Getting on board: Organizational socialization and the contribution of social capital

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Abstract

When starting a new job, newcomers strive to learn the tasks and expectations of their work, decipher the unwritten rules or norms of the culture, and achieve membership in the organization. The literature on the socialization of newcomers in organizations typically links success to the ability of the newcomer to learn to fit in. Yet recent empirical studies identified coworkers and managers as sharing the responsibility for successful socialization. The purpose of this study was to investigate the orientation and socialization processes (also known as onboarding) from the broader perspective of social capital. The concept of social capital generally describes the value and resources of social relations and network ties afforded to members of social networks or groups. Through a set of in-depth interviews with newly hired engineers in a large manufacturing organization, newcomers reported how they learned about and integrated into the social networks that made up their workplace. Overall, it was the quality of the relationships newcomers formed with coworkers and managers that was the primary driver of socialization outcomes.

Keywords

organizational socialization, social capital, social networks, work groups

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Across many disciplines there is a growing recognition of the important role social relations play in facilitating learning, performance, and well-being (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Bandiera et al., 2008; Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1985; Lin, 2001; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Recognizing the importance of social relations in organizational settings has increased our understanding of the subtle differences among people's achievements in the workplace (Coleman, 1988) and the performance of organizations (Bolino et al., 2002; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). The resources and value derived from the relations among members of social groups is often called social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Burt, 2000; Coleman, 1988, Putnam, 2000).

The concept of social capital has been variously defined to include such concepts as trust, relationships, networks, and various other resources embedded in groups (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Leana and Van Buren, 1999; Lin, 2001; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Recognizing that people are embedded in and governed by social systems has utility in management and organization studies for examining social phenomena in new ways (Schuller et al., 2000; Woolcock, 1998). In the case of organizational socialization, there is a need to go beyond the dominant individualist perspective and include the effects of social relations on newcomers in the socialization process. The idea of social capital provides a broad perspective of social phenomena and is used as a model to guide this study.

Generally, the literature on socialization assumes it is the responsibility of the newcomer to learn to fit in (Ashforth et al., 2007; Korte, 2009; Saks et al., 2007). However, the influence of social relations and network ties, as portrayed by proponents of social capital, has important effects on the ability of newcomers to integrate successfully into the organization. This article describes an in-depth, qualitative study of the effects of social capital on the socialization of newly hired engineers assimilating into a large, global manufacturing organization. This study builds on a highly cited model of social capital by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998). Although this model conceptualizes social capital as three interrelated dimensions (structural, relational, and cognitive), our findings suggest that relationships are the dominant factor in the socialization process. Furthermore, it is the quality of relationships between members of a group that is important, which Nahapiet and Ghoshal do not emphasize explicitly in their model.

Purpose of this study

This study sets out to investigate the social dynamics affecting how and what new hires (newcomers) learned about their work and how they assimilated into their new organization during the early phase of their employment. Many studies of social capital have looked at the characteristics of social relations and networks. For example, in previous studies of social networks and social capital, network positions affected the levels of social capital available to members (Burt, 1997; Granovetter, 1985) and social capital had a strong influence on employee attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors toward employers (Ho et al., 2006). Other studies found that the more strongly individuals identified with the organization, the greater their propensity to engage in the development and maintenance of social capital (Davenport and Daellenbach, 2011; Kramer, 2006). A common theme across these studies and others is that social capital is an important factor affecting individual and organizational performance.

Thus, if social capital is an important factor for individuals and organizations, an important concern regarding the socialization of newcomers is to better understand the effects of social capital on the integration of new members into a group. This article begins with a critical review of the literature on organizational socialization and social capital, followed by a description of the guiding framework used for this study based on a model of social capital proposed by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998). The next section describes the design and findings of the study of newcomer socialization experiences related to the effects of social capital. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings and implications of this study for improving the critical socialization experiences of new hires in organizations.

Conceptualizing organizational socialization

Organizational socialization is typically understood as the process by which organizations help newcomers learn about their work and adjust to the workplace (Ashforth et al., 2007; Bauer et al., 1998; Ostroff and Kozlowski, 1992; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). Generally, the different models of socialization identify what newcomers need to learn and master, such as job tasks, the organization's mission and culture, and how to interact with other members (Ashforth et al., 2007; Bauer et al., 1998; Chao et al., 1994). Researchers have found that these learning experiences affect newcomers' job satisfaction, performance, and commitment to the organization (Ashforth et al., 2007; Bauer et al., 1998; Ostroff and Kozlowski, 1992).

Of the many views of learning, social cognition is the dominant perspective guiding socialization studies (Saks et al., 2007). Social cognition is an interactive process through which individuals acquire, encode, and retrieve information to link their personal frame of reference to the collective frame of reference of the group (Bandura, 2001; Louis, 1980). Bandura (1988, 2001) argued that social cognition was influenced by the effect others have on the individual. Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed a view of workplace learning that is situated in the social practices of work, whereby novices attempt to become valued members of a community by learning the norms, knowledge, practices, and culture of that community. For Wenger (1998), learning involved social participation in communities of practice, where newcomers adopt the meanings, practices, and identities of the community through interaction with others. Information, knowledge, skills, power, and relations are key assets sought by newcomers in the socialization process (Ashforth et al., 2007; Korte, 2009; Ostroff and Kozlowski, 1992). Furthermore, Ashforth et al. (2007) stated that socialization was not only about *what* newcomers learned but also about *how* they learned. Broader views of learning articulate the mutual constitution of external interactional processes and internal information acquisition processes (Illeris, 2003). These broader views of learning imply that the social structure of the learning environment has an important influence on newcomers' socialization.

