The impact of organisational changes on work teams: consolidation or deterioration?

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1. Introduction

The aim of this communication is to investigate the characteristics of work collective and their activities in situation of organisational changes.

Cooperate decision makers perceive, organisational changes as a leverfor improving performance and responding to important economic stakes (Lecoester, Gaillard & Six, 2014), to the point of organisational changes being apply continuous (Pesqueux, 2004).

Many reorganisation projects are designed taking technical and economical dimensions into account, but they tend to ignore organisational and social aspects (Rouilleaut & Rochefort, 2005). Organisation refers to a set of rules and procedures which constitute the organisational structure (Carballeda, 1998; Petit, 2005). With this is mind From this point of view, changes are synonym of adaptation for operators (Petit, 2005), and aim to apply new terms and conditions decided by leadership to operators (Carballeda, 1998).

Other studies consider organisation as a social system, that means operators participate to the construction of organisation by their own interactions (Carballeda, 1998). Many authors have the objective of revealing the place of these regulations in organisations in change (Caroly & Barcellini, 2013; Daniellou, 1999; Carballeda & Daniellou, 1997). Earlier studies underlined the role of the collective or collective work? as a resource (Cru, 1988). Caroly, Loriol et Boussard (2006) insist on the role of the work collective in difficult situations where the actors face on a daily basis

But, socio-organisational changes often tend to weak work collectives. Changes reduce the amount of autonomous regulation in favour of external controls (Reynaud, 1988) and individual self-regulation (Loriol, 2011, p.13). The changes experienced therefore question the existence, the operating methods, and the sustainability of work collectives.

Few studies are focused to the links between work teams’ activities and types of organisational changes.

The present communication explores the effects of several organisational changes on work teams and their activities.

2. Methods

Our study was conducted within the French national transport company in three steps including different populations: ticket inspectors (N=19), payroll clerks (N=17) and railway maintenance workers (N=29).
On the one hand, 83 semi-structured interviews were carried out. Guide interviews investigate thematics such as transformation, health, cooperation and the place of managers.
On the other hand, we conducted three series of workplace observations by recording their tasks and the collective dimension of their activity (interlocutors, methods of communication, objects of their exchanges).

3. Results

We have used manual thematic analysis in order to highlight on the one hand, activity’s dimensions and, on the other hand, links with the organisational change. We have crossed these results with qualitative analysis of observations.

Organisational changes concerned in these studies are different. Firstly, ticket inspectors’careers are modified: before, operators evolved depending on their ages and experiences. Now, each one has to
apply for the shifts. Secondly, payroll clerks’ establishments merged in order to reduce workforce. The work load of operators increased. Finally, in the same way, establishments of railway maintenance workers also merged. In the same time, night work generalised and modified collective activity. Concerning ticket inspectors, we have revealed on the one hand, a re-examination of these work teams depending personal choices. On the other hand, forms of collective work are modified. Whereas within some shifts, collective dimension of work doesn’t exist, collective work seems to be develop beyond shape of existant shifts. Concerning payroll clerks, they reduced time dedicated to each file. Besides, turn-over modified work teams’take-up. This instability can perturb work teams’tconstruction over time. However, we observe also an attachment to their work team. Finally, changes have modified temporal and geographic organisation of railway maintenance workers. These elements provide work team to self-organise. Team mates can’t negotiate together who will work on night shifts. These changes question balances in work teams. They also cause many retirements.

4. Conclusion and discussion

Results indicate that the work collectives declined in others they have been recomposed, or even reinforced by putting into place new regulations. On the one hand, results from several railway maintenance teams indicate that moderate change can consolidate the work collective. Indeed, transformation provides an opportunity to develop mutual support between members of the team and to increase the room for manoeuvre, allowing the actors to gradually build a shared collective history. For example, (it is the case for several) railway maintenance teams who were not concerned by night work before. On the other hand, radical change can improve the force of the team work and make their activity less efficient as shown in ticket inspector. These negative effects can be reinforced when new organisations do not sufficiently take into account of the hidden costs related to health and the social context, for example. The participants underline the lack of communication, notably with local line management, exacerbate these impacts. This type of change can thereby lead to the disturbance of the work collective. However, we observed that when there is a shared sense of belonging, in teams whose members need to cooperate in order to carry out the work, these conditions can facilitate the (re)construction of a collective work.

References