The Socialization of Newcomers into Organizations: Integrating Learning and Social Exchange Processes

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Traditional views of socialization focus primarily on the passive learning by the newcomer of the expectations of the organization. Theorizing and research on cognitive learning and social exchange indicate that the socialization process is vastly more complex. This paper views socialization through the lenses of cognitive learning and social exchange theories finding insights from both to improve the development of human resources through a broader conceptualization of organizational socialization.

Keywords: Socialization, Learning, Social Exchange

The socialization of new employees has important consequences for individuals and organizations. Various researchers contend that the quality of socialization affects employee satisfaction, attitudes, stress, performance, commitment, and turnover (Bauer, Morrison & Callister, 1998; Gerstner & Day, 1997). In many organizations, talent is a major competitive resource and for many individuals, their careers and work are major factors in their quality of life. Unsatisfactory socialization can lead to stress, disillusionment, stalled careers, and organizational loss in the form of lowered productivity and turnover (Bauer, et al., 1998). This is not only stressful for employees it is detrimental to organizations. Individuals and organizations make huge investments in their work and careers (Bauer et al., 1998), and they obviously wish to develop those investments. Increasing our understanding of the socialization process can help people adapt to their work and organizations more successfully.

Studies of socialization vary from the general, macro level (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Wanous, 1994) to the individual, micro level (Gundry & Rousseau, 1992: Louis, 1980). Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) suggest that researchers take a multi-level look at socialization to understand better its complexity. Although difficult to operationalize in one study, this paper takes a look at socialization at the individual and group level, as well as from two theoretical perspectives—learning and social exchange theories.

The first part of this paper provides an overview of research and theorizing on the socialization process. The next part describes key components of learning theory and social exchange theory and relates these perspectives to the socialization process. The paper concludes with a review of the important points gleaned from a more complex view of the socialization process and presents the implications of this view for Human Resource Development (HRD).

Problem Statement

In their review of the socialization literature, Bauer et al. (1998) identify four major reasons that socialization is important: (1) turnover is a consequence of unsuccessful socialization and is extremely costly to organizations, (2) socialization has long-term affects on incumbent employee attitudes and behaviors, (3) socialization is the primary mechanism for the organization to transfer and maintain its culture, and (4) socialization is a critical mechanism through which employees learn about the social and political norms of the organization. There is little debate that socialization is important, yet much of the work on socialization focuses narrowly on a traditional view of learning. Authors typically define socialization as the process through which an individual acquires the attitudes, behavior and knowledge required to participate effectively in an organization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Wanous, 1994). This definition assumes it is the responsibility of the individual to learn to fit in. Yet the insiders in workgroups and organizations risk losing tremendous talent by overlooking or underestimating the importance of their roles in the socialization process. The importance of the social context is noticeably absent in much of the socialization literature. This paper seeks to broaden the scope of the socialization discourse by highlighting the important effects on the newcomer of the social context within which the socialization process occurs.

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In line with the literature on informal learning in organizations, this paper suggests that much of the learning of the social norms of the workgroup and organization by newcomers takes place informally. Furthermore, while the literature on informal learning clearly recognizes the influence of contextual factors, these factors generally refer to structural or cultural characteristics of the organization (Ellinger, 2005; Marsick & Watkins, 2001; Skule, 2004). This paper suggests that the primary influence on learning is the individual interactions and relationships with members of one’s immediate workgroup. It is the quality of these interactions and relationships that can strengthen or thwart the successful entry into an organization. The question is how might the social relationships developed toward a newcomer support or hinder learning to fit into the organization?

The Socialization Process

Theoretical work on socialization tends to take three perspectives: that of the individual’s experience, the organization’s effort, and an interactive perspective stressing the mutual influence of the individual and the organization (Tuttle, 2003). The interactive perspective takes a more collaborative approach to developing a productive relationship between the individual and the organization beginning at the time of entry (Jones, 1983; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992).

In organizational settings, socialization includes formal and informal learning experiences. Socialization as formal learning usually takes the form of organizational orientation and onboarding programs. Orientation programs typically occur for a brief period at the beginning of the newcomers’ entry into the organization. Ideally, they are designed to reduce the stress of entry by offering coping strategies to newcomers, often in the form of moderating expectations and addressing feelings of disorientation (Wanous, 1992). While an orientation program may only last the first day, socialization is a longer-term process often described as a learning process that may last beyond the first year and may be perceived as lasting the length of one’s career (Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Wanous, 1992).