While many portray socialization as the responsibility of the newcomer to learn to fit in, there is growing recognition that others in the group have significant responsibility to facilitate (or constrain) the success of newcomers (Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2006; Korte, 2009). Thus, how well newcomers integrate into the organization's social structure and what resources they develop or acquire during the socialization process are dependent on the mutual constitution of learning and membership by newcomers, coworkers, and

managers. The resources afforded to newcomers by the members of the work group during socialization are sometimes referred to as the social capital of the group.

Conceptualizing social capital

Generally, scholars describe social capital as the resources or goodwill derived from the relationships among people that can facilitate collective action (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Bandiera et al., 2008; Bourdieu, 1986; Burt, 1997; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). The value of social relations is one of the primary characteristics of social capital (Coleman, 1988) – in contrast to human capital, which is defined as individual knowledge and skills, or physical capital, which includes equipment and property (Putnam, 2000).

Nevertheless, the concept of social capital is controversial. There are major problems stemming from a diverse and amorphous variety of definitions, over-extension of the concept across vastly different phenomena, as well as arguments about the misappropriation and mischaracterization of the term 'capital' (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Beugelsdijk, 2009; Fine, 2001; Schuller et al., 2000; Woolcock, 1998). There are conflicting conceptualizations throughout the literature depicting social capital as various types of agency, resources, position, power, trust, relations, or networks. There is circularity in models of social capital depicting it as both an antecedent and consequent (Fine, 2001; Portes, 1998; Woolcock, 1998). In addition, there are serious problems with measuring whatever is meant by social capital, including the aggregation of measures across levels of analysis and organization (Fine, 2001; Woolcock, 1998).

The varied and sometimes contradictory conceptualizations of social capital in the literature created difficulties for designing a focused study of social capital in an organizational setting. Different researchers emphasized different aspects under the purview of social capital, leading some critics to rightfully argue that most anything occurring in a social group can be conceptualized as social capital. Furthermore, difficulties arose investigating the effects of social capital on newcomers. For example, does social capital facilitate newcomer socialization or does socialization create social capital? And how would we know? These and other difficulties hampered attempts to articulate the concept more clearly in a research design.

Despite the difficulties supporting the claims made for social capital and the rigorous arguments against the various conceptualizations of social capital, it has become one of the most dominant ideas in the social sciences. Some of the staunchest critics of social capital concede that, if nothing else, the idea of social capital is useful as a heuristic for studying social phenomena in new ways (Fine, 2001; Schuller et al., 2000; Woolcock, 1998). Employing the notion of social capital emphasizes the important resources and support afforded by the social relations and network ties of the group. This emphasis goes beyond the typically individualist learning orientation of many socialization studies.

The idea that social capital is the resources or relations embedded in social structures does not clearly illuminate how newcomers access, produce, and maintain these resources (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Lin, 2001). In an attempt to further articulate the interactions related to creating social capital, Lin (2001) and Portes (1998) categorized interactions into expressive (or communal) and instrumental. Expressive or communal actions are

taken to build and maintain solidarity and the current resources of the group. For example, going out for lunch with coworkers or participating in sporting events with colleagues are actions that contribute to group solidarity. Instrumental actions aim instead to create or obtain additional resources from the group for the individual. These are actions typically perceived by others as self-serving or politically motivated. Both types of actions are important and newcomers must learn how to manage a delicate balance of expressive and instrumental interactions with coworkers and managers.

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) proposed a model of social capital that included a cognitive dimension, along with the typical structural and relational dimensions. The cognitive dimension captures important content that newcomers learn about their new jobs and the organization, and for that reason it was used as the guiding framework for this study. In their model: the cognitive dimension focused on the value of shared language, meaning, and narratives for group performance; the structural dimension focused on the impersonal network configuration emphasizing the various benefits afforded by different positions in a network; and the relational dimension included the social characteristics of trust, norms, obligations, and identification with the group. They articulated the effects of these dimensions for creating and exchanging resources in social networks that are important factors affecting the performance of individuals, groups, and organizations. In reality, these dimensions are highly interrelated and difficult to separate.

Because of the aforementioned problems with the many conceptualizations of social capital, Fine (2001) and Schuller et al. (2000) advocate restraint in the use of social capital in social science, yet they agree that there is value in the concept for potentially fostering more innovative research. It is as a heuristic that this article uses the concept of social capital to move the study of organizational socialization beyond its traditionally narrow focus on learning and the individual (newcomer).

A conceptual framework of social capital related to the socialization process

By definition, newcomers to an organization are outsiders who generally become insiders through a process of socialization (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). This process requires not only learning the tasks of the job and the mission of the organization, but also attention to the social dynamics of the work group. Attending to the social dynamics as mutually constructed relations between newcomers and incumbents in the group goes beyond the typically individualist approach to socialization.

