Socialization Tactics of New Retail Employees: A Pathway to Organizational Commitment

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Abstract

To address the prevailing issue of high turnover and low employee commitment in the retail industry, this study explores the role of newcomers' individual differences and proactive socialization tactics in developing employee organizational commitment and reducing employee turnover. Based on data collected from 239 employees in a major U.S. retail store chain, this study found that individual differences, such as goal orientation and proactivity, are significantly related to employees' choices of different socialization tactics, including inquiry, observation, and networking. The three tactics are associated with organizational commitment and furthermore employees' actual turnover mainly through role clarity and attitudes toward a retail career. Among the three proactive socialization tactics, observation plays the most important role in the socialization process.
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Retailing is a labor-intensive industry with employee costs accounting for a significant percentage of a retailer's administrative costs (Levy and Weitz 2010, pp. 220–224). The unusually high labor turnover experienced by retailers exacerbates retail labor costs. The voluntary turnover rate in the retail industry is one of the highest of any industry and the rate continues to grow (Hurst and Good 2009). In 2008, the turnover rate was 60 percent for full-time retail sales associates and 115 percent for part-time employees (Reda 2008).

The organizational commitment of a retailer's employees plays a critical role both in developing this human resource-based competitive advantage and in controlling costs.

Organizational commitment is defined as the degree to which a person identifies and is involved with an organization (Mowday, Steers, and Porter 1979). A plethora of empirical research has found that organizational commitment is positively related to work effort, organizational citizen behaviors, and job performance, and negatively related to intention to turnover (e.g., Mathieu and Zajac 1990; Meyer et al. 2002).

The socialization of new hires plays a significant role in increasing employee commitment, reducing turnover, and controlling labor costs (e.g., Bauer et al. 2007; Saks and Ashforth 1997). Organizational socialization is defined as the process by which newcomers acquire the attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge needed to make the transition from being outsiders to becoming effective members of an organization. Successful organizational socialization helps employees define their work roles, and serves as a key mechanism through which organizations mold employees to fit into the organization (Ashforth, Sluss, and Harrison 2007).

Most of the prior socialization research has focused on the tactics, such as mentoring and training, used by organizations to socialize newcomers (Gruman, Saks, and Zweig 2006). However, there is limited research on the activities undertaken by new employees, as opposed to organizations, to proactively

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engage in information-seeking and relationship-building activities on their own (Ashforth, Sluss, and Harrison 2007; Ashford and Black 1996; Gruman, Saks, and Zweig 2006). In this research, we focus on newcomers' self-initiated socialization processes and the antecedents and consequences of these processes. Thus, our theoretical framework complements the previous research on socialization by exploring the proactive behaviors of new employees as opposed to socialization activities undertaken by managers. In addition, we consider characters of the new employees that affect the proactive socialization behaviors engaged in new hires.

Although many studies have suggested that organizational socialization is significantly related to employees' organizational commitment, the processes through which commitment is developed during socialization are still unclear (Bauer, Morrison, and Callister 1998; Meyer et al. 2002; Saks and Ashforth 1997). In this study, we developed a pathway model to demonstrate how retail employees' organizational commitment is developed in the socialization process and how individual differences influence socialization tactics and, thereby, employees' organizational commitment. In addition, we collected an objective measure on employees' actual turnover two years after the initial data collection to examine the longitudinal outcomes of self-initiated socialization and organizational commitment.

Conceptual framework and hypotheses development

The conceptual framework for this research is shown in Fig. 1. This framework proposes that newcomer individual differences (i.e., proactivity personality and goal orientation) affect the self-initiated socialization tactics they use. The socialization tactics undertaken by newcomers affect their role clarity and attitudes about retail careers and, subsequently, their commitment to the retailer and actual turnover. We hypothesized that, although all three of these tactics help newcomers learn about their new

organization and their positions, the tendencies to use these tactics differ among newcomers because of individual differences.

Socialization tactics

Organizational entry represents a transition process full of ambiguity and uncertainty (Miller and Jablin 1991). To reduce the feeling of lack of control resultant from such uncertainty, newcomers engage in activities to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for their position, to develop a good understanding of and adaptation to their new work environment (Ashford and Black 1996). Previous research has identified some general and specific socialization tactics engaged in by newcomers. Most of these tactics involve either information-seeking or relationship-building with other employees (e.g., Griffin, Colella, and Goparaju 2000; Miller and Jablin 1991). In this research we focus on three self-initiated employee socialization tactics that capture a broad range of behaviors: (1) observation (i.e., observing and modeling the behavior of appropriate role models); (2) inquiry (i.e., directly asking supervisors or coworkers for information); and (3) networking (i.e., building relationships with supervisors and coworkers).

Observation. Social learning theories suggest that observation is one of the primary ways in which people learn (e.g., Bandura 1971). Through observing and imitating others' performance, newcomers can learn new work skills and organizational norms, and keep improving their performance by comparing themselves with more experienced co-workers. For example, newcomers are able to learn about organizational values by observing their co-workers' behaviors that result in rewards or punishments (Miller and Jablin 1991). Ostroff and Kozlowski (1992) found that observation was the most commonly used tactic in newcomer learning. This is likely because observation is less intrusive than other socialization tactics. The social cost is an important consideration individuals make when choosing
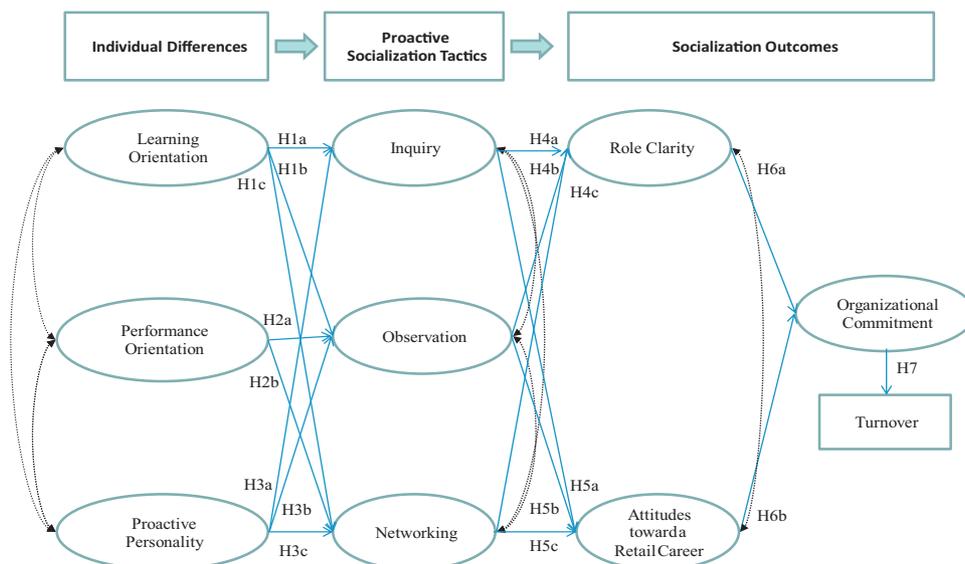

Fig. 1. A pathway model of newcomer socialization.