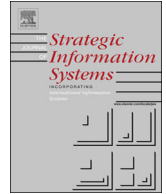




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# An affordance perspective of enterprise social media and organizational socialization

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## ABSTRACT

In response to the challenge of socializing new IT employees, some IT departments are exploring the incorporation of enterprise social media (hereinafter ESM) as an informal organizational socialization tool. Because this is a relatively new phenomenon, little is known about how ESM facilitates employee socialization. In order to contribute to our understanding of how ESM affects employee socialization, this paper invokes a case study to explore how one organization's implementation of an ESM for its IT new hire program influenced the socialization process and outcomes. To delve deeply into how the ESM influences socialization, we draw upon technology affordance theory to uncover the various first and second-order affordances actualized by different actor groups and the various outcomes resulting from the affordances. We then identify five generative mechanisms – bureaucracy circumvention, executive perspective, personal development, name recognition, and morale booster – that explain how the actualization of different strands of affordances by various groups of users produces eight different outcomes. Our results provide insights into the different affordances made possible by ESM in the context of a new hire socialization program and how these affordances have repercussions beyond those experienced by the individuals using the ESM. The results have important implications for new hire socialization and technology affordance research.

## 1. Introduction

The challenge of socializing newcomers has become an ever more pressing issue for organizations as the nature of work has increasingly shifted from long term employment within a single employer marked by slow but steady upward progression to more short-term positions and lateral movements across a variety of different organizations (Wright, 2013). With organizational affiliation waning, occupational affiliation has been on the rise. Whereas in the 1970s, workers were more likely to change their occupation than their employer, by the early 1990s, changing employers had become more common than changing occupations (Rose, 1995). Information technology (henceforth, IT) workers are among those who demonstrate greater occupational than organizational loyalty (O'Mahony and Bechky, 2006). The problem of employee flight is substantial: the cost of losing an employee is up to 3 times the employee's salary (Farren, 2007; Insala 2010). According to an IT staffing company, the direct and indirect costs incurred by organizations in replacing a single employee who makes \$60,000 per year reach approximately \$150,000 (Del Monte, 2018). The lack of organizational loyalty is important not just in terms of the costs an organization faces in hiring and training replacements, but also in the productivity losses incurred when well-trained IT workers leave a project before completion and the team must either

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redistribute the work or integrate a new member. So significant is the problem of IT talent and retention, that the issue has been rated by CIOs as the 2nd or 3rd most important issue facing IT leaders for five consecutive years in the SIM survey on IT issues and Trends (Kappelman et al., 2018).

One way that organizations may increase employee loyalty to the organization is through socialization programs (Reichers, 1987). Facing large numbers of new IT workers entering the workforce (US Bureau of Statistics, 2015) as well as the challenge of integrating experienced workers, IT departments are showing increased interest in socialization programs designed not just to train new employees in task-related skills, but also to instill a sense of loyalty to the organization in hopes of increasing the organizational affiliation of its IT workforce. Given the costs associated with hiring and training new IT employees as well as the loss in productivity incurred when valuable employees leave, the issue of effectively socializing new IT employees is of strategic importance to IT departments. Socialization is the process whereby newly hired employees learn the beliefs, values, orientations, behaviors, social knowledge, and work place skills necessary to successfully fulfill their new organizational roles and responsibilities (Fisher, 1986; Louis, 1980; Schein, 1968; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). Socialization leads to positive outcomes such as better job performance, less stress, higher job satisfaction, and reduction in intent to leave (Ashford and Black, 1996; Fisher, 1985; Kammeyer-Mueller and Wanberg, 2003). While the benefits of socialization are clear, the means of achieving effective socialization are complex with many tools and techniques available. Historically, socialization programs have relied upon formal onsite orientation sessions, offsite training sessions, buddy systems, mentoring programs, and business trips with co-workers (Louis et al., 1983).

Recently, organizations have begun implementing enterprise social media (ESM) as an informal organizational socialization tool. Social media allows users to create, edit and exchange web-based content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), thereby enabling organizations and employees to foster relationships, share knowledge and collaborate (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). ESM have a role to play in organizational innovation, operations, and human relations (Kane, 2015). Considering the potential role of ESM in an organization's IS strategy is important for organizations that wish to realize business value from ESM (Kane, 2015). Academic and practitioner research has encouraged IS managers to develop a social media strategy based on the capabilities of social media platforms to manage interpersonal networks and share content. These capabilities are well-suited for socialization programs (Kane, 2015; Kane et al., 2014). Organizations have begun using ESM systems to help new employees learn about their jobs, their colleagues, and the organization (Bennett et al., 2010). ESM enables fast and extensive knowledge sharing and facilitates open conversations (Thomas and Silverstone, 2015) both of which can foster new hire socialization. Moreover, ESM provide various opportunities such as self-marketing and relationship building that extend beyond the embedded functions and features of the technology and that may hold important ramifications for new hire socialization and, in essence, make the socialization process an "open" one. Much as ESM has been shown to enable open strategizing with a resultant sense of community and stronger organizational commitment (Hutter et al., 2017), ESM may enable open socialization wherein active participation may result in a strong sense of community and commitment.

However, the multivocality enabled through ESM in which more voices are heard and more messages are generated (Huang et al., 2013, 2015) may shift the control of organizational communication away from central, largely senior, sources to employees who have access to, and choose to engage with, the ESM. While such participation changes the rhetorical practice of organizations, in a sense democratizing the practice (Huang et al., 2013), it may also create conflicts and tensions (Huang et al., 2015). For example, in the context of open strategy, ESM has been shown to create tensions between the participatory practices of the technology and the existing managerial practices (Baptista et al., 2017). Such tensions might also be created in the application of ESM to organizational socialization practices. Formal socialization programs have been carefully scripted by senior management to convey a desired organizational message, culture, and mission. The introduction of ESM as informal socialization tools has the potential to threaten this careful scripting and disrupt the cultural norms of the organization. ESM thus have both the potential to foster a greater sense of community and organizational commitment, but also the potential to create tensions. Given the strategic importance of socialization in the current organizational context of decreasing organizational commitment marked by frequent job changes, ESM for socialization are strategically important systems and must be mindfully implemented in order to produce effective results.

Despite the strategic importance of ESM systems in organizations (Gartner Inc, 2014; Kane, 2015) and the strategic importance of attracting, training and retaining a skilled IT workforce (Kappelman et al., 2018), few studies to date have investigated the use of ESM for employee socialization (VanOsch and Coursaris, 2014). In order to contribute to our understanding of how ESM affects employee socialization, this paper invokes a case study of an organization that had recently incorporated ESM into its IT new hire program. Drawing upon technology affordance theory as our lens, we address the following research question: how do ESM affordances influence the socialization of IT new hires? This paper is organized as follows. We first provide the theoretical foundation. We then present the method, a case description and the analysis followed by the implications, limitations, and conclusion.

## 2. Theoretical foundation

Our investigation draws from organizational socialization research (Kammeyer-Mueller and Wanberg, 2003; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) and from the technology affordance perspective of information systems (Majchrzak et al., 2013). The research on organizational socialization informs our understanding of the socialization process. We then apply the technology affordance perspective as the theoretical foundation for understanding how and why ESM may alter socialization processes and outcomes.

### 2.1. Organizational socialization

Organizational socialization is a learning process wherein newly hired employees acquire the requisite knowledge, skills, values, and norms to enable them to perform their roles in their organization (Bauer and Erdogan, 2011; Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Fisher,

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