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# Routines during an organizational change: a study on dynamics and its effects

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## **Abstract**

In their quest for deeper insight into organizations, for some years now a great deal of researchers have focused on the concept of routines. Routines enable researchers to make out some of the dynamics which govern the organization, by fostering stability or , on the contrary, favoring development and change. The present paper proposes a case study which will enable us to portray two sets of routines whose dynamic and effects prove worthy of consideration. In fact, an exogenous event compels an organization to change its aims and its habits. This change triggers a break in the albeit proven set of routines within the organization. Those of the executive managers adapt themselves to new objectives without adopting the mindset, whereas most operatives become the symbol of resistance to change so plunging themselves into uncertainty, jeopardizing their identity and the meaning of their everyday situation. By means of this case, we underline how desires for openness, exchange and dialogue meant to nurture the conditions of change get bogged down, sabotaged and become useless in the daily interplay of force and opposition that the project itself engenders. Finally we will underline how this dynamic also produces effects as much upon the individuals exposed to the paradoxes that it induces as upon the organization whose coherence and integrity is gradually being whittled away.

Keywords: Organizational dynamics, organizational change, routines, job stress.

# Introduction

The aim of organizational theory is, *inter alia*, to identify and understand the set of dynamics which govern organizations, their existence and their conditions of development. For some years now and further to a ground-laying article, a large number of researchers have taken an interest in the concept of routines (Nelson & Winter, 1982). In fact, routines seemingly comprise a useful piece of research in that they are both vectors of stability and vectors of organisational dynamic change. By studying them, one can consider the organisation not as a static artifact but as a set of dynamic and constantly developing processes. With the aim of extending reflexion on this subject, our paper proposes a case study which describes an organization phasing in organizational changes. The originality of this work lies in the shedding of light upon the dynamic of two sets of routines and upon the consequences for the organization. For this purpose, we will firstly describe the utility of routines in understanding organizational dynamics, their conditions of existence with the notion of the work collective and context-dependence and their exercise arrangements with the patterns of action and interaction. After having specified our ontological and epistemological awareness, we will lay the general framework of our case followed by the methodology chosen to interpret the data. A fourth section will describe the main findings which will be appraised within the context of existing theory in the fifth and final section.

## 1 Routines

### 1.1 Interest

Organizational routines are ‘repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions, carried out by multiple actors’ (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). The ground-laying works forging the interest in routines have paved a new way towards the understanding of the organization (Nelson & Winter, 1982). By studying them, one gains better insight into the relevant organizational dynamics within the organizations so as to learn to identify them, recognize them and influence them in order to eventually endeavor to better manage them.

However, one must not underestimate the study of organizational routines as understanding what has to be acquired by considering the organization, not as some tangible fact, but as a set of permanently evolving dynamic processes (Pentland & Feldman, 2005). In order to further

our knowledge of these dynamics, it is thus necessary to go beyond the visible features of the organization in order to try to understand the underlying mechanisms which enable them to function (Newell, 1994; Sutton & Staw, 1995).

On a macro level, considering that routines occupy ‘the crucial nexus between structure and action, between the organization as an object and organizing as a process’ (Pentland & Rueter, 1994), at the organizational level, certain authors have studied the dynamics of routines which seemingly and simultaneously engender continuity and change, stability and development. In fact, ‘although the term has been in circulation for decades, we are just beginning to understand the nature of organizational routines’ (Pentland & Feldman, 2005). One problem is that organizational routines tend to look different, depending on one’s point of view. When viewed from a distance, any particular organizational routine can exhibit a great deal of continuity over time, which leads some theorists to emphasize their role in organizational inertia and stability (Nelson & Winter, 1982; Baum & Singh, 1994; Aldrich, 1999). Closer observation of routines reveals that they can change continuously and endogenously, which leads others to emphasize their role inflexibility and change (Pentland & Rueter, 1994; Adler et al., 1999; Feldman, 2000). It appears that a keener understanding of the dynamics of development and maintaining of routines makes it possible to further fine-tune our knowledge of the structural principles governing organizational change (Nelson & Winter, 1982).

From a micro perspective, considering that every routine is the result of interactions between ‘actions and patterns of action’ at the level of the individuals (Pentland et al., 2012), some authors have focused on the actor as the core unit in the dynamic of routines (Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994; Lazaric & Denis, 2005; Greve, 2008). These different studies have helped us enhance our knowledge on the role of the individual in the process of creation, selection and development of routines at the level of one or several individuals. This said, the link between the organizational level (macro) and the individual level (micro) has yet to be ascertained. Such a link would notably further our insight into the organizational dynamics. To this end, many studies have appraised the different aspects of routines in order to study the dynamics and effects. They have particularly studied the collective dimension of the routines, their context-dependence, embeddedness and specificity and finally patterns of action and interaction.

## 1.2 Collective nature of routines

One of the linchpins is the collective character of routines which has been brought to light by many empirical studies (Weick, 1990, 1993; Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994; Pentland & Rueter, 1994; Jones & Craven, 2001; Edmondson et al., 2001). In addition, the routines have to be considered as a dynamic phenomenon necessarily implying the notion of group action (Nelson & Winter, 1982; Hodgson, 1993; Lazaric, 2000; Cohendet & Llerena, 2003; Becker, 2004). In order to better understand them and to envisage a possible parallel between the micro level and the macro level, some authors have advanced the hypothesis that skills mean for the individual what routine means for the organization (Dosi et al., 2000).

