Critical Essay
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Article:

*The New Employee as a Source of Uncertainty:*

*Veteran Employee Information Seeking about New Hires*

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Introduction
Employee turnover is a fact of organizational life and it is common to find new employees at any given time in any given organization (Gallagher & Sias, 2009). Most studies conducted in this area concern the perspective of the new employee’s socialization and how they experience uncertainty and seek information to reduce their uncertainty. In Gallagher and Sias’s article *The New Employee as a Source of Uncertainty: Veteran Employee Information Seeking about New Hires* the tables are turned to center on veteran employees and their perspective when a new hire is made in their organization. This paper will provide a critical analysis of their research article.

Previously seen as “knowledgeable sources of information for the uncertain newcomer” (Gallagher & Sias, 2009) the veteran employee is looked at in this study as the individual who experiences various types of uncertainty and seeks information to reduce that uncertainty when a new employee becomes a part of the organization. The authors posit that new employees can act as the source of uncertainty for veteran employees and that veteran employees experience different types of uncertainty related to new employees (p. 24). They present this study as an addendum to the majority of research in this area which is focused on the new employee and assumed the veteran employee acted as the new employee’s information source.

**Scope & Foundations**

This study aimed to research: What types of uncertainty do veteran employees experience regarding new employees? and What information-seeking tactics do veteran employees use to reduce uncertainty about new employees? (p. 25-26). Gallagher and Sias’s goal was to observe the types of uncertainty veteran employees experienced when new employees were introduced into their organization as well as how veteran employees seek out information in order to reduce the uncertainty caused by the new employee. They based their predictions on research and
foundations built by previous studies on new employee experiences in uncertainty and information seeking. “...research on new employee uncertainty provides a useful starting point. This research indicates newcomers experience primary types of uncertainty when they begin their new jobs...” (p. 24). Miller and Jablin (1991) already established that new employees experience referent uncertainty, appraisal uncertainty and relational uncertainty in establishing the nature and requirements of their new positions. This study maintained that the same types of uncertainty could apply to veteran employees.

“Like newcomers, veteran employees may experience referent uncertainty, not about their own jobs, but about the new hire’s job. Similarly, veteran employees may be uncertain about the newcomer’s ability to competently perform his or her new tasks; a form of appraisal uncertainty. Finally, veteran employees are likely to be uncertain about how the new employee will fit into the existing social network - a form of relational uncertainty” (p. 25).

Additionally, Gallagher and Sias looked at the Uncertainty Reduction Theory of Berger and Calabrese (1975), which “posits that when individuals experience uncertainty, they experience anxiety and are motivated to reduce that anxiety by reducing uncertainty” (Gallagher and Sias, 2009, p. 25). They maintained that seeking information to reduce uncertainty is a means to relieve anxiety created by the uncertainty and that veteran employees, like new employees, use two primary strategies to seek out information: direct and indirect. Direct information seeking examples include engaging the new employee in conversation and asking overt questions. Indirect information seeking can be through observations, surveillance, indirect questions, etc. (p. 26).

Methods
The authors used data collected from interviews conducted with a range of veteran employees from varying levels at several types of organizations. They defined a veteran employee as “an individual who had been employed at his or her current organization for at least 1 year” (p. 27). A total of 25 participants were interviewed (14 women, 11 men). The participants were asked to identify a new employee at their organization, complete a demographic questionnaire and partake in the interview. The interview focused on the identified new employee and inquired about the participant’s first impressions, areas of uncertainty, how they obtained information and other relevant questions (p. 27).

Interview transcripts were analyzed with an open-coding process to “identify general themes relevant to the types of uncertainty experienced by veteran employees and the information-seeking tactics used to reduce that uncertainty” (p. 28). Interview transcripts were randomly selected and identified by two separate coders. Their selections and codes were then compared to create a code book which was used to code the rest of the transcripts. After the code book was tested and revised, it was used to code all 25 of the interview transcripts.

