

What Makes Me Stay Here?

An Action Research Approach to Organisational Change

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Abstract

This article takes a qualitative approach to understanding the meaning of the good life in a situated organisational context, addressing the possibility of staying at work as a good enough place, even though it is facing critical events (turnover, mass resignations, and mergers and acquisitions). The paper presents a case study of a tax and legal firm that was formed in 2020 from the merger of two accounting firms and that is having difficulties attracting and retaining experienced talent. The article aims to explore a concrete organisational case in which people are grappling with the decision to remain with the firm (legacy and persistence) or leave in search of new professional opportunities (innovation and change). Epistemological and methodological implications are highlighted, focusing on the research object as a heterotopic text in which various languages, voices and practices are diffractively assembled (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), interweaving various discourses and practices (Cunliffe and Locke 2020).

Keywords: action research, qualitative approach, organisational belonging, expansive learning, transformative practices

Introduction

The acronym VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) (Bennett and Lemoine 2014) aptly describes the situation in which working people today face internal and external pressures and stresses, experience plural and diverse approaches to the same work task, and are experiencing a fragmented relationship (Law 2002) with organisational processes of differentiation and integration (Czarniawska 2008).

Events such as mergers and reconfigurations of work, along with professional and organisational processes and cultures, increase the criticality of employees' relationships with work, requiring new balances between the objectives at stake, design elements (load, safety, resource allocation), autonomy and evaluation, participation and involvement, valorization and growth. Hence, increasingly widespread employees detachment from work manifest itself through multiple phenomena (Klotz et al. 2021; Wartzman 2017). Gallup's 2024¹ report titled *The State of the Global Workplace* states that 59% of the world's employees are 'quiet quitting' (not engaged) and 18% are 'loud quitting' (actively disengaged), while only 23% are 'thriving at work' (engaged). The widespread disaffection from work highlights a changed relationship between people and their work and the meanings that they attribute to it, requiring a different approach to studying the problems generated by concrete work experiences in the specific contexts considered.

This paper focuses on a specific case characterised by the dilemmatic dynamics of permanence versus exit from the work context, highlighting the epistemological and methodological implications that allow the production of knowledge capable of representing the plurality of voices in the field and the different operational practices involved. In this work, the concept of the "good life" becomes central. In this context, it refers to the possibility of finding satisfaction and fulfillment within a workplace, even when it is undergoing significant changes and challenges, such as turnover, mass resignations, and mergers. The term does not imply a perfect or ideal life but rather a "good enough" working life condition where individuals can choose to stay and find a sense of continuity and belonging (legacy and persistence) or, conversely, feel the need to leave and seek new professional opportunities (innovation and change). In this case study, the idea of the "good life" is explored

through the experiences of individuals who consider whether to stay in an organization that, despite facing difficulties in retaining talent and attracting new professionals, might still represent a fulfilling work environment.

The paper starts with a description of the organisational context considered, highlighting its characteristics and organisational structure. It then details the need for intervention and the methodological approach adopted. Finally, the main findings are reported and recommendations for transformative actions are made.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical perspective of this research is related to modes of intervention in organisations that generate knowledge and the capacity for transformation (Scaratti et al. 2021). In this sense, the researcher who intervenes in organisational contexts is able to produce knowledge by supporting and sustaining processes inherent in specific work objects and prefiguring hypotheses of transformation and change (Testa et al. 2022). The aim of such an approach is, therefore, to simultaneously develop knowledge and create change within organisations, starting from real, complex and situated problems. Situativity is a key dimension that requires researchers acting in organisations to step into the natural context and move within social situations. This requires that the various stakeholders involved be available and that the stakeholders and the researchers negotiate the adoption of methodological options. At stake is the possibility of developing a relationship of trust between the researchers and the actors in the organisational context, enabling the generation of relevant knowledge and ecologically grounded and shared orientations to action (Galuppo and Ivaldi 2021). In this context, the researcher assumes an orientation connected to action research through interaction with the people who inhabit the organisational context, promoting processes of evolutionary transformation and realistic change. Hence, the researcher needs to exercise critical thinking about their assumptions related to the relational, organisational and institutional sustainability of the processes envisaged.

The adoption of such a situated, relational, transformative and reflexive epistemological approach entails specific methodological and operational implications. It involves valorising the plurality of existing voices, discourses and practices (Cunliffe and Locke

2020) and creating a space for dialogue and confrontation with different perspectives.

