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

Russell F. Korte

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. From the perspective of social exchange theory, two major findings emerged from the data: (1) relationship building was the primary driver of socialization, and (2) the work group was the primary context for socialization. These findings challenge the current views of organizational socialization by accentuating the relational processes that mediate learning during socialization.

When asked what he wished he had learned in school to better prepare for the workplace, one practicing engineer lamented, “I wish someone had taught me how to play the political game here.” He was referring to the unwritten rules governing behavior—also known as the social norms of the organization. Preliminary investigation of the experiences of engineers starting a new job indicated that the most troublesome experience was learning how to work within the informal social systems of the organization. To understand better the problems encountered by newcomers entering a workplace, this study investigated the experiences of 30 newly hired engineers during the early stage of their employment with a large manufacturing company.

Much of the organizational socialization literature describes socialization as a learning or an adjustment process (see Table 1). Although the

Table 1. Summary of the Variables from Four Recent Models of Organizational Socialization

<i>Author(s)</i>	<i>Variables</i>	<i>Primary Actor(s) and Action</i>
Ashforth, Sluss, & Saks (2007)	<p>Socialization process Investiture (organization recognizes and supports newcomers' identities) Institutionalized socialization (formal, systematic, program to orient newcomers)</p> <p>Newcomer proactive behaviors (information seeking, feedback seeking, job-change negotiating, positive framing, general socializing, building relationships, networking)</p> <p>Socialization content (newcomer learning across content domains of referent, social, appraisal, normative, organizational, and political information)</p> <p>Newcomer adjustment (performance, organizational identification, job satisfaction, intentions to quit, role innovation)</p>	Newcomers' learning (see socialization content variable)
Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker (2007)	<p>Newcomer information seeking Referent information (functional requirements of job) Appraisal information (evaluative information on newcomers' performance) Relational information (nature of relationships with others)</p> <p>Organizational socialization tactics Content tactics (training stages and schedule) Context tactics (formal training program and group learning) Social tactics (receiving feedback, mentoring, and identity affirmation)</p> <p>Newcomer adjustment Clarifying and resolving role demands Achieving task mastery and self-efficacy Achieving social acceptance and group membership</p> <p>Outcomes (performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intentions to remain, turnover)</p>	Newcomers' adjustment (see newcomer adjustment variable)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Cooper-Thomas & Anderson (2006)	<p>Learning domains</p> <p>Task, role, and performance</p> <p>Coworker, social, and group</p> <p>History, organization, goals, and values</p> <p>Politics</p> <p>Future prospects</p> <p>Success indicators</p> <p>Role performance</p> <p>Extra-role performance</p> <p>Social cohesion</p> <p>Internal stability</p> <p>External representation</p> <p>Learning sources</p> <p>Colleagues</p> <p>Supervisor/manager</p> <p>Mentor</p> <p>Formal socialization</p> <p>Organization literature</p>	Newcomers' role performance
Saks, Uggerslev, & Fassina (2007)	<p>Socialization tactics</p> <p>Content tactics (presence or absence of a systematic program for orienting newcomers)</p> <p>Social tactics (presence or absence of a mentor and the degree of recognition afforded newcomers)</p> <p>Context tactics (formal or informal and group or individual orienting of newcomers)</p> <p>Proximal outcomes (levels of perceived fit, role conflict, and role ambiguity)</p> <p>Distal outcomes (performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intentions to quit, role orientation)</p>	Newcomers' adjustment (see proximal outcomes and distal outcomes variables)

organization's practices surely influence newcomer learning, it is believed that it is the responsibility of the newcomer to learn to fit into the organization (Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Ashforth, Sluss, & Saks, 2007; Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994; Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2006; Holton, 1996, 2001; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Wanous, 1992). This "sink or swim" perspective tends to take a narrow, one-sided view of learning in the context of the organization (Moreland, Levine, & McMinn, 2001) and grossly underestimates the influence of insiders in the organization to affect the socialization of newcomers. As a result,

much of the focus on newcomer socialization has been the identification of different domains that the newcomer must master to become a full member of the organization. These domains include (a) performance of tasks, (b) development of working relationships, (c) adoption of the organization's culture, (d) mastering the special language, (e) operating within the formal and informal power structure, and (f) appreciating the organization's history (Chao et al. 1994, Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992).

