A Case Study of the Socialization of Newly Hired Engineers: How New Engineers Learn the Social Norms of an Organization

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This case-study research investigated how newly hired engineers at a large manufacturing company learned what they were expected to do during their first year on the job, as well as how they were expected to do their work and why it was done that way (the social norms of the organization). Two major findings challenge and extend the traditional views of organizational socialization.

Keywords: Socialization, Workplace Learning, Engineers

Preliminary investigations of the experiences of engineers starting a new job indicated that the most troublesome experience was learning how the social system in the organization operated. When asked what he wished he had learned in school, one practicing engineer lamented, "I wish someone had taught me how to play the political game here." To understand better how newly hired engineers learned the unwritten rules of the workplace, this study investigated how newly hired engineers learned the social norms of the organization at the beginning of their employment with that organization.

Formulation of the Problem

Much of the organizational socialization literature takes the position that it is the responsibility of the newcomer to learn to fit in to the organization. Despite a growing recognition of the importance of the social system in organizations and the complex interdependencies within this system (Ashforth & Sluss, 2006; Schwandt, Ayvaz & Gorman, 2006), existing models of socialization typically relegate interpersonal relationships to one of several domains that newcomers have to learn to master (Bauer, Morrison & Callister, 1998; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992).

The outcomes of this "fitting in" process seem to affect employee satisfaction, attitudes, stress, and turnover (Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992). However, Bauer et al. (1998) cautioned scholars and practitioners that the outcomes of retention and turnover are more distal from the socialization process and prone to influences by several moderating factors, such as individual disposition, learning, group dynamics, organizational structure, and interpersonal relationships. While several studies have examined the relationships among specific variables, Bauer et al. stated that there has been little empirical work examining how these variables collectively interact to contribute to the socialization of the individual into the organization.

The common conceptualization of organizational socialization tends to underestimate the influence of the social system and the social norms in the socialization process. Furthermore, research and practice typically assigns much of the responsibility for socialization to the newcomer (Moreland, Levine & McMinn, 2001). This narrow view of socialization may suboptimize the successful assimilation of newcomers into the organization and contribute to suboptimal performance and commitment from the newcomer, along with higher levels of dissatisfaction and disengagement, and potentially higher levels of turnover.

The purpose of this study was to identify and understand, from the newly hired engineer's perspective, the array of critical factors—and the relationships among these factors—that affected how newly hired engineers learned the social norms of the organization and thereby integrated into the organization.

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical perspectives informed this investigation of the socialization of newly hired engineers: social cognitive theory and social exchange theory. While many researchers of socialization based their work on social cognitive theory (Saks & Ashforth, 1997), few researchers employed the perspective of social exchange theory. A brief review of each theoretical perspective follows.

Social Cognitive Theory

Many models of socialization describe stages through which newcomers pass as they become organization

members (Wanous, 1992). Learning is the common thread throughout these models as newcomers learn specific job tasks, learn the responsibilities of their jobs, learn the procedures of the work group, and learn the values and mission of the organization (Bauer et al., 1998; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992).

A perspective recently emerging in learning theory is the integration of narrowly focused theories into broader views of learning. These more inclusive views of learning incorporate cognitive, emotional, and social factors into a more integrated system of interdependent factors (Illeris, 2003; Yang, 2003). There is also a correspondence between these broader views of learning and the requirements of learning in the socialization process as described by Van Maanen and Schein (1979), i.e., learning what to do, how to do it, and why it is done this way. For example, Yang (2003) proposed a theory of knowledge comprising interactions between technical knowledge (what to do), practical knowledge (how to do it), and affectual knowledge (values, or why it is done this way). In a related manner, Illeris (2003) proposed a tripartite model of learning comprising interdependent cognitive, affective, and social dimensions.