With the idea of deepening the collective notion, some authors have focused on the more precise notion of the working community. Their studies have shown that certain individuals share the same routines within a single organization. This common denominator between individuals is hierarchical or functional in nature (Cohendet & Llerena, 2003). In the first case, these are routines that are hierarchically transmitted and they therefore identify people who share the same routines because they operate on the same chain of command. In the second case and at a given moment, these people are mobilized around a common objective (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002) or the same working practice or working life (Roy, 1959). These three types of community provide very different melting pots from which specific routines emerge and develop, different in terms of bearing, capacity of replication, degree of inertia and potential for research (Becker, 2004). In parallel to these studies, some authors have particularly paid attention to what influences the emergence, the development, the maintaining or the disappearance of routines within these communities. They have discovered that the specificity of the context within which they exist notably impacts their constitution and their characteristics.

## 1.3 Context-dependence, embeddedness and specificity

A large number of empirical works have shown that each routine is specific to the organization that houses it (Narduzzo et al., 2000; Zbaracki & Bergen, 2010; Rerup & Feldman, 2011). Each one of them is inextricably correlated with the context and structure of its organization (Cohen et al., 1995). The context influences as much the practical dimension as the motivational dimension of the routine (Cohen et al., 1995; Tranfield & Smith, 1998; Cohendet & Llerena, 2003). In a recent article, Pentland suggests even going further by proposing that the context provides a lexicon of possible actions (Pentland et al., 2012).

In relation to this, certain authors have made more detailed studies on the specificities, to the point of distinguishing subtleties among them: historical specificity (Reynaud, 1996; Hodgson, 2002), local specificity (Simon, 1976) and relation specificity. These authors subscribe to the point of view that specificity of context plays a paramount role in the constitution and development of routines. For example, historical specificity derives from the fact that whatever happens does so at a certain point of time, which is characterized by a certain constellation of environmental factors and interpretative mindsets (Reynaud, 1996). Local specificities also arise because routines are outcomes of local learning processes (Egidi, 1992), and because of cultural differences and limitations to any generalization arising from them (Simon, 1976). Apart from the collective dimension and the specificity of the context, other studies have considered what comprises routine, the patterns of action and the interactions. These dimensions are the most easily observable components of any routine and also feature in many empirical studies (Becker & Zirpoli, 2008; Pentland & Feldman, 2008; Zbaracki & Bergen, 2010; Rerup & Feldman, 2011; Turner & Rindova, 2012).

#### **1.4 Patterns of action and interaction**

Historically, the term ‘routines’ clearly referred to ‘recurrent interaction patterns’ or ‘patterns of interaction’, i.e., collective recurrent activity patterns. ‘Interaction’ is a subset of ‘action’, referring to such action that involves various actors. The term ‘interaction’ therefore clearly makes a distinction between the individual and the collective level (Becker, 2004). Contrarily to this, recurrent activity patterns on the individual level have been associated with the term ‘habits’ (Hodgson, 1993).

Patterns of action are recognizable when one action can be used to predict the likelihood of the next action. Defining the very notion of routines, the patterns of action make it possible to identify and to distinguish the organizational routines. In recent studies, patterns of action have been directly linked to economically significant outcomes, such as costs and cycle times (Pentland et al., 2012). In the literature, it is possible to find the terms of action and behavior used to identify the same concept. In 2004, Becker was stipulating that ‘behavior’ is a subset of action. ‘Behavior’ is distinguished from ‘action’ by the fact that it is observable and that it is understood as a response to a stimulus’ (Becker, 2004). Finally, it is important to recall the dynamic character of the routines which remain subject to the development of each one of their components. In 1964, Sidney Winter defined a routine as a ‘pattern of behavior that is followed

repeatedly, but is subject to change if conditions change' (Winter et al., 1965).

After having briefly laid the theoretical framework of our study, let us now describe our empirical work leading us to subsequently formulating a proposition that seeks to enrich our knowledge about routines. Firstly, we will describe the context of our mindset and our action. We will then describe the setting of our study terrain in order to make the reader aware of its particularities before presenting the conditions for access to the terrain, our method of investigation and our main findings. Finally, we will compare and contrast these findings with the existing literature covering the relevant subject.

## **2 Ontology, epistemology and methodology**

To ensure a sound research design, researchers must choose a research paradigm that is congruent with their beliefs about the nature of reality. Consciously subjecting such beliefs to an ontological interrogation in the first instance will illuminate the epistemological and methodological possibilities that are available (Mills et al., 2008).

### **2.1 Ontology**

Ontology refers to assumptions made about the form and nature of reality and is the study of being (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Individuals who deny the existence of an objective reality assume a relativist ontological position. Relativists claim that concepts such as rationality, truth, reality, or norms must be understood 'as relative to a specific conceptual scheme, theoretical framework, paradigm, form of life, society, or culture . . . there is a non-reducible plurality of such conceptual schemes' (Bernstein, 2011). In other words, the world consists of multiple individual realities influenced by context (Mills et al., 2008).