Findings and Implications

The authors found five different types of uncertainty when looking to answer their first research question asking what types of uncertainty veteran employees have with regards to new employees. The five types were: newcomer appraisal (uncertainty about the newcomer’s ability), newcomer referent (uncertainty about the newcomer’s tasks), newcomer relational (uncertainty about the newcomer’s interaction and relationships with others), transformation (uncertainty about how the newcomer will change the work environment), and newcomer initiative (uncertainty about the newcomer’s level of motivation) (p. 28). The authors had predicted appraisal, referent and relational uncertainties based on previous studies that focused on new
employees. *Transformation* and *initiative* uncertainties were determined by this study as traits specific to veteran employees regarding new employees.

When veteran employees sought out information to reduce their uncertainty created by new employees, the study determined six different tactics to gain information: overt questions, observation, surveillance, third parties, disguising conversations and evaluation of work (p. 33). *Overt questions* were used when asking background questions, to “check in” with new employees, to elicit questions from new employees and when presenting hypothetical situations. It was determined that *observation* of new employees was used by veteran employees to obtain information and take cues from “specific attitudes and behaviors” that would reduce their uncertainty (p. 35). *Surveillance* was an indirect way, similar to observation, for veteran employees to reflect on new employees’ attitudes and behaviors later on to reduce uncertainty about the newcomer’s ability and personality. *Disguising conversations* allowed veteran employees to reduce uncertainty when they shared their own stories in hope that it would elicit the newcomer to reciprocate—thus, allowing the veteran employee to gain information about the new employee. *Third parties* were used by veteran employees to process information about new employees with their co-workers and to compare notes about the new employee, helping them feel more secure and affirming their opinions. This trait is distinct to veteran employees, as is *evaluation of work*. In the study, veteran employees chose to evaluate the new employee’s work to “reduce concerns and uncertainty about the newcomer’s abilities to perform necessary tasks” (p. 37).

The implications of these findings, as mentioned previously, contribute to the already existing work in studying workplace uncertainty. The authors claim their study has positive
implications for theory by contributing to the organizational socialization and employee information-seeking literature (p. 38).

“...it broadens the notion of the organizational newcomer as more than someone who experiences uncertainty upon beginning a new job and seeks information to reduce that uncertainty... newcomers also create uncertainty for other employees simply by being new. Similarly, this study broadens the notion of the veteran employee... veteran employees experience uncertainty themselves and seek information to reduce that uncertainty” (p. 38).

Thus, the findings provide insight into specific employee behaviors within organizational processes. The authors also present the practical implications of their study by saying their results “provide empirical evidence that the arrival of a new employee creates disruption and uncertainty for veteran employees.” This information could be useful to organizational administration in educating their veteran employees of the implications of new hires as well as preparing new hires for the needs of veteran employees upon their arrival at the organization (p. 40).

Claims and Assumptions

The authors made the assumption that all new employees create uncertainty for veteran employees, but do not explore the degrees of positions surrounding the new employee and levels of uncertainty that could be generated. For example, a new employee in an organization of 600 employees with high turnover might not create as much of an impact as would a new employee in an organization with 10 employees with very little turnover. Certain variables were not considered in this study.
Also, the study did not take into account the role of supervisors to ease uncertainties of veteran employees. At the end of the study they suggested that a potential implication was that organizations could use the information to better prepare employees for newcomer situations:

“Practitioners should make it clear to both new hires and veterans that the information-seeking process can be continual and all employees should feel comfortable seeking information if they are uncertain” (p. 41).

No consideration was made in the study itself of the role of the supervisor or manager in information-seeking to reduce uncertainty.

Conclusion

This article, indeed, has positive implications in the further study of employee uncertainty. However, I feel this study ignored too many variables to be completely trustworthy. The authors admitted that a limitation of their research relied on the retrospective self-reports from the participants and that they are prone to memory biases and inaccuracy. I felt this confession alone did, in fact, harm its validity. They encouraged further research in areas they left out of the study. I believe this study could become useful as a piece of the puzzle when combined with further research.

I enjoyed reading the article and the insight I gained in my limited knowledge of new employee/veteran employee relationships and experiences.
References
