ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION AS A LEARNING PROCESS: THE ROLE OF INFORMATION ACQUISITION

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This study investigated newcomers' information acquisition about organizational contextual domains from different sources, the relationship between information acquisition and knowledge of domains, relationships between information acquisition from sources, knowledge of domains and socialization outcomes, and shifts in these processes over time. Questionnaires assessing information acquisition strategies, knowledge and socialization outcomes were completed by 151 new organizational members across a variety of organizations, after an average of 17 weeks on the job and again several months later. Results of the study indicated that newcomers differentially relied on sources to gather information, that different sources were of varying importance for gaining knowledge, and that supervisors, coworkers, task and role mastery were related to the assimilation process of new employees. Research and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

The socialization of individuals to new organizational contexts requires that they learn to understand and make sense of their new setting (Louis, 1980). Although much socialization research and theory has given primary emphasis to the adopting of normative attitudes, values, goals, and culture of the organization (e.g., Schein, 1968, 1988; Van Maanen, 1976; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), more recent perspectives have addressed the learning process that occurs as newcomers assimilate to the organization. In these newer perspectives, the organizational level issues are more distal to newcomers, whereas content areas closer to the individual, such as tasks and roles, are recognized as important

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for adjustment. For example, new organizational members are believed to experience changes in the development of work skills and abilities, changes in the acquisition of appropriate role behaviors, and changes related to adjustment to the group's norms and values (Feldman, 1981). Thus, the literature suggests four content domains which encompass the important contextual features relevant to the socialization learning process—job-related tasks, work roles, group processes, and organizational attributes—that have differential salience to newcomers and different time frames for learning (e.g., Feldman, 1981; Fisher, 1986).

In an effort to gain an understanding of the relevant features of the organization, new hires turn to available information sources including interpersonal sources such as supervisors, coworkers, and mentors, and noninterpersonal sources such as written materials, vicarious observation, and experimentation (Feldman, 1976; Louis, Posner, & Powell, 1983; Miller & Jablin, 1991). It also assumed that newcomers are proactive agents in the socialization process. Newcomers encounter features in the new organizational setting, seek out sources of information, learn what features are relevant and develop an understanding of the organizational context (Louis, 1980; Reichers, 1987). Thus, a focus on the variations in the information acquisition strategies or patterns used by newcomers would be fruitful. In addition, the notion that there are multiple sources of information and multiple learning processes is consistent with the notion that socialization is a continuous process (Feldman, 1976, 1989; Van Maanen, 1976). Over time, different contextual features or different sources of information may become more or less salient as individuals adapt to their new organizational environment.

Much of the limited amount of empirical work in socialization has been conducted in a piecemeal fashion and has typically relied on cross-sectional designs (Fisher, 1986). Some studies have focused primarily on the availability of different sources (e.g., Louis et al., 1983; Posner & Powell, 1985), while others have focused on learning about different task-related aspects or role behaviors (e.g., Feldman, 1977; Graen, Orris, & Johnson, 1973). Little or no research has examined the information acquisition process from various sources about various organizational domains in a comprehensive fashion, and little work has explored how information acquired from sources relates to learning and adaptation during early stages of the socialization process. Further, with few exceptions (e.g., Katz, 1978; Kozlowski & Hults, 1986), little work has explored changes in the process over time.

The present study takes a learning perspective with a longitudinal focus. It investigates the acquisition of information about organizational contextual features from potential sources, the relationship of information gathering to knowledge obtained about the contextual features, and
the relationship of the learning process to attitudinal outcomes, such as satisfaction, commitment, adjustment, stress, and turnover.

**Information Acquisition Patterns**

Stage models of the socialization process (cf. Feldman, 1981; Louis, 1980; Van Maanen, 1976) indicate that during the first few months on the job, new employees concentrate on gathering information, learning about the tasks necessary for the job, and clarifying their role in the organization. To acquire information and learn about the new setting, the new employee relies on sources within the organizational context. A multitude of interpersonal and noninterpersonal sources can be useful during the learning process (Kozlowski & Ostroff, 1987; Louis et al., 1983; Miller & Jablin, 1991; Reichers, 1987; Schein, 1988).

Among the interpersonal sources of information, supervisors, coworkers, and mentors have been shown to play an important role in the learning process (Ashford & Cummings, 1985; Feldman, 1976; Louis et al., 1983; Posner & Powell, 1985). Supervisors are important for the new employees' eventual success or failure (Berlew & Hall, 1966; Graen, 1976; Hanser & Muchinsky, 1978; Schein, 1988), mitigate the negative effects of unmet expectations (Major, Kozlowski, Chao, & Gardner, 1992), and are critical for developing the shared interpretive system indicative of assimilation (Kozlowski & Doherty, 1989). Coworker relationships have also been shown to play a key role in socialization (Feldman, 1977; Louis et al., 1983). Coworkers may help new employees integrate the various pieces of information in the setting (Van Maanen, 1984) and may communicate subtle values, norms or expectations that may not be well understood by supervisors or mentors (Schein, 1988). Mentors are believed to facilitate adjustment by providing support, advice and “inside” information, and by coaching and protecting employees (Kram, 1985).

Little research attention has been paid to noninterpersonal sources of information, or to a comparison of the usefulness of interpersonal and noninterpersonal sources. Three noninterpersonal sources are most often mentioned in discussions of socialization—official organizational literature, experimenting with new behaviors and observation (Ashford, 1986; Miller & Jablin, 1991; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1989; Schein, 1988). Basic information about organizational policies, procedures, and task duties may be gleaned from written literature. New employees can also learn through the rewards and punishments resulting from efforts at problem solving or experimenting with new behaviors (Schein, 1988). Finally, observing the behaviors of others in salient situations can be used to obtain relevant information about how to perform a task, the expected
behaviors, and the salient values (Miller & Jablin, 1991) and can provide newcomers with models to emulate in learning new behaviors and skills (Bandura, 1971).

