

The Importance of Tacit and Explicit Knowledge Transfer in an Onboarding Programme

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Abstract: “Onboarding” is one way of facilitating training for newcomers in order to get them socialized and trained for the job in question. Getting newcomers “up to speed” and reducing turnover is cost saving for a company. In this paper, we showcase how this has been done in a company in Norway. This organization suffered from high turnover and a lengthy training period for newcomers. Theory on socio-cultural learning, organizational culture, and knowledge management has enlightened our study. In order to display the interplay between organizational socialization and learning at work, we will present our findings on the development of an onboarding initiative. In particular, we dive into the subtleties of the border between formal structures of the onboarding and the informal best practices. Tacit knowledge conveyed through the informal best practices can be transferred and adapted through conversation and behaviour. The data material is collected through qualitative in-depth interviews over a period of three years. The onboarding is not only contributing towards higher effectiveness and less turnover, but also developing, and continuously improving, learning structures in the organization.

Keywords: onboarding, knowledge management, tacit knowledge, organizational socialization

1. Introduction

For most organizations, it is important to have able and capable staff, hence the need for adequate recruiting and onboarding processes. For a newcomer, the average time to become a full member of an organization takes approximately 12 months, but can vary between 6 to 24 months (Filstad 2016, Jakobsen 2003). Every day the person is not functioning optimally, represents a cost for the organization. Hence, the need for investigating how to reduce this time (and cost) in the organizations.

Onboarding and organizational socialization are defined as “a process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role” (Van Maanen and Schein 1977, p. 211) and “the process where the newcomer is a full member of the organization” (Wanous et al. 1992). Another definition is provided by Filstad Jacobsen (2003) : “Organizational socialization is the learning process where a newcomer in an organization adopts necessary knowledge and skills to become an established member. Hence, it includes both individual social, cultural, and situational learning processes”.

When being a newcomer, it is a lot to learn, even if you are familiar or even skilled in the trade of the organization and have prepared in advance for your position (Filstad 2016).

Also, newcomers have “declining loyalty” and are more mobile than before (Fang et al. 2011). Hence, the importance of effective socialization.

Previously, we have presented research from a case study in a company in Norway. We have now followed this company over nearly three years. The development of the onboarding programme has been described by Vold and Haave (2018, 2019). This was about how one student co-developed a mentorship programme with his colleagues in order to reduce the time it took newcomers to be fully operational in their jobs. This is now an established onboarding process that embraces both the social, cultural and situational learning.

In this paper we discuss the perspectives of organizational socialization that is a result of the development of the onboarding process at this workplace.

Our research questions are thus:

How does an onboarding programme contribute to organization socialization and learning?

How does the transfer of tacit and explicit knowledge contribute to a successful socialization of the newcomers?

We will elaborate on the theory that has enlightened our study and then we will present our findings and discussion before we draw our conclusions from this case study.

2. Theoretical foundation

Several theorists have written about onboarding and organizational socialization. Some are providing extensive suggestions for onboarding programmes (Bradt and Vonnegut 2009) and some are elaborating on how the organizational socialization can take place (Boud and Solomon 2001, Filstad 2017, Raelin 2008). Common for many of these works are the references to mainly the same older sources. In this paper we have chosen to rely on these primary sources in order to understand the field in question. We have thus mainly focused on one source: Feldman (1981). The later research is interesting and shows different aspects of the organizational socialization and in the context of different countries around the world. We have, however, gone back to the "original" sources to see if we could still understand today's processes - given a Norwegian context - based on these works.

Feldman has in two articles presented the processes of an organizational socialization. In these articles he presents models with concepts that provide an understanding of the different stages in the process from prior to the newcomer starts his or her job until the person is fully integrated in the organization (Feldman 1981, Feldman 1976).

In the article from 1981, Feldman proposes "three views of the changes that occur during the organizational socialization process" (Feldman 1981, p. 309):

1. Socialization as Acquisition of Appropriate Role Behaviors
2. Socialization as the Development of Work Skills and Abilities
3. Socialization as Acquisition of Group Norms and Values

Regarding "Socialization as Acquisition of Appropriate Role Behaviors", there are some issues that need resolving. Firstly, it is the "role definition". This is about how the newcomer defines himself or herself in the work group. During the first period of time within the organization the newcomer needs to determine the tasks that he or she is going to perform and how they are to go about time management, remembering also that the newcomer brings with them their own background with skills and preferences. If the newcomer has compliant expectations and skills with the job in question, the role definition should be easier to come to terms with. Persons that are successful at performing their work tasks may easily hand over unwanted tasks to others and be allowed to learn more, like new tasks and skills.