Encountering a novel situation (e.g., a new job) prompts newcomers to search for information to make sense of the situation (Louis, 1980). This search can involve social and personal sources of information. The search for information leads to the acquisition, encoding, and retrieval of additional information in an attempt to link the newcomer's personal frame of reference with the collective frame of reference (Bandura, 2001; Louis, 1980).

Viewing the socialization process strictly from a perspective of the newcomer learning to fit in often overlooked important social and systemic influences on the newcomer's learning process. Socialization is a complex process comprising multiple actors and interactions (Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein & Gardner, 1994; Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2006; Jones, 1983; Morrison & Brantner, 1992; Saks & Ashforth, 1997). Wanous (1992) also noted that the interactions among newcomers, insiders (coworkers and managers), and the situation (context) are important sets of factors influencing the socialization process. He found that increasing the level of interactions between the newcomer and his or her environment increased the success of socialization (Wanous, 1992). However, it seems reasonable that the quality of the interaction is important—not just the level of activity. Increasing the wrong kind of interactivity may promote the wrong kind of learning. Social exchange theory addresses the quality of interactions among individuals.

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory (SET) describes a type of ongoing relationship between people (actors) as a series of interactions in which actors exchange resources guided by rules of exchange, e.g., social norms (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). However, scholars differ on the inclusiveness of their definitions of social exchange. Some, like Blau (1986), excluded economic or negotiated exchange and stated that social exchange involved the more ambiguous and relationally oriented exchange based on reciprocity. Cohen and Bradford (1989) posited that the basis of many organizational interactions was reciprocity and that most people expect exchanges in organizations to gradually become equitable.

Recent theorizing has begun to move social exchange theory beyond its behavioral and economic roots to include cognitive and affective constructs. Recently, Lawler (2001) proposed an affective theory of social exchange that directly links emotions and sentiments to actors' perceptions of fairness, satisfaction, solidarity, trust, leniency, and commitment to their exchange relationships.

Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) also cited research that found individuals differed in their preferences for and perceptions of exchange—especially regarding reciprocity—which the authors labeled an exchange ideology. Individual differences in exchange ideology affect the quality of the exchange relationship as perceived by the actors (Andrews, Witt & Kacmar, 2003). For example, individuals with moderate to high levels of exchange ideology are more sensitive to the political environment of the organization.

The premise of role-making theory is that organizational roles are ill-defined, and individuals negotiate and clarify roles through interactions (exchanges) between leaders and members (Graen, 1986). Through these processes, the newcomer acquires information about the behavioral constraints and demands of the job, negotiates alternatives, accepts a pattern of behavior, and gradually modifies this pattern of behavior (Miner, 2002).

Of particular interest regarding the socialization of newcomers in an organization is the initiation and development of the exchange relationship between the newcomer and members of his or her work group. Leader-member exchange theory (a type of social exchange) states that work roles are developed and established over time through a process of exchanges (or interacts) between a leader and member. The leader offers increased responsibility and membership benefits to the subordinate, and in return, the subordinate offers increased commitment and contribution to the work group. Leader-member relationships are unique to each individual dyad and may develop into high-quality relationships based on trust and respect or degenerate into low-quality relationships merely fulfilling the employment contract (Bauer & Green, 1996). According to Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) model of leader-member exchange, higher quality relationships are characterized by higher levels of trust,

respect, and obligations in which the leader shares more power, information, and access with the subordinate member.

Once the newcomer is aboard, high- or low-quality relationships form quickly and tend to endure (Miner, 2002). Thus, the initial interactions between the newcomer and the work group are extremely important, because they affect attitudes, satisfaction, and performance. Another important research finding on leader-member exchange theory is that perceptions of a relationship often differ significantly between the leader and the member. Studies have shown a low correlation between subordinates' and leaders' perceptions of their relationship (Gerstner & Day, 1997). This difference in perceptions may confound attempts to socialize newcomers by fostering misperceptions, misunderstandings, and misinterpretations of events, exchanges, and expectations during the socialization process.

