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Human Resources Restructuring in Contemporary Organizations A psycho-sociological approach to organizational transformations and their impacts on social structure and workers' well-being

Senhadji Djamel [1,*]

[1]University of Continuing Education, Delly Ibrahim, Algeria

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Abstract: Human resource restructuring has become, in modern times, an organizational necessity driven by the imperatives of economic and technological adaptation. This study examines this phenomenon from a psycho-sociological perspective, exploring specifically how the relationship between the organization and the worker is being transformed. Drawing on a theoretical framework that integrates classical authors (Weber, Marx, Durkheim) and modern psychological approaches (psychological contract, social exchange, self-determination, organizational justice), and supported by recent empirical data, we establish that these transformations heighten psycho-social risks, thereby weakening professional identity and threatening social cohesion. Finally, we advocate for more responsible restructuring practices that place the human element at the center of decision-making.

Keywords: organizational restructuring; human resources; psycho-sociological approach; psychological contract; psycho-social risks; professional identity.

1- Introduction

We are living in a time when organizations are facing changes of unprecedented scale and speed. Artificial intelligence, automation, the demands of the ecological transition, geopolitical tensions, and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic are forcing business and institutions to constantly reinvent themselves. In this context, human resource restructuring appears as an essential strategic lever for maintaining competitiveness (World Economic Forum, 2025). However, behind the rhetoric of 'optimization' or 'agility' lies a more complex reality.

Restructuring is not limited to technical adjustments. It profoundly transforms the very nature of the relationship between the organization and those who bring it to life. Where a relatively supportive model once prevailed—based on a certain degree of job security in exchange for loyalty and commitment—a more transactional logic is gradually and undeniably taking hold, where flexibility, measurable performance, and job insecurity are becoming the norm. This shift is not insignificant: it affects individuals' identities, their sense of belonging, and ultimately, their well-being.

It is precisely this human dimension that we aim to explore here, through a psycho-sociological approach that bridges structural analyses of the sociology of work with individual psychological mechanisms. In essence, we examine how these restructurings reshape the organization-worker relationship and what this implies for social cohesion and psychological well-being.

Recent indicators are worrying. The Future of Jobs Report 2025 (World Economic Forum, 2025) predicts that 22% of current jobs will be disrupted by 2030, with a 39% transformation of key skills. The ILO (2025) warns of rising inequalities and psycho-social risks despite relatively stable unemployment. These figures are not merely macroeconomic; they reflect lived experiences of precariousness, anxiety, and a loss of bearings

* Corresponding author, e-mail: djsenhadj@gmail.com

In the context of accelerating economic globalization, digitalization, and organizational flexibilization, contemporary organizations are undergoing profound processes of human resource restructuring. These transformations—manifested through practices such as workforce flexibilization, performance-based management, platformization, and the increasing integration of artificial intelligence—are not limited to administrative or managerial adjustments. Rather, they signal a deeper reconfiguration of the organizational logic that governs the relationship between employers and employees.

Traditionally, the organization–employee relationship was grounded in relatively stable frameworks characterized by long-term employment, institutional loyalty, and clearly defined professional identities. However, current restructuring dynamics tend to promote more fluid, individualized, and often precarious forms of engagement. This shift raises critical psycho-sociological questions regarding how individuals perceive their roles, construct their professional identities, and negotiate their sense of belonging within increasingly unstable organizational environments.

At the collective level, these transformations may weaken traditional forms of social cohesion within the workplace, as competition, individual performance metrics, and fragmented career trajectories reshape interpersonal relations and organizational culture. At the individual level, they may generate new forms of psychosocial risk, including stress, job insecurity, loss of meaning, and identity dissonance. Consequently, the restructuring of human resources emerges not merely as an economic or managerial issue, but as a complex socio-psychological phenomenon with far-reaching implications.

Within this framework, the central problem addressed by this study can be formulated as follows: how does human resource restructuring in the contemporary context contribute to a psycho-sociological transformation of the organization–employee relationship, and what are the resulting repercussions for social cohesion, professional identity, and individual well-being?