Although a variety of sources can provide information, there are many different features to learn about from these sources. Theoretical explications of the content of learning during socialization (Feldman, 1981; Fisher, 1986; Katz, 1980) indicate that the organizational context domains relevant to socialization include task demands, role attributes, work group norms, and organizational climate and culture (Feldman, 1981; Fisher, 1986). The task domain reflects such features as understanding task duties, assignments, priorities, how to use equipment, how to handle routine problems and so forth. The role domain focuses on the boundaries of authority and responsibility, expectations and the appropriate behaviors for the position. The group domain is concerned with coworker interaction, group norms and values, and the work group's normative structure. The organizational domain focuses on the politics, power, and value premises of the organizational system, its mission, leadership style, special languages, and so forth.

Different sources are likely to be instrumental for interpreting and learning about some of these domains, but not others. Due to the limited amount of research, it is difficult to offer detailed predictions about which particular sources would be more heavily relied upon for which contextual domains; however, some propositions can be offered. Coworkers should be a more appropriate source for gathering information about group processes than supervisors, as the members of the group are the primary actors defining the group processes (Feldman, 1977; Schein, 1988). Supervisors are generally important sources of information (Hanser & Muchinsky, 1978; Schein, 1988) and may provide more information about the work role than coworkers since it is often supervisors who define appropriate role behaviors (Graen, 1976; Schein, 1988). Tying things out may be useful to gain information about the task-related aspects of the job, but experimenting may be a difficult strategy for learning about group and organizational issues. Here, observation of others may provide better information about group interaction, and organizational practices and policies (Miller & Jablin, 1991). Finally, there is some evidence which suggests that information provided by interpersonal sources is inadequate (Jablin, 1984), hence newcomers may rely on other tactics such as observation for gathering information (Miller & Jablin, 1991). Therefore, at a general level, it is hypothesized that newcomers will gather information from different sources and will acquire differing amounts of information from sources depending on the contextual domain. More specifically, it is believed that supervisors will be heavily relied upon as interpersonal sources for all domains,
coworkers will be the most critical sources for the group domain, experiment will be heavily relied upon for the task domain, and observation of others will be important for the role and organization domains.

Previous research indicates that newcomers concentrate their initial learning on the task (Feldman & Brett, 1983), role (Graen et al., 1973) and to some degree the group domain (Feldman, 1977). Thus, it is hypothesized that the task domain will receive primary emphasis in newcomers' information acquisition, followed by an emphasis on role and group issues, with less emphasis placed on organizational issues. Further, because the socialization process is developmental (Feldman, 1976), it is hypothesized that newcomers will shift their information acquisition strategies over time.

**Acquiring Information Versus Gaining Knowledge**

During the first few months on the job, newcomers focus their attention on acquiring information. By the ninth month or so, newcomers attempt to master the demands of the situation (Feldman, 1981; Schein, 1968, 1988). This implies that new employees should have gained pertinent knowledge about their task, role, group, and organization. Previous research has often failed to make explicit distinctions between the information provided by various sources about domains and the extent to which newcomers have knowledge of these domains. Most research has focused on the availability or perceived helpfulness of various sources (e.g., Feldman, 1977; Louis et al., 1983), but has neglected studying the relative contributions of different sources to knowledge or learning. It may be that sources provide a great deal of information, but the information provided by some sources is more relevant and leads to more knowledge than information from another source. Thus, an examination of the relationship between information acquisition from sources and knowledge is important. It is hypothesized that some sources of information will be more useful than others in providing pertinent information that contributes to knowledge of domains.

Given the dynamic nature of the socialization process, knowledge about different domains should develop at different times. Some researchers have concluded that employees must adjust to their group before they can master their task, and employees must demonstrate task mastery and be accepted by the group before they are given latitude in negotiating their role (Feldman, 1989; Katz, 1980). Thus, over time, it is hypothesized that newcomers will increase their knowledge in each of the four domains. It is further hypothesized that knowledge about the group will be greatest initially, but over time, knowledge about the task will increase and be equal to knowledge possessed about the group;
knowledge about the organization will be less than knowledge about other domains throughout early socialization.

**Socialization Outcomes**

The effectiveness of the transition process from gathering information to mastering the relevant job components should affect the outcomes of socialization. Ineffective socialization is related to increased turnover, lower performance, dissatisfaction, negative work attitudes, and stress (Feldman, 1981, 1989; Louis et al., 1983; Nelson, 1987; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Most of the empirical socialization studies have relied upon these traditional outcome measures (i.e., satisfaction, turnover, and stress). However, because there are a multitude of antecedent factors (e.g., motivation, performance, climate, job characteristics) related to these variables, these measures may not be the most appropriate outcome variables for socialization. A useful approach would be to focus on outcome variables that are more directly reflective of the inclusion (Schein, 1968) and assimilation processes presumed to take place during socialization (Fisher, 1986). Newcomers' adjustment to their new work setting would be one such variable more directly related to the content of socialization. Therefore, it is expected that information acquisition from sources and knowledge about domains will be strongly related to newcomers' adjustment, and somewhat related to satisfaction, commitment, stress, and turnover intentions.

