To Change or Not to Change?

Assessment of Willingness and Ability to Change

and their Predictors

in the Global Digital Services Industry

Irina Heim
Henley Business School, University of Reading, UK

Nibedita Sardar-Drenda
Henley Business School, University of Reading, UK

Corresponding author. Irina Heim, Henley Business School, University of Reading,
Whiteknights, PO Box 218, Reading, RG6 6AA, UK.
Email: irina.heim@henley.ac.uk; tel: +44(0)7493211141

Abstract

Global companies in the digital service industry implementing a large-scale restructuring change projects are experiencing a pressing need for ongoing change caused due to external and internal factors driven by the need to change business models. The aim of this study is to evaluate the willingness and ability to change as constructs of employee attitude towards change and assess their predictors in the fast-paced business environment of the digital service industry. If the general employee attitude towards change and their predictors under these conditions are known, then it would be conducive to formulate change management strategy. The research questions in study, therefore, explores what factors define employee's willingness and ability to change in the situation of ongoing organizational transformation and to suggest suitable strategy. An approach to analyzing willingness and ability to change as a construct of employee attitude towards change is developed in order to predict change readiness and change openness. This study used 306 employee surveys and nine interviews as a methodological stance. Result of this study suggests that the employees are willing to change when the proposed change makes sense to them and they have a sense of perceived control based on collaboration with management.

INTRODUCTION

Digital service companies are currently facing several challenges which are multi-level and range from operational to people management issues. The operational challenges facing digital service companies include need for ongoing organizational transformations as a result of technological acquisitions and adoption of new technologies and business models. Consequently, low levels of satisfaction are reported amongst the employees (Bersin *et al.*,

2017). Moreover, the digital service industry is racing towards automation and digitalization focusing on the delivery of big data and security services, and employees do not possess the right skills to support the changing business portfolio. Lack of knowledge leads to high costs, lower profit margins and slow proliferation of automation and industrialization. Transition and transformation projects are financially troubled; the processes are complex. These factors result in dissatisfaction amongst the employees and led to many employees "*sitting through the change*". However, an attempt to change itself can have a positive or negative impact on attitude and productivity (Weber & Weber, 2001; Piderit, 2000). In such settings, most change efforts fail (Rafferty *et al*., 2012) and this alone is the main reason for taking a new and careful theoretical approach to such transformations to which extant theories are not easily applied (Robinson, 2019).

While the failure to successfully implement planned change may be attributed to many factors, few issues are so critical as employee's attitude to change (Miller *et al*., 1994). Therefore, employees' response to it may range from positive intention to support to negative intention to oppose it (Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005). Change-supportive behaviours can be defined as "actions employees engage in to actively participate in, facilitate, and contribute to a planned change initiated by the organization" (Kim *et al*., 2011). The purpose of this study was to find the predictors of employee's attitude towards change measured by a willingness and ability to change and specify what the key underlying factors impacting employees' change-supportive behavior are, in order to plan an ongoing change.

Although many organizations are currently faced with the challenge of adapting to a rapidly changing and often unpredictable environment, the underlying concepts of the change process remain relatively simplistic in nature (Buono & Kerber, 2010). Due to the fact that the change is often in the "non-disclosure" phase, it is nearly impossible to measure the readiness

of the employees using one of the existing frameworks (Wanberg & Banas, 2000; Bouckenooghe *at al*., 2008; Rafferty *et al*., 2012). Therefore, the only way to measure the general willingness and ability to change as employee attitude indicators is by using the simplified approach adapting from existing models of readiness and openness.

This research addresses the need for a more employee-oriented approach in the study of change (Vakola, 2014) with focus on internal enablers of change readiness. It uses an abductive approach, building on the refinement of existing theories, rather than inventing new ones (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). It includes the process of reasoning from data collection to understanding of observed patterns (Robinson, 2019).