Following is the research questions addressed by the study, beginning with the central question and proceeding to the subsidiary questions derived from it:

How does human resource restructuring in contemporary organizations reshape the organization–employee relationship from a psycho-sociological perspective, and what are its implications for organizational and individual dynamics?

Sub-Questions

-What are the main forms and mechanisms of human resource restructuring in contemporary organizational contexts?

-How do these restructuring processes alter the psycho-sociological foundations of the organization–employee relationship (e.g., trust, power relations, and organizational commitment)?

-To what extent do these transformations affect social cohesion and collective dynamics within the organization?

- How do such changes influence employees' professional identity construction and sense of belonging?

-What are the repercussions of these transformations on individual well-being at work?

The purpose of this study is to examine how human resource restructuring in contemporary organizations reshapes the organization–employee relationship from a psycho-sociological perspective and to analyze its implications for both organizational dynamics and individual well-being.This section outlines the main objectives that guide the present research, aiming to provide a coherent framework for both analysis and interpretation. These objectives are articulated as follows:

- Clarify the theoretical mechanisms of this transformation.
- Identify and analyze its empirical consequences.
- Formulate recommendations for more human and responsible practices.

2-Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Sociological Foundations

Human resource restructuring is usually presented as a technical process of adjusting staffing levels and skills. Here, we suggest to interpret it as an ontological transformation of the organization itself: from an integrative social space to a functional entity prioritizing efficiency and flexibility (Bauman, 2000). Reference to certain classic authors in the sociology of work provides essential insights into the roots of this phenomenon. Max Weber (1905/1922) described bureaucratic rationalization as the progressive domination of calculative logic over personal relationships. Today's restructuring is its prime example: the worker is no longer a social partner, but a resource adjustable according to the imperatives of profitability. Karl Marx (1844) already saw alienation as the worker's loss of control over their activity and its products. Contemporary flexibility accentuates this alienation by subjecting the individual to the vagaries of the market. Émile Durkheim (1893) feared that the division of labor, without adequate normative regulation, would lead to anomie. Massive restructurings weaken organic solidarity and create a normative vacuum. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) speaks of "liquid modernity" to describe a society where ties are fluid and revocable. Organizational relationships become precisely that: temporary and conditional.

Finally, Richard Sennett (1998) shows how flexible capitalism "corrodes character" by preventing the construction of a stable professional identity based on continuity and biographical narrative.

2.2 Explanatory Psychological Frameworks

Furthermore, reference to organizational psychological theories seems essential because they allow us to understand, in particular, how these structural changes are experienced at the individual level. The theory of the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995) is particularly relevant. Employees hold implicit beliefs about reciprocal obligations: loyalty in exchange for security, commitment in exchange for prospects. Restructuring often violates this contract, generating a deep and lasting sense of betrayal (Robinson & Morrison, 2000; Turnley & Feldman, 1999).

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) views labor relations as exchanges governed by reciprocity. When restructuring creates a perceived imbalance (higher demands, lower benefits), employees reduce their investment, withdrawing their civic-minded behaviors (Brockner et al., 1992).

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) highlights three fundamental needs: autonomy, competence, and belonging. Restructuring threatens all three, leading to chronic stress and burnout (Vander Elst et al., 2012).

Finally, organizational justice theory (Greenberg, 1987; Colquitt, 2001) shows that perceptions of injustice (distributive, procedural, informational, interpersonal) amplify resistance and psychological distress. Other complementary frameworks allow us to grasp both the structural determinants and the subjective experiences of restructuring.

3- Method and Tools:

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in a critical review of both theoretical and empirical literature. The methodological approach combines elements of systematic and narrative review, enabling a comprehensive examination of the conceptual frameworks that underpin the studied transformation, as well as the evidence documenting its effects. Particular attention is given to identifying convergences and divergences across key scholarly contributions, with the aim of constructing a coherent analytical synthesis.

In addition, the study draws on secondary data derived from recent international reports, notably those published by the World Economic Forum (2025) and the International Labour Organization (2025). These sources provide up-to-date, large-scale insights into global trends and labor-related transformations. To further strengthen the empirical grounding, the analysis incorporates findings from selected meta-analyses on psychosocial risks, particularly those conducted by Hans De Witte et al. (2016) and Isabell Backhaus et al. (2024), which offer

robust, evidence-based assessments of the psychological and social impacts associated with contemporary work environments.

