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COMMENTARY

How do you socialize newcomers during a pandemic?

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Rudolph et al. (2021) identified what they consider to be the 10 most relevant topics in the field of industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology that have been affected by COVID-19. Although these 10 topics are likely to be influenced to various degrees for many employees and organizations, there is another area that is highly relevant which they have neglected that will be affected for most employees and all organizations: *organizational socialization*. This is because all organizations need to socialize newcomers, and the way they do this is going to change now and possibly forever. Furthermore, because so many employees have been laid off or are working from home, when they return to the workplace, they will need to be resocialized. In addition, many employees will be changing jobs and/or careers and as a result they will increasingly need to be socialized.

Organizational socialization is the "process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role" (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979, p. 211). It is the process through which newcomers "learn the ropes" and what it means to be a member of an organization. Research evidence suggests that this is largely a social process that happens through observation and informal interactions with other newcomers and members of the organization (Feldman, 1989; Reichers, 1987). In fact, the frequency of interactions with insiders is the primary mechanism for transforming newcomers into insiders (Reichers, 1987). Louis et al. (1983) found that newcomers rated interactions with peers, supervisors, and senior coworkers as the most helpful socialization practices. They concluded that the most important factor for making newcomers feel effective is daily interactions with peers while working. Korte (2010) found that relationships with coworkers and managers and the quality of interactions is the primary mechanism for newcomer learning and socialization. There is also evidence that the quick adjustment of newcomers depends on having developed a broad network of relationships with coworkers (Rollag et al., 2005). According to Rollag et al. (2005), the most important factor for the successful adjustment and socialization of newcomers is the speed with which they develop relationships with a variety of coworkers. Others have also shown that relational attachments with coworkers are more important for newcomer adjustment than formal practices (Nelson & Quick, 1991). Meta-analytic reviews of socialization tactics have found that the social tactics (serial and investiture) have the strongest influence on socialization outcomes (Saks et al., 2007). Indeed, interactions with insiders are fundamental for newcomer learning, sensemaking, and the replication of organizational practices (Harris et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has essentially eliminated to a large extent the ability of newcomers to experience these important informal social interactions with other newcomers and insiders and their ability to develop high-quality relationships with coworkers. This is because many newcomers will have to work remotely and alone at home, their coworkers will be working at home, or if they and their coworkers are at work they will have to maintain physical distancing and will have limited opportunities to observe, meet, and interact with each other. This has the potential of creating a situation in which newcomers will be left on their own and have no choice

but to "sink or swim." The negative consequences of this were demonstrated in a study on peer-group interaction and organizational socialization over 50 years ago. Evan (1963) found that when newcomers were left on their own or what he referred to as *isolates*, they were more likely to quit. When newcomers had interactions with two or more peers, there was a substantial decrease in turnover.

So how can organizations socialize newcomers during a pandemic? Many organizations will have no choice but to use computer-based programs or what has been called *e-socialization* (Gruman & Saks, 2018) to socialize newcomers. However, this is not likely to be as effective as traditional approaches to socialization. In one of the few studies that compared a traditional, face-to-face (social-based) orientation program with a computer-based orientation program (a self-guided, 2- to 3-day program that covered all of the same material as the traditional orientation through the use of multimedia technologies), Wesson and Gogus (2005) found that newcomers who participated in the computer-based orientation scored significantly lower on socially oriented socialization content areas. In addition, participation in the computer-based orientation had a significant negative effect on job satisfaction and organizational commitment. They also found that the computer-based orientation program was negatively associated with supervisor ratings of organizational goals and values and role understanding. The results of this study indicate that computer-based orientation programs are not likely to be very effective for the socialization of newcomers especially for socially oriented content areas.

This raises some important research and practical implications for I-O psychology. For example, if newcomers are not able to be at work and unable to frequently observe, meet, and interact with other newcomers and insiders, what is the best way to socialize them given the limitations of computer-based socialization programs?

We suggest that future research needs to examine different ways to make e-socialization programs more effective. This research should focus on facilitating meetings, interactions, and communication between newcomers and organizational members. This can take various forms. One of the most important is to assign newcomers an electronic buddy (e-buddy) and/or an electronic mentor (e-mentor) as soon as they are hired. An e-buddy or e-mentor would be an insider who provides newcomers with guidance and support through computer-mediated technology (CMT). There is some evidence that e-mentoring can be effective especially when there is frequent interaction between mentors and protégés (DiRenzo et al., 2010). However, more research is needed on the effectiveness of e-buddies and e-mentors for newcomer socialization and how to make them most effective.

Future research might also consider programs that provide newcomers with frequent opportunities to communicate with each other so that they are not left alone and do not become isolates. This can involve various forms of computer-mediated communications (CMC) as well as virtual meetings. This research might consider the frequency and content of such interactions as well as the effectiveness of various types of CMCs. The emphasis should be on finding ways for newcomers to get to know each other and the most effective method for them to discuss their experiences and share information.

A third area to consider is to train and encourage insiders to be proactive in getting to know and develop relationships with newcomers and on how to be effective socialization agents. In the socialization literature, the emphasis has been on newcomer proactivity (e.g., information seeking), and the results of many studies indicate that newcomers who are more proactive have more positive socialization outcomes (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2014). However, how can newcomers engage in proactive behaviors when they are at home, alone at work, or physically distancing at work? Future research needs to investigate different ways to enable newcomers to be proactive. One way to do this is to encourage and train insiders to be proactive (insider proactivity). This might involve training insiders on the importance of newcomer proactive behaviors and how they can be proactive by frequently contacting newcomers via various types of CMCs; providing them with information, feedback, and social support; and developing and

maintaining relationships with them. Another approach might be for supervisors to schedule weekly virtual meetings with newcomers and groups of insiders so that they can get to know each other, build relationships and develop a network of contacts. Future research is required to determine the best techniques for insiders to be proactive so that newcomers are willing and able to engage in proactive behaviors.

In terms of practice, organizations are going to have to find ways to ensure that newcomers have many opportunities to meet and interact with each other and insiders using various forms of CMT and CMCs. This is going to require considerable effort and involvement on the part of insiders to be successful. Supervisors will have to make this a top priority and ensure that newcomers are receiving the support and guidance that they require so that they do not feel alone and in a "sink or swim" situation. A good strategy might be to assign newcomers *network assignments* that require them to work and interact with other members of the organization and to build relationships with a variety of people. Rollag et al. (2005) found that newcomers adjust more quickly if their first assignment requires them to work with others, whereas those who are given stand-alone assignments remain isolated, fail to develop relationships, and are more likely to quit.

In addition to newcomers, organizations must also consider the resocialization of employees who have been working at home or who were laid off during the pandemic. When employees return to work, their work life, job, and role will probably be very different. The way their organization conducts its business and functions might have changed; how it interacts with customers, clients, and patients will be different; jobs and roles might change; and new human resource policies and guidelines about the use of personal protective equipment and physical distancing will have to be implemented. Thus, organizations need to consider how they will resocialize employees to this new reality so that they feel comfortable, confident, and capable of performing their jobs effectively in a familiar but different organization.

All this suggests that organizational socialization will become increasingly important as organizations find ways to socialize newcomers so that they will want to stay in their organization and will be engaged and effective employees. The changes that organizations will have to make in order to adjust to the ongoing effects of COVID-19 are likely to make organizational socialization programs more effective today and hopefully into the future as this topic takes a front seat in I-O research.

I-O psychology research has an important role to play in learning how best to socialize newcomers during a pandemic and to rethink how best to design and implement e-socialization programs. Helping organizations socialize newcomers and resocialize employees now and into the future should be a top priority for I-O psychology.

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