On the operational side, the researcher must be able to constantly adjust their positioning as they are immersed in a complex relational reality. This implies continuous critical reflection on their role and the interpersonal and systemic dynamics that develop in the work context (Shotter 2010), as well as competence in conflict management and building trusting relationships. Below, the specific context in which the action research intervention was developed is detailed. This is a central element since, as previously pointed out, this approach is developed and evolves according to the organisational context in which it is applied.

Organisational Context

The firm at which the action research process presented in this paper was carried out has a history of more than 20 years, years that have been marked by profound changes. Specifically, the path of the company's birth and growth can be divided into three phases that have led to the current configuration. First, the organisation was founded in 2000 by two partners who decided to create their own company to offer small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) dedicated professional services. A few years later, in 2008, two different firms merged to create an association of professionals who specialised in providing tax and administrative consulting, as well as the management of insolvency proceedings, to SMEs located in the Bergamo area.

Each of these two firms expanded over the years, leading them, in 2019, to employ 50 and 30 people, respectively, including accountants, lawyers and support staff. In 2020, these two firms merged, creating the current organisation, which is dedicated to providing consulting services for companies in the Bergamo and Verona areas. Bergamo and Verona are both cities in northern Italy with diversified and solid economies, benefiting from their strategic location and well-developed industrial and commercial networks. Bergamo has a long industrial tradition, particularly in the mechanical, machinery manufacturing and textile sectors. In recent years, Bergamo's economy has diversified, incorporating advanced sectors such as mechatronics, renewable energy and biotechnology. The city is known for its medium- to large-sized companies, which

often operate in international markets, and for its dynamic entrepreneurial culture. Verona, on the other hand, is renowned for its contribution to the agri-food sector, being one of the main centres for the production and distribution of Italian wines and agricultural products. In summary, both Bergamo and Verona are cities with strong, well-structured economies, offering various employment opportunities in industry, services and international trade that contribute to their socioeconomic development. For this reason, the firm studied is called upon to respond to complex and diversified demands from SMEs in these areas, providing specialised legal and financial support.

Today, the organisation has a staff of more than 95 individuals, including 46 professionals who work together to guide companies through the challenges and changes that accompany the growth of their businesses. The company supports Italian SME entrepreneurs in business management, providing advice and concrete solutions in the tax, administrative, financial and legal fields. The aim is to offer small and medium-sized industrial and commercial companies professional services dedicated to helping them develop in ways that generally characterise only large companies—in other words, a complete, integrated and multi-disciplinary consultancy service that can guide entrepreneurs in every aspect of their businesses.

Internally, the firm is characterised by a pyramid structure consisting of eight distinct levels: senior partners, partners, senior managers, managers, senior associates, associates, practitioners and support staff; the latter provide administrative management, document preparation, practice management and communication with clients.

Demand from Management

The first contact between the researcher and the firm arose from a demand for change articulated by the senior partners, who were concerned about the signs of fatigue and unease in their workplace. Subsequently, interviews were conducted with senior partners, which led to the emergence of three key issues that constituted the crucial premises of the action research intervention presented in this paper. The first is the ways in which various mergers have impacted the organisation, namely, the fragmentation and dislocation of the firm. Specifically, the firm comprises four sites located at some distance from each other. This physical dispersion affects the

organisational life of the firm and the working practices of staff, for whom it is a source of fatigue. Another key issue resulting from the mergers is the presence of different organisational cultures. Despite the fact that the firm established its current structure in 2020, different values, beliefs, knowledge and assumptions, linked to old affiliations, seem to remain within the firm. The last central premise that emerged from the interviews is the presence of three distinct groups of employees based on their roles and areas of competence: support staff, accounting professionals, and legal professionals.

The levers that drew attention to the need for researcher support and accompanying work in a process of organisational change are, therefore, related to the presence of a plurality of voices, groups and memberships. There is a need to manage this organisational complexity, starting by developing solutions to real problems by defining trajectories and operational paths capable of diffractively assembling languages, voices and practices (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

Methodological Approach

Responding to the demand for intervention and identifying the key issues affecting the firm enabled the researchers to adopt an approach capable of navigating the organisational complexity that emerged. To meet the need for plurality, it was decided to implement an organisational listening exercise capable of putting the firm's employees and professionals at the centre, thus allowing the different areas of criticality to emerge from the organisational context. Therefore, the main objective of the intervention was to intercept the different voices to identify the areas in need of improvement and to activate organisational reconfiguration processes. The listening phase was structured to collect feedback and suggestions from the participants in the study, with a focus on organisational processes such as recruitment, retainment, employer branding and employee rewards.

