

# Housing – Managing through change – Change fatigue

A short guide by Virtual College

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Change fatigue is a very real threat to the success of any organisational transformation.

The housing sector has seen significant levels of turbulence over the past few years. Its economic and political vulnerability means that laws, processes and wealth within the industry are constantly shifting. Something as simple as a cabinet reshuffle can impact on confidence in the sector, and when times are financially tough in the nation, the repercussions on housing can be huge.

The recession of 2008 was followed by a prolonged period of financial uncertainty that is still being felt. Moreover, the fact that the UK then lived through five years under a Conservative-Lib Dem coalition only contributed to the uncertainty.

Anyone currently working in the UK is likely to be keeping an eye on how the result of the EU referendum - and the political fallout that followed - could affect their industry. The long-term repercussions are yet to become clear, but it's widely agreed that they will be significant and touch the vast majority of sectors in some way.

## What does this mean for housing professionals?

There are many housing professionals in the UK who have worked in the sector through all the upheaval described above. On an organisational level this is likely to have meant frequent changes to services and processes, crisis meetings, management changes, office moves, sweeping organisational restructures and even redundancies.

For even the most mentally tough and resilient employees, change on this level can be demoralising and challenging to deal with. This applies even on a minor level: imagine putting all your effort into a project for months only to find out it's suddenly not needed any more, or having to worry every time you're pulled into your manager's office that redundancy will be on the table. These constant worries can result in stress and anxiety in the immediate term, and in the long-term can lead to change fatigue plaguing an organisation.





## What is change fatigue?

Change fatigue is a term that refers to a general sense of apathy or resignation towards a company by its staff. This makes moving forward difficult for companies, with many attempted transformations met with a roll of eyes from jaded employees and, subsequently, failure due to a lack of employee engagement.

## Where are companies going wrong?

Writing in Forbes, Ken Perlman, an engagement leader at Kotter International, spoke about why change - which could lead to many exciting things - so often burns employees out.

**"Change efforts are all too often unfocused, uninspired and unsuccessful," he said. "As our research shows, 70 per cent of transformation efforts fail."**

He explained that while leaders might start off approaching a change from "Point A" to "Point B", as the market changes and they shift their expectations, they will redirect their efforts towards "Point C" and then "Point D".

In these cases, employees are expected to constantly alter how they work and to take on extra responsibilities without receiving additional resources. Furthermore, they're unlikely to have a clear idea of where their organisation is going, or what their role in the transformation might be.

This situation can be exacerbated, Mr Perlman pointed out, by leaders launching a number of change initiatives, which are often introduced even as existing projects are still happening.

# Managing change fatigue

So, how can companies - when forced to make big changes - ensure that their employees don't become subject to change fatigue? While there are a number of different strategies employers could use to tackle this issue, the components at the root of change fatigue are usually as follows.



## 1. The people

Employees are at the heart of any organisation, meaning it is particularly important to ensure you have the right staff members leading the change.

You might think that an employee who brings in a lot of revenue, or one who always hits production targets, is the right person to lead change - but there's more to it than this. Leading transformation and getting the buy-in of a workforce requires an ultra-organised 'people person' with a strong set of soft skills. Think about what you need from a change leader in terms of skill sets and seek that out within your organisation.



## 2. The speed of change

If your pace of change is too fast, employees will feel panicked and left behind, but if a company moves at a snail's pace, people will fast lose interest and assume nothing's really going to happen.

Milestones and a rough timeline should be set out at the beginning of the project to ensure it is kept on track. However, don't be afraid of assessing the process as work is being done: a desire to stick to the timeline shouldn't trump the quality and workability of the project.



## 3. Don't be afraid to change your plan

Re-assessing and re-adjusting a plan as you go is the sign of a good process, while a failure to learn and improve could spell failure for the transformation.

Add assessment sessions into the change process where those involved can sit down and discuss how they feel the transformation is progressing, and raise any concerns about various aspects of the plan.

It is possible that new developments you could not have foreseen mean your strategy for change needs to be drastically re-thought. Perhaps the method of measurement you decided on isn't doing what it needs to. Maybe when the initial goals were drawn out they were too ambitious, or not tangible enough.

There is nothing wrong with your plan evolving - but firm goals must be outlined, new timelines set out and kept to, and staff members regularly updated about any changes that have been made to the plan, including why the alterations are needed.





## 4. Make it exciting

A strong comms strategy is key in staving off change fatigue in your organisation. How you present the change to staff is likely to determine whether the project is successful, or a massive waste of resource.

Transparency is essential in order for staff to feel involved and bought into the project. A lack of effective communication can mean employees feel left out and worried about their job security, or that company-wide confidence in leaders suffers as a whole.

Once transparency has been achieved, you need to make it exciting and fun for your staff members in order to generate a positive attitude to the change and to boost morale in the face of transformation. You may be able to incentivise parts of the project and throw them open to all employees: for example, you could run competitions to decide on new names of teams or departments, or offer bonuses for the best solution to a problem.

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[www.virtual-college.co.uk/housing](http://www.virtual-college.co.uk/housing)

info@housingea.co.uk • 01943 885085

**Virtual College**

Marsel House, Stephenson's Way, Ilkley, West Yorkshire, LS29 8DD, England

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