Individuals' changes in their acquisition of skills, knowledge, and adjustment to norms and values may occur at different speeds (Feldman, 1981). Some individuals may quickly acquire information and adapt early on, while others may take longer to obtain the requisite information and be slower in adapting to the new setting. Different sources of information may be more of less useful over time. If a source of information or knowledge about a domain is positively related to an outcome of socialization, a positive change in acquiring information from that source or obtaining knowledge about that domain over time should result in a positive change in the socialization outcome. Similarly, negative changes in information acquisition or obtaining knowledge should be related to a decrease in outcomes over time. It is hypothesized that acquiring more information from those sources related to outcomes and gaining more knowledge about domains over time will lead to increases in satisfaction, commitment, and adjustment, and lower stress and turnover intentions over time.

In sum, this research investigated hypotheses indicating that (a) newcomers would differentially utilize various sources to gather information about various contextual domains, (b) some sources of information...
would be more useful than others in providing information that contributes to knowledge, (c) information acquisition and obtained knowledge would be related to socialization outcomes, and (d) shifts in information acquisition, knowledge, outcomes, and their relationships would occur over time.

Method

Procedure

To capture the socialization process as it develops over time, two phases of data were collected. Time 1 data were collected from organizational newcomers as they began their careers, within the first few months in their new jobs. Time 2 data were collected approximately 5 months later.

Participants were solicited from seniors of a large midwestern university and a smaller engineering and management institute. Mailing lists obtained from the institutions were used to send solicitation letters to 1,766 seniors with engineering and management majors. Individuals were asked to respond to a survey if they had already begun or were about to begin their first post-graduate career-oriented position within the next few weeks. Reply cards were enclosed to indicate interest in participating. Surveys were mailed to interested participants who were asked to answer the questions and return the surveys directly to the researchers in postage-paid return envelopes.

Of those expressing interest \(n = 496\), 69% returned completed Time 1 surveys \(n = 334\). Of this sample, 66% \(n = 219\) returned Time 2 questionnaires as well. Of these, complete and usable data across both time periods were available from 151 participants. It is difficult to determine the exact response rate because it was impossible to distinguish recent graduates who were not interested in participating from those who had incorrect addresses, had begun graduate school, were not yet eligible to graduate, or were as yet unemployed.

Participants

The sample consisted of 88 male and 63 female newcomers, of which 62 were business majors, 86 were engineering majors and 3 were some other major. The average age of the participants was 23.09 \((SD = 2.41)\). Participants averaged 17 \((SD = 16)\) weeks on the job for Time 1 data, and 35 weeks \((SD = 19)\) for Time 2. Participants were employed across a broad range of organizations. The number of employees in the company was reported on an 8-point scale ranging from less than 100 (1) to more
than 10,000 (8), with a mean of 5.15 ($SD = 2.31$) which corresponded to the 5,000 to 10,000 employee category. The average size of the workgroup was 7.58 ($SD = 5.81$). There were no significant differences in these sample characteristics among those who completed only Time 1 surveys and those who completed both surveys.

**Measures**

*Socialization information acquisition.* This measure assessed how much information newcomers acquired about the task, role, group, and organizational domains from each of three interpersonal sources (mentors, supervisors, coworkers) and three noninterpersonal sources (observation, experimentation, and objective referents). The measure consisted of 33 items representing specific features indicative of the four domains which were generated based on the socialization literature that defined the domains of interest (cf. Feldman, 1981; Fisher, 1986). The task, role, and group domains were each assessed by eight items; the organization domain was represented by nine items. Items comprising the task domain focused on a concern with task mastery and how to do the job; items representing the role domain focused on establishing the boundaries of responsibility and learning the behavior appropriate for someone in the position; the group domain items focused on understanding how to interact and get along with coworkers; and the organizational domain items focused on learning about the politics, power, culture, and value system of the organization. Respondents were not made aware of the four conceptual domains represented by the items.

The measure was presented in matrix form and consisted of a random sequence of the 33 items of domain features arrayed against the six potential information sources. Sources were defined as: *Mentor*—someone at a higher level who has helped you by taking you “under their wing,” even though they were not formally required to do so, and who was not the immediate supervisor; *Supervisor*—your immediate supervisor or boss; *Coworker*—a member of your workgroup or other employee at your level or lower; *Observation*—observing how others do things; *Trying*—trial and error or experimenting by trying different things; and *Manual*—learning from a manual about policies, procedures, jobs, and so forth. Respondents indicated how much information they acquired from each source about each item. Those lacking mentors were instructed to omit ratings for that source. Ratings were made using a 5-point scale ranging from “a great deal of information” (5) to “no information” (1).

This procedure yielded 198 ratings (33 items $\times$ 6 sources). Scores for the measure were computed by averaging the item ratings for each
of the four domains by each of the six sources. This resulted in a summary score indicating how much information was acquired about the task, role, group, and organization from each potential source. Unfortunately, only 23 of the 151 participants indicated that they had a mentor relationship at both times. Due to the small number of participants with mentors, the mentor as a source was eliminated from analyses.

Table 1 contains the means and standard deviations for the information acquisition measure for Time 1 and Time 2. Coefficient alphas were computed for each of the domains by source scores and ranged from .80 to .91, with a mean and median of .85.

Knowledge about domains. A self-report measure of domain knowledge was designed to assess how knowledgeable newcomers were about elements representing each of the four domain areas. Respondents indicated how much they know about the various aspects of their job using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “not very knowledgeable” (1) to “extremely knowledgeable” (5). The measure consisted of the 33 items from the information acquisition measure. A summary score for each domain was computed by averaging the items representing the particular domain. Table 2 contains the means, standard deviations, intercorrelations, and internal consistency indices of the knowledge domain scores.

