Injurity: Interdiciplinary Journal and Humanity
Volume 5, Number 6, June 2026
e-ISSN: 2963-4113 and p-ISSN: 2963-3397

System Shift Risk, Human Capital, and Organizational Culture: A Proxy-Based Exploratory Validation with Methodological Safeguards

Raymond Rubianto Tjandrawinata
Universitas Katolik Indonesia Atma Jaya, Indonesia
Email: raytjan@yahoo.com

Keywords:
Organizational Culture; Human Capital; System Shift; Change Resistance; Corporate Culture

Abstract

This study examines whether the System Shift Framework can explain variation in organizational culture, human capital readiness, and resistance to adaptive change. Using a proxy-based firm-level dataset of 889 organizations, the analysis operationalizes seven System Shift dimensions: System Condition (SC), Domain Lock (DL), Actor Complexity (AC), Chokepoint Pressure (CP), Position Quality (POS), Strategy Quality (STR), and Feedback Maturity (FB). The composite risk index is calculated as SC + DL + AC + CP − POS − STR − FB, where higher values indicate stronger cultural and systemic resistance to adaptive transformation. The analysis evaluates associations with Culture Effectiveness, Norms Alignment, Values-Norms Gap, Innovation Performance, Productivity Performance, Compliance and Ethics Performance, and System Shift Success. Results show that the System Shift Risk Score is strongly and negatively associated with Culture Effectiveness ($r \approx -0.920$), Norms Alignment ($r \approx -0.979$), and Compliance and Ethics Performance ($r \approx -0.761$). Regression models explain substantial variance in culture-proximal outcomes, particularly Norms Alignment and Compliance and Ethics Performance, while explanatory power is more modest for innovation and productivity outcomes. Classification analysis shows that logistic regression provides more stable discrimination than random forest under conditions of strong class imbalance, with approximately 2.6% of firms classified as System Shift Success cases. Random forest feature importance identifies Strategy Quality as the dominant predictor of System Shift Success, followed by chokepoint pressure, internal position, and system condition. Cluster analysis identifies three interpretable states: shift-ready and adaptive culture, transitional and mixed condition, and high-risk and resistant culture.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational culture has long been treated as both an invisible infrastructure of firm performance and a difficult object of empirical measurement (Georgescu et al., 2024; O'Reilly et al., 2024; Widarko & Anwarodin, 2022; Williams, 2022; Wu et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). It is visible in daily norms, leadership practices, transparency, informal expectations, and employees' willingness to support change, yet it rarely appears as a clean variable. Culture is lived before it is counted, which makes it theoretically powerful and methodologically fragile.

Research on organizational culture has repeatedly argued that culture can influence organizational effectiveness, adaptation, integrity, innovation, and performance. Schein (2010) conceptualizes culture as a pattern of shared basic assumptions, while Denison and Mishra (1995) connect culture to effectiveness through traits such as involvement, consistency, adaptability, and mission. Barney (1986) further argues that culture can become a source of

sustained competitive advantage when it is valuable, rare, and imperfectly imitable. These arguments have gained new empirical urgency as large-scale employee review data and executive surveys have made culture measurable in ways that were previously difficult.

The present study contributes to this conversation by introducing the System Shift Framework into the human capital and organizational culture domain (Joseph & Sengul, 2025; Kuspriyono et al., 2026). The framework treats organizational transformation not merely as a matter of leadership intent or employee sentiment but as a systemic configuration shaped by structural pressure, lock-in, actor complexity, chokepoints, position quality, strategy, and feedback maturity (Joseph & Sengul, 2025; Heracleous & Bartunek, 2021). In this view, organizations do not fail to change solely because individuals resist change (Khaw et al., 2023; Kamarova et al., 2024); more often, they fail because the system generates reinforcing conditions that make adaptation costly, ambiguous, delayed, or normatively misaligned (Heracleous & Bartunek, 2021; Kuipers et al., 2024; Khaw et al., 2023).