THE PHENOMENON

Change can be defined as is the deliberate introduction of novel ways of thinking, acting and operating within an organization as a way of surviving or accomplishing certain organizational goals (Schalk *et al*., 1998) and in these terms it is very similar to innovation, in which implementation effectiveness is found to be a function of (a) the strength of an organization's climate for the implementation of that innovation and (b) the fit of that innovation to targeted users' values (Klein & Sorra, 1996).

Change can be also viewed as a process of altering the present shape/estate in order to become a better one (Bäesu & Bejinaru, 2013). Change can be analyzed from different perspectives and therefore include individual or organizational focus. Cameron & Green (2004) place individual change at the heart of everything that is achieved in organizations. An increasing number of researchers believe that many change efforts fail because change leaders often underestimate the role individuals play in the change process (Choi, 2011).

Previous studies examining the conditions in which employees support organizational change have focused on various constructs of employees' attitudes towards organizational

change which are defined as certain regularities of an individual's feelings, thoughts and predispositions to act toward some aspect of the environment (Secord & Beckman, 1969; Rafferty & Minbashian, 2019). This includes readiness for change, openness to change, commitment to change and cynicism to change (Choi, 2011). These constructs have been defined in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Weiner (2009) argues that in ordinary language the term "readiness" connotes a state of being both psychologically and behaviorally prepared to take action (i.e. willing and able) which strongly supports the selection of the attitudinal construct (i.e. attitudes to change), where attitudes are defined as certain regularities of an individual's feelings, thoughts and predispositions to act toward some aspect of the environment (Secord & Beckman, 1969). Change readiness is therefore the most known attitude toward change (Bouckenooghe, 2010), and, therefore, will be addressed in this research.

Similar to change itself, readiness for change is a multi-level construct and can be present and studied at the individual, group (unit, department) and organizational levels (Weiner, 2009). Despite the importance of change readiness concept for successful implementation of the change in the organizations, *individual readiness* as a stand-alone concept in an organizational context does not appear in the literature (Vakola, 2013), thus creating interest for further research and theorization. There are three categories of antecedents for individual readiness: external organizational pressures, internal context enablers and individual characteristics (Rafferty *et al*., 2012; Schein, 2010). This study is focused on internal context

enablers and individual characteristics of employees and change management issues related to these factors (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999).

The construct of *willingness to change* is adapted from the constructs of emotional readiness to change as proposed by Bouckenooghe *et al.* (2008) where individuals believe that they are ready for change and perceive change as a positive challenge. The construct of *ability to change* is taken from the "efficacy" component of change readiness as proposed by Armenakis & Harris (2002). This component answers the questions "can I/we successfully implement the change?" If employees do not have the confidence to adopt the new ways of operating, then an organization's change will be difficult to accept. A similar construct - "change related self-efficacy" - was proposed by Wanberg and Banas (2000) as a predictor for openness to change. They argued that individuals will not perform well in a changing context when they are not aware of their abilities. There are several models of change, readiness and openness, however, no models were found which analyzed the willingness and ability to change together as the employees' attitudes towards change.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Since the theory on the willingness and ability to change at an individual level is fragmented, the selected strategies of this study were abductive, i.e. a process of reasoning from data to understanding, with the aim of offering the framework of underlying variables, the observed pattern. We begin with simple logic to guide the exploration of the data, but then we will develop plausible explanations for the results, and, in doing so, extend and enrich the theory. We applied the abductive approach due to the extant theories being fragmented and not

easily applied, given the phenomenon, the context, or the goals of this research (Robinson, 2019).

The research design of the questionnaire is based on the main measures of willingness and ability to change collected from the academic literature. The formulation of questions is guided by the mixture of theoretical approaches proposed by Wanberg and Banas (2000), Bouckenooghe *et al.* (2008), and Rafferty *et al.* (2012). The independent variables in this study compiled from academic sources are summarized in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