Social Norms in Organizational Settings

Scott (2003) described three components of the social structure of an organization as the cultural-cognitive structure, the behavioral structure, and the normative structure. There is a strong correspondence between Scott's social structure and what Van Maanen and Schein (1979) described as newcomers' efforts to learn what to do (cultural-cognitive), how to do it (behavioral), and why it is done this way (normative).

Many scholars define social norms as the shared, informal rules governing and predicting individual behavior in social groups (Ellickson, 2001; McAdams, 1997; Sherif, 1936). From a rational perspective, some argue that social norms function at the group level to restrict the behavior of members of the group to a range of behaviors that promote the interests and values of the group (Blau, 1986). Elster (1989) argued to the contrary, offering examples of social norms, such as dysfunctional forms of reciprocity, that are not for the betterment of the group as a whole. While Elster (1989) described social norms primarily as emotionally charged constraints on behavior, Katz and Kahn (1978) described the concept of social norms as a form of cognitive map helping individuals function as members of a group and helping them accomplish their work.

Studies have shown that social norms often supersede individual norms because of the human need for affiliation and a supportive values structure, which drives individuals toward conformity and compliance with the group (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Sherif, 1936). In his systematic analysis of the concept of social norms, Sherif proposed a psychological description of social norms as shared frames of reference. Furthermore, Katz and Kahn stated that social norms and values, as cognitive maps or shared frames of reference, require shared beliefs about appropriate behavior of group members, objective commonality of the beliefs among members, and awareness of group support of those beliefs. Testing his ideas of social norms as shared frames of reference, Sherif found that individual norms or frames of reference tended to converge in group settings—and that the shared norms of the group tended to persist in individuals beyond the group setting.

The norms of a group are an important means by which the group develops and maintains uniformity among its members (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti & Grada, 2006). An important goal of the socialization process is to maintain uniformity of the group in spite of the influx of newcomers. Socialization is a means of informing newcomers of the norms of the group and encouraging internalization of these norms (Axelrod, 1986; Bandura, 2001). However, socialization can become problematic when the norms of the group are inconsistent with the norms of the individual, the individual's profession, or other groups in an organization.

Summary

Critics of the current state of the literature on socialization point to the fragmented nature of the work and the lack of a holistic view of the process (Bauer et al., 1998; Saks & Ashforth, 1997). While most of these views tend to regard socialization as a learning process, they pay less attention to the social interactions that seem to be an important factor of socialization. Learning and exchange theories tend to emphasize the relational factors between the learner and instructor (or member and leader) as an important mediator of learning outcomes. Furthermore, these outcomes are not based solely on the unilateral efforts of the newcomer. If relationships are the mediators of learning in the social realm—especially about relatively intangible norms embedded in the social structure—it seems that the current perspectives on organizational socialization underestimate the importance of the social processes between the newcomer and members of the work group. These perspectives also underestimate the responsibilities of the incumbent members of the work group to facilitate the socialization process.

Research Design

Several authors described a qualitative methodology as, not only appropriate, but also more likely to provide insights into complex social phenomena (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2005). Stake (1995) described qualitative case-study research as an appropriate design for acquiring an in-depth understanding of the complex interactions and functions of people in the context of a specific situation. Also, Yin (2003) described case-study designs as relevant strategies for research questions of *how* and *why*, as well as relevant strategies for

research focused on contemporary events within a real-life context and in which the researcher had little to no control over events. Thus, the characteristics of this study (examining a complex social phenomenon in context) seemed most appropriate to a qualitative case-study research design.

In his discussion of quality in qualitative research, Seale (1999) advocated the benefits of research designs drawing from multiple paradigms. For example, he proposed a triangulation of methodologies to help cancel out the biases of any one method by the biases of other methods (e.g., using quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the same data from different perspectives). Furthermore, Seale stated that the use of multiple methods could help increase the understanding of a phenomenon. This study applied a blended approach to analyzing the data collected under a qualitative case-study research design.