Despite 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 must master (Ashforth, Sluss, & Saks, 2007; Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007; Bauer, Morrison, & Callister, 1998; Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2006; Holton, 1996; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992; Wanous, 1992). However, people in organizations do most of their work in smaller group settings (Hodgkinson, 2003; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Koopmans, Doornbos, & van Eekelen, 2006; Moreland, Levine, & McMinn, 2001) and the trend toward teamwork and cross-functional work in organizations necessitates a broader view of the socialization process—a view beyond the individual responsibility of the newcomer.

Scholars have related the outcomes of the socialization process to employee satisfaction, attitudes, stress, and turnover (Ashforth, Sluss, & Saks, 2007; Bauer et al., 2007; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992; Saks, Uggerslev, & Fassina, 2007; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Although several studies have examined the relationships among specific variables in the socialization process (e.g., organizational tactics, newcomer information-seeking behavior, newcomer categories, role perceptions, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intention to quit), Saks et al. (2007) stated that more research is needed on the social tactics that contribute to socialization of the individual into the organization. Two recent meta-analyses of the socialization research (Bauer et al., 2007; Saks et al., 2007) analyzed the relationships among the variables of organizational socialization (see Table 1). These meta-analyses found that *how* newcomers learn during the socialization process has significant effects on their levels of job satisfaction, role clarity, commitment to the organization, and intention to quit (a prediction of retention). Of all the organizational tactics studied, the social tactics were the strongest predictors of job satisfaction, commitment, and retention (Bauer et al., 2007; Saks et al., 2007). Social tactics in these studies were made up of Van Maanen and Schein's serial tactics (the newcomer receives guidance from a mentor in the organization) and investiture tactics (the organization recognizes and accepts the newcomer's identity; 1979).

Initial interviews with practicing engineers undertaken for this study indicated the presence of strong influences outside the control (and responsibility) of the individual, signifying a need for further exploration of the experience.

Examining the nature of newcomers' experiences when beginning a new job could enhance our current understanding of how newcomers cross the boundary from outsider to insider. Increasing the understanding of the socialization process becomes important to individuals and organizations hoping to improve employee satisfaction, engagement, commitment, and retention.

Because the social tactics appeared to be the strongest predictors of socialization outcomes, Saks et al. (2007) stated that more research is needed to further our understanding of how and why these tactics work. The purpose of this study was to identify and explain, from the newcomer's perspective, the array of qualitative factors and the relationships among these factors that determined how newly hired engineers learned the social norms of the organization.

Theoretical Framework

Many researchers of organizational socialization based their work on learning (Bauer et al., 2007; Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2006; Saks & Ashforth, 1997; Saks et al., 2007). Yet an important factor in newcomer learning is the interaction between the newcomer and others in the organization (Billett, 2002; Koopmans et al., 2006). Effective developmental interactions, such as newcomer learning, include personal, relational, and communication factors (Eddy, D'Abate, Tannenbaum, Givens-Seaton, & Robinson, 2006). Interactions between people for the purpose of learning a new job can be conceptualized as a form of social exchange, in which the newcomer seeks information on various aspects of the workplace from more experienced members of the organization. This study examined the phenomenon of socialization as a learning process influenced by processes of social exchange.

Social Exchange Theory. Social exchange theory (SET) describes a type of ongoing, dynamic relationship between people (actors) as a series of interactions in which actors exchange resources guided by rules of exchange, such as 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 balanced—either through reciprocal return of favors from others or reduction of resources offered to others.

Recent propositions have begun to move social exchange theory beyond its behavioral and economic roots to include cognitive and affective constructs (Lawler, 2001; Molm, 2003). Lawler proposed an affective theory of social exchange that directly links emotions and sentiments to an individual's perception of fairness, satisfaction, solidarity, trust, leniency, and commitment to exchange relationships. This link to affective characteristics offers a rich explanation of the judgments actors make related to the exchange relationship.