### **2.2 Epistemology**

Epistemology refers to claims as to how knowledge of 'reality' may be gained. It considers the nature and forms of knowledge and reflects the relationship between the 'knower' and what may be known (Blaikie, 2007). To fit our ontological position, we choose constructivism as a research paradigm. Constructivism denies the existence of an objective reality, 'asserting instead that realities are social constructions of the mind, and that there exist as many such constructions as there are individuals (although clearly many constructions will be shared' (Guba & Lincoln,

1994). Epistemologically, constructivism emphasizes the subjective interrelationship between the researcher and participant, and the co-construction of meaning (Hayes & Oppenheim, 1997; Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997). Researchers, in their ‘humanness’, are part of the research endeavor rather than objective observers, and their values must be acknowledged by themselves and by their readers as an inevitable part of the outcome (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Stratton, 1997; Mills et al., 2008).

## **2.3 Methodology**

In seeking a research methodology that would provide a fit with our ontological and epistemological position, we were led to explore the concept of Grounded Theory (or GT). The GT method is derived from the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism and is considered to be an interpretivist approach to the research process (Stern, 1994). The interpretivist approach itself, stemmed from the constructivist paradigm. Even if its epistemological basis is not made explicit by originators (Birks & Mills, 2011), several authors identify GT when it is underpinned by a constructivist paradigm (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

# **3 Fieldwork**

## **3.1 Context**

The globalization of the economy has heightened international competitiveness, the pressure exerted upon companies and on their exchanges. In this particularly complex and dynamic environment, the postal services were initially concerned (Crew & Kleindorfer, 2004). As presaged in the late eighties, the report paved the way for the European directives at the onset of the next decade, creating an incentive for the national postal services in member countries to commit themselves to in-depth changes. Since 1991, the national French operator has continually reformed its structures for this purpose. Evolving from civil service status to a that of a public company, from a national monopoly market to that of a European oligopoly and from a public service oriented organization to a customer oriented organization, several rationalization policies have been implemented over the last twenty years leading to the full opening of markets on 1st January 2011 (Crew & Kleindorfer, 1997).

Among these measures is one that influences all the others, i.e., financial autonomy. Previously placed under the supervision of the state, the public company is now forced to balance its

accounts and compelled to improve its performance as much as possible. However, within the context of gradually opening its markets to competition and its notorious stagnation of volumes of processable mail, forecasts for the revenue of the postal operator are foreseeably low. The real issue is more about maintaining what already exists. Although in the past, every effort of differentiation was dispensed with, given the monopoly enjoyed in the defined area, today the situation is very different. The company now needs to be competitive both in price (cost control, economies of scale) and service (meeting commitments on delivery times, quality of service, etc.) in order to keep hold of large sectors of business (banking, insurance, mail order, etc) which were once dependent on it. All these new goals are gradually being incorporated into company culture and all hierarchical echelons are now evaluated and rewarded according to their ability of fulfilling the economic objectives to which they are assigned.

These streamlining efforts concern the entire mail division of the company, and in particular one of its local branches, which makes up the empirical framework of our research.

### **3.2 Going on Site**

Our access to this organization was made possible within the framework of a study of the 'determinants of health at work' directed by the University of Nantes (Detchessahar & al., 2006) and sponsored by ANR<sup>1</sup>.

The local branch of the French postal operator that received us is responsible for collecting and distributing all the mail (letters and parcels weighing less than 20 kg) over an area spanning two departments. To operate, the organization comprises a regional management, two industrial sorting platforms and 50 operational distribution centers. There are approximately 5,000 employees with different professional statuses, depending on their date of recruitment. The most senior employees benefit from a work contract drawn up under public law and are civil servants. The latest recruits have contracts made under private law and are salaried workers. At the time of our intervention, there was a quasi-parity between civil servants and salaried workers.

Having been previously made aware of this subject by some of the organization's occupational health physicians, the local entity volunteered to participate in this study in order to understand the reasons for the recent deterioration in its key health indicators (recorded incapacities, amount of sick leave, sudden leaves of absence). In order to identify as precisely as possible

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<sup>1</sup>Agence Nationale de la Recherche, a French institution with a remit for funding scientific research

the expectations of this research partner with regards to the issues being identified, a series of interviews were conducted with key functional managers, occupational health physicians and social workers. All participants were particularly sensitive to the psycho-social development of the different populations in the local entity. Prior these interviews being rounded off, feedback was exchanged which helped to accurately define the scope and terms of our study in this organization: its headquarters and four mail distribution centers chosen for their intrinsic traits (size, location and population).

### 3.3 Data collection

Once these units had been identified, it was possible to schedule our work in order to successively study them individually. The full carry-through of the fieldwork was nearly 18 months. For purposes of the data triangulation<sup>2</sup> of sources needed for the internal validity and reliability of the findings of our study<sup>3</sup>.

Research methods used in each unit consisted of three phases:

- a phase of collection and analysis of the documentation which relates to the logistic data (volumes, rate of processing, rate of anomaly, properties of the delivery systems), the social data (population, status, seniority, turn-over, rate of unionization) and the medical data (unexpected leave of absence, sick leave, medical unfitness).
- a qualitative phase consisted of interviews with volunteer interviewees . In order to encourage participation, we were present during the times that all the staff were availability. Each interview was conducted using a guide including five subjects and with the aim of understanding the nature and consequences of the changes. During the qualitative phase, we conducted 99 interviews averaging 1 hour and 20 minutes in length, 88 of which were digitally recorded with the permission of the interviewee. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematical analysis software. Our sample consists of individuals whose sampling in rank, status, seniority, age and sex is representative of the parent population (340 people).