The empirical setting is an author-supplied firm-level organizational culture dataset containing 889 organizations (Corritore et al., 2020; Srivastava et al., 2024). The dataset was provided as a populated analytical workbook for the present study and contains firm-level culture indicators mapped onto System Shift constructs. Seven System Shift variables are constructed from culture-related proxies, and the System Shift Risk Score is computed as SC + DL + AC + CP − POS − STR − FB (Barr, 2026; Srivastava et al., 2024). Higher risk scores indicate stronger systemic resistance to adaptive transformation (Corritore et al., 2020; Reader et al., 2025). The study evaluates whether that risk score and its components are associated with Culture Effectiveness, Norms Alignment, Values-Norms Gap, Innovation Performance, Productivity Performance, Compliance and Ethics Performance (Hartnell et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2023), and a binary System Shift Success outcome (Barr, 2026; Reader et al., 2025).

The article is intentionally cautious. The data are proxy-based, and the variables are reconstructed from available indicators rather than directly measured through a dedicated System Shift survey instrument. Some outcome models also operate on smaller subsets because STR, FB, innovation, productivity, and full risk scores are not available for all firms. These constraints do not invalidate the study but define its proper contribution: an empirical plausibility test and exploratory validation of a theoretical diagnostic framework.

The study of organizational culture emerged from the recognition that formal structure alone cannot explain how organizations coordinate behavior, sustain commitment, and adapt to changing environments. Schein's (2010) theory of culture emphasizes shared assumptions that shape perception and behavior, while Kotter and Heskett (1992) argue that culture influences performance when it aligns with environmental demands and strategic imperatives.

Denison and Mishra (1995) provide a particularly relevant bridge between culture theory and effectiveness measurement. Their model links involvement, consistency, adaptability, and mission to organizational effectiveness — a connection that matters for the present study because the System Shift Framework similarly treats culture as a configuration rather than a single attitudinal score. Culture is not only what people value but also how norms, strategy, leadership, and feedback combine to enable or obstruct adaptation.

Recent finance and management scholarship has renewed interest in corporate culture as an empirical object. Graham, Grennan, Harvey, and Rajgopal (1995) demonstrate, using executive survey evidence, that executives perceive culture as deeply relevant to firm value,

productivity, compliance, innovation, and financial reporting quality. Their study is important because it distinguishes between values and norms — a distinction that directly informs the present analysis of Norms Alignment and the Values-Norms Gap.

Digital culture measurement has also advanced through employee review and text-based methods. The Culture 500 initiative by MIT Sloan Management Review and Glassdoor illustrates how large-scale review data can be used to compare cultural attributes across firms. Such methods are not without limitations — they are subject to selection bias, representation problems, and construct-validity concerns — yet they provide an important empirical opening: culture can now be studied at scale, albeit with appropriate caution.

Human capital theory and resource-based perspectives suggest that firms derive durable advantage from resources that are difficult to imitate, socially complex, and embedded in routines. Culture and human capital converge precisely at this point: culture shapes the interpretive environment in which employees convert skills, trust, and coordination into performance. A strategy may be formally sound, but without norms alignment and feedback maturity, it may remain behaviorally inert.

The System Shift Framework extends this argument by distinguishing between pressure-side variables and adaptive-capacity variables. System Condition, Domain Lock, Actor Complexity, and Chokepoint Pressure represent sources of resistance, while Position Quality, Strategy Quality, and Feedback Maturity represent the system's capacity to move. Transformation depends on the configuration between these two sides rather than on either side alone.

The novelty of this research lies in several aspects. First, it introduces the System Shift Framework — originally developed for understanding technological and policy transitions — to the domain of organizational culture and human capital. Second, it operationalizes seven System Shift dimensions using proxy-based indicators derived from organizational culture data, demonstrating how systems thinking can be applied to cultural diagnostics. Third, it explicitly distinguishes between culture-proximal outcomes (Culture Effectiveness, Norms Alignment, and Compliance and Ethics Performance) and distal performance outcomes (Innovation and Productivity), providing boundary conditions for the framework's applicability. Fourth, it employs multiple analytical methods — correlation, regression, classification, and clustering — to triangulate findings and assess robustness. Fifth, it identifies three empirically grounded organizational culture states (shift-ready and adaptive, transitional and mixed, and high-risk and resistant) that can serve as a diagnostic typology for practitioners. Sixth, it emphasizes methodological safeguards by acknowledging proxy-based limitations and avoiding causal claims while demonstrating empirical plausibility.