Qualitative research (Zucchermaglio et al. 2013; Scaratti 2021) allowed for an in-depth and detailed understanding of the employees' experiences, perceptions and motivations, and an exploration of the personal feelings and reasons that drive the employees to adopt behaviours consistent with them. Specifically, the action research activity was structured in three main phases: individual in-

terviews (Phase I), discussion groups (Phase II) and working tables (Phase III).

During Phase I, several employees who held positions of responsibility in the firm and were considered by the firm to be privileged interlocutors were interviewed. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted to begin exploring the organisational climate. In Phase II, four focus groups were conducted with participants selected by the senior partners, which made it possible to deepen and broaden the view of the themes that emerged during the interviews.

The conversational interactions that took place during the interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were thematically analysed, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). An inductive, data-driven analysis was adopted, where coding took place without the researcher applying analytical preconceptions. This approach is consistent with the theoretical and epistemological setting of the study, as it highlights the specificities of the observed context. The phases of the analysis included familiarisation with the data, the generation of initial codes, the identification of broad themes, the revision and refinement of the themes, the definition and naming of the themes and the production of the final report.

After these initial exploratory phases and the development of an understanding of the study's internal criticalities, the action research initiated shared design work, structured by working tables (Phase III). These were supervised by the researchers but managed by a manager selected by the researchers and the senior partners. The working tables turned out to be an integral part and outcome of the action research, activating the project based on the critical issues identified through the interviews and focus groups. At this stage, the researchers passed the responsibility of continuing the project to the participants themselves, making them the protagonists in the process of change made possible by the action research intervention.

Results

The analysis of the data collected through the interviews and focus groups made it possible to identify the main issues that caused fatigue and concern among the study participants. Through these qualitative methods, it was possible to gain an in-depth insight into the experiences, perceptions and concerns of the individuals in-

volved. The interviews provided an opportunity to gather the personal narratives of the interviewees, while the focus groups enabled the observation of group dynamics and discussions that revealed common and shared problems. This process prepared the basis for the working tables, which provided opportunities for structured discussion among the various participants in the study. During these working tables, the collected data were discussed and analysed, and efforts were made to find practical and shared solutions. In this sense, the preliminary organisational listening phase was a crucial element, as it allowed the central themes of discontent to emerge clearly and systematically. The main areas of discomfort and concern were highlighted, providing a solid basis for further discussion and action.

Perceptions of Vagueness

The Organisational Model. The 2020 reorganisation introduced a new organisational model to the firm, aimed at supporting the expansion resulting from the recent merger. However, this new set-up was greeted with detachment by the firm's support staff and professionals. They saw the model as an imposition from above, disconnected from established working practices. In particular, the structural change remained largely theoretical, with little practical application, creating a discrepancy between what was planned and what was implemented. One employee commented as follows:

One is a senior associate, and the other a junior associate, but in concrete terms, what does that mean? Nothing. It's not that on a project there is a senior, a junior and a trainee. The trainee leads, the junior does the work, the senior takes the responsibility, so there are different roles, so there is a difference. In this case, that is not the case. It's just an economic difference.

The Role of the Manager. Another critical point is the role of the new managers created by the reorganisation. Despite the new hierarchical structure, the managers are not recognised by support staff, who tend to bypass them to address their bosses directly at the top, as expressed by the following comment:

I know that I am not recognised as a partner...it is often perceived that they go to the person above me for help.

The Role of Partner: The roles identified within the firm are often perceived as empty labels with no real meaning. The difference between one role and another, as well as their career paths, is determined on a personal basis and linked mainly to the economic remuneration offered. This approach renders appointment as a partner a matter without substantial meaning, as there is no real recognition of the asymmetry between employees. One participant explained this as follows:

It's not that on a project there is a senior, a junior and a trainee. The trainee leads, the junior does the work, the senior takes the responsibility, so there are different roles, so there is a difference. In this case, that is not the case. It's just an economic difference.

The Appraisal Process. The reorganisation introduced an evaluation process similar to the 360° model, in which all employees can evaluate each other. However, this method exacerbates the perceived lack of asymmetry by allowing employees to evaluate their superiors. One participant commented on this as follows:

It does not recognise anything, it devalues, it dismantles all the work that has been done, so I actually asked: "Let me get this straight, does the receptionist evaluate me?"

Career Progression. One process that may be clear in theory but is vague in practice is career progression. Professionals, in particular, claim to have seen numerous inconsistencies between what is stated and what is implemented. Often, the evaluation criteria for moving up the ladder have been varied or even ignored. One participant commented as follows:

There also needs to be clarity on what are the growth mechanisms for those who are already senior partners, but that must never change again, because unfortunately, since 2015 [since I have been here], they have changed 20 times.

