one with predictive power – to explain how employees’ beliefs about impending change are translated into behavioral responses.

**Review and relevance of Recent Research**

A recent study utilised the Theory of Planned Behavior in relation to an organisational relocation (Jimmieson, Peach & White, 2008). Relocation of an enterprise is a significant occurrence that impacts on a range of organisational logistics, requiring strategies to manage uncertainty among employees (see Kleasen & Foster, 2002; Spreckelmeyer, 1995). Beyond the logistics of relocating assets and people, organisational relocation management includes ensuring rationalisation of relocation plans, project management of the enterprise transition including planning for future business requirements and notification to vendor services and other contacts, in addition to considerable anticipation of the impacts to various organisational groups (Stokols, Clitheroe & Zimuidzinas, 2000).

In particular, physical changes to the work environment can result in potential disruption to social relationships or perceived status, when staff relocate away from nearby peers or out of offices into open workspaces (Bommer, Rich & Rubin, 2005; Caldwell, Herold and Fedor, 2004). Conversely, Fox and Krausz (1987) found that perceived benefits of the relocation predicted positive emotions and less stress reactions for 155 Israeli employees whose organisation had moved from one major city to another. Later, Martin (1999) found that employees who felt that they had received sufficient information and had a say in the
forthcoming move reported better post-move mental health, job-related contentment and enthusiasm, and intrinsic job satisfaction. Thus, relocation is a critical and potentially stressful workplace event, for which carefully designed change management and communication strategies are needed to ensure positive outcomes for employees and organisations.

TPB utilised to support organisational relocation

The TPB offers a comprehensive, yet comparatively parsimonious model from which to assess employee intentions to carry out behaviors that support change. It encompasses themes explored by various authors across the change literature. First, it has been argued that more favourable change reactions are derived from positive employee attitudes about the need for change, as well as the extent to which employees believe that such changes are likely to have benefits and positive implications for themselves and the wider organisation (Armenakis et al., 1993; Miller, Johnson, & Grau, 1994). Second, the suggestion that subjective norm predicts intentions to support organisational change is based on the idea that social influence creates pressure among employees to act in change-supportive ways. Third, the extent to which employees believe that various factors will either facilitate or impede their ability to act in change-supportive ways (i.e., perceived behavioral control) is consistent with studies that have shown that perceptions (or appraisals) of control are influential in helping employees to cope and adjust during times of organisational change (e.g., Terry & Jimmieson, 2003; see also Sutton & Kahn, 1986).

Jimmieson, Peach and White (2008) hypothesised that attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control were positively associated with intentions to engage in change-supportive behaviors for the relocation. Next, it was predicted that employee ratings of communication about the relocation were positively related to intentions and that this relationship will be mediated by attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control. Lastly, employee perceptions of participation in change-related decision-making were also predicted to increase intentions with this relationship expected to be mediated by the three TPB variables.

A graphical summary of the working hypotheses in the research under review (Jimmieson, Peach & White, 2008) appears below.
Organisational context of research

A local government body in Australia responsible for the city's transport and parking, in addition to a comprehensive range of residential, business and community services was being relocated to a 40-storey office tower. Council services being relocated included core management and administration functions and a public library which provides learning programs, facilities and resources for a broad range of community groups - affecting approximately 2,000 staff across various subsidiaries of the council.

Although employees were likely to continue working in their current work units, new office layouts were expected to improve the effectiveness of workflow between organisational divisions. Of particular significance, all employees across all hierarchical levels were required to work in large, open spaces. Thus, the issue of privacy was one major issue of concern for employees, especially for managerial staff.

The change management plan for relocation to the new building was sectioned into 'workplace design', 'readiness to move', 'moving in', and 'post occupancy' phases. Employees were also encouraged to participate in implementation activities (e.g., attendance at workshops and forums), as well as contribute toward design of the new office environment (e.g., choice over seating plans and colour schemes for office equipment). During the design...
phase, employees were also encouraged to consider transition issues related to the new accommodation, such as evaluating work practices, identifying important relationships to promote better contact between key groups, evaluating storage and equipment needs, and becoming familiar with the goals of ecologically sustainable work practices.

**Research method and preliminary analyses**

Participants volunteered to complete a questionnaire assessing the standard TPB measures (see Ajzen, 2002). Scale development was partially based on output from an employee focus group designed to elicit predominant beliefs about attitudinal and control factors about performing the necessary target behaviors to support the relocation. A total of 180 questionnaires were distributed to employees by workplace representatives (across the Office of Lord Mayor and six council divisions) and 84% were returned to a secure collection box.