The research has been conducted in a German subsidiary of a French global digital service company (*the Organization*) with more than one hundred thousand employees and a revenue of more than €10 billion annually. According to Forbes (2018), the organization is on the list of 100 top digital companies in the world. In July-August 2018, 2310 employees were invited to participate in the survey, 549 were on holiday and 306 employees replied to the online survey, which came to a total response rate of 17.39%. However, since the research has been conducted in three local offices, the response rate in these locations is much higher. One-country's focus allowed it to exclude the influence of different laws and national culture effects on the behavior of respondents. In total, 249 male and 47 female participants have responded, including 3.92% aged 30 or below, 42.48% between age 31 and 50 and 53.6% aged 50 or older. The distribution of age and gender of the respondents are normal as they reflect the demographic distribution in the company. Most of the participants had more than 20 years of work experience in the company (50.98%), more than third of the employees had 11-20 years of experience (31.05%), and the rest had less than 10 years of experience (17.97%).

Surveys

The survey comprises of 52 multiple-choice questions and free-txt comments. The SPSS statistical tool was used to analyze the primary data. To find an association between variables, Spearman's rank correlation is used. Spearman's rho correlations are used. Values of from 0.3 to 0.7 are considered as valid moderate correlation scores, and above 0.7 – strong correlation scores. Analysis of variance techniques includes the Mann-Whitney test for two independent samples like gender and the Kruskal-Wallis test for more than two independent samples like age, level of job seniority, the company background, and job function. The free text comments from the respondents are coded into themes and represented in percentage to the total.

Interviews

For the interviews, fifteen employees who were aware about an upcoming change were selected and invited, nine participated in the interviews. The interviews were based on 17 questions covered aspects of cognitive and affective readiness adapted. All questions were open-ended and their answers were coded into themes. After the interview, the answers were summarized and sent to the interviews for approval.

The interviews and the open questions in the survey were coded in Excel and the output is shown in percentage to the total. The responses to the interviews were integrated into analysis wherever it is appropriate.

THE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The overall *willingness to change* was measured based on the answers to the question: *"I feel I am ready for another organizational change"* (emotional readiness). The open-ended question revealed that employees are ready for an internal job change only when it is

meaningful (see Table 3 below). Overall, employees are willing to change only if the upcoming change makes sense to them. This confirms the importance of *the valence* component of cognitive change readiness proposed by Armenakis *et al*. (1993).

Insert Table 3 about here

In order to plan the best possible change intervention, it is important to examine whether there are differences in the degree of willingness to change amongst groups of employees. There were several categories of employees identified for this investigation such as age, gender, job function, company background and number of experience (job seniority). In order to test the variance, several hypotheses were constructed to understand the impact of individual characteristics on willingness to change. The evidence to reject the H0 hypothesis for age and job seniority was found. Therefore, it can be concluded that age and level of seniority in the company have an impact on willingness to change, as older and more senior people are more pessimistic towards change.

We found three potential reasons behind this impact. Firstly, people who are working longer in the company have lived through several organizational changes and have criticized the change management capabilities in the Organization. Secondly, the requirement of job comfort and job stability is higher in senior employees. Thirdly, the fear of being unemployed is also greater in senior employees above the age of 55. Therefore, agreeing to change in jobs without knowing the impact of this change (personally) is an unlikely behaviour in this age category.

The overall *ability to change* was measured based on the answers to the question: *"My past experiences make me confident, that I will be able to perform successfully after an organizational change is made"*. It can be assumed that an employee's belief on his or her

capabilities to support a change is the best measure to assess the general ability to change in the Organization. The open-ended questions explored that employees wish processes and pools to be a part of restructuring and change as well.

Similar to the willingness to change questions, a tendency to respond differently by several groups of employees is tested for the ability to change. However, evidence has been found to reject the H0 hypothesis for company background indicating that the company background has an impact on the responding tendencies for the ability to change in the Organization. The impact of company background can be explained by the effect of previous changes. Employees with a different company background can have different attitudes to change.

Impact of internal enablers

In order to formulate the best possible change management strategy, it is important to analyze the impact of internal context enablers on the willingness and ability to change.