In a comprehensive description of socialization, Van Maanen and Schein (1979) describe the process as crossing a boundary and adopting a new role. The role in comprised of content (what to do) and process (how to do it) knowledge, as well as the mission (why we do it this way). The composite of these three knowledge bases make up the norms of the role. Additionally, Van Maanen and Schein identified ranges of six tactical dimensions by which organizations process newcomers: collective vs. individual; formal vs. informal; sequential vs. variable; fixed vs. variable; serial vs. disjunctive; and investiture vs. divestiture. The various combinations of these tactics can lead to outcomes that induce newcomers to take a custodial role (adopt and maintain the status quo), a content innovative role (fostering content innovation), or a role innovative role (redefining the role itself).

Looking across the work on socialization, Louis (1980) described four themes covered in the organizational socialization literature: (a) the characteristics of the process, (b) the stages of socialization, (c) the content of socialization, and (d) the effects of socialization practices. Louis also describes the perspectives taken by different disciplines on the socialization process—ranging from a narrow focus on outcome (e.g., turnover, commitment, satisfaction) to a broad view based on the phenomenology of the experience and the construction of meaning by individuals during socialization.

Other theoretical models describe distinct tasks to be mastered by newcomers. These begin with mastering the job tasks, followed by clarifying the role, integrating into the workgroup, and assimilating into the organization’s culture (Bauer et al., 1998). Focused specifically on the content of socialization, Chao, O’Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, and Gardner (1994) found support for six content dimensions of socialization comprised of performance proficiency, politics, language, people, organizational goals and values, and history. Chao et al suggest these dimensions are relevant for understanding the effects of socialization and better predictors of more distal outcomes, such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and retention.

A common view of socialization is that it is a learning process. Some organizations realize that allowing newcomers to learn their way into the organization by trial-and-error is neither efficient nor effective and have developed programs for socializing new members into the organization (often called orientation or onboarding). However, studies have shown that much of this formal information is of little value to newcomers (Bauer, et al., 1998; Moreland, Levine & McMinn, 2001). Organizations tend to approach socialization programs as a passive, unilateral learning process. The underlying assumption is that the new employee needs to learn how to fit into the organization. Efforts to develop and implement more effective socialization processes seem to suffer continually from this narrow understanding of the socialization problem (Moreland, et al., 2001).

Viewing the socialization process strictly from a learning-to-fit-in perspective often overlooks important social and systemic influences. Socialization is a complex process comprised of multiple actors and interactions. Socialization is not primarily the responsibility of the newcomer to conform to the organization; it is just as
important for the organization to recognize that the context and workgroup interactions within which the individual socializes into the organization have tremendous influence on the process and content of the individual’s learning (Bauer et al., 1998). This context includes multiple informal factors beyond the organization’s typical efforts to transmit its culture and expectations to the newcomer.

Wanous (1992) reviewed several models of socialization by Feldman, Buchanan, Porter, Lawler, Hackman, and Schein and developed an integrated, four-step model comprised of (a) confronting organizational reality, (b) understanding job role and tasks, (c) learning appropriate behaviors, and (d) assessing success. Wanous also notes the interactions of newcomer characteristics, insider characteristics, and situational characteristics as important sets of factors influencing the socialization process. These sets of factors are similar to the individual, social, and contextual interactions described by Bandura (1977) as a component of social learning theory. Increasing the level of interaction was found to increase the success of socialization. However, it seems reasonable that the quality of the interactivity is more important than the level of activity. Increasing the wrong kind of interactivity probably reduces the success of socialization.

Among the multiple formal and informal factors, this paper focuses on socialization as a process—a series of ongoing interactions comprised of individual and situated cognition, and social exchange. Recent cognitive and social learning perspectives posit that the learning process is mutually constituted by the social interaction and the content and context of the learner’s environment. These interactions influence newcomers’ learning about the nature of their work and the norms of the workgroup and organization into which they are assimilating (Louis, 1980; Weick, 1995). These interactions also influence the quality of exchanges between the newcomer and his or her coworkers and supervisor (Miner, 2002). Newcomers must, not only learn what to do in their new jobs, but also how to conform what they do to the appropriate way things are done in the organization—primarily the expectations of the workgroup as a social system.