Attitudinal outcome measures. Participants were asked to answer several sets of questions in order to assess how well newcomers were assimilating to their work environments and new jobs. These measures are described below. Unless otherwise noted, a 7-point Likert-type scale was used. The means, standard deviations, intercorrelations, and internal consistency reliabilities for the outcome measures are contained in Table 2.

1. Satisfaction. Respondents were asked to rate how fulfilled and content they were with various aspects of their job using a 5-item scale similar to that used by Fisher (1982) and Hackman and Oldham (1975). A 6-point Likert-type rating scale was used.

2. Commitment. The organizational commitment scale focused on how loyal participants felt toward their company. Eight items were used to measure commitment. The scale was a shortened version of the measure developed by Mowday, Steers, and Porter, (1979).

3. Adjustment. Based on a report by Fisher (1982), respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt they had adapted to their work situation, were trusted by others, and felt independent. A 15-item scale was used to measure adjustment.

4. Stress. Based on an adaptation of scales by Caplan (1980), two measures of stress were assessed: physical stress and psychological stress. Physical stress was assessed with an 11-item scale in which respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they felt symptoms such as
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Interpersonal sources</th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th>Noninterpersonal sources</th>
<th>Row means</th>
<th>Significant comparisons</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Co-Worker</td>
<td>Watching</td>
<td>Trying</td>
<td>Manual</td>
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<td>Task</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>3.35 .93</td>
<td>3.38 .89</td>
<td>3.22 .75</td>
<td>3.37 .77</td>
<td>1.76 .76</td>
<td>3.03 .50</td>
<td>S,C,W,T &gt; MA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>3.28 .89</td>
<td>3.27 .81</td>
<td>3.19 .76</td>
<td>3.37 .84</td>
<td>1.67 .62</td>
<td>2.96 .47</td>
<td>S,C,W,T &gt; MA; T &gt; W</td>
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<td>Role</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>3.20 .90</td>
<td>3.03 .86</td>
<td>3.34 .73</td>
<td>3.24 .84</td>
<td>1.38 .50</td>
<td>2.87 .50</td>
<td>S,C,W,T &gt; M; W &gt; C</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>3.25 .86</td>
<td>2.96 .81</td>
<td>3.34 .79</td>
<td>3.36* .91</td>
<td>1.36 .49</td>
<td>2.87 .48</td>
<td>S,W,T &gt; C &gt; M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>2.81 .83</td>
<td>3.46 .71</td>
<td>3.83 .67</td>
<td>2.66 .77</td>
<td>1.24 .34</td>
<td>2.81 .45</td>
<td>W &gt; C &gt; S,T &gt; M</td>
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<td>Time 2</td>
<td>2.75 .83</td>
<td>3.32* .79</td>
<td>3.84 .68</td>
<td>2.78* .83</td>
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<td>2.79 .46</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>3.09 .88</td>
<td>3.09 .79</td>
<td>3.28 .79</td>
<td>2.11 .73</td>
<td>1.95 .69</td>
<td>2.75 .50</td>
<td>W &gt; S,C, &gt; T &gt; M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>3.13 .86</td>
<td>3.13 .77</td>
<td>3.29 .78</td>
<td>2.22* .79</td>
<td>1.83* .62</td>
<td>2.76 .50</td>
<td>W,S,C, &gt; T &gt; M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>3.11 .82</td>
<td>3.24 .73</td>
<td>3.42 .66</td>
<td>2.84 .69</td>
<td>1.58 .50</td>
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<td>W &gt; S,C, &gt; T &gt; M</td>
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<td>3.10 .80</td>
<td>3.17 .74</td>
<td>3.42 .69</td>
<td>2.93 .77</td>
<td>1.52 .45</td>
<td></td>
<td>W &gt; S,C,T &gt; M</td>
<td></td>
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*Note: N = 151. In the significant comparisons column, a greater than sign indicates significant differences within a row at p ≤ .05; S = supervisor, C = coworker, W = watching or observation of others, T = trying or experimentation, M = manual or objective referents.

* Indicates significant within-cell differences between Time 1 and Time 2 at p ≤ .05.
### TABLE 2
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between Information Acquisition From Sources, Knowledge About Domains, and Outcomes for Time 1 and Time 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Time 1 M</th>
<th>Time 1 SD</th>
<th>Time 1 α</th>
<th>Source Knowledge M</th>
<th>Time 2 M</th>
<th>Time 2 SD</th>
<th>Time 2 α</th>
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<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.26</td>
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<td>Coworker</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.21</td>
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<td>Watching</td>
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<td>0.66</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trying</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manual</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.07</td>
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<td>Knowledge Task</td>
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<td>0.51</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.23</td>
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<td>Role</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.12</td>
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<td>Outcome</td>
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<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>4.42</td>
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<td>.89</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
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<td>Commitment</td>
<td>5.06</td>
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<td>.88</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.07</td>
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<td>Adjustment</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psy stress</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.26</td>
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<td>Phy stress</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnover int</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>-.23</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** For source variables, scores were collapsed across the four domains for each source, except for correlations between source and knowledge whereby corresponding source by domain and knowledge domains were computed.

Entries below the diagonal are for Time 1 variables; entries above the diagonal are for Time 2 variables.

Correlations that differ by .23 or greater are significant at $p \leq .05$.

Correlations $\geq .13$ are significant at $p \leq .05$. 
dizziness, poor appetite, or upset stomach. The psychological stress scale included five items such as having trouble getting up in the morning, not feeling qualified for the job, or generally feeling stressed by the job.