Job satisfaction. The satisfaction of the employees in their job has been measured by a question: *"Are you satisfied in your current job?"*. No significant association between job satisfaction and willingness and ability to change was found. Therefore, it can be concluded that despite the average scores for job satisfaction (58.46% of the respondents have chosen options for slightly satisfied and strongly satisfied), it does not seem to impact the willingness and ability to change in the Organization.

Individual perception of organizational culture. The individual perception of organizational culture is measured in this research by three questions. The first question was *"I am aware of the values of the organization and can identify myself with them"*. It aims to measure the awareness and identification of employees to the values of the Organization. The values are set company-wide and are listed on the website.

A moderate positive correlation value was found between the question *"I am aware of the values of the organization and can identify myself with them"* and the ability to change. As a result of this, it can be concluded that employees who are aware of the values and vision of the organization have a greater belief in their own capabilities to cope with change. A test of variance has been conducted for all the identified groups of employees for the question *"I am aware of the values of the organization and can identify myself with them",* as this question shows moderate positive correlation to the ability to change and it was found that only company background has an impact on the scoring tendency for values of the Organization and identification with them. Based on secondary sources of information, it can be concluded, that as a result of previous change (M&A of two European companies), the Organization has two distinct groups of employees since the Organization has grown rapidly in the last years due to acquisitions. It can be concluded that culture may affect the perception of organizational values and therefore affect the ability and willingness to change.

Understanding the need and urgency for change. The need and urgency for change is measured in this research by three statements: "*I understand the current organizational challenge in the organization*", "*My direct and executive management communicates regularly on the current challenges in the organization*", and "*I understand that there is a need for change in the organization as soon as possible*".

The statement *"I understand the current organizational challenge"* has also a moderate positive association with willingness to change measured by the response to *"I am ready for another organizational change"* and ability to change measured by the response on *"My past experiences make me confident, that I will be able to perform successfully after an organizational change is made"* which means employees who understand the current organizational challenges in the Organization are also more willing and able to change.

A moderate positive association found between "*I understand that there is a need for*

change in the organization as soon as possible" and *"I am ready for another organizational change"* which shows that an employee who understands there is an immediate requirement of change also feels ready for an organizational change. Therefore a test of variance for all groups of employees for *"I understand the current organizational challenges in the organization"* and *"I understand that there is a need for change in the organization as soon as possible"* has been conducted and it was found that job function has an impact on understanding the challenges in the organization (*"I understand the current organizational challenges in the organization")*. It was also found that gender has an impact on employees' reactions to *"I understand that there is a need for change in the organization as soon as possible"*. The responses to *"I understand the current organizational challenges in the organization"* differ among different departments. This can be explained by the fact that some groups of employees have a better overview of processes and financials and therefore a greater understanding for a need of change.

Individual perception of organizational capabilities to change. This factor is measured in this research by four responses "*I believe that the organization has been able to cope effectively with new situations*" (61.1% of respondents disagreed with the statement), "*I believe that past changes in the organization resulted in improvements*" (72.55% of respondents disagreed with this statement), "*I believe that the organization has proven itself capable of implementing organizational changes*" (62.09% of respondents disagreed with this statement), *"The organization generally provides appropriate support when needed to cope with organizational changes"* (67.32% of respondents disagreed with the statement). The main themes addressed in the comments were dissatisfaction about working in the Organization, which included processes, tools, management and near and offshoring strategies, dissatisfaction about past change and lack of trust on change implementation capabilities in the Organization. The participants highlighted the requirement of including

processes and tools in restructuring measures.

A moderate positive correlation was found between the questions *"I believe that past changes in the organization resulted in improvements"* and *"My past experiences make me confident, that I will be able to perform successfully after an organizational change is made"* and ability to change (see Table 4 below). This means the Organization's capabilities to change have an impact on the ability to change over an individual in the Organization: in other words, when employees believe that past change has brought improvements, they tend to believe that they can cope with a future change and perform successfully. The H0 hypothesis for a variance for all groups of employees for the question *"I believe that past changes in the organization resulted in improvements"* has been tested with not enough evidence to reject the H0 hypothesis, indicating that all groups of employees have the same tendency to respond to these questions.