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<sup>2</sup>Triangulation is a method used by quantitative researchers to check and establish validity in their studies by analyzing a research question from multiple perspectives, however the idea is most often used in all kinds of research

<sup>3</sup>'Validity' and 'Reliability' are concepts ordinary used for testing or evaluating quantitative research, however the idea is most often used in all kinds of research. In qualitative research, these concepts refer to whether the findings of a study are true and certain—'true' in the sense that research findings accurately reflect the situation, and 'certain' in the sense that research findings are supported by the evidence. (Golafshani,2003).

- a phase of observations in the life of the organization: phase of operational work termed ‘internal’ (sorting of the mail), a phase of work termed ‘external’ (delivery to the letter-boxes), a phase of collective work (meetings, work groups) and a phase of breaks and abstract exchanges.

### **3.4 Analysis**

As mentioned above (cf. 2 on page 6), to deal with these data, we chose GT methods as ‘an inductive methodology that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). GT is particularly suitable for dealing with ‘qualitative data of the kind gathered from participant observation, from the observation of face-to-face interaction, from semi-structured or unstructured interviews, from case-study material or from certain kinds of documentary sources’ (Martin & Turner, 1986).

The GT methodology encourages the researcher to take steps, through the rotating cycle of collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), to determine if one’s theory is genuinely useful for addressing the phenomena under study. Movement from data to concept is appropriately viewed as a movement across levels of abstraction, not a numerical tabulation of incidents associated with a discovered concept. The researcher seeks to discover(identify) a slightly higher level of abstraction—higher than the data themselves—that allows the application of a name to the action or object observed or referred to (Martin & Turner, 1986). The analytical guidelines followed in this study are its fundamental tenets and include: (a) the constant comparative method, (b) theoretical coding, (c) theoretical sampling, (d) theoretical saturation, and (e) theoretical sensitivity (O’Reilly et al., 2012).

## **4 Results**

### **4.1 Documentation review**

The results of our documentation review show that each center under study experienced a significant increase in sudden leaves of absence, sick leaves and temporary incapacities during the two years prior to our study. These data suggest this trend is by no means correlated with the number or severity of work related accidents or reported occupational diseases, which were on the decrease for the same period. Concerning ergonomics and physical working conditions,

our documentation review reveals that many measures have been introduced by the company in recent years to improve the operational conditions of work particularly in terms of quality, safety, proper facilities and training of postal employees and their supervisors. All the staff we met unanimously welcomed these measures. Our documentation review also reveals that the turnover processed during the same period was characterized by a relative stability both in terms of both volume and cyclicalness (seasonality).

## **4.2 Qualitative phase**

Qualitatively, the successive organizational changes within the company are worrying both to the postal employees and managers. If the majority of them readily acknowledge the need to adapt their practices to new economic demands, they are nevertheless concerned about the future of postal work in the light of developments seen in recent years (rationalization, continuous change, intensity). However, no member of personnel we met really discussed the difficulty of their task, the level of involvement required or the mental or physical aspects required. They were more concerned about the time requirements for performing the diverse day-to-day activities for which they were responsible and their position within the restructuring plans, the conditions of synchronization between continuity and change.

### **4.2.1 Headquarters: Executive and middle management**

The results of our interviews with members of the regional management reveal that beyond the discourse, most of the actions undertaken are still deeply impregnated by an administrative character bequeathed from the history of the company. As borne out by our review of the corresponding documentation, all programs of organizational change are designed by the general management located at the national headquarters in Paris. Before implementing them nationwide, they are initially tested on specific local units before being codified in an internal reference matrix and rubberstamped by a team of experts. The regional management that we studied was no exception and most of the actions performed in the implementation of organizational change incentives are the conscientious application of directives and procedures performed on a national level. The aim of this codification is to guarantee compliance with the procedures to be performed within a specified time. Even if the possibility of designing appropriate proposals is encouraged to include possible local specificities, when questioned, most managers recognize that this undeniably created complications, wasted time and were therefore circumvented as

much as possible so as to meet strategic and particularly stringent deadlines.

#### **4.2.2 Distribution centers: hands-on management**

The vast majority of hands-on managers appreciate the new responsibilities entrusted to them, including management activities that provide them with the possibility of widening the diversity of their tasks, complementing their skills and exercising more autonomy. However, at the same time, they criticized the many paradoxical instructions and time constraints associated with them (mandatory objectives, time frames and deadlines).

In the words of one interviewee,

This is what we are suffering from: we are constantly in action, in project management, dealing with information that comes up to us and after dealing with the day-to-day business. Time is all that matters and yet the working day takes priority because we are constantly faced with it and cannot get out of it.

An operational manager, male, 48 yrs old.

In detail, the analysis of our interviews reveals that the population of local managers display two different attitudes towards the on-going organizational changes.

A first population of managers implements the procedures for organizational change sticking as closely as possible to the reference document. To their minds, the studies performed prior to their development guarantees them a satisfactory if not optimal result. They consider themselves as the 'conveyor belts' in the system and must be seen as trustworthy and up to the task. They say that their hierarchy expects this attitude from them and that they will be rewarded and promoted for their ability to pass the imposed projects on within the agreed deadlines. For them, an energetically organizational change steered with conviction is the best thing for all the individuals concerned. They make up by far the majority of the population of local managers we met.