The analytical process follows a thematic coding strategy, through which the collected materials are organized into key categories corresponding to the study's objectives: theoretical mechanisms, empirical consequences, and normative implications. This approach allows for a systematic comparison of sources while ensuring analytical depth and coherence.

Overall, this mixed-methods strategy—combining critical literature review with secondary data analysis—provides a comprehensive and methodologically rigorous overview of the phenomenon under investigation, while remaining consistent with the epistemological and practical constraints inherent to secondary research.

Study Limitations

This analysis relies primarily on secondary data and predominantly Western literature. Conducting field studies in Arab contexts is absolutely essential to shed light on the reality of the impacts caused by human resource restructuring in contemporary organizations, and to determine—based thereon—the nature of the interventions needed to mitigate the severity of the negative effects it has on the human element.

4- Results and Discussion

4.1 Motivations and Structural Factors of Restructuring

Restructuring is not an isolated event. It is a response to systemic pressures.

Globalization and increased competition force organizations to reduce costs and continuously optimize (Streeck, 2009).

The technological revolution—AI, automation—is redefining the value of human labor and rendering some jobs obsolete (World Economic Forum, 2025).

Political deregulation facilitates labor flexibility.

Finally, a cultural shift values individual performance at the expense of collective stability (Bauman, 2000).

4.2 Methods and Practices of Restructuring

Contemporary organizations use a diverse repertoire of methods to carry out their restructurings. These practices are not neutral: they differ in their visibility, perceived abruptness, and psychosocial implications. They can be classified into three main categories: direct, indirect, and mixed/innovative methods. Each category generates specific reactions among workers, ranging from immediate traumatic shock to a more diffuse but equally corrosive long-term precarity. We examine these methods in detail here, highlighting their mechanisms, their usual managerial justifications, and their consequences on employees' lived experience.

4.2.1 Direct Methods: Shock and Symbolic Violence

Direct methods are the most visible, the fastest to implement, and often the most traumatic for both individuals and collectives.

- Mass layoffs (Downsizing): This practice remains the most radical and dramatic. It consists of eliminating a significant number of positions in a single wave, generally for economic reasons (decreased revenue, relocation, mergers and acquisitions). From a psycho-sociological perspective, mass layoffs constitute a form of "symbolic violence" in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu (1991): the organization legitimately exercises its power to redefine the social and economic value of workers, suddenly relegating them to the status of "superfluous." The laid-off employee not only loses his source of income; he suffers a profound identity crisis, a brutal rupture of belonging, and social stigmatization that can leave lasting psychological scars (loss of self-esteem, feelings of personal failure).

The "survivors" are not spared. The phenomenon of "survivor syndrome" (Brockner et al., 1992) describes a combination of guilt ("why them and not me?"), work overload (taking on the tasks of those who left), and increased distrust of management ("if it happened to them, it could happen to me tomorrow"). This distrust rapidly erodes the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995) and fosters a collective emotional withdrawal.

- Job redesign (or redeployment): Less dramatic than mass layoffs, this method involves merging several posts into one, expanding responsibilities, or introducing new technological requirements to reduce the number of employees needed. Often presented as "modernization" or "process optimization," it is perceived by workers as an intensification of work and a loss of autonomy. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) explains the feeling of inadequacy that arises when new tasks require unmastered skills, generating chronic stress and demotivation.

4.2.2 Indirect Methods: Diffuse Precarity and Slow Attrition

Indirect methods, often described as "soft," aim to reduce staff without direct confrontation or dramatic layoffs. They are particularly utilized in the public sector or highly regulated industries where legal constraints limit abrupt job cuts.