Insert Table 4 about here

Communication in the organization. The quality of communication in the Organization is measured by three questions. The first question was *"The communication I receive from the organization centrally is timely and useful"*, which 53.26% of the respondents agreed with, the second question was *"Information on upcoming changes does not first come to us mostly as rumors"*, which 83.07% of the respondents disagreed with, and the third question was *"My line manager and executive management communicate on a regular basis on upcoming changes"*, which 60.68% of the respondents agreed with. The topmost categories of comments were that the timing and content on change communication do not meet the expectations followed by allegations that news on upcoming change mostly comes as rumors. For all the questions in communication in the Organization, the correlation

is weakly positive and so no significant correlation has been found with willingness and ability to change.

Trust in leadership. The questions aimed at testing in trust in leadership could not be added to the survey due to the recommendation from the management team. Therefore, this factor was explored in personal interviews only. Two questions were asked to assess the role of trust in leadership. For the first question *"In the organization, do you think there a discrepancy in trust in direct management and trust in executive management?"*, the answer was positive for all participants. Several reasons were highlighted for this lack of trust. For the second question, *"Do you think trust in management plays a crucial role in the success or failure of change efforts?"*, the answer again was also positive for all the participants. Therefore, this study is compelled to consider this factor as positively influencing willingness and ability to change.

Past experience with change. Most of the respondents (69.97%) referred to the last organizational change they participated in as an acquisition. Upon asking the question if the goal of the organizational change was clear, 43.7 % answered yes, 28% no and 25% maybe. For the question *"Was the change successful in your opinion?"*, only 14% responded "yes", 38.56% responded "no", and 45% responded partially "yes" or "no".

The interviewees were asked to name the most important change management issues. For example, Interviewer 4 said the following in response to the question "*what are the main challenges and what can be done better*":

"...Set the strategy, involving the employees, lead them to the new organization, focus on the customer and solve the issues".

Interviewer 5 suggested, "to involve the people in the planning and in the beginning".

To summarize, no significant positive correlation was found between past experience with change and ability and willingness to change. However, employees would like to be

involved and have control over the upcoming change events at the earliest stages. Recommendations provided by the interviewees on the question are summarized in Table 5 below. The most common responses included increasing transparency, people involvement, training, demonstrating people perspective, collecting feedback and effective communication.

Insert Table 5 about here

Figure 1 below summarizes the findings in this research into a simple model.

Insert Figure 1 about here

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research explored that employees are willing to change when the proposed change makes sense to them. Evidence has been found that the factors have an impact on the willingness and ability to change include: job function, age, years of job experience (job seniority), knowledge of values, company background, understanding the current challenges, understating the urgency for change, positive attitude toward past changes. Trust in leadership at different levels plays a crucial role in shaping an organization's change readiness.

Managers can use findings in this study to learn how to plan and manage organizational change in the fast-paced business environment of digital service industries. This often requires a longer time with a focus to extend the organizational restructuring to behavioral and mindset change. This research suggests a practical approach to the assessment of change readiness in the industry where employees represent the main assets of the organization and take an active part in the co-creation of the value propositions with customers (Heim *et al*., 2018).

The main finding in this research is that change initiatives become more complex and strategic and, therefore, there is a need to manage the transition and emotions of employees in a long-term perspective. This study contributes to organizational change literature, suggesting a simple model explaining factors affecting employees' willingness and ability to change. The limitation of this research has included the fact that the context of the upcoming change was not known to the employees. These scores could have been more accurate if the employees had known this. Further research needs to explore more about the perception of change strategies in a fast-paced business environment and suggest new theoretical approaches explaining change dynamics.

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Table 1.

Definition and explanation of constructs of employee attitudes.