The second population comprises individuals who see themselves as 'interfaces' whose remit is to facilitate the implementation of an organizational project. For these individuals, it is not just meeting the deadlines or the recommended format which counts but the compatibility of the changes implemented with local specificities. These individuals consider that it is difficult, even dangerous, to apply a method deploying a 'pre-manufactured' project without considering the opinions and expectancies of the people affected.

In the first case, we consider that the aims of the local management are similar to those of the decision-making middle management in their compliance with procedures and deadlines. For purposes of simplicity, let us refer to these managers M1. In the second case, the local management is more aware of the risks of unsuitable organizational change. These individuals are more inclined to defend the interests of the operational postal workers for whom they are responsible within their hierarchy and we will refer to this case as M2.

### 4.2.3 Distribution centers: staff

On the one hand, operational workers (postmen and postwomen) appreciate the changes in the make-up of their activities which allow them to discontinue a portion of the sorting phase in favor of the distribution phase. On the other hand, they perceive the new production constraints as a hindrance to the interpersonal relationship side of their activity, which has been stripped down to a strictly labor-centered function. In fact, their patterns of service (cordial exchanges with the recipients, adjusting the order of the delivery round when needed, the possibility of offering small services to others, etc ...) are now thwarted by a level of time requirements that have become mandatory.

All the operational staff resent this erosion in their margins of autonomy and in the words of one of them :

Before, we were confident as we knew what we had to do. Sure, some days we had to work hard, that's normal, but we knew it'd be easier the next day or later [...] Now all that is over, they've compressed everything, you have to work at full pace all of the time and you're not allowed to ask any questions, you distribute...volume, volume, volume... that's it.

A post distribution worker, male, 42 yrs old.

In this normalized scheme, if a distribution postal employee wishes to pursue the interpersonal interactions among recipients on his round, it will delay the theoretical performance of the round, and push back the time his or her service ends, thus encroaching on his or her rest period. Therefore, to maintain their working practices, most of them now start early, limiting interactions with colleagues, going without breaks and upping their pace to keep the time required for operational autonomy and the interpersonal relationship aspect which is so appreciated. The consequence of these opposing goals are that the days don't seem long enough to

sufficiently fulfill the various tasks of the day, the pace picks up, people become exhausted and misunderstanding ensues .

In the words of one manager,

By running faster and faster, the carriers contribute to their own misfortune.

An executive manager, female, 47 yrs old.

### **4.3 Observation approach**

#### **4.3.1 Headquarters: Executive and Middle Management**

At this hierarchical level, our observation phases enabled us to attend steering committees, work meetings and informal interviews. For us, these areas of exchange are characterized by two defining features.

Firstly and hierarchically speaking, each action is seemingly performed with a substantial time constraint. Urgency seems to be the metronome of activities at this hierarchical level. Any problem must be addressed without delay. To our minds, it is possible to explain this pressure of the moment via the daily difficulties that may come from the operational centers as well as from the various demands from Paris<sup>4</sup>.

The second is the obviously political nature of the observed interactions. As regards the local organization under study, the main threats are industrial disputes and strike movements which paralyze operations and render its efforts meaningless. In addition, the individuals being monitored appear to work in a hostile environment where everyone does their best to avoid having to take decisions or any initiatives being tabled that might spark industrial disquiet.

To our minds, these two particularities explain how the spaces normally devoted to dialogue and exchange appeared to us as simple 'rubber stamping' entities where one formally validates a decision in relation to what has been advocated within the upper echelons or in relation to what had been satisfactory in the past. This attitude encourages as much as it legitimates the attitude of the managers in the case M1 referred to above and at the same time marginalizes the attitude of M2 managers whose efforts are seemingly to no avail.

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<sup>4</sup>There would have been every interest for our study to continue its observations and our interviews within the national management so as to further our understanding of the observable organizational dynamics. In any case, such a demand would have surpassed the predefined scope of our study terrain.

### **4.3.2 Distribution centers: hands-on management**

Despite the attitude of the management conserving its reflexes bequeathed from the past years, as regards local management, it is prompted to favor exchange, dialogue and the taking of initiative. In order to do so, a meeting is held on a weekly basis which aims to make operational postal employees aware of the forthcoming changes and to record all possible remarks, questions or ideas likely to enhance the on-going project. In reality, these meetings have become merely information giving shops. During each meeting, the local managers list the facts and intentions to operatives who remain passive and mute. This muteness, even self censorship, can be explained in two ways.

The first reason is that the postal employees have nothing to expect from their hierarchy, and are convinced that any demand will be subsequently disregarded. In the case of M1, it is because local managers are perceived as being in league with the national management. In the case of M2, the reason is that managers appear powerless when faced with on-going projects.

The second reason is that most postal employees wish to leave the distribution center to commence their delivery round as soon as possible. As previously specified, the new standards governing distribution no longer enable the post(wo)men to construct or maintain the interpersonal relationship side of their round which they so welcomed. To keep this going, they need time. With this in mind, not asking questions in a meeting is a means of shortening it so the round can commence. Nevertheless, we are compelled to observe that the possible problems in the life of a distribution center, whether linked to the implementation of an on-going project or simply to the daily life of the center, no longer have a place where they can be voiced and addressed.