The majority of the sample was employed on a full-time basis (91%) and employees in the sample had an average tenure of 10.56 years ($SD = 8.80$) working for the council, and an average tenure of 5.55 years ($SD = 4.31$) for the division in which they worked.

Preliminary analyses of the data revealed that female staff and older employees reported higher intentions to engage in activities planned over the subsequent 6 months that were supportive of the move to new premises. Additionally, female employees reported higher levels of perceived behavioral control and also perceived that they had received more communication about the change process compared to male staff.

**Results Summary and Discussion**

**Effects of Attitude, Subjective Norm and Perceived Behavioral Control on intentions**

Hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to reveal the extent to which the standard TPB predictor variables predicted intentions to carry out specific activities related to the relocation. Analyses within the Jimmieson, Peach and White (2008) study showed that a significant amount of variance in intentions was explained ($R^2 = .30, F(3, 139) = 19.98, p < .001$), demonstrating that employees who held positive attitudes toward performing behaviors that supported the relocation ($\beta = .23, p < .01$), who perceived pressure from others to complete the required activities ($\beta = .28, p < .001$), and who felt they were in control of performing such behaviors ($\beta = .18, p < .05$), were more likely to intend to carry out supportive activities related to the relocation. Specifically, employee self-ratings of attitude,
subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control were predictive of their reported intentions to carry out activities during the next 6 months that supported the move to new premises.

The results of this recent study (Jimmieson, Peach & White, 2008) are consistent with other literature examining the robustness and utility of the model (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Azjen, 1991), and in particular, the prediction of employee intention and behavior within an organisational change context (e.g., Dawkins & Frass, 2005; Hill et al., 1996; Maurer & Palmer, 1999; Rei et al., 2002; van der Zee et al., 2002). Therefore, this recent research serves to provide useful parameters for communication and participation strategy design to facilitate change-supportive behaviors for such purposes.

**Analyses Testing the Role of Communication and Participation on Intentions**

Consistent with Baron and Kenny’s (1986) recommendations for the testing of mediated models involving continuously measured variables, hierarchical multiple regression analyses was also employed to determine the influence of communication and participation on intentions. Analyses via Sobel (1982) testing revealed that communication and participation were significantly related to intentions. Results presented by Jimmieson, Peach & White (2008) showed considerable support for the model that the effects of communication and participation on intentions are mediated by attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control, whereby employees who felt that they had received appropriate information about the relocation and had been involved in decisions related to the relocation process reported higher intentions to engage in supportive behaviors.

Across the results of the study, general support for the hypotheses confirmed the utility of the TPB to explain the simple and complex effects that communication and participation have on employee intentions to engage in activities that support a change initiative. In this respect, ensuring that employees are informed and consulted therefore helps to foster positive attitudes and create social pressure among employees to act in supportive ways of impending change. Additionally, the study’s findings are consistent with other theorists who note that accurate and timely information about a significant workplace event contributes to a sense of predictability, thereby enhancing personal control beliefs and engendering a sense of self-efficacy among employees (e.g., Bell & Staw, 1986).

Therefore, the TPB assists our understanding as to why common change management strategies, such as communication and participation strategies, lead to positive employee reactions to organisational change. These results also add to a growing body of research that
such change management strategies can reliably foster positive responses among employees undergoing office or plant relocation (Daly & Geyer, 1994; Lawson & Angle, 1998; Martin, 1999; Miller & Monge, 1985).

**Practical application - TPB as the change and communications ROI framework**

Too often, practitioners build a program of communication and engagement interventions without relevant consideration of how these efforts will be measured against important change outcomes, such as the performance of required behaviours expected from employees as part of the change journey or post-implementation (e.g. reading project communications, proactively seeking out further required information, constructively voicing concerns to management or project leaders, ensuring availability for training, adhering to new post-implementation processes and/or seeking additional performance support if required).

As highlighted in this review, a deeper understanding of the determinants of employee intentions is very useful during change management practice for the purposes of designing targeted and effective change interventions. Moreover, the intention-behaviour relationship has been demonstrated within organisational and change settings (Cherne, 2008; Dawkins & Frass, 2005; Gentry & Calantone, 2002; Rei, Lang, & Welker, 2002; van der Zee, Bakker, & Bakker, 2002) yet such quantitative analyses are rarely utilised to reflect the value of the change and communication efforts in hard terms. Comparison measurement between a baseline, positively fostered employee intentions following engagement and communication interventions, as well as behaviour performed post-implementation, could serve to provide the evidence of “realised benefits” against which resourcing and budget is factored to derive return-on-investment.