Closely related to socialization, the premise of role-making theory is that organizational roles are ill-defined; therefore, individuals must negotiate and clarify roles through interactions (exchanges) between members (Graen, 1986). Thus 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) on the basis of exchanges with others in the organization.

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 interactions) 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 (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The quality of leader-member exchanges is 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 model of leader-member exchange (1995), high-quality relationships are characterized by high levels of trust, respect, and mutual obligations between the leader and member. Once the newcomer is aboard, high- or low-quality relationships form quickly and tend to endure (Miner, 2002). This makes the initial interactions between the newcomer and manager extremely important, subsequently affecting attitudes, satisfaction, and performance into the future.

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. This work highlights the important influences on newcomer socialization afforded by others in the organization.

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). Although most of these views tend to regard socialization as an individual learning process, they pay less attention to the interactions (exchanges) between the newcomer and others. Recent learning and exchange theories tend to emphasize the relational factors between the learner and instructor (or member and leader) as an important influence on learning and exchange outcomes.

If relationships and interactions influence 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 interactions between the

newcomer and members of the work group. The goal of this study was to investigate the social interactions that constitute the socialization process—specifically, the quality of interactions that influenced the learning process of newcomers to the organization.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, case-study research design. Several authors described a qualitative methodology as not only appropriate but also more likely to yield 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 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 or 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.

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. The participants in this study came from 26 work groups. Some of these work groups were well established and others were relatively new. Although upper management promoted change, newcomers frequently mentioned the traditional "company way" as a constraint for change.

Research Questions. This study addressed the general question of *how new engineers learned the social norms of the organization* as they began their employment. Preliminary investigations into the phenomenon of socialization through the literature and from pilot interviews with practicing engineers and managers indicated that the socialization process was problematic—especially regarding the social system in 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. 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?

Sample. Following the logic of theoretical or purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we asked managers in the organization to identify individuals to interview for the purpose of collecting rich, in-depth information addressing the research questions. Managers chose individuals according to length of employment, gender, and experience. All participants had been with the company at least 6 months and none had been employed with this company longer than 18 months. 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 hires: 13 newly hired engineers with previous job experience
- Managers: 6 managers of work groups with newly hired engineers

Data Collection and Analysis. In his discussion of quality in qualitative research, Seale (1999) advocated the benefits of having research designs draw from multiple paradigms. For example, he proposed a triangulation of methodologies to help minimize the biases of any one methodology in the biases of another methodology (e.g., using quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the same data from different perspectives). Furthermore, Seale stated that use of multiple methodologies could help increase the understanding of a phenomenon. Avoiding the purist extremes of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, this study used a blended approach to analyze the data collected under a qualitative case-study research design.

Participant data came from semistructured interviews conducted and recorded by the researcher following the Critical Incidents Technique (Ellinger & Watkins, 1998; Flanagan, 1954; Gremler, 2004). 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? In some cases, participants said there was not a specific incident and recounted a series of small experiences that occurred over time giving them an understanding of the norms of the organization. A professional transcriber converted the recordings to text, and the researcher checked the transcriptions for accuracy with the original recordings.

Analysis of the interview transcripts followed qualitative analysis procedures recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). Four steps constituted the qualitative analysis process. The researcher (1) carefully read the transcripts and attached predetermined codes to specific statements that described learning and norms; (2) retrieved all statements coded as learning and norms, carefully reread the retrieved statements,

and proceeded to open-code (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) the statements at a finer level of detail, staying close to the participants' language; (3) sorted the open codes into categories; and (4) identified and described the categorical themes emerging from these data. The emergent data indicated that relationship building was a critical process for newcomers. Furthermore, it was the quality of the relationships formed within the context of the work groups that enabled or constrained newcomer learning and integration into the workplace.

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. These themes are described in the findings section.