Research Questions

This study addressed the question of *how* new engineers learned the social norms of the organization as they began new jobs in an organization. Preliminary investigations into the phenomenon of socialization through the literature and from initial interviews with practicing engineers and managers indicated that the socialization process was problematic—especially regarding the social influences of the workplace. Therefore, this study focused on the learning processes whereby new engineers (newcomers) learned the social norms that governed how work was done in the organization. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do new engineers learn the social norms of the organization?
2. What are the factors influencing this learning process in the organization?
3. How does this learning process unfold?

Sample

Following the logic of theoretical or purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), managers in the organization identified individuals to interview for the purpose of collecting rich, in-depth information addressing the research questions. Three groups composed the sample:

- New grads: 17 newly hired engineers, recent graduates from higher education, first job out of school.
- Experienced hires: 13 newly hired engineers, previous job experience.
- Managers: six managers of work groups with newly hired engineers.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participant data came from semistructured interviews conducted and recorded by the researcher following the Critical Incidents Technique (Ellinger & Watkins, 1998; Flanagan, 1954; Gremler, 2004). A professional transcriber converted the recordings to text and the researcher checked the transcriptions for accuracy with the original recordings.

The analysis of the text (data) used the ATLAS.ti software analysis tool and followed qualitative analysis procedures recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). Four steps constituted the analysis process: (a) review the transcripts and attach predetermined codes to statements that described learning and norms; (b) retrieve all statements coded as learning and norms, and proceed to open-code (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) these statements at a finer level of detail, staying close to the participants' language; (c) sort the open codes into patterns and categories; and (d) identify the thematic patterns and categories emerging from the data.

Following Seale's (1999) recommendation of triangulating research methods as a means to increase the quality of research into a phenomenon, the researcher developed a rating scale to measure the quality of the relationship-building efforts of newcomers and the efforts of their work groups. Three criteria composed the ratings for newcomers (collaboration, nonwork relationships, and extra-role behavior) and four criteria for work groups (mentoring, inclusion, interaction, and assignment). These criteria emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview texts reported by participants. The analysis of these ratings compared the socialization efforts of newcomers and their work groups between different locations and divisions in the organization, as well as between new grads and experienced hires.

Findings

Two major findings emerged from the data. First, *relationship building was a primary driver* of the socialization process, and second, the *work group was the primary context* for socialization—not the organization. The data indicated that relationship building mediated the learning interactions between newcomers and their coworkers and managers, and the most important relationships formed within the work group. Overall, newcomers reported the necessity of building relationships with coworkers and their managers as a means to learning what to do and how to do it.

In addition, newcomers in this organization reported that coworkers were the primary source of learning the social norms of the work group (65% of learning incidents reported) and thus were the primary focus of their

relationship-building efforts. Newcomers also reported relationship-building efforts with managers for the purpose of learning on the job (15% of learning incidents reported). The remaining learning interactions were self-directed, whereby newcomers relied on their personal knowledge and experiences as a source of learning to understand and adapt to the social norms of the organization (18% of learning incidents reported). Further analysis of these three categories of learning (coworkers, managers, and self) revealed several subthemes that provided more detail about the relationship-building and learning processes during the socialization of these newcomers. These subthemes are described in the following sections.

Relationship Building and Learning From Coworkers

Within the category of learning from coworkers, two subthemes emerged: (a) obtaining a mentor to learn the tasks and norms of the job and (b) integrating into the group by learning the expectations of the work group. The best learning experiences reported by newcomers resulted from developing high-quality mentoring relationships with experienced workers. In a few work groups, the manager formally assigned a coworker to serve as a mentor to the newcomer; however, in most work groups the newcomer sought a willing coworker and developed a mentoring relationship informally. These mentoring relationships subsequently helped the newcomer learn what to do on the job, how to do it, and oftentimes why it was done this way. While much of the content of this learning domain focused on the tasks of the job, newcomers also developed important insights about the way things worked in the group, including the formal and informal rules guiding behavior in the work group (social norms). From the perspective of the newcomer, a major factor influencing the success of these mentoring relationships was the quality of the relationship, which in turn affected the quality of learning achieved by the newcomer.