In this study of socialization, we deliberately focused on a model of social capital by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) that articulated the cognitive, structural, and relational interactions of social groups. Other models do not include the shared understandings among individuals that Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) defined as the cognitive dimension of social capital. As newcomer learning is a key factor in socialization, the inclusion of cognition is critical to understanding the effects of social relations and network ties on newcomer learning during the socialization process. The following sections describe the characteristics of each of the three dimensions of social capital in the context of the socialization process.

Fitting in: Integrating into the structural dimension of social capital

One of the newcomer's primary tasks is moving from the position as an outsider to insider in the group (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) described the structural dimension of social capital as the impersonal configuration and structural characteristics of a network. In organizations, structural social capital refers to the characteristics and benefits of different network positions (Burt, 2004; Granovetter, 1985; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998).

During socialization, newcomers must learn the configurations of the social structures of the organization, which includes learning how their positions fit in and evolve with respect to the positions of others (Ashforth et al., 2007; Chao et al., 1994; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). The actors in different network positions have differential access to resources and can provide different opportunities and resources to newcomers as they strive to integrate into the group.

Getting to know others: Building the relational dimension of social capital

In contrast with the impersonal structure of social networks, the relational dimension encompasses the relationships among individuals in the group. This dimension involves the social and political norms, as well as the levels of trust, mutual obligation, and identification that influence how individuals relate to and interact with one another (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998).

Beyond trust and cooperation, Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) do not elaborate on the quality of relationships among members of a group. The formation and quality of relationships have been articulated systematically in communication studies (Villard and Whipple, 1976) and social psychology (Fitness et al., 2007). Individuals' beliefs, expectations, and ideals concerning relationships with others, as well as the particulars of the situation, affect how relationships are formed (Fitness et al., 2007). Regarding the learning process in social settings, Merriam et al. (2007) reviewed several studies and concluded that learning in social settings was heavily influenced by the quality of collaboration, mutual support, cooperation, and empathy among learners and instructors. Furthermore, Villard and Whipple (1976) found that individuals' goals for interpersonal communication are connected to their need for relatedness and growth and that an individual's identity derives from his or her relationships.

In the socialization process, newcomer integration into the organization is dependent on high levels of mutual appreciation and support (inclusion), understanding and liking (affection), and shared control (Mahoney and Stasson, 2005). The outcomes of newcomers' efforts to integrate into existing network structures depend largely on the interpersonal relationships developing between newcomers and insiders (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Korte, 2010; Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Understanding how things are done: Developing the cognitive dimension of social capital

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) defined the cognitive dimension of social capital as the strength of shared understandings, language, and narratives among the members of the

group. Newcomers lack much of the knowledge and skills that support the interactions of insiders. For newcomers, achieving an adequate level of shared understanding encompasses far more than simply knowing how to do the tasks of the job – it requires understanding why things are done the way they are and the meanings they have in the social context.

Learning the collective knowledge of the group is a complex, dynamic relational process (Schwandt et al., 2006). The newcomer needs to understand the information and information flows of the group, but also the meaning, assumptions, and values attributed to that information that create and sustain the collective knowledge base of the group (Ashforth et al., 2007; Schwandt et al., 2006). Modeled after Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) dimensions of social cognitions, structures, and relationships, the following study investigated how social capital affected the socialization experiences of newly hired engineers in a large manufacturing organization.

Research design

The overall purpose of this study was to investigate *how* newcomers integrated into the workplace through the lens of social capital – specifically the social cognitive, structural, and relational dimensions of the workplace. Furthermore, because of the differing perspectives in the literature on the precise nature of social capital this study took a more exploratory approach to better articulate the process of socialization from a social capital perspective in this organizational setting. For both these reasons, a qualitative case-study design seemed best suited to this exploration of a complex social phenomenon in context.

The socialization experiences of newly hired employees offered a unique opportunity to explore how the notion of social capital affects newcomer socialization and why it is important in the workplace. A qualitative method is more likely to yield new insights into complex social phenomena (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2005). In addition, 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. Specific to research on social capital, Lee (2009) recommended more qualitative research to elaborate on the preponderance of quantitative studies on social capital in the business and management literature.

The organization participating in this study is one of the world's largest manufacturers and, at the time, employed 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 into a department of approximately 1000 engineers located in the United States. Thirty newly hired engineers participated in this study.

The engineering work in this company was organized by project and product teams focused on different stages of the design-and-build process. Each work group included eight to 20 engineers and a manager engaged in some particular aspect of the workflow, such as designing parts, testing and validating products, or developing software. The 30 participants in this study came from 26 different work groups in the organization, representing a broad range of activity and social networks.

All of the new hires had completed a relatively rigorous interview process that included multiple interviews and tests of their decision-making skills. In most cases, a manager of a particular work group had interviewed newcomers for a specific job or position, although not all newcomers ended up working for the manager with whom they had interviewed. In some cases, human resource (HR) managers reassigned new hires to a different work group at the start of their employment. On the first day of employment, the new hires attended a half-day orientation program that covered procedural paperwork and general presentations about the company's mission, culture, and products. At the conclusion of this event, someone from the work group met the newcomer and took them back to the group's location. The company delegated the socialization process to the managers of the groups. There was no formal socialization program and the process varied widely from substantial to negligible guidance and information sharing. As a result, the experiences of newcomers starting their jobs varied widely.