5. Turnover intentions. A 3-item scale (based on Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, & Klesh, 1979; Seashore, Lawler, Mirvis, & Cammann, 1982) assessed how often participants thought about quitting, and the probability that they would look for a new job in the next year.

Results

All analyses were based on a sample size of 151. The results are organized to address: (a) differences in patterns of information acquisition among sources and domains; (b) the relationship between sources of information and knowledge obtained about domains; (c) relationships between sources of information, knowledge about domains, and attitudinal outcomes; and (d) changes in attitudinal outcomes over time due to changes in information acquisition.

Information Acquisition Patterns

Newcomers were asked to report the extent to which they used each of the sources to learn about various features of four domains (task, role, group, and organization). Within an information source, the intercorrelations across the four domains were somewhat high, ranging from .45 to .86; the average intercorrelation was .73. However, within a domain, across the sources, the intercorrelations were relatively low, ranging from .15 to .62, with an average intercorrelation of .24.

The first set of hypotheses focused on information acquisition patterns. It was hypothesized that newcomers would differentially rely on sources to learn about domains and that the pattern of information acquisition would shift over time. Further, it was hypothesized that newcomers would focus primarily on acquiring information about their task and role and devote less attention to acquiring information about the organizational domain.

Repeated-measures MANOVAs, one for each time period, were conducted as overall tests of whether sources were differentially relied upon to learn about different domains and to control for Type I error due to the large number of subsequent univariate tests. The dependent variables were the information acquisition scores for each of the sources for each contextual domain (see mean scores in Table 1). The MANOVAs included two within-subjects factors (domains and sources). For Time 1 data, results showed significant main effects for domains ($F(3,148) = 55.01, p \leq .001$) and sources ($F(4, 147) = 265.59, p \leq .001$), and a
significant domain by source interaction \((F(12, 139) = 81.37, p \leq .001)\). Similar results emerged for Time 2 in that there were significant main effects for domains \((F(3,148) = 50.79, p \leq .001)\) and sources \((F(4, 147) = 291.78, p \leq .001)\), and a significant interaction \((F(12, 139) = 78.13, p \leq .001)\). At a general level, the hypothesis about differential source use for learning about domains was supported. A series of follow-up tests were conducted to examine the significant results and interactions in more detail.

To evaluate the extent to which newcomers differentially relied on various sources to provide information about the various contextual domains, Tukey tests were computed among ratings for source use within each domain. Significant comparisons are indicated in the right hand column of Table 1. In general, observation of others was relied upon to the greatest extent, followed by interpersonal sources. Trial and error experimentation was used to some extent and objective referents were used to a very small extent.

Different sources were relied upon to obtain information about different domains. For the task and role domains, all sources except objective referents were generally used to an equal extent; but, for the group and organization domains, observation of others was relied upon significantly more than other sources. With respect to interpersonal sources, both coworkers and supervisors provided information to an equal extent for the task and organizational domains. For the role domain, supervisors provided significantly more information than coworkers, but the reverse was true for the group domain. With respect to noninterpersonal sources, experimentation was relied upon significantly more than observation of others for the task domain. The reverse was true for the group and organizational domains. The pattern of these means did not vary much over time.

**Acquiring information about domains.** To evaluate which contextual domains newcomers acquired the most information about, Tukey tests were conducted for information acquisition among the four domains across all sources (i.e., row means in Table 1). Significant differences were found between the task domain and all other contextual domains. In addition, newcomers reported acquiring significantly more information about the role than group domain, and more about the group than organization domain. Surprisingly, this pattern of means did not change much over time.

Although shifts in information acquisition patterns over time were expected, only one trend was observed. A significant increase in experimentation from Time 1 to Time 2 occurred. Little evidence of mean change was found; however, analytical procedures which focus on
TABLE 3
Cross-Time Correlations Between Sources, Knowledge, and Outcomes, and Between Knowledge and Sources by Domain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time 2</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Source by domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Super</td>
<td>Task</td>
<td>Knowledge domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cowork</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Watch</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trying</td>
<td>Org</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psy stress</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phy stress</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnover intent</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Knowledge domain

| Task | -.01 | .03 | .08 | .07 |
| Role | -.08 | .02 | .15*| .18*|
| Group| .14*| .11 | .24*| .16*|
| Org  | .18*| .00 | .25*| .10*|

Note: Correlations are between sources and knowledge at Time 1 and outcomes at Time 2, and between sources by domain at Time 1 and knowledge at Time 2.

For source by domain, information acquisition from the source for the domain corresponding to the knowledge domain were correlated.

*p<.05

individual variation as opposed to aggregate level changes were expected to show shifts over time. Such analyses are presented later.

Domain Knowledge

The second set of hypotheses focused on knowledge of various domains. It was hypothesized that some information sources would be more useful than others in providing information that contributed to knowledge. Further, it was hypothesized that knowledge about the group domain would be greatest initially, but, over time, knowledge about the task would increase.

Information acquisition from sources and knowledge. Correlations between corresponding self-reported knowledge and source domains were computed (e.g., information from supervisors about the task domain was correlated with knowledge of task). Correlations between commensurate source and knowledge variables by domain were computed within each time period (Table 2) as well as between Time 1 acquisition and Time 2 knowledge (Table 3). Similar patterns of correlations were found within time periods as well as in the cross-time correlations indicating some degree of consistency in these relationships.
Significant correlations in Tables 2 and 3 indicate that gathering information from observation and experimentation was related to knowledge of the four domains. Information acquired from other sources appeared to play a smaller role in knowledge beliefs; there were few significant correlations, and those that were significant were of smaller magnitude. These findings are interesting because they do not parallel the results pertaining to how much information sources provided for a particular domain (from Table 1). For example, for the task domain, the amount of information acquired from observation and trying are essentially equal to the information acquired from interpersonal sources; however, acquiring information from interpersonal sources does not relate to how much newcomers report knowing about an area. Similarly, supervisors and coworkers provide an equal amount of information about the organizational domain, yet only the information from supervisors is significantly related to knowledge about the organization. These findings support the notion that the utility (for gaining knowledge) of the information acquired is not equivalent to the amount of information acquired. Interpersonal sources may provide information about the organizational context, but observation of others and trial and experimentation appear to contribute more to the perceptions of knowledge gained about these features.