Construct	Definition	Indicative literature
Readiness for change	Extent to which an individual believes that a change at the individual level is needed and whether he or she has the capacity for it	Armenakis *et al.,* 1993 Holt *et al.,* 2007a Holt *et al.,* 2007b Holt & Vardaman 2013
Commitment to change	A mindset that binds an individual to a course of action deemed necessary for the successful implementation of a change initiative	Herscovitch & Meyer 2002 Fedor *et al.,* 2006 Herold *et al.,* 2008 Choi, 2011
Openness to change	An underlying trait of flexibility and assumes creativity, curiosity, and artistically sensitivity, i.e. "willingness to accommodate and accept change"	Fox *et al.,* 1988 Miller *et al.,* 1994 Wanberg & Banas, 2000 Axtell *et al.*, 2002 Groves, 2005 Madsen *et al.*, 2005 Devos *et al.,* 2007 Kwahk & Kim, 2008 Choi, 2011
Cynicism about organizational change	Pessimism about future organizational change being successful, a dispositional attribution of the failure (the motivation and competence of organizational leaders) and/or a situational attribution of the failure	Choi, 2011 Wanous *et al.*, 2004

Table 2.

Independent variables.

Variable	Type	Indicative literature
Age	Demographic	Niessen *et al.,* (2010) Kunze *et al.,* (2011) Hertel *et al.,* (2013)
Gender	Demographic	Alas (2008) Ostroff & Clark, 2001
Job level and function	Demographic	Alas (2008)
Tenure in the company	Demographic	Alas (2008)
Company background of the employee	Demographic	Van der Smissen *et al*., (2013)
Individual perception of organizational culture	Internal context enabler	Choi (2011)
Understanding the need and urgency for change	Internal context enabler	Armenakis *et al.,* (2007)
Individual perception of organizational capabilities	Internal context enabler	Choi (2011)
Quality of communication	Internal context enabler	Choi (2011)
Trust in leadership	Internal context enabler	Rafferty & Simons (2006) Bouckenooghe *et al*., (2008) Higgs & Rowland (2000, 2001, 2005) Higgs & Rowland (2011)
Past experience with change	Internal context enabler	Rafferty *et al.,* (2012) Raffery & Restuborg (2016)
Change participation as a part of past experience with change	Internal context enabler	Bouckenooghe *et al.,* (2008)

Table 3.
Open comments on *"I feel I am ready for another organizational change"*.

Free text comments on willingness to change	N of responses	% of total
No comments	263	85.95
Open to internal job change only when it is meaningful	21	6.86
Dissatisfaction due to past change	9	2.94
Question on change itself	7	2.29
Dissatisfaction due to constant state of change	5	1.63
Not open to job change	2	0.65
Grand Total	306	100.00

Source: primary data collected through online survey.

Table 4.
Spearman correlations for individual perception of organizational capabilities to change and willingness and ability to change questions.