Research questions

The general question addressed in this study was: *how did newcomers develop and access the resources of and achieve membership status in their work groups as they began their employment*? Preliminary investigations into the socialization of newcomers through the literature and from pilot interviews with practicing engineers and managers indicated that the socialization process was problematic – especially regarding the integration of new hires into the social systems of the workplace. From the information collected, three questions guided this study:

1. What are the effects of the *social structures* in the workplace on newcomer socialization?
2. What are the effects of the *social relations* in the workplace on newcomer socialization?
3. What are the *perceptions and understandings* (shared or otherwise) newcomers develop about their work and the organization during socialization?

Sample

Following the logic of theoretical or purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and with the goal of collecting rich, in-depth information on the socialization experience, we asked HR managers in the organization to recommend newly hired engineers who represented a range of work groups and a mix of gender and ethnicity. Specific attention was paid to selecting those most likely to provide rich, in-depth information about their experiences. With these criteria in mind, HR managers provided a list of potential participants. One of the research associates in the company helping us with the study sent a notice explaining the study to each of the participants' managers and asked for their permission for their subordinate to participate. All managers agreed and the research associate sent an invitation to each participant asking for their voluntary participation. We assured each participant that their participation was voluntary, would not affect their status in the organization, and their responses would be kept strictly confidential. We acknowledge the risk of selection bias in such an approach and understand

the limitations this imposes on the findings; however, in the end the sample represented a range of experiences from new graduates to experienced hires as well as a range of experiences starting out in this particular company – from bad to good.

All the newcomers had been with the company at least six months and none had been employed with this company longer than 18 months. Seventeen participants were recent engineering graduates and 13 came from previous jobs at other companies. Participants represented a mix of men and women, as well as members of different ethnic groups, although the sample was primarily Caucasian and male.

Data collection and analysis

Participant data came from semi-structured interviews conducted and recorded by one of the researchers following the Critical Incidents Technique (Ellinger and Watkins, 1998; Flanagan, 1954). Interview questions prompted participants to recall specific incidents in which they learned something about 'the way things work here,' 'how the work was organized,' and 'what factors do you think help or hinder your performance?' Subsequent questions probed for specifics: What was the incident? What happened? Who was involved? What did the participant learn from this? These interviews lasted from 1 to 1½ hours. A professional transcriber converted the recordings to text, and the primary researcher checked the transcriptions for accuracy against the original recordings. During the analysis, the researchers shared preliminary findings with the participants and sponsors as a check on the accuracy of the data; those participants who provided feedback agreed that the initial findings were accurate.

The researchers analyzed the transcripts in accordance with the qualitative analysis procedures recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). The qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti facilitated the three-step coding process. First, the researchers carefully read the transcripts and attached predetermined codes to specific statements that related to the dimensions of social capital as described in the conceptual framework. The elements coded at this level included broad statements regarding the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions of social capital. Second, the researchers retrieved all of the predetermined coded statements, carefully reread these, and proceeded to open-code (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) these statements at a finer level of detail, staying close to the participants' language. Finally, the researchers examined all the open codes and sorted them into thematic categories.

Findings

By definition, newcomers enter a social system as outsiders and one of their primary goals is to become full members of the group (Lave and Wenger, 1991). How the different social structures affected newcomers' experiences is described in the following section.

Fitting in: Integrating into the structural dimension of social capital

For newcomers, the workgroup, rather than the organization as a whole, was the primary context of their socialization. Based on a thematic analysis of the open codes referring to

the social structure of the work groups, the major theme that emerged is: *How do I fit in?* (see Table 1).

Typically, newcomers entered the workgroups at the lowest level of seniority in the group's structure. Newcomers generally described the hierarchy of the groups in terms of the status afforded to particular people because of their position, often based on seniority or expertise. An important task for newcomers was developing a sense of what their position within the group would be as a full member of the group, as well as a clear picture of who could help them learn the tasks and procedures of this position. The opportunity to develop a sense of belonging varied, with some finding this a simple process and others encountering more challenges. Those achieving a position of full membership early reported higher levels of engagement in and enthusiasm for their jobs than those confused about their position within the structure. Newcomers who remained unsure of their position indicated higher levels of disappointment and anxiety because of feelings of isolation or neglect. For example, 'I've seen people who came after me. They have a tough time comprehending [how] they will fit in the organization. They have a tough time to comprehend what their role is, what they can do and what they cannot do.'

Several newcomers also reported challenges finding those who could provide needed information and assistance. For example, 'The biggest question that I have and still have is – who does what? Who do you go to to answer those questions?' The importance of developing this sense of fitting in was reported by nearly all of the newcomers – both for facilitating learning about their jobs, as well as for fostering a sense of belonging to the organization. Many of them described their desire to be accepted as one of the group as the first step toward getting beyond the position of the 'new guy' in the group. It was a label they wanted to shed as quickly as possible. One individual bragged a little when he said, 'And I've only been here six months and I'm not like, certainly not the new guy anymore. There's a lot of people newer than me here.' Another recounted his experience with similar pride, 'He [*my manager*] was like – you're going into a position that usually the new guys don't go into, so you're going to have to step it up a little bit.' Attaining this position in the work group brought with it the feeling of success, as well as respect and camaraderie. This achievement also indicated a greater level of stability or security as a member of the group.

