

Executive summary

Overview of the state of change management in the UN system

In recent years, the pace and scope of change within the UN family have increased significantly. Transformation is accelerating to achieve the Secretary-General's vision of empowered individuals driving a forward-thinking and agile culture. Yet such change needs to be guided and managed. More importantly, people need to understand, adopt and sustain change over time. For each new change staff need to adjust and repeat these processes.

This takes structured yet agile approaches that are focused on people so that transformations occur respectfully and effectively, leaving no one behind. Change management provides exactly this. In the UN, change management practitioners are increasingly called upon to support digital transformation, business transformation, new ways of working and other changes. Yet until now, we knew little about how the work of change professionals was structured, resourced, implemented, monitored or perceived and supported.

The purpose of the first *State of Change Management in the UN System* was to take stock of the practice of change management across UN entities and establish a baseline from which to track evolutions of the practice over time. Results from the first edition of the survey, conducted in July and August 2023, emphasize the need for systematic applications of change management strategies, methods and tools. This is necessary to optimize the assistance change management professionals can offer their organizations. The survey also shed light on the challenges of change management in the UN and offers solutions.

104
RESPONDENTS

19
CITIES

4
REGIONS

37
ORGANIZATIONS

Change management is central to the UN's ability to transform itself, to support its constituents and meet the demands of increasingly complex global challenges. The UN Lab for Organizational Change and Knowledge (UNLOCK) project at the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) guides, empowers and connects change management professionals across the UN family and supports UN entities in establishing change management as a standard practice.

Read on for:

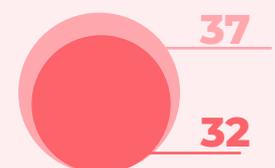
- Results from change practitioners who responded to the *State of Change Management in the UN System* survey; and
- What the UNLOCK project at the UNSSC will do in response to these results.

Overall findings



Digital transformation, business transformation, new ways of working, and culture change top the list of ongoing transformations in the UN system

According to survey participants, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered or accelerated certain types of transformation. As of July 2023, the vast majority of organizations represented in the survey (32 out of 37) were implementing digital transformations, 31 were carrying out a business transformation, and 28 were instituting changes to their ways of working and their culture. This shows that many organizations are undergoing several transformations at once.



Number of organizations
implementing
digital transformations



A majority of organizations are nearing, at or past the point of change saturation

Seventy per cent of organizations represented (26 out of 37) in the survey report five to nine simultaneously ongoing changes. Sixty-three per cent of survey respondents say their organization is nearing, at or beyond the point of change saturation. Only 11 per cent say their organization has plenty of spare capacity for change, and 21 per cent indicate they have some extra capacity. Advancing additional changes while navigating change saturation requires skill, tools and coordination.



Five to nine simultaneously ongoing changes



Change management practitioners in the UN system are highly skilled and experienced, with noticeable gaps in key areas of systemic UN transformation

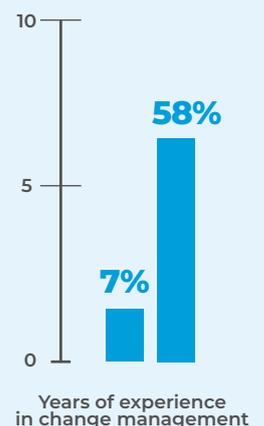
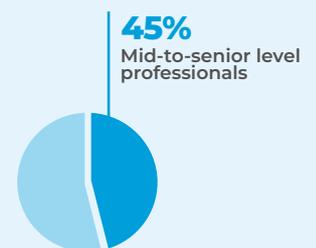
Many participants have advanced- or expert-level experience in project management (57 per cent), communications and engagement (56 per cent), strategy development (53 per cent), facilitation (47 per cent) and managing a portfolio of change management initiatives (45 per cent). They also possess advanced- or expert-level experience in business transformation (46 per cent), new ways of working (40 per cent), and digital transformation (38 per cent). However, they describe noticeable gaps in critical skills and functions related to systemic UN transformation. Fully 66 per cent report not being skilled or having few skills in behavioural science; 64 per cent report having little or no experience in 'UN Reform'; 56 per cent say the same about research, monitoring and evaluation. In the area of innovation, 31 per cent say they have little or no experience.



The change management workforce is diverse and it encompasses many more people than just change management professionals

Forty-five per cent of survey participants are mid-to-senior level professionals. A majority (58 per cent) have six or more years of experience in change management, but some (7 per cent) have as little as one year. One third of their job titles contain the words change or transformation. Forty per cent of participants are located in dedicated transformation offices or units. Information and Technology departments are the most likely to include change management as part of their work. Less than a third of survey participants work full-time on change management, indicating they have other responsibilities. Data and feedback from the survey indicate there are many more change management practitioners across the UN family than responded to the survey – not all of which are directly identifiable by job title or self-identify as such.

