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Looking beyond - socialization tactics: The role of human resource systems in the socialization process

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ABSTRACT

Previous research questions whether the association between socialization tactics and human resource systems has been properly explored. Based on theory, we present a framework that links socialization tactics and human resource systems for various groups of newcomers. In doing so, we contribute to academic theory by exploring the under-researched areas of the content and context of socialization tactics, while illustrating helpful practices to retain key newcomers in organizations. The article provides new insights into socialization tactics and human resource systems by bridging the two theoretical areas, opening up this conceptual space for examination by organizational scholars. We also discuss the theoretical and practical implications for human resource scholars and practitioners accordingly.

1. Introduction

Organizational socialization is “the process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role” (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979, p. 211). Scholars have shown growing interest in understanding this process because the effective socialization of new entrants has two significant practical implications: i) protecting and maximising the return on investment made in the recruitment and training of new employees and ii) leveraging the potential competitive advantage of human capital. First, ineffective socialization is a primary cause of premature voluntary and involuntary employee turnover (Fisher, 1986). Consequently, this disrupts work and reduces productivity (Shaw, Gupta, & Delery, 2005), resulting in increased costs and wasted investment in the recruitment and training of newcomers (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003). Second, effectively socialized newcomers may be better trained, more skilled and more loyal, providing a source of competitive advantage in the marketplace. This advantage could be important given recent economic and demographic changes and the mobility of today's workforce, with a subsequent decline in organizational loyalty (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007).

In a seminal work, Van Maanen and Schein (1979) proposed six bipolar socialization tactics that are at managers' disposal to enable better structuring of newcomers' experiences. Since this work, research has linked socialization tactics to several adjustment outcomes: employees' role orientation; newcomers' role ambiguity; role conflict; organizational commitment; job satisfaction; intention to quit (e.g. Ashforth, Sluss, & Saks, 2007; Bauer et al., 2007; Jones, 1986; Saks & Ashforth, 1997b). Research in the last 30 years on socialization has mainly focused on exploring additional adjustment outcomes, such as job performance and perceived job and organizational fit (Cable & Parsons, 2001; Kim, Cable, & Kim, 2005).

Unfortunately, the more nuanced questions appear unanswered. For example: are some socialization tactics more effective than others in facilitating newcomers' adjustment in certain contexts; are some tactics more important than others for the adjustment of certain newcomers, such as knowledge workers (e.g. Saks & Gruman, 2012; Saks, Uggerslev, & Fassina, 2007)? Furthermore, despite speculation connecting socialization tactics with organizational strategy, structure and human resource (HR) management strategies

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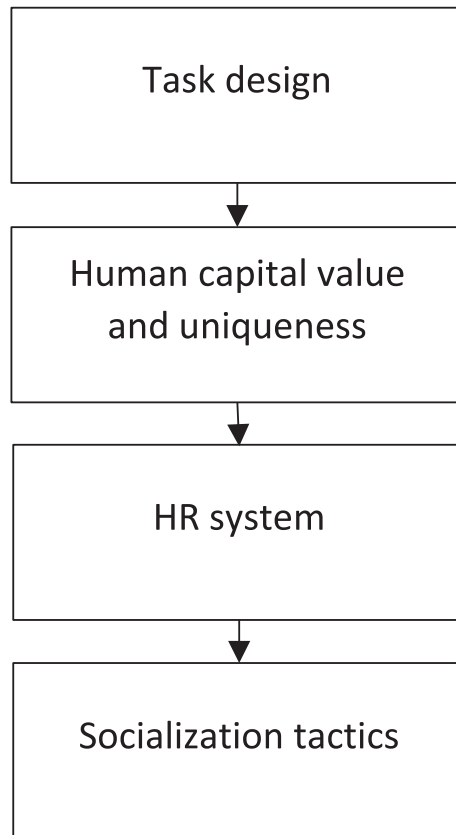


Fig. 1. The proposed relationships between task design, human capital, HR systems and socialization tactics.

(e.g. Baker & Feldman, 1991; Saks & Gruman, 2014), connections have been somewhat indirect and superficial (Ashforth, Sluss, & Harrison, 2007). This is reflected in inconclusive empirical and theoretical evidence of how socialization can be linked to HR management (Saks & Gruman, 2014).

We intend to make two key contributions to the socialization and HR literature, based on the HR architecture model (Lepak & Snell, 1999) and the job characteristics literature (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). The former highlights that not all employees possess the knowledge, skills and abilities to make them of equal strategic importance for the organization; the latter looks at the influence of task design. First, we propose that the HR architecture model (Lepak & Snell, 1999) and job characteristics literature may provide useful theoretical underpinnings for socialization tactics. This is important, as it gives organizations clues that, based on task design for different newcomers, provide them with different values of human capital. As such, they might benefit more if they are exposed to different socialization tactics, making the process quicker and resulting in mutual benefits – for the organization and the newcomer. Second, we consider that providing HR systems with specific socialization tactics and initiatives could prevent turnover among various groups of newcomers. Literature suggests that not all tactics are equally efficient in socializing newcomers under different contextual conditions (e.g. Saks et al., 2007; Saks & Gruman, 2012). Providing suggestions that may benefit newcomers more than others is thus an important next step.

This paper starts by providing a general overview of socialization tactics and the HR architecture model. Moving forward, we provide an integrated view of the two fields and suggest which specific activities may be appropriate to socialize various types of newcomers in organizations. We conclude with some theoretical and practical implications.

2. Socialization tactics and the human resource architecture model

We try to integrate three literature streams, namely, job characteristics, human resource architecture and socialization tactics literature. Fig. 1 provides an overview of how conceptual relationships derived from these three streams unfold. Our process model of connecting job characteristics, socialization tactics and HR systems starts with task design, which leads to specific knowledge, skills and ability needed by the new position. Newcomers in new roles then benefit the most with specific HR systems, which can further enhance the value of knowledge, skills and abilities, which in turn may be reflected in using specific and more beneficial socialization tactics in order to socialize newcomers more effectively and retain them in the organization. We start by discussing the relationship between human capital, HR systems and socialization tactics and finish with the job characteristics model as it presents the underlying mechanisms that inform the use of HR systems and selection of different socialization tactics.

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