**TPB application to change and communication Intervention design**

Change strategy developed out of an elicitation exercise conducted with staff could reveal the nature and variability of key employee perceptions or beliefs as they relate to organisational changes and required employee behaviours in the post-implementation environment, such as new ways of working (target behaviours). Additionally, through consultation with all, or representative organisational personnel, via a focus group or iterative succession of focus groups, measurement of the TPB variables provides the framework for predicting employee intention and behavior across the change journey – permitting a reiterative process model of change management through measurement of intentions (and its determinants) across successive stages of a change program (Jimmieson, Peach & White, 2008; Cherne, 2008).
In this manner, employee beliefs about a change event are elicited with the relative effects of attitude, social influence and perceived control on employee intentions enabling intervention design around the most salient issues, as determined by employees themselves. Not only does this exercise provide useful data to inform change intervention, but is in itself a strategy to increase employee participation and engagement in the change, that can begin to effect positive outcomes within the change context (Jimmieson, Peach & White, 2008; Cherne, 2008). This way, pertinent results within the TPB measures can inform the direction and nature of communication and engagement activities. Example communication and engagement strategies to foster positive employee intentions toward change-supportive behaviours include:

- **Communications regarding perceived individual and organisational benefits of performing required behaviors (attitudinal drivers), targeted to build or reinforce strong positive staff perceptions of the value in performing these tasks.** This suggestion is consistent with research that promoting change benefits can foster positive employee attitudes toward the change (e.g. Armenakis et al., 1993; Miller, Johnson, & Grau, 1994). Conversely, negative or false beliefs commonly held by employees can be identified and debunked.

- **Communications which highlight available organisational resources to employees to engage in change-supportive behaviors, targeted to increase employees’ perceived behavioural control within the change landscape.** Additionally, engagement with employees to understand perceived barriers from performing tasks and removing these, or facilitating additional supports, toward subsequent performance of those tasks.

- **Strengthening influential relationships (subjective norms) within the organisation to visibly model and reinforce the required behaviors to support the change, such as securing senior executive sponsorship for the change project/program and building change capability amongst frontline managers and key team members.** It is considered that this factor is crucial to establish change momentum as well as the sustainability of change success (Conner, 1992). More specifically, the communication or change specialist can provide organisational leaders key messages that will be of most benefit to fostering positive employee intentions or commitment toward the change, derived from quantitative analyses of salient beliefs within the change context at that time. Change efforts and budgets can be therefore be directed where they will be the most effective, according to complex relationships between employee change drivers (TPB variables). The
strength of this model is the scope it provides to predict and measure these factors in addition to employee intentions with respect to planned outcomes sought at milestones throughout or after implementation.

The TPB as an indicator of change readiness and commitment

Within practice, change management strategies frequently incorporate Conner’s (1992) commitment curve to guide change efforts and change readiness assessment against the stages of preparation, acceptance and commitment. However, assessment of what stage of commitment is reached by employees during change, more often than not, occurs in an unstructured and qualitative manner. The TPB offers then, not only a framework for targeting intervention design, but also a model for understanding, defining and measuring the changing nature of employee cognition, attitude and behaviour across the relevant phases of the change journey (awareness, acceptance/resistance and commitment).

Elicited beliefs and attitudes in addition to observed behaviours within the unique change context, as measured within the TPB, can be mapped in a straightforward manner to Conner’s commitment stages. Subsequent measurement of the TPB variables, therefore, provides the change practitioner with an objective and repeatable framework for measuring the influence of communication and engagement activities on employee beliefs and intentions over time. By including measurement of employee intention toward performing specific behaviors that are requisite to a successful transition, practitioners can understand even in the early stages of the change program, the likelihood of employees to perform necessary behaviors identified to support the change. More importantly, they are also armed with the comparative priorities for intervention from such data analyses. In this manner, valuable “readiness checks” could be also be gleaned throughout the change journey to identify and ameliorate crucial performance gaps prior to a change project launch or go-live. Use of the Conner (1992) model in tandem with the TPB also provides the practitioner with a shared language and standard benchmarking process of change success, widely utilised in the commercial and change management fields.

