Socialization

An Excerpt from "Organizational Entry: Onboarding, Orientation and Socialization,"
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Socialization is broadly defined as "a process in which an individual acquires the attitudes, behaviors and knowledge needed to successfully participate as an organizational member."[2] Socialization is an ongoing process that sometimes lasts for a year. It represents a sense-making process that helps new hires adapt, form work relationships and find their place in the organization. A typical socialization process includes three phases:[3]

1. Anticipatory socialization: This stage occurs before new hires join the organization. Through interacting with representatives of the company (e.g., recruiters, managers), new hires develop expectations about the company and the job prior to organizational entry.

2. Encounter: When new employees begin a new job, they start to learn about job tasks and receive training. Managers can exert their influence by helping new employees understand their roles and duties. Also, by understanding the stresses and issues that newcomers experience, managers can help cultivate a high-quality work relationship with newcomers.

3. Settling in: New employees begin to feel comfortable with their job demands and social relationships. They will be interested in the company's evaluation of their performance and in learning about potential career opportunities within the company.

Regardless of the years of work experience that new employees have, knowing the technical and social aspects specific to the job and the company is essential to function in a new environment. Figure 1 summarizes what employees should learn and develop through socialization.

Figure 1: Socialization Content	
Performance proficiency	Learning and mastering the knowledge, skills and abilities to perform the required work task.
People	Establishing successful and satisfying work relationships with organizational members.
Politics	Gaining information regarding formal and informal work relationships and power structures.
Language	Understanding the profession's technical language as well as acronyms, slang and jargon unique to the organization.
Organizational goals and values	Understanding the rules or principles that maintain the integrity of the organization.
History	Learning the organization's traditions, customs, myths, personal background of other members.
Source: Chao, G. T., O'Leary-Kelly, A. M., Wolf, S., Klein, H. J., & Gardner, P. D. (1994). Organizational socialization: Its content and consequences. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 79,* 5, 730-743.	

Orientation and Onboarding: An Effective Program

Within the broad socialization process, newcomer orientation refers to a training program that occurs when an employee first begins employment with an organization. The purpose of orientation is to prepare employees to perform their jobs effectively, learn about the organization and establish work relationships.[4] A successful new-employee orientation program can help lessen the impact of reality shock on newcomers and facilitate the socialization process.[5]

According to a new survey by the Society for Human Resource Management, 83% of companies report the use of a formal orientation program for new employees. The most frequently used formats are group-based and individual sessions, whereas only 11% of companies conduct the orientation program using a computer-based format.[6] Often used interchangeably with the term "orientation," onboarding refers to "the orientation process for newly hired managers." Similar to orientation, an onboarding program involves introducing new managers to the work they will be supervising and helping them understand the culture and the operation of the company.[7] Compared with 2004, 34% of HR professionals indicated that the investment in onboarding programs has increased in 2005.[8]

Often, an onboarding or orientation program involves communicating factual information about pay and benefits, reviewing company rules and policies, and completing paperwork. It may also include presenting an employee handbook to newcomers and giving a quick tour of the office. While these procedures are important in terms of providing basic information about the organization, an effective onboarding program should actively involve new employees and encourage them to ask questions. Other individuals also play a role in the onboarding process. Helpful managers and peers can enhance employees' learning the new job.[9] In addition, the nature and the quality of new employees' relationship with their managers have a significant effect on socialization.[10]

When planning the details of an orientation program, HR practitioners should set the objectives of the program. For example, Corning, Inc., the manufacturing giant, had several objectives aimed at improving productivity. It sought to reduce voluntary turnover in the first three years of employment and to shorten the learning curve of new employees by 17%. Also, the program was designed to foster a uniform understanding of employees about the company and to build a positive attitude toward the company. As it turned out, newcomer turnover was reduced by 69% after two years.[11] The example of Corning illustrates that setting objectives in advance to focus on realizing goals can help develop a successful program.

HR has overall responsibility for program planning and follow-up and must coordinate with the immediate supervisor to avoid duplication or omission of important information. Usually, much attention is placed on the content of the orientation program, leaving the follow-up process neglected. After completing the orientation program, HR representatives may review a checklist of items with employees to ensure all items have been covered. As new employees are not the only individuals involved in the program, getting feedback from everyone involved in the process is essential. This can be done through roundtable discussions with new employees after their first year on the job or by giving questionnaires to all relevant individuals (e.g., managers, peers). Having a formal and systematic follow-up process will not only help evaluate the program's effectiveness, it can also identify areas for further improvement.[12]

Tactics and Values of Socialization

Organizations employ a variety of tactics or techniques to socialize newcomers during the encounter stage. Specifically, socialization tactics help facilitate the socialization process by reducing uncertainty and anxiety associated with entry experience and helping newcomers adapt and acquire the necessary attitudes and behaviors.[13] Presented in Figure 2 are the basics on which the socialization literature is built.