In organizational culture, change is rarely linear. There are visible policies and invisible routines, stated values and actual norms, strategic announcements and everyday behavioral bottlenecks. The System Shift Framework is designed for such situations, treating adaptive success as a function of whether structural pressure is offset by position quality, strategy, and feedback capacity.

The central hypothesis is straightforward: a higher System Shift Risk Score should be associated with weaker Culture Effectiveness, lower Norms Alignment, larger Values-Norms Gaps, and a reduced probability of System Shift Success. Conversely, stronger Strategy Quality

and Feedback Maturity should improve the likelihood that an organization becomes shift-ready rather than resistant.

H1: System_Shift_Risk_Score is negatively associated with culture effectiveness and norms alignment.

H2: System_Shift_Risk_Score is negatively associated with compliance and ethics performance.

H3: System_Shift variables explain culture-proximal outcomes more strongly than distal performance outcomes such as innovation and productivity.

H4: Strategy Quality is a dominant predictor of System Shift Success because strategic clarity translates cultural capacity into adaptive direction.

H5: Organizations cluster into theoretically meaningful states: shift-ready/adaptive culture, transitional/mixed condition, and high-risk/resistant culture.

METHOD

The study uses an author-supplied, populated firm-level culture dataset prepared for empirical validation of the System Shift Framework in the context of human capital and organizational culture. The workbook contains nine sheets. The main firm-level observations are located in the Raw_Data sheet, while Analysis_Command specifies the analytical tasks and Variable_Map documents how raw culture indicators are mapped onto System Shift constructs. The unit of analysis is the firm or organization, with 889 organizations in the full dataset. The analytical subset varies by outcome because some variables are not fully observed across all firms.

Seven System Shift constructs are derived from culture-related proxies. System Condition (SC), Domain Lock (DL), Actor Complexity (AC), and Chokepoint Pressure (CP) represent pressure-side dimensions, while Position Quality (POS), Strategy Quality (STR), and Feedback Maturity (FB) represent adaptive-capacity dimensions. The composite index is calculated as: System_Shift_Risk_Score = SC + DL + AC + CP − POS − STR − FB. Higher values indicate stronger systemic resistance to adaptive change.

The outcome variables are Culture Effectiveness, Norms Alignment, Values-Norms Gap, Innovation Performance, Productivity Performance, Compliance and Ethics Performance, and System Shift Success. Culture Effectiveness and Norms Alignment are proximal cultural outcomes, while Innovation and Productivity are more distal outcomes likely influenced by market structure, firm size, industry, technology intensity, and competitive conditions beyond culture alone.

The analysis proceeds in four steps. First, descriptive statistics and correlations examine the direction and magnitude of association between System Shift variables and outcomes. Second, linear models evaluate explanatory power for continuous outcomes. Third, logistic regression and random forest classification are used to predict System Shift Success. Fourth, k-means clustering identifies interpretable organizational states based on risk scores and cultural outcomes.

Data provenance and use-rights statement. The empirical file used in this study is an author-supplied, restricted-use, firm-level organizational culture workbook compiled for scholarly analysis of human capital and organizational culture. The dataset contains 889 firm-level observations and includes culture-related indicators mapped onto System Shift constructs.

The manuscript reports aggregate statistical findings only and does not redistribute raw firm-level records. Because the underlying raw-source license, original sampling frame, and data collection period are not disclosed in the manuscript file, the dataset is treated as proprietary or restricted-use research material. Access to raw records, if requested by editors or reviewers, should therefore be handled through a controlled review process rather than public release.