### **4.3.3 Distribution centers: staff**

Our in situ observation periods revealed the particular intensity that underlies distribution centers during a working day, especially in the 6:30 – 9:00 am shift which corresponds to the collective sorting and individual sorting phases. This period of coexistence (the only one of the day) is characterized by a particular tension because of the desire of each employee to avoid to the greatest degree any unnecessary interaction. The obvious aim is thus to complete so-called ‘internal’ work as fast as possible so as to begin the phase of work called ‘external’ or the actual mail delivery as such.

This period is also characterized for hand-on managers (M1 and M2) by a particularly

excessive level of solicitation. In addition to their role of coordination and support, they must handle the irregularities that have become recurrent (if not on a daily basis) due to sudden leaves of absence and sick leaves which both disrupt the work-flow and the correct assignment of each round. For this population, this phase appeared to be particularly difficult as the conditions for the balance between instructions, constraints and available resources (staff, time) seem precarious and questionable on a daily basis.

Faced with tired, skeptical or disappointed distribution postal employees, the local managers must assume on a daily basis the hierarchical responsibility for their movement. As such, they are now the guarantors of the balance between the continuity of action, deployment developments and the necessary adaptation of practices, three keys principles which are particularly difficult to balance in the daily turnover while maintaining the mandatory pace. Local managers are given responsibility, evaluated, promoted and compensated on their ability to meet quantitative targets (stream flow, operating margin) and qualitative targets (personnel management, customer satisfaction, deployment of reorganization programs) and the tasks that now fall on their shoulders put them at risk of fatigue and breakdown.

## 5 Discussion

Thus our results show a significant increase in sudden leaves of absence and sick leaves devoid of specific and factual explanation. The day-to-day organization of the activities is hampered by an atmosphere of palpable tension and a constant risk of malfunction forcing those in charge of the coordination and its accomplishment to adapt on a daily basis. When asked about these points, people explained their incomprehension not about the need for change as such, but on the practicalities of change. Their main principle is to question or disavow the practices of each individual without providing any particular compensation other than the need to evolve. The resulting contradictions (paradoxical instructions, perceived lack of recognition, progressive dilution of collective understanding) repeated throughout the day and not properly defused through a suitable outlet and the fact of being in the grip of a perpetual quest for time, end up creating situations of tension and unease, which progressively exacerbate the very reasons for their appearance.

All the same, apart from this statement about the situation of the organization under study, it has been possible for us to distinguish a very particular set of organizational dynamics

surrounding projects introducing organizational changes. In fact, our findings bring to light a constantly changing set of routines which become at odds with the daily situation, thus impacting the development of the organization.

### **5.1 Endogenous change by absorptive capacity**

First of all, the choice of direction taken in order to orchestrate the change projects within the centers of distribution under study can themselves be interpreted as routines. The findings of our qualitative phase clearly underline the characteristics of the routine defined in the execution of the organizational change.

In the first place, if the executive managers in charge of steering the organizational change projects wish to act like executives in a profit-driven company such as it is supposed to be today and their actions are still impregnated with the culture inherited from that of a state enterprise. In this respect, a large majority of the managers we met are committed to complying with their instructions and meeting the deadlines as far as possible. In this respect, the background of the organization impacts the present action and thus its future. It is well recognized in the literature that routines change in a path-dependent manner and are shaped by history (Nelson & Winter, 1982; Levitt & March, 1988; North, 1990). In our case where the need for change arises from an exogenous event (a regulatory constraint), the means of steering the change is naturally shaped by the background of the organization and the organizational change is already part of an identified path dependence. In this way, our findings clearly illustrate the definition of path dependence proposed by Sydow et al. as 'the process through which past actions influence the likelihood of future actions' (Sydow et al., 2009). When considering an other definition, path dependence is a process that 'causes lock-in in the absence of exogenous shock' (Vergne & Durand, 2010), we can observe that in our case, even in the case of a major exogenous event, path dependence remains highly significant. In the event of decisions being taken in relation to past successes, our work follows the proposition of Pentland who advance that 'Path dependence within a performance makes the pattern recognizable. As a pattern of action develops in response to a stimulus, it becomes more likely that a similar pattern will occur in response to a similar stimulus'(Schultz, 2008; Pentland et al., 2012).

This propensity to continue past routines is reinforced in our case by the uncertainty weighing upon all decisions or actions that could jeopardize the industrial environment. In fact, in situations of uncertainty, particular pervasive uncertainty, routines make a sizable contribution

to the actors' ability to pick a course of action (Becker, 2004). In power dynamics, routines help actors to deal with pervasive uncertainty stemming from two effects: by setting certain parameters, firms may increase predictability and, at the same time, free limited cognitive resources (North, 1990).