Managers of new employees describe the difficulties getting new recruits up to speed—described as helping them learn the appropriate way of doing things (a training gap). The missing knowledge and skills are often in the form of people and task oriented knowledge and skills. Supervisors and coworkers in workgroups often expect newcomers to have acquired the necessary skills for interpersonal relations through their life experiences or through their innate character. How they acquire these knowledge and skills is not well articulated in the literature. The following section describes theories of cognitive learning and social exchange that help understand the interactions of individual and situational factors affecting the socialization of newcomers into organizations.

Learning Theory and Socialization

Typically, organizations consider the socialization process a success if the individual conforms to the organization’s culture and stays with the organization. This perspective views socialization as a learning process whereby the newcomer acquires and internalizes the norms expected of his or her role. While corporate level functions (e.g., Human Resources) may provide procedural information related to the job or mission-related information about the organization, supervisors and coworkers are the primary sources of information about the social and political norms of the job. Learning is a key component of the socialization process as newcomers learn the ropes of their workplace (Gundry & Rousseau, 1994; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992).

Although many theories and definitions of learning exist, most include the concepts of acquiring knowledge and skills leading to change, increased experience, and greater capacity (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Also, one of the perspectives emerging in learning theory is the integration of more narrowly focused theories into more holistic views of learning. This more inclusive of learning incorporates cognitive, emotional, and social factors into a more integrated system of internal factors and social context (Illeris, 2003; Yang, 2003).

Research indicates that informal learning is the most pervasive type of learning in organizations (Ellinger, 2005; Marsick & Volpe, 1999; Skule, 2004) characterized as learning that is “nonstructured, experiential, and noninstitutional … driven by people’s choices, preferences, and intentions” (Marsick & Volpe, 1999, p. 4).

From the cognitive perspective, learning is a general process by which people acquire, retain, and organize information into cognitive or knowledge structures. The assimilation of information into existing cognitive structures results in a relatively idiosyncratic interpretation of information based on the existing knowledge held by the individual. These existing knowledge structures serve to filter incoming information and influence the assimilation of new information and as a consequence, may change as a result of the interaction between existing and new information.

Cognitive-based learning theories explain the importance of one’s perceptions or frame of reference in filtering information and ascribing meaning to the incoming information (Ausubel, 1968; Bandura, 2001; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). In addition to the influence of one’s cognitive filter, incoming information changes repeatedly as
it transfers from the environment, through various levels of memory, and is retrieved (Gagne, 1985). Recent theorists add another layer of influence from the emotional (affectual) makeup of the individual. The processing of information takes mental energy driven by the affective orientation of the individual (Illeris, 2003). Different authors and theories describe these two sub-processes of filtering and assimilating in different ways, such as attention and retention (Bandura, 1977); reception and retention (Ausubel, 1968); and selection, encoding, and retention (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). A common thread through all of these models and theories of learning is the influence of an existing frame of reference (frames) on the recognition, interpretation, and assimilation of new information. Goffman (1974) describes social frames as variously organized sets of implicit postulates, rules, and entities. These frames can range from highly organized and complex structures to simple perspectives based on specious folklore.

A frame initiated or triggered by some incident, event, or deed influences how one perceives a situation, the actions selected to fit the perceived situation, and the perceived outcomes of the actions. Frames can be modified retrospectively by looking back on an incident and adjusting the frame (reframe the situation) to make sense of the outcomes (Goffman, 1974; Weick, 1995). In this perspective, the change in behavior, or potential behavior, obtained through experience, which defines learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), may include a change in the frame in use. Constructing and reconstructing frames is an important process of cognition (Ausubel, 1968, Bandura, 1977; Boudon, 1996; Weick, 1995).

