Critical Analysis Essay
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February 7, 2013

Article:
The New Employee as a Source of Uncertainty:
Veteran Employee Information Seeking about New Hires

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Introduction

Like a pebble that creates ripples in a pond, a new employee impacts all aspects of an organization. As such, the influence of new employees in organizational life has been studied by researchers for nearly forty years (Gallagher & Sias, 2009, p. 23). Although topics related to new employee socialization and uncertainty are common in research, Gallagher and Sias (2009) focused on the perspectives of veteran employees regarding newly hired employees in their study of uncertainty, as described in The New Employee as a Source of Uncertainty: Veteran Employee Information Seeking about New Hires. What follows is a summary and critical analysis of the presentation of their findings.

Theories

The authors grounded their research in Berger and Calabrese’s Uncertainty Reduction Theory (as cited in Gallagher & Sias, 2009). The theory suggests that individuals experience anxiety when they encounter uncertainty in a situation. To alleviate this anxiety, an individual will attempt to eliminate uncertainty through information seeking, which is “an individual’s conscious choice to gain information via specific strategies” (p. 26). While this theory has been applied to previous research about employee uncertainty from the perspective of new hires, it has not been applied to the perspective of veteran employees in regards to new hires.

Scope

Gallagher and Sias (2009) predicted that, like newcomers, “veteran employees likely experience uncertainty when a newcomer enters their work environment and need information to reduce that uncertainty” (p. 24). Based on previous research of new hires, the authors predicted that veteran employees experience the same three primary types of uncertainty as new hires: referent uncertainty, appraisal uncertainty, and relational uncertainty. New hires experience
referent uncertainty regarding the nature of their new job’s requirements, and veterans may experience the same uncertainty, albeit in regard to their new co-worker’s job, not their own. Relatedly, appraisal uncertainty on the part of the veteran employees may occur if they have questions about a new hire’s ability to complete a job’s requirements competently. Lastly, relational uncertainty describes the concern that both newcomers and veterans experience when a new person enters the social network of an organization. The authors acknowledged that other types of uncertainty may also apply to the veteran experience and seek to discover the types of uncertainty that veteran employees experience regarding new employees in their first research question.

Their second research question, within the context of Uncertainty Reduction Theory, explored the information-seeking behavior and tactics of veterans in their attempts to reduce uncertainty about new hires. The authors predicted that veterans used both direct strategies, such as asking overt questions of the new hire, and indirect strategies, such as asking indirect questions of the new hire. Other indirect strategies of information seeking include observation, surveillance, solicitation of third-parties for information, testing limits, and disguising conversations. The authors noted that veteran employees might be able to use more tactics than newcomers because veterans, as established members of an organization, have fewer concerns about social costs than new hires. Teboul (as cited by Gallagher & Sias, 2009) states that if an individual is conscious of a potential loss in social approval in an attempt to seek information, “he or she is likely to be more cautious in the choice of communication tactics” (p. 26).

Methods

Gathered through a snowballing sample method, the authors recruited 25 participants from a variety of types of organizations who represented a diversity of veteran employees.
(employed by their organization for at least 1 year) at various levels of positions, from non-supervisory workers to senior-level administrators. The participants were interviewed about their initial impressions, uncertainty, and information-seeking behavior regarding a newcomer (employed by their organization for no longer than 3 months).

To analyze the data, the primary researcher reviewed interview transcripts to identify general themes of uncertainty and information-seeking tactics with an open-coding process. The primary researcher and a second coder then worked together to further refine codes and used axial-coding to develop a code book, which was tested and revised until categories and subcategories within each theme were identified, and then used to code the 25 interviews.

Results

Participants reported experiencing five types of uncertainty in regard to new employees. Three types of uncertainty—newcomer referent, newcomer appraisal, and newcomer relational—corresponded to types of uncertainty experienced by newcomers in previous research regarding the expectation of which tasks that would be performed by the newcomer, the capabilities of the newcomer to perform tasks competently, and the fit of the newcomer within the established social networks of the organization.

Two additional types of uncertainty reported by veterans were transformation uncertainty and newcomer initiative. Veterans reported transformation uncertainty about “how the new employee might change the normal work routine or affect the veteran’s daily work habits” (Gallagher & Sias, 2009, p. 31). Veterans reported both negative and positive consequences associated with the changes experienced in an organization with the arrival of a new employee. Veterans indicated that they took on more work until the newcomer was fully trained. A positive aspect of transformation uncertainty related to the optimistic expectations that veterans had about
the new ideas and insights that a new hire might bring to an organization. A third aspect of transformation uncertainty was job security, as reported by two participants where the newcomer was also a new boss.