Although the influence of the history of the organization and the uncertainty over the effects of managerial decisions readily marks the patterns of actions and interactions of the top executives in our study terrain, their routines nevertheless serve to drive the change and prepare for the future. From a management perspective, the influence of managerial decisions on organizational routines is, of course, an important driver of organizational change that needs to be considered (Witt, 1998; Knott & McKelvey, 1999). For this reason, a certain number of individuals originally skeptical about on-going projects have finally chosen to adapt the new objectives of the organization out of conviction or for a strategic purpose (a desire for recognition or promotion). By following the dynamic of change delivered by the executive management, a certain number of these individuals (M1 managers or recently recruited staff member) have mimicked their way into acquiring (Lynch, 1998; Dawkins, 2006) and/or by hierarchical legacy the routines of the leaders they follow (Cohendet & Llerena, 2003). This capacity of absorption by individuals allows the change-bearing routines to be gradually diffused throughout the organizations. Some authors define absorptive capacity as: 'a set of organizational routines and processes by which firms acquire, assimilate, transform and exploit knowledge to produce a dynamic organizational capability' (Zahra & George, 2002). In a sense, this definition extends view that organizational learning is based on routines (Levitt & March, 1988). Whether we label this process 'learning' or 'absorption', the creation of dynamic capabilities depends on the underlying routines actually changing (Winter, 2003). If the routines display inertia, absorptive capacity will be low, learning will be slow, and the capabilities of the organizational may not be particularly dynamic (Pentland et al., 2012). By following this proposition, it is possible to envisage the routines which drive change themselves changing on contact with the individuals who adopt them. However, a new in-field study would naturally be required to verify such a hypothesis.

## **5.2 Resistance**

Faced with executives managers and individuals (M1 managers and recently recruited operatives) sharing the same change objectives, are M2 managers and some of the operational staff

who refuse to accept the conditions for change being tabled. Although they are aware of the need for change, the means recommended to them for doing so do not suit them. Most of these individuals come from a period of public enterprise and have therefore lived through all the integration practices over this period of time (competitive examinations, early career in Paris, promotion by seniority). Apart from this common culture, the members of this population share a certain conception about their work inherited from public service which is demonstrated on a daily basis by the social relationships with the people they deliver to on their round, a certain autonomy during this round, a respect toward the uniform they wear and rules and regulations of the Postal service, now a thing of the past. For them, this combination of knowledge represents a profession that has to be conserved against the deluge of changes being unleashed upon it.

Routines store knowledge (Nelson & Winter, 1982) including 'procedural knowledge' (Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994) or 'tacit knowledge' (Cohendet et al., 1999; Lazaric, 2000; Knott, 2003). This is why on a daily basis, individuals endeavor to continue their habits despite the efforts of the management to influence their routines (changes of procedure, hierarchical orders, threats of sanctions). Managerial influence is always subject to limitations when it comes to influencing routines as they are actually implemented (Leibenstein, 1987; Lazaric & Raybaut, 2004). The behavior of these individuals also comes from the history of their profession and their organization (Sydow et al., 2009). For them, the daily accomplishment of their routines provide an identity and a savoir-faire which must be defended. Their discourse and their acts constantly refer to the organizational memory of their enterprise. Organizational memory has been an important topic of research for many years (Walsh & Ungson, 1991). Here, our interest is in memory of past practices, how tasks were accomplished in the past. Humans obviously have capabilities for remembering past events, and research on routines has explored the role of procedural and declarative memory (Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994; Lazaric & Denis, 2005; Lazaric, 2008). When people perceive that their lives flow in parallel, when they experience the same sequences, durations, temporal locations and rates of recurrence of events, they are more likely to believe that they share the same set of circumstances and, on that basis, develop or strengthen a sense of common identity (Bluedorn & Denhardt, 1988). Thus, some of them wish to maintain their past habits not just for the preservation of the profession but also for the preservation of their professional identity. Faced with this wave of organizational change, these individuals are aware that their profession is undergoing change and that for many of their colleagues it

is already a thing of the past. The uncertainty surrounding their future practices and their professions weighs upon their daily working lives and makes them further confirm their wish to protect and to maintain their daily routines (North, 1990; Becker, 2004).

### 5.3 Conflict of routines

Our case study brings to light the existence of two sets of routines within the same organization. Even if both these sets draw from the history of their organization and are part of a coherent path dependence, their aims nevertheless contradict each other. An exogenous event has caused a change in objectives at the highest hierarchical level. According to the discourse of their proponents, these new aims should be accompanied by a change of habits at all levels of the organization (accountability of the management, autonomy in decision-making, waiving of practices originating from the management). In reality, the habits have not evolved as one might have wished. The organization is in an in between position where it is not like it was or what it is supposed to have become. As regards the management, the new objectives have actually accommodated past routines as a vehicle for promotion. Faced with this, the individuals who disagree with the new objectives rely on the strength of their past routines to resist this wave of change which impacts them. On a daily basis, the individuals try to keep their position and to suitably perform the task belonging to them by performing the routines of the group he/she belongs to. All the same, their daily work is hampered by individuals who do not share their conception of change.

The action/reaction opposition places the routines both in a perspective of change and of progress (Pentland & Rueter, 1994; Adler et al., 1999; Feldman, 2000) and in a perspective of stability and continuity (Nelson & Winter, 1982; Baum & Singh, 1994; Aldrich, 1999). This struggle for influence causes friction and rows and underlines the dynamic character of routines (Pentland & Rueter, 1994; Cohen et al., 1996; Lazaric, 2000; Lazaric et al., 2001; Feldman & Pentland, 2003).