Following Seale's recommendation (1999) to triangulate 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. 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 (see Table 2). These criteria recurred throughout the texts, and the quality of the criteria indicated the quality of the socialization experience reported by the newcomer. Analysis of these ratings compared the socialization efforts of newcomers and the reciprocal efforts of their work groups. More description of the findings follows.

Findings

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* (see Figure 1).

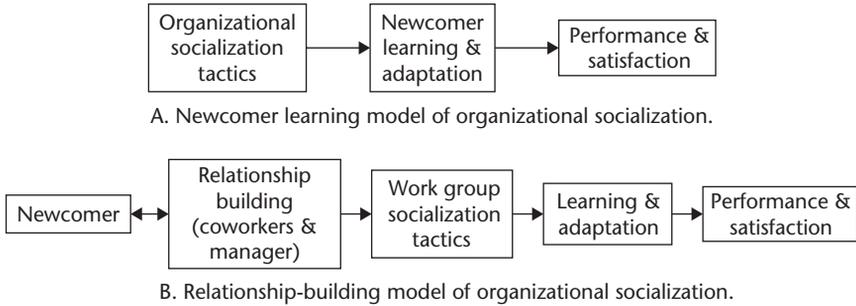
According to a frequency count of learning incidents reported and attributed to different sources, newcomers in this organization reported that

Table 2. Emergent Themes Used as Criteria for Rating the Quality of the Newcomers' Socialization Experiences

<i>Criteria for Individual Rating</i>	<i>Description of Criteria and Sample Statement</i>
Collaboration	Does the newcomer regularly consult or collaborate with others about work tasks, or projects? "After informing people what I thought was going to happen, I kind of got nods and—OK."
Nonwork relationships	Does the newcomer share nonwork information and try to know others outside of work situations? "We're always chatting. Always, I mean a lot of it's work-related, but let's say like 30 to 40 percent of our conversation is just about personal life and going out and doing things."
Extra-role behavior	Does the newcomer contribute effort to the group beyond expected responsibilities? "And at that time, it was just, I volunteered to take this on because I was new to the organization."
<i>Criteria for Work Group Rating</i>	<i>Description of Criteria and Sample Statement</i>
Local mentoring	Does a coworker in the group provide regular, ongoing direction and instruction to the newcomer? "And so I feel like the one main guy who I have been working with, he's been very helpful in straightening things out."
Group inclusion	Does one or more coworkers invite the newcomer to lunch or after-work social activities? "So pretty much almost every day we'd go out to lunch. I mean a lot of times it would just be kind of me, the steering guy, and this other guy."
Interaction with manager	Does the newcomer have frequent and regular contact or interaction with the manager? "But he'll also stop over and ask how I'm doing, how the weekend was. Very personal."
Meaningful assignment	Does the newcomer have a meaningful, responsible project or assignment soon after entry into the organization? "My manager will give you a certain car program or a truck program, and you will follow it through from start to finish."

coworkers were the primary source of learning the social norms of the work group (65% of learning incidents reported). 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% of learning incidents reported).

Figure 1. A Comparison of (A) the Newcomer Learning Model of the Socialization Process from the Literature and (B) a Model of the Socialization Process in This Study Highlighting the Mediating Qualities of Relationship Building



Further analysis of these three sources of learning (coworkers, managers, and self) revealed several subthemes that provided more detail about the learning processes during the socialization of these newcomers. The next sections describe these subthemes in more detail.

Learning from Coworkers. 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. The most satisfying learning experiences reported by newcomers resulted from developing high-quality mentoring relationships with an experienced coworker. 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 or accepted the help of a willing coworker and developed a mentoring relationship informally. These mentoring relationships subsequently helped newcomers learn what to do on the job, how to do it, and oftentimes why it was done that way. Although much of the content of this learning focused on the tasks of the job, newcomers also developed important insights about how things worked in the group and the organization, 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 seemed to mediate the quality of learning experienced by the newcomer. Newcomers recounted a range of experiences—from good to bad—with developing a mentoring relationship. For example:

[I asked him], Who do I talk to? Then he'd kind of be like—OK, I think it's this person. And then he'll just look up the name for me real quick and he'll let me know. *And sometimes he'd just come with me and see if*

whatever information they're giving me is accurate or not, because he's been on this project for a while.