Table 1. Data Availability and Analytical Sample Sizes Across Model Components

Analytical component	Reported usable N	Reason for reduced N / note
Core culture proxies: SC, DL, AC, CP, POS	889	Available for the full firm-level dataset in the firm-level culture dataset summary
Complete System Shift score: SC, DL, AC, CP, POS, STR, FB	492	STR, FB, agility/productivity, and complete risk-score variables are not available for all firms
Innovation-related models and three-cluster analysis	253	Innovation_Performance and all cluster variables are available only for the complete-case subset
System_Shift_Success classification	492 or smaller complete-case subset	Binary success is rare; the firm-level culture dataset reports about 2.6 percent positive cases

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive profile

The firm-level culture dataset is relatively complete for core cultural variables such as SC, DL, AC, CP, and POS, each available for 889 firms. However, STR, FB, agility/productivity, and the complete risk score are available for 492 firms, while Innovation_Performance is available for 253 firms. The mean System_Shift_Risk_Score is approximately zero, with a standard deviation of 5.36, a minimum of -18.35, and a maximum of 18.74. This indicates substantial cross-firm heterogeneity in systemic resistance to adaptive cultural change.

Table 2. Descriptive Characteristics of the System Shift Dataset and Outcome Variables

Variable / outcome	Reported pattern
Full firm-level dataset	889 organizations
Complete subset for clustering	253 organizations
System_Shift_Risk_Score	Mean approximately 0; SD 5.36; range -18.35 to 18.74
System_Shift_Success	Only about 2.6% of firms classified as success cases
Data type	Proxy-based organizational culture and human-capital indicators

Correlation and regression evidence

The main empirical pattern is strong and consistent for culture-proximal outcomes. System_Shift_Risk_Score is strongly negatively correlated with Culture_Effectiveness (r approximately -0.920), Norms_Alignment (r approximately -0.979), and the Compliance/Ethics proxy (r approximately -0.761). These associations support H1 and H2. Firms with higher systemic resistance tend to display weaker cultural effectiveness, lower alignment between norms and stated values, and weaker compliance/ethics-related cultural signals.

Table 3. Regression Model Performance for Culture-Proximal and Distal Outcomes

Outcome	Model R2	Interpretation
Culture_Effectiveness	1.000	Very high; partly expected because the outcome is constructed from overlapping proxies
Norms_Alignment	0.980	Very strong explanatory power
Compliance_Ethics_Performance	0.787	Strong explanatory power
Productivity_Performance	0.352	Moderate explanatory power
Innovation_Performance	0.209	Weak-to-moderate explanatory power
Values_Norms_Gap	0.138	Weak explanatory power

The regression results support H3. The System Shift variables explain culture-proximal outcomes much more strongly than distal performance outcomes. This is theoretically plausible. Culture effectiveness, norms alignment, and compliance/ethics are closer to the proxy indicators from which the constructs are derived. Innovation and productivity are influenced by many additional factors, including industry, market position, technology, capital intensity, and organizational scale.

A specific caution is required for Culture_Effectiveness, where the reported R2 reaches 1.000. This value should not be interpreted as independent predictive validity. It reflects partial construct overlap between the predictors and the outcome because Culture_Effectiveness is built from closely related culture proxies. The correct interpretation is construct-consistency within the operationalization, not causal explanation and not out-of-sample prediction. For journal submission, this result should be treated as a diagnostic validity check, while stronger claims should rely on less tautological outcomes such as innovation, productivity, compliance/ethics, and externally measured performance indicators.

Predicting System Shift Success

The classification task is difficult because the success outcome is highly imbalanced. Only about 2.6 percent of firms are classified as System_Shift_Success cases. Under this condition, accuracy is not sufficient as a model-quality indicator, and ROC-AUC can also be optimistic when the positive class is rare. The random forest model achieves high accuracy but weaker ROC-AUC, suggesting that much of its apparent accuracy may come from predicting the majority class. Given the severe class imbalance, future work should supplement accuracy and ROC-AUC with precision-recall AUC, F1 score, and calibration plots. The present analysis therefore treats classification findings as exploratory discrimination evidence.