More inclusive learning theories recognize social influence as a source of information for learning (Bandura, 2001; Illeris, 2003; Yang, 2003). A key construct of the environment affecting the learning of the new employee is the behavior of coworkers and the supervisor (modeled events or modeling) observed by the learner. The influence of modeled behavior on learning varies depending on the level of attention it captures and its perceived value for the learner (Bandura, 1977)—both of which are influenced by situational requirements and the frames in use. Modeling is a primary channel for the transmission of information, although acquisition of information is not always enough to adopt new behavior. Often overlooked in discussions of socialization are the differences in frames interacting between the newcomer and insiders. Differences in frames can lead to misperceptions, misunderstandings, and misinterpretations. Effectively communicating across different frames of reference requires an understanding of the frames in use and the language employed by different frames.

The perceptual set or frame of reference of the learner is the filter through which the learner acquires new information (Bandura, 1977). The perceptual set is a construct of previous knowledge, beliefs, and values derived from the learner’s past experience and present situational conditions. Generally, one assimilates information that conforms to one’s perceptual set and discounts information of minor consequence that does not fit into one’s perceptual set. In the event that one encounters ill-fitting information of major consequence, the individual experiences cognitive dissonance and thereby undertakes actions to remedy the dissonance (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Integrated or holistic learning theories provide a useful theoretical lens for explaining the socialization process of new professionals entering the workforce. With a frame of reference different from the frames of insiders, newcomers encounter a novel situation (new job) in which the individual does not have a prepared routine for action. Encountering a novel situation prompts individuals to search for explanations and reasons. This search can involve social sources and internal sources. Boudon (1996) uses cognitive theory to describe the relationship between individual and collective beliefs. A key characteristic of beliefs is that individuals assume, because their beliefs seem to be grounded on solid reasons, that these beliefs are held by others. There is this transsubjective dimension to beliefs that falls somewhere between pure subjectivity and objectivity. Research on reasoning has demonstrated that multiple individuals will reach similar conclusions—supported by likely reasons, even if invalid—due to collective beliefs created through processes of contagion, cues, and socialization (Boudon, 1996). It is the spread of a common belief system that is the primary purpose of socialization.

In the case of socializing newcomers, it seems plausible that there is not a common belief system in place between newcomers and insiders regarding the social and political norms of the organization. And the construction of a common system of beliefs depends as much on the exchange between the newcomer and insiders as it does on the content and the situation (Bandura, 2001; Boudon, 1996). In addition to internal cognitive and affectual processes, social interaction strongly influences learning in organizations. In the case of socialization, a key driver of learning is the interactive process between the newcomer, coworkers, and supervisor—each approaching the process from idiosyncratic perspectives, preferences, and intentions. There is an extensive literature on leader-member exchange theory and the next section presents an overview of its theoretical and empirical foundations, as well as its insights for socialization.

Leader-Member Exchange Theory in Socialization
relationships with multiple people inside and outside the workgroup. An interactionist perspective views the socialization process as the outcome of mutually constituted relationships among the supervisor, coworkers, and the newcomer (Louis, 1980; Jones, 1983). Much of this interaction takes place informally.

Graen (1986) described the socialization process as a series of role-finding, role-making, and role-implementation processes. The premise of role-making theory was that roles are ill-defined in organizations and individuals negotiate and clarify roles through interactions between leaders and members (Graen, 1986). Through these processes, the newcomer acquires information about the behavioral constraints and demands of the job, negotiates alternatives, accepts a pattern of behavior, and modifies this pattern of behavior over time (Miner, 2002). More specifically, Graen states that the behavioral constraints and demands of the job are the “accepted beliefs” (p. 1202) of the organization that determine behavior (note that these beliefs do not have to be verifiable, but merely accepted).

Leader-member exchange theory (LMX) states that leaders (more commonly identified as managers and supervisors) develop different relationships with their subordinates. These relationships range from high quality to low quality (Miner, 2002). Different scholars have identified different dimensions comprising these relationships such as trust, respect, and obligation (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Dimensions identified by Diener and Liden (1980) include dimensions of perceived contribution, loyalty, and interpersonal attraction (affect). Other dimensions include subordinate competence, exchange equity, and influence (Diener & Liden, 1980). According to Graen and Uhl-Bien’s model, higher quality relationships are characterized by higher levels of trust, respect, and obligations in which the leader shares more power, information, and access with the subordinate member.