Table 1 Structural dimension categories derived from the reported experiences of newcomers

Structural dimension category derived from open codes	A sampling of the open codes from the participant transcripts based on the structural dimension of social capital
How do I fit in?	Difficulty understanding how I fit into the organization
	Learning a lot from meetings (how the group works, who to ask with questions)
	I'm not sure if I will stay in this group or be transferred
	I became the 'owner' of this particular process
	People from other groups came to me with questions

Although most of the newcomers described their experiences of figuring out how they fit into their work groups, a couple of the individuals reported their experiences primarily from the position of spanning the boundaries between groups. For example, one newcomer described a situation in which there was some interaction with members of other groups, but mostly of a business or technical nature. Another offered this observation:

> But not only did I get an orientation, for like, the entire system, I also got an orientation for all the people involved in each aspect of the system. So now I had at least the main contact of all the major players with all this type of stuff … This is, you know, every single system, how the whole system runs and this is like a key contact for every one of those things, to get face time with every one of those people.

Newcomers' experiences in developing a sense of their position within the group ranged from good to bad. Some received helpful information about where they fit in and who does what. Others were left on their own to find a way to fit in. An unlucky few were deliberately ignored or prevented from connecting to others by indifferent or hostile coworkers in the group. Across the spectrum of belonging, the quality of the relationships newcomers developed with their coworkers played a significant role in their integration into the social structure of the work group.

Getting to know you: Building the relational dimension of social capital

Two broad themes emerged from the data gathered on the relational dimension of social capital. One theme described newcomers' experiences in *finding a mentor* for the purpose of learning how to accomplish various tasks and how things were done in the organization, as well as facilitating integration into the group. The second theme described efforts at *building camaraderie* – a category of activities for the purpose of becoming integrated into the group (see Table 2).

Finding a mentor One of the important relationships reported by several of the newcomers was a high-quality mentoring relationship with a senior coworker in the work group. Local mentors were a good source of 'inside information' about the particular work of the group, as well as the social, political, and cultural aspects of the organization and the industry. Not all of the newcomers reported having such a relationship. But those who did have a mentor appeared to have a significantly more positive sense of learning, integration, and job satisfaction.

> My first day, [*my boss*] said that [*coworker*] was going to kind of be my mentor, to help me out and get up to speed on all this stuff. And so I sat kitty-corner to him and he's the guy that, especially the first two months, like I asked, continuously asked him to come over and look at this … And he's been extremely helpful … It was a lifesaver.

In a few of the groups, the manager assigned a senior coworker to be the newcomer's mentor. In other groups, a mentoring relationship developed informally – someone in the group took an interest in helping the newcomer. Several newcomers also reported having no one to mentor them. For these newcomers, this lack of anyone in the group taking an interest in them left them in a difficult position.

> I just had to, from all my background and skills, just kind of run with it, which was very difficult, because I feel if somebody just had given me a little bit more mentoring time during an initial phase, with some of the skilled people within the group, that I would have been much more productive.

One of the primary mediators of the variance in the quality of newcomer learning appeared to be the presence of a mentor in the work group. Although the organization had a formal mentoring program that deliberately matched an employee with a senior executive in another part of the company newcomers reported that this program was not beneficial at this early stage of their employment. During the early stage of the socialization process, what was helpful was having a mentor within the work group – a local mentor. Along with frequent interactions, this local mentor provided more specific information about the particular job tasks and helped facilitate the newcomer's integration into the group.

Table 2 Relational dimension categories derived from the reported experiences of newcomers

Relational dimension categories derived from open codes	A sampling of the open codes from the participant transcripts based on the relational dimension of social capital
Finding a mentor	Manager guided him to particular experts
	Manager may not be the best person to go to
	People don't have time to teach you
	Assigned to work under experts in other departments
	One main guy helping me to understand things
	Boss assigned a coworker to be my mentor
	He was letting me do stuff and guiding me
	And he 'scooped me under his wing'
	Identifying a few key players and learned to ask them
	It's been interesting to see how he works
	He tells me the ins and outs of how things work
	I would go to his desk and say 'what's going on'?
	I have a couple of mentors that help me
	It would be more helpful to have someone assigned, rather than find a mentor
	Different kinds of mentors: teachers or supervisors
	Find another new hire with slightly more experience
Building camaraderie	Chatting about personal life
	Need to be buddy-buddy with everybody
	Lots of social interaction contributes to a sense of belonging
	Being included by the manager immediately
	Going to parties hosted by a coworker
	Socializing and talking about our prospects for work at bars on Friday night
	Easiest way to get a new job assignment is to have a good connection to people outside the group

Building camaraderie There was a wide range of relational experiences among newcomers in this study. At one extreme, some experienced a group of coworkers who were very accommodating and collaborative. At the other extreme, some newcomers experienced coworkers who were rather unaccommodating and reclusive – and in a few cases coworkers were indifferent or openly hostile. Newcomers often linked their relational experiences to similarities or differences in personality, age, status, workload, interdependencies of the work, and differences in the histories and cultures of the groups. For example, several young, unmarried newcomers recounted differences owing to their coworkers being 'over 30 [years old]' and married with families.