Figure 2: Socialization Tactics	
Collective-individual	Subject newcomers to common entry experiences with a group versus unique experiences in isolation from other new hires.
Formal-informal	Use specifically designed activities and materials while segregating newcomers from incumbents versus no exclusively prepared materials and immediate mixing with incumbents (e.g., learning on the job).
Sequential-random	Communicate the sequence of discrete and progressive learning activities versus ambiguous or unknown sequence.
Fixed-variable	Communicate specific time frame of completing each socialization step versus no given time frame.
Serial-disjunctive	Provide newcomers with access to experienced organizational members as role models or mentors versus no access to experienced models.
Investiture-divestiture	Provide newcomers with positive social support and affirm their personal characteristics versus provide more negative social feedback until newcomers adapt.
Source: Van Maanen, J., & Schein, E. H. (1979). Toward a theory of organizational socialization. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 1,* 209-264.	

It is beneficial for both employees and organizations to be able to identify appropriate tactics for socializing new employees. For example, research suggests tactics that are more collective, formal, sequential, fixed, serial and supportive enhance newcomer loyalty and reduce turnover.[14] As a potential result of successful socialization, employee adjustment is indicated by outcomes such as organizational attachment and commitment, job satisfaction, social integration, role clarity, task mastery and values congruence.[15] In addition, people who are well socialized in their organizational roles tend to have higher incomes, be more satisfied, more involved with their careers and more adaptable, and have a better sense of personal identity than those who are less well socialized.[16]

Literature and Research

Do Organizational Socialization Tactics Influence Newcomer Embeddedness and Turnover?[17]

Because newcomer turnover is an issue that many organizations face, this study seeks to understand how socialization tactics influence newcomer turnover by embedding new employees more extensively into the organization. Embeddedness represents a web of restraining forces that influence employee retention when employees become tied to their organization through different types of links, investments and affective and cognitive appraisals. To test how socialization tactics relate to newcomers' adjustment and turnover, a sample of new hires from a large financial service organization completed a survey that measured individual perceptions of socialization tactics and employee embeddedness. Organization's records of turnover were matched with survey responses approximately a year after the survey administration.

The results demonstrated that tactics that were collective, fixed and supportive (investiture) were positively related to on-the-job embeddedness, and on-the-job embeddedness was negatively related to turnover. Based on this information, the author suggests that the nature of socialization activities allows organizations to actively embed new employees in the organization. Companies can achieve this through 1) involving experienced organization members in the socialization process as role models or mentors; 2) providing newcomers with positive feedback as they adjust to the new environment; 3) structuring orientation activities to allow newcomers to experience the activities together; and 4) providing clear information about the stages of socialization process.

Shaking Hands With a Computer: An Examination of Two Methods of Organizational Newcomer Orientation[18]

Computer-based training is commonly used to provide learning and training exercises to employees. As a result of technological advancement and cost reasons, a number of organizations are shifting from traditional group-based orientation sessions to computer-based sessions. This study explores the differences between the impact of the two methods on organizational socialization outcomes. A group of new employees (261 individuals) participated in either a group social-based orientation session or an individual computer-based session. They were then asked to complete a survey measuring the six content areas of organizational socialization (organizational goals and values, history, politics, language, people and performance proficiency). Compared with employees who attended the social-based orientation session, those who were in the computer-based session reported lower levels of socialization in the content areas of people, politics and organizational goals and values, and no significant differences on the more information-based dimensions of history, language and performance proficiency. Therefore, contrary to the argument that initial orientation sessions are likely to be ineffective in helping newcomers adjust to their new organizations, this study demonstrates that formal orientations and the choice of training method can have an effect on socialization outcomes for employees.

Organizational Socialization: A Field Study Into Socialization Success and Rate[19]

To understand whether there is an underlying pattern to organizational socialization, this study examines the adjustment rates of new hires in two organizations that use comparable organizational socialization tactics. Newcomer learning is evaluated in terms of four domains: 1) role (knowledge and mastery of skills and understanding of performance requirements); 2) social interaction (integration with colleagues); 3) interpersonal resources (establishment of a network of contacts); and 4) organization (knowledge of the structural and cultural aspects of the organization). Additionally, job satisfaction and intent to quit are measured as attitudinal outcomes of socialization during the post-entry period. Specifically, newcomers in two organizations went through group-based socialization, were mostly segregated from insiders, went through a specific process with various stages that had to be passed according to a timetable and had access to experienced role models. Results indicated that new hires reported learning in all domains. Learning was related to attitudes not at entry, but rather at the early post-entry period, suggesting newcomers may reduce their uncertainty and begin to make sense of the new situation, which, in turn, has a positive impact on job satisfaction and intent to quit. This research also demonstrates that both information acquisition and attitude measures are relevant for measuring the process of socialization.

In Closing

An important aspect of newcomer adjustment at different position levels is to gain confidence and personal control over the situation. To achieve this, effective onboarding or orientation programs enable new employees to learn the organizational culture and behavior. These programs also help facilitate the broader socialization process, which not only involves newcomers and HR practitioners, but also hinges on the support from immediate supervisors and co-workers, as social networks have been proved to provide information as well as to welcome the newcomer as an integral part of the organization.

Endnotes

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