Recent work on the political and motivational aspects of routines has highlighted the importance of power relations in routines when they articulated the idea of ‘routines as a truce’ (Lazaric et al., 2001). The routine as a truce idea suggests the routine as a resolution to the conflict. Our findings do not tally with these hypotheses and stress the fact that the routines can equally embody conflict and contradiction. The existence of a routine does not necessarily indicate that a truce has been achieved (Pentland & Feldman, 2005). Our results point to the

kinds of divergence within a routine that can form the locus for on-going dynamics of domination and resistance. Political conflict can be and probably often is a part of many routines. In fact, any organizational routine could be the locus for acting out many different conflicts (Pentland & Feldman, 2005).

This dynamic conflict of routines undergoing change takes place in a situation of time pressure. This applies both for the executive management who must meet the strict deadlines governing the deployment of the project and the operatives who must do their round under time pressure. On the one hand, this is due to new productivity demands which are imposed upon employees and on the other hand, due to their wish to keep a margin of autonomy which belongs to them during the moment they are fulfilled.

Experimental research in psychology clearly supports the impact of time pressure on the maintenance of routines. A replication and extension of the original experiments found that time pressure increases the likelihood of routine choices (as opposed to non-routine choices), even when the inadequacy of the routine was indicated before the choice (Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994; Garapin & Hollard, 1999). Some works indicate that increased time pressure (and other increased constraints such as stress) will not only induce falling back on routine responses, but will also lead to a preference of those routine responses which are rehearsed most often (Betsch et al., 1999). Time pressure also bears an influence when actors search for new routines (externally or from within the group involved in the routine). A possible explanation is that 'when time is scarce, teams will not devote scarce temporal resources to internal development of new work routines', but rather adopt some readily available routine (Zellmer-Bruhn, 1999). As a result, by not being able to provide the conditions of reflexion or conscious choice, this change in practices takes place under a significant time constraint which results in resistance and the tensions from individuals accruing from this resistance. This contraction in the organization exposes the individuals concerned to a proven risk of job stress which further encourages them to rely on their routines so as to keep the sense and identity of their daily work.

However, all these dynamics are not without consequences for the individuals and the organization. Worn out by the daily struggle for power, the most fragile employees are exposed to proven psycho-social risks. Through a series of dynamic effects, the project of organizational change produces a vicious circle suffered by the most fragile employees (sudden leaves of absence, sick leave, medical unfitness). In addition, far from finding in this project a means of performance, in its daily life, the organization finds a source of degradation of its daily perfor-

mance caused by irregularities that have become recurrent (if not daily) due to sudden leaves of absence and sick leaves both which disrupt the correct assignment of work.

Apart from these findings it would be useful to continue this research work in order to study the consequences of such behavior. In fact, routines can fall apart if there is a lacking sense of collective mindedness for instance because the collective sense-making process is disturbed (Weick, 1990, 1993). Conditions of (extreme) time pressure and other constraints obstruct collective sense-making (for instance because there is less time, and less opportunity to communicate), thus making it more likely that routines, once adopted, fall apart (Becker, 2004). Thus, there is every reason to think that the routines observed here will develop in this dynamic of opposition, a set of selection/retention will come and qualify certain routines suitable for espousing new challenges while others having become outmoded and unsuitable will be shelved (Nelson & Winter, 1982; Knudsen, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this case study we have revealed different findings that provide food for thought in this rich and complex study of organizational routines. Our case describes an organization confronted with a succession of organizational changes within the framework of an important change initiative introducing new objectives. This exogenous event disturbed albeit time-tested routines and such a disturbance produces a series of very particular effects.

First of all, the gradual change in the routines of management. Although it was quite coherent to foresee that the new objectives of the organization would influence the existing routines, to our minds, it is the new objectives of the organization that mostly espouses the existing routines. Through uncertainty and the pressure of time exerted upon the executives, far from disqualifying the existing routines, contrarily, the initiative for change consolidates them and even guarantees their diffusion among the new recruits eager to integrate.

Secondly, the conditions for change provided by past routines surprise a large majority of operatives who fail to grasp the on-going dynamic. Perceiving the change as a threat to the different components of their daily work so as to foster a purely productive dimension to their profession, most of them became worried. Equally plunged into an uncertainty surrounding their future and the constraints from the pressures of time imposed upon them, they also take refuge in their routines to explain their will to resist and preserve the identity of their profession.

Even the recommended tools for transmitting a change initiative which aim to favor dialogue and the dialogue itself get to be boycotted so as to preserve routines. Such a gesture means that not only the conditions for change are devoid of media for exchange and dialogue but so are all the problems pertaining to daily work. This absence of dialogue and the possibility of regulation subsequently causes a degradation in the organizational coordination which is particularly obnoxious for the actors concerned

Therefore in our case, it is possible to observe a set of two routines resulting from the past culture of an organization which, due to an exogenous event, are led to confront each other in areas they had once co-inhabited. This opposition dynamic impacts the individuals who experience the consequences of this confrontation every day. Every hierarchical level is concerned by these effects, and this hampers the daily functioning of the organization and places on the most resistant workers the responsibility of assuring performance from one day to the next despite the situation. Gaining more detailed insight into the dynamics of the organization makes it possible to fine-tune the conditions of for its management and the conditions for change. For this reason, studying the dynamic of organizational routines is a promising direction to take. Among these dynamics, refining our understanding of the conditions for changing routines and their interdependence enable foresight and thus a limitation of the effects arising from the inevitable disturbances in any organizational life.

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