Some newcomers found themselves in work groups that provided a wealth of resources in the form of information and assistance, not only about job tasks, but also about the organization, the industry, career development, and even non-work-related aspects of the group. Others found themselves in work groups that provided little information and assistance: 'Some of these engineers are not that … They're approachable, but you kind of get the feeling like – don't bother me.' A smaller number of newcomers characterized their work groups as high stress and conflictual: 'I don't feel like I'm part of a team, I don't feel like there's any kind of teamwork thing.' These differences seemed to depend heavily on the relationships among the existing members of the group.

Newcomers reported different levels of social interaction within the work groups. One reported a lot of social interaction: 'going to lunch with them, talking to them about non-work stuff. The other new hires, like we'll go out to the movies during the weekends. A lot of interaction.' In contrast, another newcomer lamented, 'So I guess in my group there's not too many people I can relate with, that I can socialize with or relate with outside of work.' A heightened sense of insecurity and isolation accompanied the reports from newcomers experiencing difficulty in establishing good social connections to others in the group.

Through their interactions with coworkers, some newcomers learned about the political norms in their groups and in other groups: 'People don't know you, you don't know them. You just make sure they know you and who you are before you just start asking things of people.' As another newcomer put it, 'So I guess just knowing the right people helps out a lot in progressing, and also building a good relationship with your [*manager*] and your director and all that, helps out a lot too.' Others, working with more reserved or less sociable coworkers, struggled to learn the details of their work. For most newcomers, it was the quality of their relations with coworkers that facilitated or constrained their learning and integration.

Many of the job-related experiences newcomers reported were embedded in descriptions of their relationships with others. As one newcomer recounted the advice given him by his manager, 'if you want anybody to go outside of the box to help you, you've really got to know these people.' Additional advice he received from his manager included this:

> you've got to be very careful of how you talk to some people because, you know, you [*don't want to*] say one thing that makes it sound like they messed up the program or it's completely their fault, even if it really is. We've just got to be buddy-buddy about things. We say – it's really no one's fault, we can all work this out.

Newcomers often reported their experiences searching out those with the information they needed to accomplish a task (instrumental actions). They also reported their attempts to be sociable (expressive or communal activity), talk about non-work topics, meet after work to socialize, and so on. For newcomers, building relationships was a primary task that often preceded gaining access to specific information and learning about how things were done in the organization. How receptive and collaborative their coworkers were had a major influence, not only on the newcomers' learning experiences and performance, but also on their engagement in and satisfaction with their work and the organization. Thus the goodwill experienced by newcomers in the context of the work groups depended heavily on the efforts of the other members of the group to respond to and help newcomers. For example, one newcomer described his manager as someone that 'really makes you feel like he trusts you, that you're part of the group, that he wants you to know what's going on that could be impacting you and not be caught off guard.'

Some of the difficult experiences newcomers had with their coworkers might be attributable to the culture of the organization and the resources available to the group. As an executive in HR explained, the organization was staffed very lean, the workload was heavy, deadlines were compressed, competition was high, and there was often little to no time formally allocated for work group members to help newcomers learn their jobs or about the organization.

Learning how things are done: Developing the cognitive dimension of social capital

As described above, learning how one fits in and building relationships were major factors that contributed to a positive adjustment. Another important and related dimension of socialization experiences was related to the efforts of newcomers to learn and understand the groups' norms for work and membership. One newcomer described his information seeking as follows, 'I have some questions. I mean technically how should I do this? Or what's the appropriate way to word this? Or how would this be perceived? And I get knowledge from the people around me that do it every day.'

The development of this cognitive dimension of social capital manifests in three areas: *understanding the engineering method, learning the work processes*, and *learning the culture of the group* (see Table 3).

Understanding the engineering method Because engineers usually share a common educational background, they also tend to have a fairly common understanding of the technical aspect of their work. Many of the newcomers shared the professional narrative of the engineer as a problem solver, but they found they had to learn the idiosyncrasies of the proper way to solve problems within their particular work group. Many newcomers were recent graduates, so for them the differences between how they solved engineering problems in school and how problems were solved in a work group were salient. Common differences between school and work centered on the increased complexity and ambiguity experienced in solving practical problems:

Table 3 Cognitive dimension categories derived from the reported experiences of newcomers

Cognitive dimension categories derived from open codes	A sampling of the open codes from the participant transcripts based on the cognitive dimension of social capital
Understanding of the engineering method	Understanding the work of engineering in practice
	Common knowledge of data analysis
	Familiarity with software tools and computers
Learning the work processes	How to work within the system (processes, procedures, norms)
	Understanding the complexity of the development and production systems
	Understanding the way things are done
	Learning a lot from listening to others discuss a problem
	Learning different processes (purchasing, review, decision-making)
Learning the culture of the group	How to interact with different people
	How to work with union people
	Different priorities for different levels of hierarchy
	Learning who you can trust
	Learning expectations of manager and others
	How to communicate and present information in meetings
	Learning motives behind different people's actions
	Learning the language
	There is a preferred way of doing things
	Avoid conflict
	Ensuring learning from experiences
	Learning a lot from meetings (how the group works, who to ask with questions)

> I mean in school it's very textbook. They always try and model everything in a mathematical sense in school. And in the real world, it's a lot more difficult to model things. It's just there's a lot more variables involved and there's the unsurety too of whether or not you're modeling it right. Are you following the right procedures and principles? And stuff like that.