TPB measurement as evidence of benefits realisation

Data analyses based on measurement of the TPB, enables the practitioner to forecast commitment toward the change via robust theoretical prediction of employee intention to support the change and subsequent performance of change-supportive behaviors. This approach also enables reliable and meaningful quantitative reporting to change event sponsors.
and stakeholders about prime change risks and opportunities, as well as can reflect the degree of influence change and communication interventions are making toward change outcomes. All too frequently however, change readiness reporting is based upon employee opinion gathered by interview, informal feedback or by survey, and lacks the rigor of causal relationship analyses to defend change management success claims.

A (statistically significant) measured increase between employee intention toward performing change-supportive behaviors and subsequent uptake of these behaviors, offers quantifiable and highly valid evidence of success of the change management strategy and its implementation. Return-on-investment of the change efforts can then be estimated from this available ‘hard’ data, relevant to resourcing costs and with respect to demonstration of achieving these and other planned change transition outcomes. Eventually, use of this methodology may help shift the perception of change management as a “soft benefit”. Indeed, behavioural and other statistical indicators (e.g. employee satisfaction or engagement, work ambiguity, role overload, work absence or turnover) could be included as part of a comprehensive assessment of the influence of communication and engagement efforts to yield favourable organisational outcomes.

Therefore, practitioners can offer a proven, strategic approach to management of the change landscape, focusing time and resources only toward key influences operating in the environment. Through an understanding of what and how to target in their communication and engagement interventions (based on attitude, social influence and control factors), this change management approach can assure stakeholders of comprehensive assessment of their project and confidence that that their investment in change management activities is being appropriately directed.

**Future research and practice directions**

Other powerful social influence processes, described by social identity and self-categorization theories, are now also being considered within the TPB framework (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Haslam, Powell, & Turner, 2000; Hogg & Terry, 2001; Turner & Haslam, 2000). This research suggests that employees experience social influence within the work environment, less from interpersonal pressure and more from a sense of connectedness with others, based on their psychological membership to a salient reference group (e.g. business unit, branch, team or their organisation as a whole). Such investigations provide additional potential for change interventions within the workplace. Recent research relating to organisational relocations has revealed that employees who indicated that they identified strongly with their
branch were more likely to have stronger intentions toward and subsequent adoption of change-supportive activities, if they perceived that fellow branch employees were also engaging in the desired behaviors (Cherne, 2008). How identities are shaped by the work environment continues to receive research attention and will be highly relevant to the changing landscape of organisational settings (e.g., Elsbach, 2003).

Another further advantage of the TPB approach, inherent in its belief basis, is its ability to identify the underlying beliefs that distinguish between intenders and non-intenders for the specific behavior under investigation (see Fishbein & Stasson, 1990; Peach, Jimmieson & White, 2005), which may help practitioners to develop a greater understanding of the psychological factors that distinguish between those employees who support the change and those who do not, in order to intervene accordingly.

**Research value and conclusion**

Overall, the reviewed research contributes to our understanding of organisational change and communication strategies by providing a theoretical approach that has predictive power. The TPB serves as a useful framework for change and communication practitioners to powerfully predict and shape employee intentions to support change efforts and align their behaviors to organisational goals. Additionally, this approach enables practitioners to quantify change drivers within unique contexts and design situationally-relevant interventions. Staged measurement of employee beliefs and intentions can also provide indicators of change readiness and serve as the basis of evidence for benefits realisation and subsequent calculation of return-on-investment.

Whether for global or enterprise transformation efforts, or for local or gradual change initiatives specific to human capital investment, process efficiency or reducing costs, the TPB offers a robust theoretical and practical framework to elicit key change drivers relevant to unique organisational contexts and audiences, as well as offers a rich explanation of cognitive and social belief systems and motivations that influence employee intentions to accept and support change events. Moreover, a longitudinal assessment of the TPB factors in conjunction with communication and participation, provides a process model to inform change interventions designed to facilitate behaviourally-based performance targets.

It is no surprise then, that isolated communications strategies or training efforts often fail. Such solutions aimed at effecting attitude-change or increasing staff knowledge cannot address the complexity of required communication and transition support to enable employee
engagement toward change commitment or sustained implementation success. Understanding the psychological determinants of employee intention and behavior enables change and communication specialists to target their interventions to influence attitude, subjective norm and perceived control toward increased change readiness and adoption of target behaviors.

Current economic imperatives demand that change management and communication strategy design be based on more than anecdotal concerns and priorities, guess-work and gut-feel. An understanding and application of the TPB framework in association with its relationships with communication and engagement strategies, can serve to foster employee intentions to support change and sustain these outcomes over time. This methodology also offers an empirical process for change intervention evaluation and hard evidence from which to demonstrate the financial return of such activities.

References