Not everyone who guides, encourages or supports the adoption of change is a change management professional. People managers and senior leaders are also facilitators of change. Change agents, for example, are influential people who, regardless of their grade or post, are called upon to support change initiatives. More than two thirds of participants (67 per cent) report the presence of change agent networks in their organization.





The fundamental elements of change management are inconsistently applied across UN entities

Only 17 per cent of survey participants indicate the presence of organization-wide change management strategies; 45 per cent rarely or never apply models, frameworks and methodologies; 40 per cent do not offer training to senior leaders and people managers. In addition, more than half of participants (52 per cent) do not share best practices across their organization. Only about one third (32 per cent) of all survey participants possess official change management certifications.



Size of organization and change management certification impact the practice of change management

In some cases, the absence of certification significantly impacts the application of fundamental elements of change management. For instance, certified practitioners rank the level of change management maturity of their organization higher than their uncertified colleagues. There are also clear differences between the practice of change management in larger compared to smaller organizations. For example, 72 per cent of participants from larger UN entities report a change management strategy for the project they're working on. Among smaller UN entities, that number is only 46 per cent.



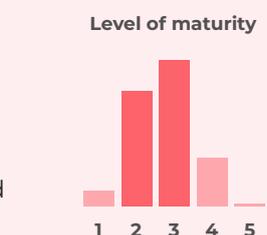
Participants agree on the main challenges in their practice

The most prevalent perceived challenges, in decreasing order, are: lack of leadership support (mentioned by 45 per cent of participants); change-resistant culture (40 per cent); lack of alignment (23 per cent of participants); change saturation and the burden of concurrent change (22 per cent) and lack of awareness of the importance of change management (22 per cent of participants). These challenges, expressed qualitatively, correspond to the barriers to change management maturity identified in multiple-choice questions answered by change leads.



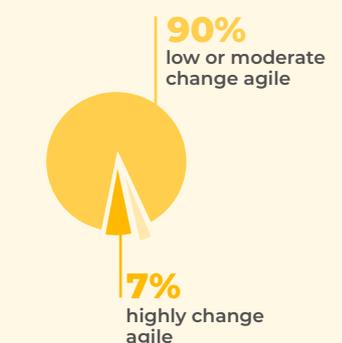
The practice of change management in the UN is still immature

Out of five levels of change management maturity, five being the highest, 45 per cent of change leads rank their organization at level three, 'multiple projects'. None of these leads give it the highest rating of five which is "Organizational competency". Only one lead (5 per cent) employed at a smaller UN entity, gives it the lowest rating of one, "Ad hoc or absent". The most prevalent barriers to change maturity are strategic shortcomings and lack of organizational buy-in, identified by 65 per cent of change leads, followed by lack of understanding (60 per cent), lack of leadership support and prioritization (55 per cent) and complexity of change (50 per cent) and change-resistant culture (50 per cent).



Participants rate their organization's change agility poorly

UN entities are not yet able to rapidly anticipate and respond to changes in flexible and effective ways. Only 7 per cent of change management professionals who responded to our survey rate their organization as highly change agile. Ninety per cent believe their organizations are low or moderately change agile. On the change agility scale, twice as many uncertified respondents rate their organization as low (31) than their certified counterparts (12).



As a consequence of this survey, the UN Lab for Organizational Change and Knowledge (UNLOCK) project at the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) will...

Empower



Properly equip those responsible for steering and supporting change through new courses for senior leaders, people managers, project managers, and those delivering UN 2.0.



Continue to include the topic of change management in our leadership and management programmes. This is a result of UN organizations recognizing the role of leaders and managers in change.



Strive to establish a UN certification in change management.

Connect



Continue to support the UNLOCK Network. In times of tighter budgets, sharing knowledge and learning from each other is even more important than ever. Join us!



Reach even more practitioners and others who facilitate change in subsequent editions of *The State of Change Management in the UN System*. Participate and sign up! Also remember to share the link to this site with colleagues who may want to participate too.

Guide



Make recommendations to standardize how change management is measured, in collaboration with the UNLOCK Network.



Include learning from the survey in our advisory services to ensure our support is tailored to your UN 2.0 needs.



Take stock of the state of change management in the UN system every two years.

About the *State of Change Management in the UN System* survey

The State of Change Management in the UN System is produced by the UN Lab for Organizational Change and Knowledge (UNLOCK) project at the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC). It's the first-ever comprehensive stocktaking of its kind and captures the responses from 104 change practitioners from 37 organizations who were surveyed in July/August 2023.