- Voluntary Early Retirement: Organizations offer attractive financial incentives (bonuses, partial salary maintenance) to encourage employees nearing retirement age to leave. This method enjoys broader social acceptance because it gives the illusion of individual choice. However, it often masks implicit pressure ("if you don't leave, other measures will follow"). Psychologically, it can generate a feeling of premature abandonment and a loss of social utility among those leaving, while the remaining employees experience a progressive overload.
- Recruitment freeze and non-replacement of natural departures: Widespread in government departments and public companies, this method consists of not replacing departing employees (retirement, resignation, transfer). It leads to a slow but continuous decrease in staff through attrition. From a psycho-sociological perspective, it creates a growing workload for the remaining employees, a dilution of teams, and an erosion of internal social capital (Blau, 1964). The feeling of "doing more with less" becomes permanent, fostering fatigue, cynicism, and disengagement.

These indirect methods, although less visible, establish a culture of permanent uncertainty which, in the long term, can be as destructive as mass layoffs.

4.2.3 Mixed and Innovative Methods: Between Flexibility and Social Acceptability

The most advanced organizations seek to combine economic efficiency and social acceptability by developing hybrid approaches.

- Professional flexibility (imposed part-time work, mandatory telecommuting, job sharing, zero-hour contracts): Presented as advances in work-life balance or agility, these arrangements actually increase perceived job insecurity and the constant availability of employees. They perfectly correspond to the "liquid modernity" described by Bauman (2000), where relationships become temporary and conditional. Psychologically, they generate diffuse anxiety linked to the unpredictability of income and working hours.
- Involuntary internal mobility and retraining programs: Organizations offer geographical or functional reassignments, often accompanied by training. The stated intention is to avoid outright layoffs. However, these relocations impose abrupt biographical disruptions (family relocation, career change) and a feeling of loss of control, threatening the needs for autonomy and belonging (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Ultimately, no method is free from negative psycho-social effects. Direct methods cause immediate traumatic shock; indirect methods lead to slow wear and tear; mixed methods often mask increased job insecurity under a veneer of innovation. The choice of method strongly influences the perception of organizational justice (Colquitt, 2001) and, by extension, the acceptance or resistance to change. Responsible management therefore requires combining these methods with enhanced support measures to limit the human cost.

Practices vary, but all have psychological implications. Direct methods (layoffs) are the most traumatic, constituting symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991). Indirect methods (early retirement, hiring freezes) create a diffuse overload (Blau, 1964). Mixed approaches (flexibility, telecommuting) often mask increased job insecurity (Bauman, 2000).

4.3 Psychosocial Effects and Consequences

The consequences of human resource restructuring are not limited to economic or operational adjustments; they are profoundly multidimensional and extend to the entire social fabric of the organization and beyond. They affect collective structures (cohesion, institutional trust), individuals (identity, mental health), and family and community spheres. These effects, often cumulative and long-lasting, are documented by a growing body of empirical literature, ranging from longitudinal studies to recent meta-analyses. We examine these effects here in three main sub-dimensions, drawing on the theoretical frameworks previously used to shed light on the underlying mechanisms.

4.3.1 Effects on the Social Structure of the Organization

Restructuring constitutes a major shock to the "miniature society" that the organization represents, weakening the relationships that ensure its internal cohesion.

- Lasting Erosion of Institutional Trust: Trust between employees and management, a fundamental link in organizational cohesion, suffers a severe blow. This erosion is not limited to vertical relationships (hierarchy-subordinates); it extends to horizontal relationships between colleagues, which become marked by suspicion and competition (Blau, 1964). Survivors of a restructuring plan often develop a generalized mistrust: "If it could happen to them, it could happen to me tomorrow." This loss of trust fuels organizational cynicism, which reduces commitment and fosters emotional withdrawal, making any future collective mobilization more difficult (Rousseau, 1995).
- Brutal redefinition of professional identity: In the traditional model, employment was a major source of social identity and personal dignity. Restructuring, by making employment precarious and contingent, erodes this stable identity. Richard Sennett (1998) speaks of "character corrosion": professional discontinuity (job changes, forced mobility, the constant threat of dismissal) prevents the construction of a coherent biographical narrative based on perseverance and continuity. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) complements this analysis by showing how the loss of autonomy and belonging weakens the sense of competence, generating an identity void often compensated for by withdrawal or a frantic pursuit of individual performance.