Obtaining membership in the group was the second subtheme that emerged from the category of learning from coworkers. Newcomers learned by observing and listening to how others interacted in the group, and through the advice of others. Much of the content of this learning domain focused on the social interactions and the norms governing these social interactions. Knowing how to interact with others helped newcomers build relationships and facilitate their integration into the group. However, this was not always the outcome. Coworkers, as well as the newcomer, had to contribute to the relationship-building process. Some newcomers reported disappointment with the poor quality of the response they received from coworkers and the seemingly one-sided relationships they were building in their work groups.

Learning From the Manager

Newcomers also learned the social norms of the work group from their manager. However, with few exceptions, newcomers in this organization had scant contact with their manager. Two subthemes emerged from the manager category related to learning the social norms of the work group. The first subtheme to emerge described the need for newcomers to learn the expectations of the manager. Newcomers perceived these expectations as important norms they must learn and sought information from their managers by trying to get to know their managers better, i.e., by building high-quality relationships. Despite little interaction with their managers, the few newcomers able to build high-quality relationships with their managers reported learning valuable insights about the way things worked in the organization. Some also reported gaining insights about how to make sense of the way things worked in the organization.

The second subtheme to emerge described the efforts of newcomers to build relationships with their manager as a means to achieve a valued position as a full member of the group. Many newcomers believed that higher-quality relationships with their manager enhanced their membership in the group, provided higher-quality learning about their work and the organization, and afforded greater opportunities for development and advancement. Because most newcomers had little contact with managers, there were few examples of very high-quality relationships between newcomers and managers—although many newcomers reported their relationships as positive and adequate under the circumstances. Those circumstances were that managers were extremely busy and not available due to the demands of their jobs.

Learning From the Newcomer's Knowledge and Past Experience

Newcomers also reported learning to understand and adapt to the social norms of the organization guided by their own personal knowledge and experience. Obviously, new grads did not report the wealth of experience in organizations compared with experienced hires. However, they had previous experience with social norms from group projects and extracurricular programs, internships, and co-ops in school. Experienced hires relied on their understanding of the social norms they encountered based on previous employment experiences. Individually, some newcomers appeared to have a richer set of these experiences, and some had stronger propensities for the social aspects of groups. They often reflected on their past experiences to help them interpret the social information they perceived in their present jobs. Also, through the process of self-reflection, some indicated that they internalized the social norms of the work group and conformed their personal knowledge about the way things work in organizations to the current norms they encountered.

In relation to this self-directed learning of the social norms of the work group, two subthemes emerged. The first subtheme described the individual's norms for relating to others. Efforts at relating to others often built upon the personal norms already generally held by newcomers, which guided them to act respectfully and responsibly in the workplace and keep relationships positive and collaborative.

The second subtheme to emerge described a series of norms related to improving personal expertise. Many newcomers professed beliefs in having a strong work ethic, including the norm of continual learning and improvement. Taking courses, reading, talking to experts, and self-study were some of the ways newcomers followed the influence of this norm. The norm of continual improvement included social expertise, as well as the technical expertise required on the job. Regarding social expertise, many newcomers believed they needed to improve their management and leadership skills as one facet of their overall expertise.

Analyzing the Quality of Relationship Building Between Newcomers and Their Workgroups

Human resource managers at the organization speculated that perceived cultural differences between locations and divisions might affect the quality of the socialization experiences of newcomers more than the influence of the work groups. To test this idea, comparisons were made of the quality of relationship building between the newcomer and the work group by rating the newcomer's efforts against three criteria (collaboration, nonwork relationships, extra-role behavior) and the work groups efforts against four criteria (mentoring, inclusion, interaction, and assignment). Comparing the means of the combined ratings between locations and divisions found no significant differences using the Mann-Whitney test (Cohen & Lea, 2004) for nonparametric data ($p = .53$ and $p = .30$, respectively). Managers also speculated that differences might appear between the groups of new grads and experienced hires, and indeed, there was a significant difference indicating that experienced hires generally developed lower-quality relationship building during socialization ($p = .03$). The qualitative analysis of the transcripts corroborated these results noting lower levels of satisfaction and higher levels of conflict reported by experienced hires.