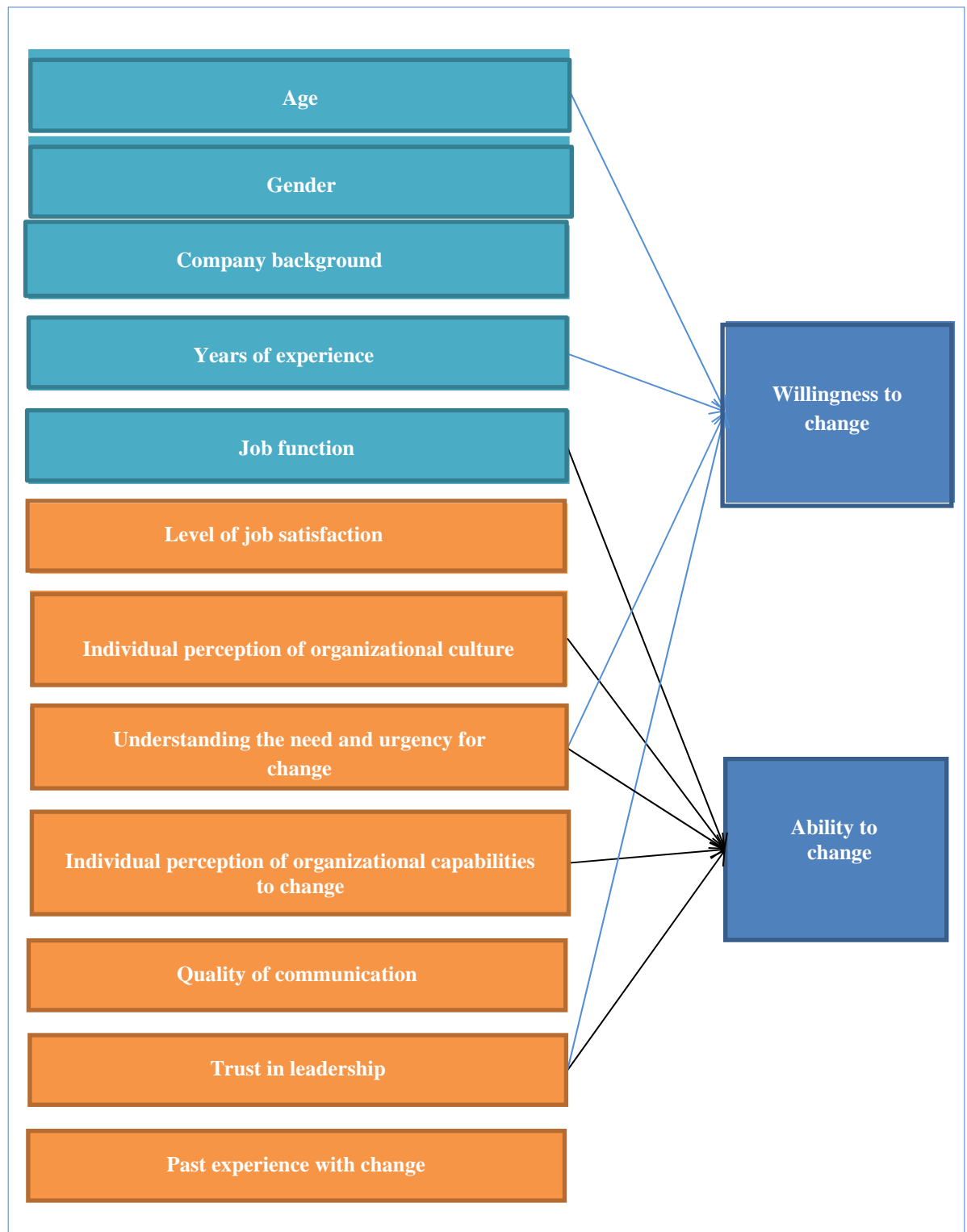| Question	I believe that the organization has been able to cope effectively with new situations	I believe that past changes in the organization resulted in improvements	I believe that the organization has proven itself capable to implementing organizational changes	I feel I am ready for another organizational change
I feel I am ready for another organizational change	.09	.15**	.13*	1.00
My past experiences make me confident, that I will be able to perform successfully after an organizational change is made	.25**	.31**	.27**	.42**

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Source: primary data collected through online survey.

Table 5.
Results of change behavioural requirements from the online survey.

Questions	N of responses	% of total	Change strategy
I want my leader to tell the reality as it is and motivate everyone to deliver the change.	251	82.03%	Framing
I want my leader to express his own views and use his experience to shape the implementation of the change.	133	43.46%	Shaping
I want my leader to be persuasive and expressive.	133	43.46%	Shaping
I want my leader to set boundaries and expectation for the change for others to operate in.	127	41.50%	Framing & creating
I want my leader to provide a positive mood as well as the temporal and physical space for me to think and act differently during the change.	116	37.91%	Creating
I want my leader to establish an emotional connection to the change and create a compelling story for the organization about the change.	99	32.35%	Framing
I want my leader to control what gets done and hold others responsible for delivering task for the change.	98	32.03%	Shaping
I want my leader to create ownership, trust and confidence.	87	28.43%	Framing & creating
I want my leader to encourage others to voice their opinions through empathy and high quality dialog skills.	78	25.49%	Creating

Source: primary data collected through online survey.

Figure 1. The relations amongst variables and willingness and ability to change.

Source: Authors.