The final type of uncertainty, newcomer initiative uncertainty, described the unease experienced by veterans about the motivation and work ethic of newcomers, distinguished from appraisal uncertainty as a “willingness to work rather than ability to do the job” (Gallagher & Sias, 2009, p. 33).

Participants also reported using six different information-seeking tactics to reduce new employee uncertainty. Like newcomers, veterans used overt questions, observation, surveillance, disguising conversations, and third-parties to acquire information and reduce uncertainty. Unlike newcomers, veterans also employed evaluation of work as a method of information seeking.

Veterans asked overt questions to solicit questions from the new hire to model that asking questions was appropriate behavior and to directly address any uncertainty on the part of the newcomer. Veterans were more comfortable using such overt information-seeking tactics because social costs were not a concern. Observation was used by veterans to reduce uncertainty about a newcomer’s ability to do a job. While similar to observation, surveillance is a distinct information-seeking tactic that focuses on “general attitudes or behaviors rather than specific cues” (p. 35). Surveillance was used by veterans most often to gain information about a newcomer’s ability and personality. Disguising conversations allowed veterans to share information with newcomers “with a hope that newcomers would reciprocate” (p. 36), providing the veteran with information about the newcomer’s background and experience. Third-party
opinions about a newcomer also helped a veteran to assess and affirm their own opinion of a newcomer, thus reducing uncertainty related to a new employee.

One information-seeking tactic used by veterans but not newcomers was evaluation of work, which allowed veterans to assign value to the work produced by a newcomer to judge if the new hire was able to competently perform the necessary tasks expected of the position.

Implications

The results of this study expand the understanding of organizational entry with relation to the uncertainty experienced during the addition of a new employee, which is experienced by veterans of the organization as well as the incoming employee. Although similar types of uncertainty are experienced by both newcomers and veterans, transformation uncertainty and newcomer initiative uncertainty were uniquely experienced by veterans. Likewise, veterans reported the use of an information-seeking tactic—evaluation of work—that had not been evidenced in research of information-seeking tactics used by newcomers.

Based on the evidence that newcomers create uncertainty for veteran employees, the authors proposed that practitioners provide information about the newcomer and his/her role in the organization directly to current employees to ease the socialization process.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Gallagher and Sias addressed a much needed area of study through their research. Their study focused on the perspective of veteran employees regarding new employee uncertainty, acknowledging the strife that all employees experience during times of transition in an organization. Furthermore, their study explored the tactics of information seeking used by veteran employees to reduce this uncertainty. Such information has practical applications for
practitioners who can provide better training and support for veteran and new employees during periods of organizational transition.

Although the authors addressed a gap in previous literature, they relied on the evidence of previous research of newcomer uncertainty experienced by the newcomer to justify the theories and predictions of this study about newcomer uncertainty experienced by veterans. When their results yielded evidence that three types of newcomer uncertainty were shared by newcomers and veterans, they provided a single paragraph to provide support for their prediction, but dedicated multiple paragraphs to provide support for the evidence of uncertainty types experienced uniquely by veterans. With an uneven presentation of these results, the authors did not fully explore how the overlapping types of uncertainty were uniquely experienced by veteran employees, contradicting the supposition of their research about the importance of bringing the veteran employee perspective into the field of research, which they described as a “largely one-sided view of the organizational socialization process” (p. 24).

The presentation of evidence for their second research question, “What information-seeking tactics do veteran employees use to reduce uncertainty about new employees?” (p. 26), offered a more detailed explanation of each tactic reported, even though most of the tactics overlapped with evidence of research of information-seeking tactics used by newcomers.

In their limitations, the authors addressed several weaknesses in their study, including a small sample size and a reliance on purely qualitative method involving “retrospective self-reports…which are prone to memory biases and inaccuracy” (p. 41). They also noted that their research did not question participants about the reason they chose certain information-seeking tactics, and indicated that different types of veterans preferred different tactics based on responsibility for training or supervision of new employees.
Personal Perspective

The ethnographic aspect of this study appealed to me. From a practical standpoint, I appreciated the inclusion of the interview questions in an appendix to provide the reader the context for the responses given by participants. Although the sample size was limited, I also appreciated the attempt by the researchers to include a diversity of voices, not only veteran employers in manager or executive roles.

As I have been formulating my own research questions for my thesis, I have realized how difficult it is to address an area of study that is lacking research. How surprising to see that the perspective of veteran employees had been largely excluded from the conversation! As such, the exploratory nature of this study permits for more generalized findings and limited scope that will lead to future, more directed investigations about the implementation of organizational practices that will alleviate employee uncertainty.
References