**Domain knowledge and changes over time.** *T*-tests between the four knowledge domains were performed to assess which domains newcomers believe they know the most about (see means in Table 2). As expected, at Time 1, knowledge about the group was significantly greater than knowledge about the task (*t* = 2.90, *p* < .01), role (*t* = 3.37, *p* < .01), and organization (*t* = 11.25, *p* < .01). Knowledge about the organization was significantly lower than all other domains. This pattern changed somewhat at Time 2. Knowledge about the task was greater than role (*t* = 4.63, *p* < .01), group (*t* = 3.10, *p* < .01), and organization (*t* = 13.01, *p* < .01). Knowledge about the organization was significantly lower than all other domains.

In order to evaluate whether newcomers increased their self-reported knowledge about contextual domains over time as hypothesized, *t*-tests were calculated for each knowledge domain between Time 1 and Time 2. Significant changes in knowledge were observed only for the task (*t* = 4.97, *p* < .001) and role (*t* = 2.42, *p* < .05) domains. These findings support the notion that knowledge of the group is greatest initially, knowledge of the task increases over time, and knowledge of the organization is relatively low.
Relationship of Information Acquisition and Knowledge to Outcomes

The third set of hypotheses were concerned with outcomes of the socialization process. It was hypothesized that information acquisition from sources and knowledge about domains would be related to socialization outcomes. It was further hypothesized that positive changes in information acquisition from sources and knowledge would be positively related to changes in outcomes, while negative changes in information acquisition or knowledge would be related to a decrease in outcomes over time.

For each source, there are four variables which represent information acquisition for each of the four domains. High intercorrelations among domains within a source were observed, while lower intercorrelations were observed across sources. Further, correlations between each source by domain and the outcomes variables revealed that correlations were virtually identical for a particular source across domains and the outcome variables. For example, the correlation between information acquisition from supervisors about the task domain and satisfaction was the same as the correlation between information acquisition from supervisors about roles and satisfaction. Therefore, the information acquisition variables were collapsed across domains for each source (i.e., the column means in Table 1).

Information acquisition, knowledge, and outcomes. Correlations within time periods between information acquisition from interpersonal and noninterpersonal sources, knowledge, and the outcome variables are presented in Table 2. Correlations between information acquisition and knowledge at Time 1 and outcomes at Time 2 are contained in Table 3. At both time periods, obtaining more information from supervisors was related to higher satisfaction and commitment, and a lesser desire to leave the organization. Obtaining more information from coworkers was related to higher satisfaction and commitment, and less stress and turnover intentions at Time 1. There were no significant correlations between information from coworkers and outcomes at Time 2. These results suggest that supervisors may consistently influence newcomers' job attitudes, but the influence of coworkers may occur only initially.

Information acquisition from observation and trying was related to stress. It appears that the source of this stress derives from having to gather information on one's own through observing and trying things out.

Individuals who believed they possessed more knowledge about the domains were more satisfied, committed, and adjusted. Again, the task and role domains appear to be the most salient for newcomers. Particularly strong relationships were observed between knowledge and
adjustment. Further, the correlations between knowledge and outcomes were generally of greater magnitude than those between sources and outcomes. Specifically, the correlations between knowledge and adjustment were significantly greater than correlations between any of the sources and adjustment. These results are consistent with the stage model view that information acquisition is important for mastery, and mastery is important for outcomes and newcomers' adjustment.

Changes over time. To examine changes over time, analytical procedures which are sensitive to individual variations, as opposed to focusing on mean differences, were desired. Hierarchical regression can be used to examine change in a dependent variable over time. The Time 2 variable is used as the dependent variable. The Time 1 measure of the dependent variable is entered in the equation first, followed by some factor that is believed to relate to change in the dependent variable over time. After controlling for the variance in Time 2 scores due to Time 1, the relationship between the variable believed to be related to change and the adjusted Time 2 scores (which now reflect change from Time 1) are examined. A significant increase in $R^2$ at the second step indicates that the variable of interest is related to a change in the dependent variable (Cohen & Cohen, 1983).

The interest here was in determining whether changes in information acquisition or knowledge were related to changes in the outcome variables. That is, we were interested in relating two sets of changes to each other—changes in information acquisition or knowledge to changes in outcomes. Time 2 outcome scores were used as the dependent variables. Time 1 outcome scores were entered in the regression equation first, followed by a change variable to represent change in information acquisition or knowledge. Because a single score was needed to represent the change variable, difference scores were computed for each source and knowledge score. For each subject, the Time 2 source score or knowledge domain score was subtracted from the respective Time 1 scores. The difference score (representing change in information acquisition or knowledge) was entered in the regression following the Time 1 outcome score to examine whether changes in information acquisition or knowledge were related to changes in outcomes. The intercorrelations among the difference scores for sources and knowledge were very close to zero. Three sets of hierarchical regressions were computed for each outcome variable for (a) the interpersonal source difference scores, (b) the noninterpersonal difference scores, and (c) the knowledge difference scores. Table 4 presents the results of the regression analyses.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Interpersonal sources</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$R$</td>
<td>$R^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological stress</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical stress</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnover intent</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Time 2 outcomes were dependent variables; Time 1 outcome entered in regression followed by difference scores for either interpersonal sources or knowledge (Time 1 minus Time 2). Results for sources are on the left; results for knowledge on the right. Source column indicates which sources were significant; knowledge column indicates which knowledge domains were significant.