[My coworkers are] approachable, but you kind of get the feeling like—don't bother me. You can go ask them questions and stuff like that, but then their cell phone rings or something comes up and then it's kind of like—"I have to take this call" or "I have to do something else." So you kind of, there's this feeling of—ask questions, but don't take too much of my time.

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. 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. Again, newcomers reported a range of experiences from efforts to build relationships with their work group.

I felt part of the group within two months. . . . *Going to lunch with them, talking to them about nonwork stuff.* The other new hires, like, we'll go out to the movies during the weekends. A lot of interaction.

Here I would say, of the companies I've worked at, is really not very quick to accept new people in that there is the [company] lifer mentality, that if you didn't come here at the beginning of college and [were not] raised in [the company] perspective and way of life, then why should we trust you? How do we know what you're doing and all you know is reasonably sound?

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 norms of the work group. The first subtheme described the need for newcomers to *learn the expectations of the manager*. Newcomers perceived these expectations as important norms they must learn to help them integrate into the group. Newcomers described their efforts at trying to get to know their managers better personally and professionally by building high-quality relationships. Despite a general low frequency of interaction with their managers, the few newcomers able to build high-quality relationships with their managers reported learning valuable insights about how things worked in their work group, in other work groups, and in the organization. Some also reported

gaining insights about how to make sense of the way things worked in the organization. For example:

But he [*manager*] says—“If you’re not impeding anybody else in the company, and you are getting a better product to the customer,” he says—“so be it.” *He says—“Make the system work for you.” He feels the system is a guide*, while some people feel the system is like law.

The second subtheme to emerge described the efforts of newcomers to build relationships with their manager as a means to enhance their position in the group and the organization. Many newcomers believed that higher-quality relationships with their manager enhanced their membership in the group and afforded greater opportunities for development and advancement in the organization. For example, one newcomer remarked, “People say it’s who you know. *I said—“Well, it’s not really who you know. The question is—who knows you?”*

First of all, being at [*company*], everybody wants to get to the eighth level. They want that, and of course they say the eighth level is one of the most difficult levels, you know, to get to, unless you know someone.

The projects I get is a big indication to me that, you know, my boss trusts me with some very highly visible things where I’m meeting with people very high up in our company.

Because most newcomers had little contact with managers, there were few examples of very high-quality relationships between newcomers and managers. Most newcomers reported neutral relationships—neither good nor bad (medium-quality). They accepted the fact that managers generally were not available or responsible for day-to-day guidance: “I mean, I didn’t have a lot of contact with my official boss. You know, his job was more—the way I saw it, his job was more to organize a group.”

Learning from the Newcomer’s Knowledge and Past Experiences. Newcomers also reported learning to understand and adapt to the social norms of the organization by reflecting on their personal knowledge and past experiences. Understandably, new grads did not report a wealth of experiences in organizations compared to experienced hires. However, they had previous experience with social norms from group projects and extracurricular programs, internships, and co-ops in school. Experienced hires often interpreted their current perceptions of the social norms of the work group based on previous employment experiences. Individually, some newcomers appeared to have a richer set of these past experiences, and some had stronger propensities toward social interactions.

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 conformed their personal knowledge about how things work in organizations to the current norms they encountered.

Well, at first, I felt discouraged because I'm a person who always likes to do my best. . . . So, I was kind of discouraged, like—"OK, what am I doing wrong?" And I felt bad. But as I got used to it, it got fine.

Managers' Views of the Socialization Process. To triangulate the data gathered from newcomers, this study similarly analyzed data gathered from interviews with six work-group managers who recently hired new engineers. The conversations provided additional insights into the contextual factors influencing the characteristics of the work groups, as well as the managers' perceptions and beliefs about the socialization process for newcomers.

