

## Research Brief

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

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Current scholarship views organizational socialization as a learning process that is primarily the responsibility of the newcomer. Yet recent learning research recognizes the importance of the social interactions in the learning process. This study investigated how newly hired engineers at a large manufacturing company learned job-related tasks and the social norms of the organization

## Implications of Findings

Enhancing the socialization of newcomers into an organization is an important strategy for developing human resources. Several suggestions for facilitating development of high-quality relationships between newcomers and others in the organizations emerged from this study:

**...building relationships in the context of small work groups is a primary driver of socialization for newcomers, especially in large organizations.**

- Assigning a local mentor the responsibility and time for (1) building a high quality relationship with the newcomer; (2) coaching him or her about specific job tasks, contacts, and information; and (3) providing regular and constructive feedback during socialization.
- Providing explicit and systematic opportunities for newcomers to build relationships inside and outside of their work groups.
- Designating responsibility to coworkers for building relationships and integrating the newcomer into the social structure of the work group. Also, encouraging informal mentoring from multiple members of the group.
- Furnishing a directory of resources to help newcomers find information important to their jobs, processes, and the organization. For example, identifying key subject-matter experts in the organization.
- Enabling more frequent and regular interaction between newcomers and their supervisors, as well as other key members of the organization.
- Documenting what newcomers learn and need to learn. Have newcomers contribute to this information as they learn on the job.
- Encouraging and facilitating social interaction beyond the tasks of the job; for example, lunches, dinners, sports, and other social activities outside of the workplace.
- Fostering immediate access to tools, information, and training, as well as meaningful assignments in the early stages of the newcomers' employment.

This study found that relationships mediated the quality of working and learning among workers in a group; therefore, it seems appropriate that managers and coworkers attend to the relationship structures found in work groups as critical contextual factors that affect learning and work organizations.

### **Methods and Background**

This study employed a qualitative, case-study research design, described by several authors as an appropriate methodology and one likely to yield insights into complex social phenomena.

The organization participating in this study is one of the world's largest manufacturers, employing more than 250,000 people around the world. The company, headquartered in the United States, has been a global engineering and sales leader for decades. During the two years preceding this study the company hired nearly 200 new engineers, of which 30 participated in this study (all participants had been with the company at least 6 months and none had been with the company more than 18 months). The participants in this study came from 26 work groups. Some of these work groups were well established and others were relatively new. Participants represented a mix of men and women, as well as a mix of those who had previous job experience and those for whom this was the first job after graduating from school. Three groups composed the sample:

- New grads: 17 newly hired engineers starting their first job out of school (recent graduates from higher education)
- Experienced new hires: 13 newly hired engineers with previous job experience
- Managers: 6 managers of work groups with newly hired engineers

This study addressed the general question of how new engineers learned the social norms of the organization as they began their employment. Three research questions guided this study:

1. How do new engineers learn the social norms of the organization?
2. What factors enable and constrain this learning process in the organization?
3. What factors determine how well new engineers learn and integrate into the workplace?

Participant data came from semi-structured interviews conducted and recorded by the researcher following the Critical Incidents Technique. Questions prompted participants to recall a specific event or incident in which they learned something about "the way things work here." Subsequent questions probed for specifics: What was the incident? What happened? Who was involved? What did the participant learn from this? A professional transcriber converted the recordings to text, and the researchers checked the transcriptions for accuracy with the original recordings.

Four steps constituted the qualitative analysis process. The emergent data indicated that relationship building was a critical process for newcomers. Use of predetermined codes initially helped identify and categorize the experiences reported by newcomers into exchange and learning experiences related to the norms of the group. From these categories, common themes emerged that indicated how newcomers learned, what factors affected their learning, and how well they learned as they began their jobs. The researcher then developed a rating scale to measure the quality of the relationship building efforts of newcomers and the corresponding efforts of their work groups. From the thematic analysis of relationship building efforts reported

by newcomers, seven criteria emerged that signified the quality of relationship building between the newcomer and his or her coworkers:

- Criteria for individual rating: collaboration; non-work relationships; extra-role behavior
- Criteria for work group rating: local mentoring; group inclusion; interaction with manager; meaningful assignment

### **What We Found**

Two major themes emerged from analysis of the data gathered from newcomers:

1. Relationship building was the primary driver of the socialization process—not individual capability for learning.
2. The work group was the primary context for socialization—not the organization.

The data indicated that the quality of relationship building between the newcomers and members of their work groups mediated the quality of learning by newcomers. Overall, newcomers reported the necessity of building relationships with coworkers and their managers as a prerequisite for learning what to do and how to do it well. According to a frequency count of learning incidents attributed to different sources, newcomers in this organization reported that coworkers were the primary source of learning the social norms of the work group (65%). Newcomers also reported learning from managers (15%). The remaining learning interactions were reportedly self-directed, whereby newcomers relied on their personal knowledge and past experiences as a source of learning to understand and adapt to the social norms of the organization (18%). Further analysis of these three sources of learning (coworkers, managers, and self) revealed several subthemes that provided more detail.

Within the category of “learning from coworkers,” two subthemes emerged: (1) developing a specific mentoring relationship with a coworker in the group and (2) being accepted into the work group by getting to personally know the members of the group. Two subthemes emerged from the “learning from the manager” category: (1) the need for newcomers to learn the expectations of the manager and (2) the efforts of newcomers to build relationships with the manager as a means to enhance their position in the group and the organization. In addition, newcomers often reflected on their past experiences to help them interpret the social information they perceived in their present jobs. Also, through a process of self-reflection, some indicated undertaking a process of internalizing the social norms of the work group and aligned their personal knowledge about how things work in organizations to the current norms they encountered.

To triangulate the data gathered from the newcomers, this study similarly analyzed data gathered from interviews with six work-group managers who recently hired new engineers. Most of these managers recognized the importance of helping newcomers integrate into the relationship structure of the work group and the organization. They believed relationship building was as much a responsibility of coworkers and managers as it was of the newcomer.

In addition to analyzing qualitative themes emerging from the data, comparisons were made of the socialization experiences between two locations, two divisions, and between new graduates and experienced hires. Statistical analysis of these comparisons found no significant differences

in the quality of socialization experiences between locations and divisions. However, this analysis indicated that experienced hires reported more difficulty integrating into the work group than new graduates.

The evidence presented by this study indicates that building relationships in the context of small work groups is a primary driver of socialization for newcomers, especially in large organizations.

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