As accepted beliefs, roles become cognitive structures within an individual’s belief system (Miner, 2002). The theoretical foundation of the role-making process rests on the dyadic interaction between the leader (supervisor) and the subordinate. Leader-member exchange theory (LMX) states that work roles are developed and established over time through a process of exchanges (or interacts) between a leader and member. The leader offers increased responsibility and membership benefits to the subordinate and in return, the subordinate offers increased commitment and contribution to the workgroup. Leader-member relationships are unique to each individual dyad and may develop into high-quality relationships based on trust and respect or degenerate into low-quality relationships merely fulfilling the employment contract (Bauer & Green, 1996).

LMX has evolved significantly since its introduction in the 1970s as vertical-dyad linkage theory (VDL) based on role-making theory. In their review of the development of leader-member exchange theory (LMX), Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) identify four stages reflecting different interests in the relationship between a leader and member: (a) the examination of differentiated relationships in dyads, (b) study of the relationship and organizational outcomes, (c) describing the process of partnership building, and (d) expansion of dyadic relationship to groups and networks. Subsequent research and theorizing added complexity to the basic dyadic notions of LMX recognizing the situational and contextual factors involved in constructing relationships. This expansion of the focus of interest in the phenomenon provides greater insight to the socialization process—especially by including contextual factors and the influence of relationships beyond the supervisor (e.g., coworkers).

Research on LMX found high correlations between the quality of the relationship and interpersonal attraction (liking and similarity)—especially affective similarity between the leader and member. Certainly, organizations attempt to control many of the compatibility issues that contribute to liking and similarity in the recruiting and selection processes. However, once onboard, high- or low-quality LMX relationships form quickly and tend to endure (Miner, 2002). Another important finding of research on LMX is that perceptions of the LMX relationship differ between the leader and the member (Gerstner & Day, 1997). This difference in perceptions may confound attempts to socialize newcomers by fostering misperceptions, misunderstandings, and misinterpretations of events, exchanges, and expectations during the socialization process.

While much of the existing research on LMX has been on the leader and member dyad, Graen later extended the theory to horizontal (coworkers) and diagonal (matrix) dyads (Miner, 2002). Sherony and Green (2002) examined the relationship patterns between coworkers, as well as between workers and leaders. Drawing on Heider’s theory of balance, they found that individuals’ relationships with their superior moderated the relationship they had with coworkers. The theory of balance predicted that if both coworkers had equivalent relationships (good or bad) with their supervisor they tended to have a good relationship with each other. If coworkers had differing relationships with their supervisor, they had a poor relationship with each other. From this work, it seems likely that leaders can not only influence the type of relationships they have with their subordinates, but can influence the relationships between coworkers. This has direct application for socialization as newcomers learn about and develop relationships with multiple people inside and outside the workgroup. The importance of a multidimensional view of
socialization relationships (vertical, horizontal, and diagonal) seems important to examine as the use of teams and informal learning increases in the workplace.

Conclusions and Implications for HRD

It seems plausible that the interaction of two different factors—relationship-building and learning—contribute to the outcomes of the newcomer’s socialization process. The following model describes socialization as learning and exchange processes comprised of interactions between the new employee and the supervisor and the new employee and co-workers.

![Diagram of socialization process]

**Figure 1.** A process of socialization as new employee learning and relationship-building.

The mission of HRD, to develop and unleash human expertise in organizations (Swanson & Holton, 2001) is clearly relevant during an individual’s entry and socialization into the organization. And some argue that the learning and relationship-building by the individual begins even before entry—in the recruitment and selection stage (Wanous, 1992). The experiences encountered by the individual during socialization affect that individual’s attitude and motivation toward the work, workgroup, and organization for a long time. Research has found that these initial first impressions endure (Bauer, et al., 1998). One explanation for the tenacity of these impressions comes from learning theory in which the knowledge constructed by an individual during an experience becomes embedded in that individual’s cognitive structure (Huber, 1993). In turn, this embedded knowledge serves to filter and influence the acquisition, processing, and retrieval of subsequent information in an iterative manner enacting expectations and outcomes (Bandura, 1977; Weick, 1995). The tenacity of initial impressions highlights the importance of starting and nurturing the newcomer’s experience with the organization in the best possible manner.

