

ROBERTS, R. 2022. The National Performance Framework and the psychological factors that can influence change. [Blog post]. Posted on SPICe (Scottish Parliament information centre) spotlight, 10 March 2022. Available from: <https://tinyurl.com/523pbxvy>

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2022

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Guest blog: the National Performance Framework and the psychological factors that can influence change.

March 11, 2022

This guest blog, from Dr Ruby Roberts, Research Fellow of Industrial Psychology, Aberdeen Business School, RGU, picks up one of the key themes identified in the Scottish Leaders Forum report on The National Performance Framework, and highlighted in another guest blog published today. As with all guest blogs, what follows are the views of the author, and not those of SPICE and the Scottish Parliament.

People drive change

Technological innovation offers solutions to many of the challenges that we face as a society, whether that be electric vehicles, low-carbon energy or online video meeting services. Yet, for innovation to be truly successful it needs to be used. How people respond to technology, and new ways of working, can influence how successful those changes are. This can be individual consumers, corporate decision makers and gatekeepers in companies, or policy makers working in government. However, people can be reluctant to change, preferring the status quo. They may be influenced less visible, psychological factors such as attitudes towards change, motivations and personal incentives, as well as perceived risks. So, how can we accelerate innovation uptake in the face of these hurdles?

Our research on oil and gas technology adoption decisions

We can learn how to support these changes from recent research from Robert Gordon University and the Net Zero Technology Centre which looked at technology adoption decisions. Prof Rhona Flin and I took an alternative approach by examining the psychological factors which influence technology adoption decisions in upstream oil and gas. Over the course of the two-year project six key psychological factors were identified. These ranged from how innovative decision makers are, whether the technology and service provider were trusted, individual's attitudes towards innovation, to risk perceptions and expertise. These are represented by the Psychological Technology Adoption Framework, shown in the graphic below.

Six psychological factors that influence technology adoption decisions



Graphic showing the six psychological factors that influence technology adoption decisions - cognitive, motivation, attitude, personality, social and organisational.

So, what about the wider application of our research?

Whilst this research focused on technology decisions in oil and gas, the Psychological Technology Adoption Framework can be a useful tool to think about what influences people's response to new ways of working. In November 2021 I had the opportunity to present these findings to the Scottish Leaders Forum sub-group to better understand why adoption of the National Performance Framework (NPF) has been "patchy".

We discussed how people's attitudes to the NPF, whether it is seen to be useful, and a potential preference for the status quo can act as barriers. The sub-group's new report describes this attitude as possibly seeing the NPF as 'yet another thing' that leaders need to do. Trust between stakeholders is key, not only cross-party trust but confidence between the perceived owners and users of the NPF. How leaders and their teams are motivated will likely impact on use of the NPF, particularly where teams are competitive.

As a psychologist I am pleased to see that the latest report recognises these psychological factors, highlighting the need for behavioural change. Awareness building and knowledge development are valuable. Leaders, including political leadership, act as fundamental drivers for improvement of accountability. Success will mean that they need to create an organisational culture that values the NPF, that has procedures in place that make it easy to use and motivates change for the better. Opportunities for lesson sharing can provide practical support as well as fostering good working relationships. My advice is that change is hard. Don't feel bad if you find it difficult to improve innovative activities in your organisation. But do not give up as it is important that we all work towards a bright future—endeavour to persevere.

Dr Ruby Roberts is a Research Fellow of Industrial Psychology, Aberdeen Business School, Robert Gordon University.