The managers reported knowing from experience that newcomers were more successful at learning the norms of the group when they had the opportunity to learn from coworkers in strong mentoring relationships. Corroborating the successful experiences reported by newcomers, successful managers perceived that building high-quality relationships with one or more coworkers was a precursor to learning the social and technical aspects of the job. One manager reported, "I try to team them up with somebody who's been there longer, that knows the ropes. Sometimes it's more formal; sometimes it's more informal."

Most of these managers recognized the importance of helping newcomers integrate into the relationship structure of the work group and the organization. They fostered a collaborative environment and mentoring relationships, as well as ensuring newcomers met key people in the organization and attended important meetings. They believed relationship building was as much a responsibility of coworkers and managers as it was of the newcomer.

Throughout the reported experiences of newcomers in learning the social norms of the organization, relationship building was a common theme closely related to the quality of learning and level of satisfaction reported by newcomers and managers. It was through their relationships with coworkers and managers that newcomers learned the specific tasks of their jobs, gained access to critical information in the organization, and collaborated within and across work groups.

The research team also wanted to know if there were qualitative differences in socialization experiences between two locations and divisions believed to have culturally different environments. Additionally, the researcher noticed important differences emerging from the data between new grads and experienced hires. These assumed differences were investigated further by rating the relationship-building experiences of newcomers and their work

groups according to seven criteria. These criteria emerged as important influences on the socialization experiences of newcomers according to the thematic analysis of the experiences reported by newcomers.

Analyzing the Quality of the Socialization Experience. 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 grads and experienced hires. The analysis of the reports by newcomers identified three themes that became the criteria for assessing newcomers' efforts at relationship building (collaboration, nonwork relationships, and extra-role behavior). The analysis also identified four themes that became the criteria for assessing the work groups' quality of relationship building (mentoring, inclusion, interaction, and assignment). These criteria emerged from the thematic analysis of the data described in the previous sections. These were themes that consistently appeared in the reports of the participants and in varying levels of quality (see Table 2). For example, most of the participants who had a mentor found the presence of a good mentor to be a positive experience (high-quality) and the lack of a mentor to be a negative experience (low-quality).

To compile the ratings, the researcher reread each transcript, looking for evidence indicating the quality of the newcomer's efforts at collaborating, developing nonwork relationships, and putting forth extra-role behavior. The evidence found in the transcripts for these activities was rated 1 for low-quality, 2 for medium-quality, and 3 for high-quality. Similarly, this analysis rated the relationship-building efforts of members of the work group (coworkers and managers) on the criteria of mentoring, inclusion, frequency of interaction, and project assignments. The sum of ratings on all seven criteria (individual and work group) permitted a measure of the quality of the relationship-building experiences, as reported by that newcomer in his or her work group.

Human resource managers at the organization speculated that perceived cultural differences between company locations and divisions might affect the quality of the socialization experiences of newcomers more than the influence of the work groups. Using the Mann-Whitney test (Cohen & Lea, 2004) for nonparametric data to compare the means of the combined ratings for newcomers and work groups between locations and divisions found no significant differences in the quality of socialization experiences between locations or divisions ($p = .53$ and $p = .30$, respectively). The qualitative analysis of the transcripts supported these findings, revealing no notable difference in experience between locations or divisions.

During the qualitative analysis of the transcripts, the researcher noticed differences between the socialization experiences of new grads and experienced hires. The thematic analysis indicated that experienced hires reported more difficulty integrating into the work group than new grads. Using the Mann-Whitney test to compare means between independent groups (experienced hires and new grads), the researcher found evidence of a significant

difference, indicating that experienced hires experienced lower-quality relationship building during socialization ($p = .03$). This finding corroborated the qualitative analysis, which indicated noticeably higher levels of conflict and frustration, as well as a lower level of satisfaction reported by experienced hires.

Qualitatively analyzing the data gathered from 30 newly hired engineers from multiple work groups across a large manufacturing organization revealed a widespread belief by newcomers in the critical importance of building relationships among coworkers and managers to facilitate learning on the job and integrating into the group. A common belief implied by newcomers in many of the groups was the need to get to know people before asking them for information or help learning their jobs.