Realistic job previews attempt to start the experience by lowering the newcomer’s expectations in the hope that the newcomer will experience less disillusionment and dissonance once onboard (Wanous, 1992). Research on this tactic shows positive results early in the newcomer’s socialization, but the effects dissipate over time as the individual experiences more of the actual working conditions. Socialization practices that depend on a single tactic, such as realistic job previews, risk suboptimizing the socialization process. It would be better to couple these efforts with relationship-building efforts. The critical influences of the supervisor and coworkers provide much of what newcomers learn as they adapt to the organization.

The assumption that it is the responsibility of the individual to learn the norms and expectations of the workgroup and organization tends to overlook the importance of the social exchanges among members of the workgroup. The practice of providing information on procedural and structural characteristics of the organization misses the opportunity to understand more effectively the social processes of socialization and subsequently help the newcomer join the group more effectively. The organization may also miss an important opportunity to take advantage of innovative ideas toward the work that has become taken-for-granted in the organization. Benefits can accrue to newcomers and organizations from the careful and thoughtful recognition and consideration of each other’s perspectives.

**Suggestion 1:** More carefully accommodate the perspective (frame of reference) of newcomers during the socialization process as a way to foster a more successful socialization experience and acquire new ideas.

Other research on the phenomenon of social exchange may be able to provide important insight to the socialization process by expanding the focus of socialization beyond the education of the newcomer into the organization’s ways of doing things. The strong influences of interactions among coworkers and supervisors and the quality of these interactions highlight the importance of relationships in the socialization process (Sherony & Green, 2002).
The current state of LMX theory takes a broader, more systemic approach to the process of developing relationships as partnerships. This view directs attention beyond just the newcomer and includes the emergent quality of network formation within the workgroup, and in more cross-functional and team-based environments, to relations with other workgroups. One important oversight indicated by the research on social exchange is that the supervisor, coworkers, and newcomer make important contributions to the quality of the relationships formed during socialization. Therefore, it seems critical to develop the knowledge and skills of supervisors and coworkers related to newcomer socialization. The fact that these relationships tend to endure and are difficult to change once formed speaks to their importance. Organizations seem to assume that experienced insiders know what is important to succeed and, furthermore, know how to educate and train newcomers to succeed. A more systematic approach to training supervisors and coworkers in effective socialization practices could help improve the socialization process for newcomers.

Suggestion 2: Expand the scope of socialization programs to include more formal training and education of supervisors and coworkers.

Another key finding of the socialization research is that orientation and onboarding programs tend to focus on tactical and procedural information and perhaps the more abstract vision and mission of the organization. Moreland et al, (2001) have found much of this information is of little use to individuals. Information that is more useful tends to be that which helps the individual understand the unwritten rules (norms) of the workgroup(s) and helps the individual better form high-quality relationships in the organization. By definition, this crucial information is unwritten and often learned by trial and error. This is a difficult area to explain to newcomers, as much of this information is implicit or not condoned officially by the organization. Much of this information is of a political nature and serves to maintain the status quo of the internal power structures through which work gets done. While this is a sensitive area to expose to newcomers there are potential benefits, as well as liabilities, to making more of this information explicit. First, making the unwritten rules more apparent helps newcomers function more effectively and more quickly in the organization. Second, examining these rules may help reinforce functional practices and identify dysfunctional practices to eliminate. Changing dysfunctional practices starts with the awareness of their existence.

Suggestion 3: Expand the scope of socialization programs to explicate the more implicit social and political norms of the organization.

Adopting these suggestions would noticeably change the content and structure of socialization processes and the socialization experience of newcomers in organizations. Of course, the complexity of this view of the socialization process demands more time and attention from limited organizational resources—most notably the increased demand on time and attention from supervisors and coworkers. Organizations will have to balance the demands they already have on resources with the potential benefits of more successful socialization. At the least, HRD professionals in organizations can increase the effectiveness of current socialization practices through the knowledge and awareness of the complex interactions of learning and relationship-building and recommend a more systematic focus of current resources to best advantage. At best, the HRD professionals can broaden the scope of socialization practices to encompass more of the factors that affect the success of newcomers’ socialization into the organization.

References