Summary and Conclusions

From most of the reported experiences of these 30 newcomers, the overriding theme was the importance of building relationships. Relationships facilitated learning by newcomers, as well as the work done in the work groups. Those individuals (typically experienced hires) unable to develop high-quality relationships reported higher levels of disappointment and frustration, along with lower levels of productivity and integration into their work groups.

The essence of the socialization process emerging from this study was the importance of building high-quality relationships with coworkers and managers (within the work group). However, coworkers, managers, and newcomers were mutually responsible for the success of the process. It seemed that newcomers could not succeed without the support of others in the work group. The work in this organization was complex and divided among many individuals and groups. This structure required coordinated and productive interactions among many individuals and groups in the organization. High-quality relationships facilitated this coordination and productivity among individuals and groups. It appears that building relationships was an overriding social norm facilitating the work of the organization. Those newcomers that built high-quality relationship structures or social networks quickly learned what they were expected to do and how to do it. They also integrated quickly and successfully into the work group. The literature on organizational socialization and the practices of this organization seem to underestimate the primacy of relationship building—especially for the established members of the work group toward the newcomer. The underutilized potential for coworkers to facilitate a positive socialization process is an opportunity for organizations to improve the socialization experiences of newcomers.

This finding suggested the second overriding theme of the study—that the socialization process was determined within the context of the work group. Newcomers did not join a homogeneous organization, they joined heterogeneous work groups within this organization—and their experiences varied from good to bad depending on the quality of the relationships they developed within the work groups they joined. By conceptualizing the socialization process as primarily the responsibility of the newcomer to learn to fit in overlooks the overwhelming influence of coworkers and the manager (the work group) on the experiences of newcomers. Furthermore, delegating the socialization process to the managers of the work groups reinforces the primacy of the work group as the context for socialization.

This study shed light on the socialization process in this particular organization and uncovered implications for increasing the understanding of socialization in broader terms. The importance of the relationship between newcomers and members of their work groups might not be unique to this organization and might have important implications for newcomer learning in general. Future research would help support this assumption.

Implications for Human Resource Development

As a process for developing the expertise and performance of newcomers, socialization is an important HRD process. First of all, scholars and practitioners engaged in the socialization process and workplace learning might consider placing greater emphasis on relationship building and the relationship structures among organizational members as important processes, variables, and drivers of learning and performance in organizations.

Traditional views of socialization and HRD tend to underestimate the influence of the dynamic relational processes among members of the work group. Schwandt et al. (2006) argue that the creation and utilization of knowledge depends on the specific structure of relationships and values found in the group. The collective nature of organizational work suggests that HRD scholars and practitioners attend to the collective dynamics (especially the relational dynamics) among members of the work group—not just the characteristics of individual members entering and working in the organization. As indicated by the data in this study, forming high-quality relationships had positive effects on learning and integration into the work groups and the organization—although this outcome was not found across all the work groups.

Socialization is an important development strategy for organizations looking to increase the capacity of their workforce, improve their competitive advantage, and develop future capabilities by bringing new talent into the organization in the form of current and potential expertise. Recognizing that this talent develops within the constraints of a relationship structure built by members of work groups suggests that the HRD processes in organizations foster the relationship-building processes within which newcomers become members of the organization and within which work processes function. Enhancing learning and performance in organizations is one of the missions of HRD, and if learning is mediated by relationships among workers in a group, then it seems appropriate that HRD professionals attend to the relationship structures found in organizations as contextual factors affecting the learning of members of the organization.

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