Furthermore, quantitative analysis via the frequency counts of learning incidents and the ratings of the relationship-building efforts indicated the primacy of the work group at influencing the outcomes of the socialization process in this organization. This triangulation of analysis method concurred that newcomers socialized into work groups—not a monolithic organization. Moreover, these work groups afforded a range of socialization experiences, from bad to good. Although these 30 newcomers joined the same organization, they did not encounter the same experiences. The two primary findings (the importance of relationship building and work group variance) suggest a broader view of organizational socialization is needed.

Conclusions and Discussion

The questions guiding this study arose from several exploratory discussions with engineers and managers about the experiences of newcomers learning the ropes in the workplace and the consequences of this learning for job satisfaction and retention. These discussions revealed the difficulties encountered by newcomers related to learning the social norms of the workplace.

This study found that, for newcomers, building relationships with members of a work group was a primary driver and mediator of socialization in this organization, if not the most important one. Also, the quality of socialization experienced by newcomers across the organization strongly related to the differences in the quality of relationship building experienced by newcomers within the various work groups. It was the quality of the relationships within the work group that appeared to mediate how well newcomers learned the norms, tasks, and procedures of their jobs. For example, several newcomers at the organization reported frustration at the lack of direction, instruction, and support they received from their coworkers and manager. In these situations, newcomers often attributed these difficulties to lack of interest, respect, or attention from others. At the other extreme, several newcomers reported receiving valuable direction and support, along with highly satisfying experiences learning the particulars of their jobs—in

large part because of the high quality of relationships they formed with their coworkers or manager. Relationship building was a necessary activity dependent on the mutual interaction, exchange, and reciprocity between the newcomer and other members of the work group.

The primacy of relationships for learning as found in this study supports what Ashforth and Sluss (2006) described as the “fundamental embeddedness of individuals in dense networks of interpersonal relationships” (p. 8). Obviously, newcomers are not embedded at the early stages of their employment, and achieving a high quality of embeddedness is an important objective of socialization. In this organization, newcomers relied on their relationships with others for information and help in learning what to do on the job, how to do it, and why it was done this way.

Theories of social exchange state that the relationship between actors will become stronger if both parties reciprocate efforts to enhance the relationship. If efforts are not reciprocated, development of the exchange relationship will stall or decline (Blau, 1986; Molm, 2003). Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) defined the quality of a relationship as a range from high to low on the basis of level of trust, respect, and mutual obligation developed between actors. Tierney (1999) added the dimensions of frequency of interaction and degree of interpersonal support as factors contributing to the quality of exchange relationships. In addition, the quality of the exchange relationship influences the perceptions of the actors toward each other, as well as the perceptions of subordinates toward the work group and organization (Bauer & Green, 1996; Lawler, 2001).

Lawler's affect theory of social exchange (2001) explained how joint activities among actors generate positive or negative emotions that individuals consequently attribute to the social group, thereby producing stronger or weaker ties between the actors and the group. Relationship building between newcomers and other members of the work group is just such a joint activity, and the data in this study indicated the emotional consequences of relationship building on newcomers' perceptions of their job and the organization. Lawler went on to state that these positive or negative emotions attributed to the group affected the quality of future relationships among individuals and the group. The emotional assessment of the group's relationship structure on the part of the newcomer and others in the work group likely affects future interactions in a self-fulfilling manner. Many newcomers implied that their impressions and expectations of future support and attention from others in the company formed out of their initial experiences with coworkers.

Rather than view newcomer socialization as an individual responsibility of the newcomer, work groups are responsible as well for socialization of newcomers by enabling or constraining their integration as new members. The quality of relationships formed between newcomers and coworkers has a lasting effect on the subsequent satisfaction and performance of newcomers in the workplace.

The socialization process experienced by newcomers in this study is one of the first experiences they reported regarding the social norms of the organization. What newcomers perceived and experienced at the beginning of their job became their perception of “the way things are done here.” The socialization process is a social norm of the work group and by extension becomes a social norm of the organization, from which newcomers infer how the organization values them as employees.