* $p \leq .05$;  ** $p \leq .01$
For interpersonal sources, significant increases in $R^2$ were obtained for satisfaction, commitment, and adjustment, which was due to the supervisor source. Thus, a positive change from Time 1 to Time 2 in gathering information from supervisors was related to a positive change in satisfaction, commitment, and adjustment over time. There were no significant effects for the regressions of the noninterpersonal sources; changes in gathering information from noninterpersonal sources did not relate to changes in outcomes over time. These results suggest that newcomers who increase the amount of information obtained from supervisors will be more satisfied, committed, and adjusted over time, whereas those acquiring less information over time become less satisfied, committed, and adjusted. The strongest results were for satisfaction. Specifically, a change in information acquisition from supervisors accounted for 7% of the variance in change in satisfaction over time.

The results for regressions examining self-reported knowledge indicated that changes in knowledge were related to changes in commitment, adjustment and feelings of stress. A positive change in knowledge about the task domain accounted for this effect. Between 4% and 5% of the variance of the change in commitment, adjustment, and stress was accounted for by change in task knowledge. These results emphasize the importance of task mastery. As newcomers developed mastery over their task-related duties, they felt more committed, better adjusted, and less stressed over time.

Discussion

The results from the study generally supported the hypothesis that sources of information are differentially important for knowledge or mastery as well as for attitudinal outcomes. Results indicated that: (a) newcomers rely primarily on observation of others, followed by supervisors and coworkers to acquire information; (b) the focus of information acquisition is primarily on the task and role-related aspects; (c) new members believe they know more about their workgroup initially, but over time increase their knowledge of the task and role; (d) observation and experimentation are the most useful sources for obtaining knowledge; (e) supervisors as an information source and obtaining knowledge about the task and role domains are most important for positive socialization outcomes; and (f) acquiring more information from supervisors or more task knowledge is related to positive changes in socialization outcomes over time. These results are generally consistent with models of socialization that advocate linkages between information acquisition and mastery, and between mastery and outcomes. Further, the present
research provides preliminary results which describe how the process
takes place through various information acquisition strategies.

Some information acquisition sources (observation and experimentation) appear to be more important for task and role mastery than others. However, other sources (supervisors and coworkers) are more likely to provide benefits in terms of positive attitudinal outcomes such as satisfaction, commitment, and feelings of adjustment. The greater role that noninterpersonal sources appear to play in terms of knowledge may be due to the fact that the information provided by noninterpersonal sources may be clearer and more objective than that provided by personal sources (Daft & Lengel, 1984). Newcomers often report that they need more information than they actually receive from interpersonal sources (Jablin, 1984). Also, it is likely that simply being told relevant information from sources is a less effective learning technique than observation or trial and error. Considerable support exists for the notion that learning occurs through observation of others and then modeling of their behavior (Bandura, 1971).

Although obtaining information from supervisors and coworkers may not contribute directly to knowledge, as newcomers spend time getting information from sources, they may establish a social support network or become integrated into the informal social network. Peers and coworkers may meet the social needs of employees during socialization (Kram, 1985), and seeking out social support can be a strategy used by newcomers to adapt to the organization (Feldman & Brett, 1983; Fisher, 1986). This strategy can provide newcomers with the necessary support and foundation for the more proactive strategies, such as observation and experimentation, that lead to task mastery. In addition, supervisors may be the most potent source for facilitating newcomers' adjustment to and satisfaction with the organization (Berlew & Hall, 1966; Graen, 1976), especially as the focus shifts from the group context and group relations to task mastery. Further, the results suggest that newcomers who can increase the amount of information acquired from supervisors or increase their knowledge of their task, will be more satisfied, committed, and adjusted, and less stressed over time. Even if newcomers do not initially receive adequate information from their supervisor or develop task knowledge, this can be compensated for over time. Additional work is needed to more clearly define the roles of supervisors and coworkers in the development of new organizational members.

It should be noted that some of the observed relationships, though significant, were somewhat small in magnitude. The strongest findings, in terms of socialization outcomes, were seen for adjustment and, to a lesser extent, for satisfaction. This pattern of findings is interesting. The
low relationships for the more traditional outcome measures (commitment, stress, turnover, and satisfaction) are likely due to the fact that there are multiple antecedents for these variables; socialization processes are just one factor. However, from a theoretical perspective, adjustment is more specific and relevant to the content of socialization (Fisher, 1986); hence, stronger results are expected. This suggests that we may need to develop better or more theoretically relevant outcomes of socialization (cf. Chao et al., 1989), as opposed to using traditional or convenient measures.

Traditionally, the content focus in socialization theory has been on the organization domain; that is, learning the values, norms, goals, and culture of the organization. Results from this study indicate that acquiring information about and mastery of these issues is less important than a focus on task, role or group issues during early job experiences (at least within the first 6–9 months). These temporal findings support work in role-making and job characteristics research (Graen et al., 1973; Katz, 1978, 1980; Kozlowski & Hults, 1986). When socialization is viewed from a long-term perspective, the contextual features of the organization environment may become critical and play a greater role after newcomers have achieved task and role mastery.