Lack of Tuning

Collaboration. As seen above, the firm has seen a significant increase in the number of employees and professionals through numerous mergers. This has led to a complete reorganisation of the structure of the firm in several respects. First, space was reorganised: people who had been working in the same office for years were moved to facilitate contact and collaboration with new colleagues. However, this change encountered some difficulties as employees showed resistance to leaving established collaborations in favour of the new working relationships required by the reorganisation. The possibility of effective collaboration is further hampered by the physical distance between the different locations. One participant commented as follows:

The real issue is the will of the people. I would like to do it, and then I find it impossible because I believe that the other side does not want to mix.

Fairness. One element that has generated discontent within the firm, and in some cases led to some employees leaving, is the lack of fair treatment. In particular, there are disparities in economic compensation, which seems to be a consequence of mergers between different offices and the presence of different professional groups. One participant commented as follows:

The inequality of internal treatment, in my opinion, is also very much related to the mergers that have been made; different firms that are merged, that have different remuneration policies, put together, automatically there is a disparity that, in my opinion, has never been taken into account.

Sense of Belonging. The numerous mergers that have affected the firm in recent years have created difficulties with professional identification. In particular, there still seem to be marked boundaries between the different firms that have been merged under one name, preventing a common and widespread sense of belonging. One participant commented as follows:

I still see rigidities in collaborating between people from different firms.

Professional Practices. One difficulty that has emerged, linked to the mergers that have taken place, is the ability to adapt working methods to the new practices and procedures required by the firm. Specifically, following the reorganisation, an attempt was made to adopt a common and shared executive model to standardise operations. However, some employees have shown a reluctance to abandon the professional methods they had been using for years in favour of the requirements of the new company. One participant commented as follows:

We are trying to have the same...the same methods, procedures...it's difficult a little bit because of the merger, but especially because we are talking about accountants who have perhaps been working for more than 10–20 years in the same way, and to change the way they approach it, the way they work, is complicated.

In conclusion, the 2020 reorganisation, aimed at supporting the firm's expansion through new mergers, was perceived by workers as an imposition disconnected from established practices. The structural change, which remained largely theoretical and poorly implemented, revealed a discrepancy between planning and practical implementation. The hierarchical model introduced was not recognised at the operational level, generating confusion and inefficiency. The perceived vagueness is exacerbated by the lack of adaptation of working methods to new requirements, ineffective leadership and insufficient integration of new colleagues, creating a fragmented and uncooperative environment. The evaluation process and career progression are perceived as vague and influenced by economic rather than meritocratic criteria. Finally, the lack of fairness and a shared sense of belonging have further fuelled discontent and a resistance to change.

The action research process, by implementing several organisational listening sessions, was able to identify the critical issues arising from the various mergers and reorganisations that have impact-

ed the firm. Table 1 summarises the insights that emerged, providing a starting point for structuring the working tables.

Table 1. Critical Issues

Criticalities that Emerged	
<i>Perception of Vagueness</i>	<i>Lack of Attunement</i>
Organisational model	Collaboration
Role of manager	Equity
Role of partner	Sense of belonging
Appraisal process	Professional practices
Career progression	

Discussion

The empirical data collected through the action research project highlight the main causes of fatigue that led workers in this company to ask, “What Makes Me Stay Here?” The causes identified include several factors, ranging from working conditions and internal relational dynamics to expectations of professional growth and work–life balance. These factors were carefully analysed and categorised to better understand how they influenced the participants’ motivation to remain part of the firm.

The action research demonstrated the effectiveness of a situated, relational, transformative and reflective approach in the organisational context. This approach facilitated the management of organisational complexity by combining different perspectives and operational practices. This made it possible to recognise and value the different perspectives of workers, integrating feedback and suggestions into the decision-making process. Specifically, based on the data collected, the organisation’s management has committed to implementing transformational interventions to create an environment where people can work with serenity. These interventions include implementing work flexibility policies, programmes to support psycho-physical well-being, team-building activities to strengthen team spirit and continuous training initiatives to foster professional development. In addition, regular feedback mecha-

nisms were set up to monitor the organisational climate and to intervene promptly in any critical issues.

In conclusion, the action research project not only provided a clear snapshot of the existing problems but also indicated a concrete path towards significantly improving the well-being of the participants in the study. The active participation of workers in the research and transformation process increased their sense of belonging and involvement, helping to create a more open and collaborative organisational culture.

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Note

- 1 <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace.aspx>