These organizational effects create a vicious circle: weakened cohesion reduces collective resilience to future changes, making organizations more vulnerable to crises.

4.3.2 Psychological and Health Effects

The impacts on mental health are among the most documented and alarming.

- Significant increase in chronic stress and anxiety: The perceived threat of job loss, even among survivors, produces elevated levels of cortisol (the stress hormone) and sleep disturbances. Recent meta-analyses confirm a strong correlation between job insecurity and generalized anxiety (De Witte et al., 2016). Backhaus et al. (2024) observed a 35–40% increase in mental health disorders within two years of a major restructuring.
- Increased risk of burnout and depression: The workload experienced by survivors, combined with guilt and fear, promotes emotional exhaustion. Self-determination theory explains this phenomenon by the simultaneous threat to three fundamental needs: loss of autonomy (imposed decisions), feelings of inadequacy (new, uncontrolled demands), and a breakdown of belonging (departures of colleagues). Longitudinal studies show that workers exposed to recurring restructurings have burnout rates twice as high as the average (Vander Elst et al., 2012).
- Indirect physical effects: Chronic stress related to restructuring is often accompanied by somatic disorders: hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes. A long-term Swedish study of 40,000 workers revealed significantly higher rates of these conditions among those exposed to prolonged job insecurity (National Institute for Health UK, 2022).

These psychological effects are not transient; they can persist for several years, affecting overall quality of life and the ability to reintegrate into the workforce.

4.3.3 Effects on the Family and the Local Community

The repercussions of restructuring extend far beyond the organizational framework, affecting both private and collective spheres.

- Weakening of family stability: Anxiety related to job insecurity or the actual loss of a position impacts marital and parental relationships. Intra-family conflicts increase, traditional roles (often the primary source of income) are challenged, and children may indirectly suffer from parental tensions (school-related stress, behavioral problems). Qualitative studies show that periods of restructuring are often associated with an increase in separations and domestic violence (National Institute of Health UK, 2022).
- Impact on local community cohesion: In single-industry regions or those dependent on a large employer (public or private), massive restructuring causes a comprehensive economic and social shock: closure of local services (shops, schools), emigration of young people, weakening of community organizations, and increased social insecurity. Bauman (2000) describes this phenomenon as an extension of "liquid modernity" at the local level, where communities lose their stable foundations.

In short, the psycho-sociological effects of restructuring are cumulative and systemic. They not only affect the individuals directly involved but also weaken the entire social fabric, with human and societal costs often underestimated by policymakers. These consequences underscore the urgent need for a more responsible approach, capable of anticipating and mitigating these impacts rather than viewing them as inevitable collateral damage.

4.4 Specificities in the Arab Context

The Arab context is distinguished by cultural, institutional, and legal particularities that strongly influence the effects of human resource restructuring. The relatively high level of legal protection for employees, particularly in the public sector, contrasts with a deep cultural value placed on employment as a source of dignity, social status, and family honor. This symbolic dimension makes job loss particularly stigmatizing, amplifying the psychological (stress, anxiety, loss of self-esteem) and social (weakening of family and community cohesion) repercussions.

Restructuring is often perceived as an external constraint (budgetary reforms, international pressures), exacerbating feelings of powerlessness and distrust of institutions. Indirect methods (early retirement, hiring freezes) predominate due to legal rigidities, but they generate overwork and demotivation in the long term.

Despite these challenges, regional initiatives aim to mitigate the impacts by strengthening social safety nets, vocational training, and social dialogue, in order to reconcile economic adaptation with the preservation of individual and collective dignity.

4.5 Towards a Responsible Restructuring Model

Faced with the high human costs of current restructuring practices—erosion of trust, weakening of professional identity, increased mental health issues, and the breakdown of social cohesion—it is imperative to rethink the methods of these transformations. A responsible model does not consist of rejecting the need for organizational adaptation, but rather of reconciling it with a genuine consideration of the human dimension. This model, which we call "responsible restructuring," is based on several interconnected principles, inspired by both international best practices (Nordic models, Emirati experiences) and the lessons of the psycho-sociological theories used in this study.