Despite these new challenges in the workplace, newcomers mostly shared a common understanding and appreciation of the engineering profession with their coworkers. In many cases, this shared understanding helped facilitate the relationship building that was critical to learning about the specifics of their jobs and the organization.

Learning the work processes In almost every case, the work assigned to newcomers required them to learn the appropriate way of doing things from others in the work

groups. Newcomers reported that they were sometimes surprised or even dismayed at the amount of bureaucracy that constrained their work. One sounded bemused when he noted, 'there's a hell of a paper trail to things.' Adapting to these constraints was necessary for newcomers to accomplish their tasks and interact with others in the work process. They often described it as the way things were done.

> But when you're new, you're really frowned on if you try to go around the system … So they want you to learn this new system of procedures. And so because you're new, they're [*supervisors*] going to be more diligent about you doing it a certain way than they are about some of the more senior guys who have been there for a while.

An obvious but important part of the socialization process is learning to do the job in a way that is compatible with the other members of the organization. Because important aspects of the job are not always obvious, newcomers rely on others in the group to help them learn the way things are done. For example, one newcomer described how he learned the finer points of his work: 'I just kind of pick it up from interacting with different people and just talking to people about how you get things done around here.' In this and many other examples, the quality of learning newcomers described was closely linked to the quality of their relationships with others in their work groups. Thus, this learning invariably included knowledge of the social system as well.

Learning the culture of the group Many newcomers described the importance of learning and understanding the social system of the workplace – formally and informally. The social system primarily entailed the norms, beliefs, and values – in other words, the way things were done. Newcomers came to understand that there were socially and politically appropriate ways of doing things. For example: 'And in these meetings usually directors and executive directors come, so people don't joke around that much … It's actually a very formal meeting.' Understanding the informal cues about the way things worked was an important part of learning the social system: '[*The Director*] relayed it through our boss. [*The Director*] didn't right out say it to us, but we could tell that how our boss related [*it*] … that you know where the message was coming from and it wasn't him [*our boss*].'

Across the different groups, one could see subtle differences in the norms, values, and beliefs of the group members. One newcomer described the difficulties of working with someone coming from another group. 'The old group she used to be in at [*this company*], I guess it was extremely different and that's how it worked. And that's not how we work.' It seemed that each group had its own subculture in the organization and learning these cultural nuances was important. It helped newcomers integrate into the group by aligning themselves with the norms, beliefs, understandings, and narratives held by others.

Summary of newcomers' experiences related to social capital

Overall, the reports by newcomers of their experiences indicated a complex entanglement of social structures, relationships, and shared understanding of the appropriate ways of working that were difficult to separate. The newcomers' need for information was obvious, but the emphasis they placed on camaraderie, solidarity, and a sense of belonging was striking. As one newcomer said, 'even though it's this small thing, they [*coworkers*] come and ask

[*me*]. And it makes you feel good that you're also part of the team.' High-quality relationships with coworkers not only made the work enjoyable and fulfilling but also provided access to higher quality resources (information and learning). For newcomers at this stage of their employment, the quality of the relationships they were able to develop with others affected their efforts to find their place in the organization and learn about their work.

From our analysis it appears that newcomers are socialized into the work group – not into the organization. These work groups afforded a wide array of socialization experiences ranging from good to bad. The two primary findings – the importance of relationship building and the variety of experiences among different work groups – suggests that the relational dimension within the work groups mediated the development of and access to the resources and membership positions in the groups. It was through relationships that newcomers found their way into and around the social structures of the work groups and developed a shared understanding of the workplace culture.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings reported from this study describe the socialization experiences of newcomers from the perspective of a commonly used model of social capital by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998). This model partitioned the notion of social capital into structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions. Although Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) clearly stated that the dimensions were highly interrelated, there were notable characteristics that differentiated the dimensions. Overall, the findings of this study indicated that the relational dimension was the dominant dimension in the socialization process and seemed to mediate the other two dimensions. The quality of the relationships that formed between newcomers and their coworkers and managers (the relational dimension) largely affected where and how well they fitted into the social structure of the work group (the structural dimension). The quality of relationships also affected the quality of their learning and performance (the cognitive dimension). Furthermore, the content of the relational dimension was primarily concerned with the characteristics of interpersonal relationships, such as friendship, camaraderie, liking, trust, and respect. These characteristics were closely related to Villard and Whipple's (1976) articulation of relationships based on personal and emotional ties, which they categorized as inclusion, affection, and control. The findings of each dimension are discussed below.

As the status of newcomers entering an organization begins at a marginal position in the network, they worked hard to get recognized by and make connections with others that afforded them stronger membership ties into the group. The findings of this study indicate that the re-positioning of newcomers from outsiders to insiders is heavily influenced by the quality of the relationships and goodwill developed between the newcomer and the manager and coworkers.