From the organization's perspective, it is critical that individuals learn to perform their task and engage in appropriate role behaviors. A primary issue during early socialization then becomes determining what sorts of learning processes or strategies take place which enhance task and role mastery. Here, an integration with training issues can be useful. Training has traditionally focused on the learning of appropriate job content and task-related behaviors (Feldman, 1989). One of the most effective training techniques has relied on social learning theory (Bandura, 1971). Training outcomes are enhanced as trainees observe role models engage in relevant behaviors and then try to imitate these behaviors on their own (cf. Latham & Saari, 1979). Results from this study support this perspective. Newcomers gathered information from appropriate role models (supervisors, coworkers), but actual learning or knowledge took place through the observation and experimentation strategies. Utilization of these impersonal strategies appears to provide important benefits in terms of task-related learning. Due to the importance of social learning for mastery of domains, it appears that more research that focuses on linking training to the socialization process is needed. Such research should focus on how to enhance the use of such social learning training techniques during the early socialization process.

Another important issue pertains to the role of individual differences in the socialization process. While different information acquisition strategies are of varying importance for different outcomes, an
investigation of the role of individual difference characteristics such as self-efficacy, prior socialization experience, and personality characteristics as they relate to the use of strategies and learning is sorely needed.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations of this research. One potential limitation is that it relied on self-reports. Although self-reports of information acquisition are appropriate when the interest is in newcomer perceptions, a comparison of newcomers' perceptions to those of other sources of information may be fruitful for further understanding the process. Similarly, self-reports of knowledge were used. Future work should be directed at obtaining independent assessments of knowledge or mastery through either work samples or supervisory reports.

A related issue concerns common method variance. Some caution is warranted in interpreting the correlational results as all measures were obtained from the newcomers. Some relationships may have been inflated due to common method variance, although the extent of such a bias is unknown. In evaluating the potential impacts of method variance, it is important to consider the factors built into the design of the study that mitigate its effects. First, the fact that individuals were required to make 198 ratings about information acquisition from sources and the 5-month gap between surveys make it unlikely that participants would remember their previous ratings. Indeed, if a strong response bias were operating, we would expect similar correlations with all outcomes, but this was not the case. Moreover, response sets would tend to produce consistent patterns of correlations over time. Here, different patterns of relationships were observed in the cross-time correlations and for the relationships between information acquisition, knowledge, and outcomes over time. Thus, although method variance is a concern, it is not a likely explanation for the major findings of this study. Clearly, future research should seek independence in the measurement of key constructs.

It should also be noted that we found considerable divergence across sources, but little divergence among domains. It is possible that newcomers have difficulty distinguishing among the domains early on; however, it is also possible that either a response bias was operating for domain measures or that our measures were not sensitive enough to detect domain differences. Future work should be directed at better differentiating among domains.

Additional limitations center around sampling issues. Although the response rate was similar to that reported in other socialization studies, it was lower than desired, and approximately one third of the sample dropped from Time 1 to 2. Although we did not detect any differences
between those who dropped from the study and those who responded at both times, there may be some unmeasured factor which might call into question the representativeness of the sample. A further concern relates to the tenure levels of the participants at each administration as they averaged 17 weeks on the job during the first time period and 35 weeks during the second. There was overlap of the tenure distributions for the two administrations. Future work should attempt to better control the tenure levels during measurement periods and attempt to measure newcomers at earlier points in time. Finally, the use of difference scores may pose some problems. It was necessary to use difference scores because a single variable indicating a change over time in information acquisition or knowledge was needed in order to relate this change to changes in outcomes in a regression equation. Difference score measures can be susceptible to problems of reliability, and their appropriateness for answering substantive research questions has been challenged (e.g., Cohen & Cohen, 1983; Johns, 1981). However, it has also been argued that difference scores may be the most natural and useful estimate of individual change over time, even though there may be problems with them (Rogosa, Brandt, & Zimowski, 1982). Thus, some caution is warranted in interpreting the regression results for change.

Practical Implications

Organizations typically direct their socialization tactics toward the processing or training of new members. These efforts often involve formal orientation or initiation programs to provide newcomers with important information about the organization. Yet, new members, especially those entering their first organizational jobs, cannot immediately assimilate to the new job and environment, and a short orientation or training program may be of little use in fostering adjustment over the first year. The findings from this study suggest alternative approaches to facilitating the socialization of new organizational members.

Organizations should provide incentives, training, and/or support for newcomers' initiative, such as experimentation and active observation of other workers. Although such strategies are somewhat risky in that they are stressful, they appear to offer an effective means for task mastery. Thus, organizations should encourage new employees to engage in these strategies, but should also try to minimize their negative impact, perhaps through stress reduction programs and increasing the availability of interpersonal sources for providing a social support network.

The key role shown to be played by supervisors and coworkers during very early socialization suggests that it may also be efficient to focus on
training organizational insiders, as opposed to focusing solely on developing formal socialization programs for newcomers. For example, training could be directed at sensitizing coworkers on the key socialization elements important in the early socialization processes. Coworkers are important at the very early stage in newcomers’ experience for learning about group processes and intergroup relationships. Similarly, organizations should focus efforts on training supervisors to be more aware of their importance to new members. This training might follow from VDL theory or leader-member exchange by emphasizing the development of dyadic relationships between supervisors and new members in the development of their roles. Supervisors are not only key models, but they also mediate information from the broader organizational context and are critical for integrating newcomers into the group (e.g., Kozlowski & Doherty, 1989). Therefore, it might be beneficial to develop socialization programs which train insiders to facilitate newcomers’ socialization as well as to encourage newcomers to adopt useful learning strategies by emphasizing social learning, what content areas are important, and how to learn about them.

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