Table 4. Comparative Performance of Classification Models for System Shift Success Prediction

Model	Accuracy	ROC-AUC	Interpretation
Logistic Regression	0.772	0.719	More stable and interpretable under class imbalance
Random Forest	0.951	0.608	High accuracy but weaker discrimination

Feature-importance analysis indicates that Strategy Quality (STR) is the most important predictor of System_Shift_Success, with reported importance around 25.7 percent. It is followed by CP, POS, SC, AC, DL, and FB. This supports H4 and suggests that adaptive

transformation depends strongly on strategic clarity, while chokepoints and internal position shape whether that strategy becomes behaviorally actionable.

Cluster analysis

K-means clustering with k = 3 is conducted on the subset of 253 firms with complete data for risk score and core outcomes. The silhouette score is 0.230, indicating that cluster structure is present but not sharply separated. This is expected in organizational culture data, where firms typically occupy a continuum rather than discrete natural categories.

Table 5. Cluster Profiles of Organizational Culture States Based on System Shift Risk and Cultural Outcomes

Cluster	N	Risk Score	Culture Effectiveness	Norms Alignment
Shift-ready / adaptive culture	87	-4.888	0.724	0.769
Transitional / mixed condition	131	0.791	-0.120	-0.132
High-risk / resistant culture	35	9.051	-1.298	-1.384

The cluster solution supports H5. The shift-ready cluster has low risk and positive cultural outcomes. The transitional cluster occupies the middle of the distribution, with moderately elevated risk and slightly negative culture indicators. The high-risk/resistant cluster has high risk and substantially negative culture effectiveness and norms alignment. The pattern is therefore coherent with the System Shift interpretation of culture as a configuration of resistance and adaptive capacity.

The findings provide exploratory support for the System Shift Framework in the human-capital and organizational-culture domain. The most robust evidence appears where the theory is conceptually closest to the data: culture effectiveness, norms alignment, and compliance/ethics. These outcomes are not distant financial performance measures. They are direct expressions of how the organization's normative and behavioral architecture operates.

The negative association between System_Shift_Risk_Score and culture outcomes suggests that cultural weakness is not simply an employee sentiment problem. It can be interpreted as the visible surface of a deeper system configuration. When system condition is weak, domain lock is high, actor complexity increases, and chokepoints block change, the organization loses adaptive flexibility. Conversely, position quality, strategic quality, and feedback maturity reduce the risk score and support cultural alignment.

Figure 1 visualizes this configuration. The three clusters show a clear gradient: low risk and positive cultural outcomes in the shift-ready group, intermediate values in the transitional group, and high risk with negative culture indicators in the resistant group. The pattern does not imply deterministic causation. It does, however, show that the System Shift variables organize the data into meaningful cultural states.

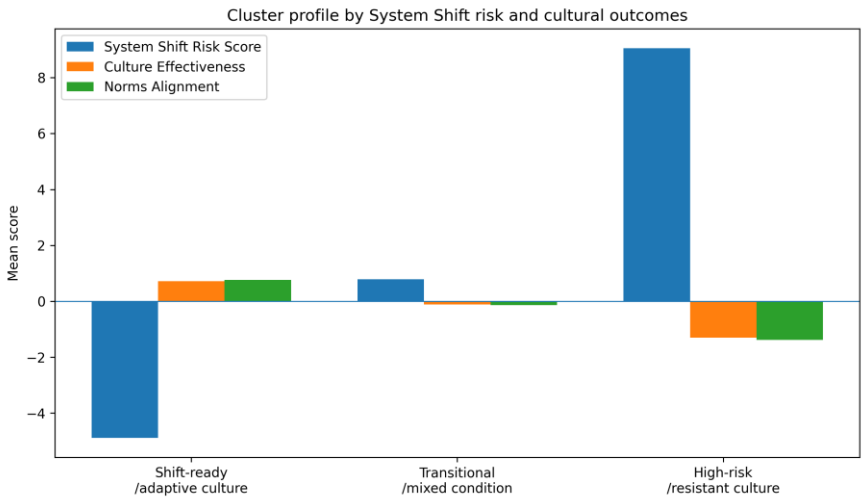

Figure 1. Cluster profile of firm-level organizational culture states

The figure reports the three-cluster solution estimated from complete-case observations using System Shift Risk Score, Culture Effectiveness, Norms Alignment, Values-Norms Gap, Innovation Performance, and Productivity Performance. Cluster labels are assigned substantively according to the mean risk score and cultural outcome profile: shift-ready and adaptive culture, transitional and mixed condition, and high-risk and resistant culture.