Relationships enabled or constrained integration into and the development of camaraderie with the group. Throughout the various reports of newcomers' learning and striving to integrate, relationships seemed to be the dominant medium through which resources were developed and delivered. The relational dimension of social capital described by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) focuses on trust, norms, obligations, and identity. However, relationships also include important elements of control, inclusion, and affect (Villard and Whipple, 1976). Not only do newcomers need to develop trust, they also strive for some equitable level of control, acceptance into the group (inclusion), and friendship

(affect). For newcomers, these attributes of the relational dimension of the work group appear to be as important, if not more so, than the norms, obligations, and identity afforded by the group.

The efforts of newcomers to fit in show characteristics of the instrumental and communal qualities described by Lin (2001) and Portes (1998). Several newcomers reported their beliefs that it was important to first get to know people (communal actions) before asking them to help (instrumental actions). Newcomers attempting to integrate successfully into the group carefully balanced instrumental and communal actions. Balancing these actions can be difficult and required deliberate effort to avoid the self-serving appearance of instrumentality. Getting to know others was a means of learning what others expect and how others might perceive their requests for information or assistance. Perceptions are fallible (Bandura, 2001), and the formation of good relationships with coworkers was contingent, not only on the perceptions, intentions, and actions of the newcomer, but also on the perceptions, intentions, and actions of their coworkers and managers.

In some of the cases, newcomers struggled to fit in despite their best efforts. For whatever reasons, their coworkers were not receptive and accommodating, leaving the newcomer in a marginal or isolated position in the group, with weak relationships and under-developed understanding of the way things worked in the group. Understanding the primacy of relationships in the socialization process was crucial to the success of newcomers on the job. The relational characteristics of the work group seemed to mediate the newcomer's movement from a marginal to a more central position in the social structure of the group and the development of an understanding of the way the group worked.

The cognitive dimension of Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) model of social capital emphasizes the value of shared language, meanings, and narratives for accomplishing shared goals. It was often reported by newcomers that they needed to learn how and why things were done the way they were in the group. Despite their rigorous engineering education, many reported some hesitation about making decisions without checking with the group or their manager. As they became more knowledgeable about the way the group worked, they became more confident making decisions on their own. Again, the quality of their learning and related levels of confidence were facilitated by the quality of the relationships they developed with others in the group.

In many ways, managing the development of work relationships by newcomers and coworkers is a difficult process owing to the fact that, starting out, newcomers do not know the structural, relational, or cognitive dimensions of the group. Learning these unwritten rules is facilitated by first developing good relationships and through mentoring, which afford newcomers the group's resources of information, values, and beliefs. Those newcomers that were able to develop higher quality relationships with their coworkers and managers also reported higher levels of integration, camaraderie, performance, and job satisfaction.

Overall, the findings of this study showed that socialization, or the idea of learning to fit in, was portrayed by newcomers as a group or communal process reflecting much of the discourse related to the notions of social capital. The use of a social capital frame to view the socialization process brings to the forefront the interdependent and relational nature of starting a new job not typically found in the socialization literature or practice. Not only is it the responsibility of the newcomer to learn to fit in, it is also crucial for the others in the work group to welcome sincerely and assist the newcomer as a member of the group.

Implications for human resource management

It is commonly understood that socializing new hires is an expensive and challenging endeavor for organizations and newcomers (Bauer et al., 1998; Saks and Ashforth, 1997). Part of the challenge inherent in the process of socialization involves the development of newcomers' capabilities and commitment to the organization. The process of finding their place in the organization, integrating into the relational structure, and learning the appropriate ways of thinking and working are difficult if left up to the newcomer to learn to fit in. Delegating this complex, interdependent process to work groups and newcomers without some direction and awareness of the mutual obligations of both parties is a risky situation for organizations.

The heavy emphasis on the relational characteristics of socialization, as reported in this study, indicates the need for work groups to take more responsibility for integrating newcomers into their social structures. The newcomer and his or her coworkers and manager mutually constitute learning and integrating into an organization. Newcomers are not in a position to learn and integrate into the organization on their own.

Reducing the 'ramp-up' time and attrition for new hires is critical, both for organizations and for the well-being of workers. Facilitating interpersonal relations among workers has major effects on how well newcomers integrate into the organization. In addition, the findings imply that relationships have a huge influence on what they can do (performance) and how they feel (satisfaction) toward the organization. Thus, viewing socialization in organizations from the perspective of developing social capital highlights the critical importance of getting socially connected quickly.

In this study, newcomers entered the organization with high levels of human capital – degrees in engineering; however, to effectively integrate and deploy their expertise required the development of relationships in the work group. The success of these efforts varied by group and appeared to be as dependent on the efforts of coworkers in the group to accept and mentor the newcomer as it was on the newcomers' efforts to fit in.

For HR managers, taking charge of designing and managing the relational dimensions of work groups is an important role with critical consequences for performance – especially of newcomers to the organization. The effects of the relatively intangible social systems on individuals are important mediators that enable and constrain the work of the organization. The findings in this study indicate that the concept of social capital and its benefits are vital to the learning and performance of newcomers and that the relational structures of work groups mediate the formation of, and access to, the resources of the group, which affects the success of socialization processes for newcomers.

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