The experiences of newcomers during socialization have important consequences for organizations. Reviews of the socialization literature offered some evidence that the quality of the socialization experience influenced the newcomers’ future job satisfaction and commitment to the organization (Bauer et al., 2007; Saks et al., 2007). Newcomers in this study implied that their perception of the quality of their relationships with others (a major factor of the socialization process) was an important factor affecting their satisfaction with their job. The importance of the relational qualities of newcomers’ experiences and the salience of the work group as the context for these experiences suggest a shift is needed in the emphasis of organizational socialization from a focus on the newcomer’s capability and responsibility for learning to a focus on the mutual constitution of relationships within the work group as a mediator of newcomer socialization.

Limitations of the Study. This study investigated the experiences of a purposive sample of newcomers in one organization, which limits the generalizability of the findings. However, the objective of this research was to conduct an in-depth exploration and explanation of the socialization process as experienced by a rather homogeneous group of newcomers in a large organizational setting.

Another limitation is the use of retrospective data. Retrospective bias is a potential problem in studies that rely on participants to recall past phenomena—especially complex phenomena laden with informal and intangible characteristics, such as social norms and learning processes. This study employed interview techniques recommended in the literature to help minimize retrospective bias, among them focusing on specific examples rather than reflection on general concepts, asking for elaboration, and focusing on recent experiences (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990; Weiss, 1994). The overriding limitation of any technique relying on self-reported data is the accuracy of reporting by the respondent. Studies have identified biases and the fallibility of memory (Golden, 1997; Huber & Power, 1985). However, self-reported data is sometimes the only means of collecting data, and if it is kept to the recent past (one to two years), it is considered useful—accepting the limitations of bias and memory lapse (Huber & Power, 1985; Miller, Cardinal, & Glick, 1997). In this study, the retrospection was limited to the past 12–18 months.

In addition, the data from newly hired engineers were triangulated with information from a cross-functional team of executives and researchers in the organization and from the managers of the work groups directly involved with the socialization process. Not only did these additional sources corroborate

many of the findings derived from the data gathered from newcomers; they elaborated the data to include additional information about the context and intentions related to the socialization process in the organization. Also, various groups of scholars and practitioners reviewed the analysis process and findings as they emerged, offering additional observations and insights from several perspectives. Researchers assume that following rigorous interviewing procedures and triangulating the data gathered through interviews with data from other sources related to the phenomenon under study increases the validity of the interview data (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

Implications for HRD and Socialization Practices. Increasing interest in the socialization of individuals into organizations has produced more studies over the past few years, yet the prevailing focus of these studies has continued to emphasize the responsibility of the newcomer to learn to fit in. The evidence presented by this study indicates that building relationships in the contexts of small work groups is a primary driver of socialization for newcomers, especially in large organizations.

Traditional views of socialization tend to underestimate the influence of the dynamic relational processes among members of the work group. Schwandt, Ayzav, and Gorman (2006) argued that creation of knowledge (i.e., learning) and its use depended 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 social dynamics (especially the relational dynamics) among members of the work group, not just the competencies of individual members entering and working in organizations.

Enhancing the socialization of newcomers into an organization is an important strategy for developing human resources. Organizations looking to increase the capacity of their workforce, improve their competitive advantage, and develop future capabilities might improve the outcomes of newcomer job satisfaction, performance, commitment, and ultimately retention by facilitating development of high-quality relationships between newcomers and others in the organization. Several suggestions emerged from this study:

- 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.

Recognizing that what newcomers learn develops within the constraints of the relationship structures within work groups suggests that organizations might foster and enhance the relationship-building processes in work groups through which newcomers become productive members of the organization. In addition, future research in learning, development, and performance in organizations might include or focus on the complex social interactions, exchanges, and relationships among members of work groups in organizations. These complex interdependencies seem to be strong mediators of the learning and work performed in organizational settings. 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.

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Russell F Korte is an assistant professor in Human Resource Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a co-chair of the AHRD Theory Committee.