4.5.1 Fundamental Ethical and Organizational Principles

The first pillar of a responsible model is grounding in clear ethical principles that place dignity and respect at the heart of the process.

- Full transparency and honest communication: Any restructuring must be accompanied by early and detailed disclosure of the economic or strategic reasons, the aims, the selection criteria, and the planned timeline. This transparency directly addresses the informational dimension of organizational justice (Colquitt, 2001) and reduces perceptions of injustice that amplify stress and resistance. Studies show that when explanations are perceived as

sincere and comprehensive, anxiety levels decrease significantly, even among directly affected workers (Vander Elst et al., 2012).

- Participation and social dialogue: Involving employee representatives, unions, and, where possible, the workers themselves in developing the restructuring plan, is a powerful lever for restoring trust. This participation strengthens procedural fairness and gives individuals a sense of control, partially satisfying the need for autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In contexts where social dialogue is institutionalized (as in Nordic countries), restructurings are better accepted and their psychological impact is mitigated.

4.5.2 A Gradual and Humanized Approach to Implementation

Instead of opting for brutal and sudden measures, a responsible model prioritizes gradualism:

- Start with the least impactful measures: hiring freezes, voluntary early retirement with attractive incentives, internal retraining.
- Reserve collective redundancies as a last resort, and only after all alternatives have been exhausted.

This gradual approach reduces the psychological shock and allows individuals to adapt gradually, avoiding the effect of "symbolic violence" described by Bourdieu (1991).

4.5.3 Massive Investment in Human Capital as a Preventive and Curative Strategy

Restructuring should not be solely destructive; it can become an opportunity for skills development.

- Systematic training and retraining programs: Any restructuring plan must include upskilling and reskilling pathways adapted to market needs (digital, green, and managerial skills). These programs, funded by the organization and/or the government, help restore a sense of competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and reduce perceived job insecurity.
- Partnerships with educational institutions: Collaboration with universities, vocational training centers, and online platforms to offer personalized and certified training programs.
- Priority to internal mobility: Promoting redeployment within the organization before resorting to external solutions, thus preserving a sense of belonging and internal social capital (Blau, 1964).

4.5.4 Enhanced Psychological and Social Support

Addressing the psychological shock must be integrated into the process.

- Individual and group psychological support: Establishment of listening, coaching, and brief therapy services for laid-off workers and survivors. This support aims to manage professional grief, anxiety, and loss of identity.
- Social support networks: Creation of support groups for affected workers, facilitating the exchange of experiences and information about the job market.
- Strengthening social safety nets: Extended unemployment benefits, transition funds, guaranteed income during job searches – measures that mitigate the financial and psychological shock, particularly crucial in contexts where employment is a source of social dignity (as in Arab countries).

4.5.5 Continuous Evaluation and Adjustment

A responsible model is not static: it must include mechanisms for regular evaluation (climate surveys, well-being indicators, rehire rates) to adjust practices based on worker feedback.

In short, this responsible restructuring model – transparent, participatory, gradualist, training-oriented, and supportive – does not oppose economic efficiency; it complements it. By preserving human capital, motivation, and innovation, it constitutes a winning long-term strategy for both organizations and societies.

An alternative model must prioritize transparency, participation, gradualism, investment in training, and psychological support (Colquitt, 2001).

4.6 Conclusion

Restructuring is not a purely economic inevitability. It reveals the tensions of contemporary capitalism and its human costs. A psycho-sociological approach shows that it is possible—and necessary—to rethink these processes to preserve the dignity and well-being of workers, while maintaining competitiveness To achieve this balance, we propose the following recommendations:

- Strengthen protective legal frameworks without hindering adaptability.
- Invest heavily in continuing education.
- Promote social dialogue and participation.
- Implement systematic psychological support.
- Support research on the impacts in non-Western contexts.

These recommendations form a strong practical foundation and, at the same time, open promising research perspectives that can be summarized as follows:

- Comparative longitudinal studies to measure long-term effects.
- Qualitative studies focused on the experiences of survivors of restructuring processes.
- Experiments with responsible human resource management interventions to test the effectiveness of these recommendations.

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