A ranked description from the firm-level analytical results is retained in the text only: Strategy Quality is reported as the most important predictor of System Shift Success, followed by Chokepoint Pressure, Position Quality, System Condition, Actor Complexity, Domain Lock, and Feedback Maturity. This ranking is theoretically meaningful but should not be visualized as a quantitative figure until the exact model-generated importance values are regenerated from the original workbook and model object.

The weaker explanatory power for innovation and productivity should not be treated as a failure of the framework but rather as a boundary condition. Innovation and productivity are distal outcomes influenced by technology, market structure, capital allocation, product cycles, and industry conditions. Culture matters, but it does not operate in isolation. The framework is strongest when applied to culture-proximal outcomes and should be extended with industry controls and objective performance data for more rigorous predictive testing.

Theoretical Contributions

First, the study provides an exploratory empirical bridge between organizational culture research and systems-based transformation theory. It shows that culture can be modeled as a configuration of pressure and adaptive capacity rather than as a single aggregate climate score. Second, the study clarifies the difference between culture-proximal and distal performance outcomes. The System Shift Framework performs strongest where the outcomes are directly cultural, and more modestly where outcomes are mediated by broader business conditions.

Third, the study contributes to the growing literature on culture measurement by showing how employee-review-style proxies can be used cautiously for system diagnostics. The paper does not claim that such proxies replace dedicated survey instruments. It argues that they can generate plausible diagnostic signals when interpreted with methodological discipline.

Managerial Implications

Managers should treat cultural transformation as a system problem rather than a communications problem. The findings suggest that strategic clarity, chokepoint removal, and internal position quality are central to whether a firm becomes shift-ready.

A firm with high System Shift risk should not begin with symbolic cultural messaging alone. It should identify where norms are locked, where feedback loops are weak, and where execution bottlenecks prevent strategy from becoming behavior.

The cluster typology can be used as a diagnostic tool. Shift-ready firms may focus on scaling adaptive practices. Transitional firms should prioritize alignment and feedback. High-risk firms require deeper structural intervention before performance claims can be expected.

Limitations and Future Research

The study has important limitations. The analysis is proxy-based and does not use direct measurement of every System Shift construct. Several variables are reconstructed from available culture indicators, which creates overlap between predictors and culture-proximal outcomes. This is why high R2 values, especially for Culture_Effectiveness, should be interpreted as construct-consistency evidence rather than independent causal validation.

The manuscript file does not include the raw model-output tables needed to independently regenerate every diagnostic figure. Consequently, the present version limits visual evidence to the cluster profile supported by the reported cluster means. The feature-importance visualization used in an earlier draft has been removed because it relied on rank-scaled reconstruction rather than model-generated importance values.

The binary success outcome is highly imbalanced. Future studies should use class-imbalance-aware metrics, calibration plots, precision-recall curves, and out-of-sample validation. Objective performance indicators such as revenue growth, productivity, innovation output, turnover, and compliance incidents should be added to distinguish culture-proximal validity from distal performance validity.

Future research should also test the framework across industries, countries, and firm-size classes. A longitudinal design would be especially valuable because System Shift is fundamentally a theory of transition, not merely cross-sectional association.

CONCLUSION

This study provides exploratory evidence that the System Shift Framework can diagnose cultural resistance and adaptive readiness in human-capital and organizational-culture settings. Higher System Shift risk is associated with weaker culture effectiveness, lower norms alignment, and weaker compliance/ethics signals. Strategy Quality emerges as the most important reported predictor of System Shift Success, while cluster analysis identifies three coherent organizational states: shift-ready, transitional, and high-risk/resistant. The findings are strongest for culture-proximal outcomes and more modest for innovation and productivity, indicating both the value and the boundary conditions of the framework. Taken cautiously, the evidence supports the System Shift Framework as a useful diagnostic architecture for understanding why some organizations are ready to adapt while others remain locked in resistant cultural configurations.

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