Organizational Socialization

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is organizational socialization?

Organizational socialization—also referred to as onboarding—is "…the process by which newcomers make the transition from being organizational outsiders to being insiders" (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007, p. 707). The overall goal of organizational socialization is to facilitate newcomer adjustment (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). Specifically, adjustment means that new employees understand the key tasks of their job (i.e., role clarity), have confidence in their ability to perform the key tasks of their job (i.e., self-efficacy), feel like they are an accepted member of the organization (i.e., social acceptance), and understand the organization's culture (e.g., goals, values, norms).

Both individual-level characteristics and behaviors and organizational-level efforts are related to newcomer adjustment (Bauer et al., 2007). At the individual level, employee characteristics (e.g., proactive personality, extraversion) and behaviors (e.g., information seeking, relationship building) are both associated with adjustment (see Bauer & Erdogan, 2011 for a review). However, since many individual-level characteristics and behaviors may not be malleable, they represent less promising intervention targets overall; thus, this summary will focus on organizational-level efforts.

Organizational socialization tactics can be characterized in six dimensions (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979):

► Collective or individual: the degree to which newcomers share common group experiences versus individual ones

► Formal or informal: formal tactics involve giving newcomers a set of officially prescribed and customized experiences apart from experienced employees, such as through an academy or internship, whereas informal tactics involve unplanned learning through trial and error, while working amongst experienced employees

► Sequential or random: the degree to which newcomers progress through distinct phases

► Fixed or variable sequencing: the degree to which the socialization process has a stated timetable

► Serial or disjunctive: the degree to which existing workers help socialize and mentor newcomers

► Investiture or divestiture: the degree to which a newcomer's identity is affirmed versus stripped away

The most common way to assess organizational socialization tactics is through a 30-item self-report measure called the *Socialization Tactics Scale* (Jones, 1986). Examples include, "This organization puts all newcomers through the same set of learning experiences," "Much of my job knowledge has been acquired informally on a trial and error basis," and "Experienced organizational members see advising or training newcomers as one of their main job responsibilities in this organization."

Newcomer adjustment, which serves as the primary sign of the effectiveness of organizational socialization efforts, has been measured in two ways (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). The more common approach is to use independent measures of each primary adjustment indicator (role clarity, self-efficacy, and social acceptance; culture has not been typically included in this approach). Alternatively, there are a few multidimensional socialization measures (e.g., Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994; Haueter, Macan, & Winter, 2003). The literature to date does not provide clear guidance on a preferred approach, but it is important to note that all of the findings discussed below are based on the first approach; more research is needed to explore the second approach.

Why is organizational socialization important?

Organizational socialization tactics and newcomer adjustment are important because they are associated with several workforce outcomes. In general, socialization strategies are moderately associated with perceptions of fit, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intentions to quit. They are modestly associated with job performance and turnover (Bauer et al., 2007; Saks, Uggerslev, & Fassina, 2007). Socialization strategies are thought to operate by improving newcomer adjustment, which then improves outcomes. The evidence thus far provides preliminary support for this assertion, though experimental research is needed to deliberately implement and test the effects of different socialization strategies.

What organizational socialization strategies are thought to be most effective?

Broadly speaking and for the most part, both newcomer adjustment and workforce outcomes are better when organizational socialization tactics involve collective and formalized experiences among newcomers, sequenced experiences according to an established schedule, support and mentoring from existing workers, and recognition and support of newcomers' attitudes, skills, and abilities (Bauer et al., 2007; Saks et al., 2007).

More specific connections between tactics, newcomer adjustment, and workforce outcomes vary by the type of socialization tactic. The tactics most strongly connected to outcomes are support from existing employees and support of newcomers' attitudes, skills, and abilities (Saks et al., 2007). In light of this, organizations should foster connections between new and experienced employees. This may include opportunities for job shadowing; using established organization members to guide and nurture new employees; providing positive, consistent feedback on new employees' performance; ongoing professional mentoring; and validating new

employees' unique identities. It is less important that socialization of newcomers be done as a set of experiences that are exclusively for groups of newcomers, apart from experienced employees. If this is practical and can be achieved, it may be helpful, but the remaining strategies have stronger connections to newcomer adjustment. Again, it is important to caution that due to the nature of the research thus far, there is no evidence that such strategies directly cause changes in newcomer adjustment or outcomes; further testing is needed.

QIC-WD Takeaways

► Organizational socialization (or onboarding) strategies are characterized in accordance with six dimensions—collective or individual, formal or informal, sequential or random, fixed or variable, serial or disjunctive, and investiture or divestiture.

► Newcomer adjustment is considered the most immediate goal and indicator of the effectiveness of socialization efforts. Adjustment is most often defined as role clarity, self-efficacy, and social acceptance, though there is some research that departs from this approach.

► In general, socialization strategies are moderately associated with perceptions of fit, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intentions to quit. They are modestly associated with job performance and turnover.

► Both newcomer adjustment and workforce outcomes are better when organizational socialization tactics involve collective and formalized experiences among newcomers, sequenced experiences according to an established schedule, support and mentoring from existing workers, and recognition and support of newcomers' attitudes, skills, and abilities.

► The socialization strategies that are most strongly connected to outcomes are support from existing employees and support of newcomers' attitudes, skills, and abilities.

► In terms of both newcomer adjustment and workforce outcomes, it is less important that socialization of newcomers be done as a set of experiences that are exclusively for groups of newcomers, apart from experienced employees.

► Experimental research is needed to test the effect of organizational socialization tactics on newcomer adjustment and workforce outcomes.

► Practitioners or researchers who would like to assess organizational socialization tactics should consider the 30-item *Socialization Tactics Scale*. Note that if socialization strategies are standardized and known (e.g., whether there are cohorts, whether there is a fixed schedule), using this scale is not informative and could create a false sense of variability where none exists.

► For an overview of best practices in employee socialization, see Bauer (2010).

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