Secondly, the "management of intergroup role conflicts" is about the relationship with the immediate work group and other groups in the organization. Feldman (1981, p. 312) claims: "Groups that did not participate in role-defining activities may disagree strongly with the inclusion or exclusion of certain tasks, or with the priorities assigned certain tasks. Individuals who are continually upset by such work conflicts and who have not yet developed decision rules to deal with them will need to invest more energy and time in resolving conflict and will have less time for their duties".

The newcomer needs to have realistic expectations about how the organization resolves the different approaches regarding management of "intergroup role conflicts" and be able to cope with the situations.

Thirdly, the "management of outside-life conflicts" are brought up as the outside-life may put constraints on the work-life. This is a realization of that the employee is a complete person that is influenced both by what happens at work and at home. Being aware of how much either of the situations may influence each other and having realistic expectations around this issue eases the choice of organization.

On "socialization as the development of work skills and abilities" Feldman (1981) points out the necessity of how motivation for a job is not enough to be successful. It is necessary to have skills as well. However, being overqualified may result in a sense of not being able to utilize one's skills. According to Dunnette, Arvey and Banas (1973) there is a correlation between this situation and high turnover in organizations. However, there

are situations that oppose this; if the job market is tight, it is a higher chance that persons will stay in their jobs even if they feel overqualified.

Feldman (1981) stresses the importance of some major issues: the organization must present the job as accurately as possible, and the jobseekers should show an accurate presentation of themselves. If this is not followed, the chances are high for mismatch between job and skills, the newcomer not receiving correct introduction and training for the job. Perceiving early success may lead to higher involvement. This is also tied to feedback on their jobs; positive feedback may lead to improved job performance, and conversely, negative feedback may lead to “disappointment, confusion, and loss of self-confidence”.

Regarding “socialization as acquisition of group norms and values”, it is about the influence the work group has on the socialization process. Again, the more realistic the newcomer is about the organization and work tasks, the easier it is to accept and comply. This also applies to norms and values. Sharing norms and values with work colleagues and the organization contributes towards shared values and attitudes. However, Feldman (1981, p. 314) suggests that the newcomers and the other employees need to establish trust. When the newcomer and the co-workers trust each other, the co-workers are more likely to share information that is necessary for the newcomers to become more competent at their work. Likewise, the perception from the newcomers are mainly the same; they do not feel that they are included and get important information about their job until they have befriended and trusted their co-workers. Newcomers may turn to others in the workgroup for interpretations of experiences, hence, the workgroup may also filter information in order to get the newcomer to accept different interpretations that indicate different views on values and norms.

Also, innovation and “spontaneous cooperation” are mentioned as results of successful organizational socialization. Fully participating members are more prone to develop, seek more education and contribute towards innovative behaviour. Behaviours within a group also matter for how the groups will perform. High degree of communication within a group and participation in group activities enhances the group cohesiveness. Working in groups may also contribute towards higher job involvement (Feldman 1981).

Mastery of job and the sense of belonging may contribute towards both extrinsic and intrinsic satisfaction. Feldman (1981) refers to Vroom (1964) and his work on work motivation which conclude on a weak relationship between work performance and satisfaction.

Regarding learning in groups, what is described by Feldman also correlates with what Lave and Wenger (1991) discovered when they did research amongst midwifery and how the midwives exchanged knowledge amongst each other. They described what they called Communities of Practice (CoP) where the participants have different placements in the group according to level of knowledge. Their legitimate peripheral participation in the CoP would be decided by their level of competence and knowledge.

What happens within the organizations regarding exchange of knowledge may also resemble what Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) describe in their SECI-model. The model shows how tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1967) can become explicit amongst members of an organization, and how this can become internalized and thus tacit knowledge with other members of the organization. Through socialization and articulation, the tacit knowledge is shared from one individual to one or more individuals. Through this externalization the knowledge becomes explicit. The receivers of the new knowledge combine this with their existing knowledge. Then the new knowledge is internalized and made tacit. See figure 1, below:

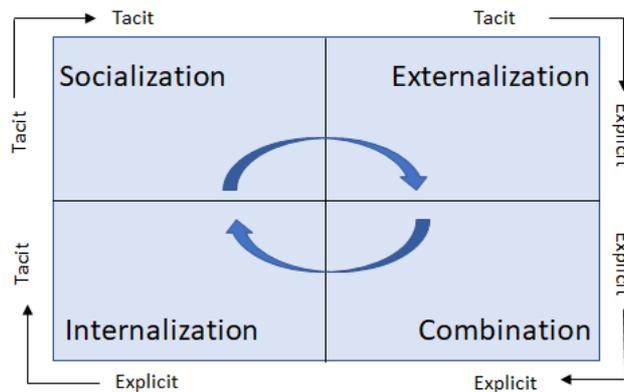


Figure 1: The SECI-model from Nonaka &Takeuchi (1995)

3. Method of Inquiry

This study is a case-study in combination with a longitudinal approach. Yin (2003, 2014) defined a case as “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in real-life and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident”. Using a case design gives us the possibility to acquire a deeper understanding of the phenomenon we are studying, whether it is organizations, events or people (Geertz 1973). The data collection started back in 2017 as an individual interview with Respondent 1. In 2019, we conducted a group interview via skype with the top-manager group of the organization about the possibilities of doing more comprehensive studies in the firm, this was respondents 1, 2 and 3. As this was granted, we visited the organization on two occasions. On our first visit, we conducted in-depth individual interviews with one of the newcomers (respondent 4) and one mentor (respondent 5) as well as interviewing the senior manager (respondent 3) and two operations managers (respondent 1, respondent 3) responsible for the onboarding program.

Table 1: Overview of Respondents and Interviews

	Interviews			
Respondents	Interview 1 2017	Skype Interview 2 28.02.19	Interview 3 21.03.19	Interview 4 13.08.19
Respondent 1 operational manager	Individual interview	Group interview with respondent 2 and 3	Group interview with respondent 2	In-depth Individual interview
Respondent 2 senior manager		Group interview with respondents 1 and 3	Group interview with respondent 1	
Respondent 3 operational manager		Group interview with respondents 1 and 2		
Respondent 4 Newcomer (K)			In-dept individual interview	
Respondent 5 Mentor (M)			In-dept individual interview	
Respondent 6 Mentor (K)				In-dept individual interview
Respondent 7 Newcomer (M)				In-dept individual interview

In addition, we did some observation on visiting the premises of the organization, that gave us an immediate impression of the of the workplace organisation. Some months later, we followed up by doing in-depth interviews with the operational manager (respondent 1), one mentor and one of the newcomers (respondents

6 and 7). In table 1 we show an overview of the respondents and the timeline of the data collection. The data from the interviews has been transcribed and analysed by both empirical and theoretical categories.

3.1 Limitations

Eisenhardt (1989) refers to steps regarding building theory from case studies. Here she suggests that one should compare the outcome to both similar literature and conflicting literature. As earlier stated, we found it interesting to revisit the “old” source that most of the literature refer to, namely Feldman, and see if it still valid. By doing so, and thereby excluding newer sources and also conflicting literature may represent a limitation to our case study.

Case studies may have weaknesses as they e.g. are difficult to cross-check, have problems with observer bias, or be difficult to generalize (Nesbit and Watt 1984).

4. The case study

The case is from a company in Norway that is working in a knowledge intensive business. The business they are in, are under pressure and they are dependent on customers to choose their company as their service provider. We gained access to the organization through one of the employees having been a student at The Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences. The former student initiated an onboarding process as an including and co-developed process with his co-workers. In this onboarding there is both a selection process, an onboarding process and a start-up that will provide the newcomers with opportunities of organizational socialization and the possibility of gaining both tacit and explicit knowledge about the work they are to undertake. The newcomers are being assigned a mentor, a team and a team leader.

The onboarding programme has since the start in 2017 been developed further and it is now a programme with a duration of 11 days. During the programme’s day one, the newcomers are introduced to the company, its history, values and norms. On the second day, they start intensive training before they are assigned to a mentor and start their “apprenticeship” that lasts for 8 days. The last day of the onboarding programme is dedicated to test/evaluation that will allow for reflection, and then feedback. This feedback goes both ways; the newcomers give feedback on how they have perceived the onboarding process, and the mentors/team give feedback to the newcomer on how they have perceived their efforts.

5. Results and discussion

Here we will present the results from our investigations, where we show that the material reveals how the onboarding process developed in the organization has encompassed many of the major issues raised in the theory we have presented above.

We have structured this part according to Feldman’s (1981) description of the three processes:

1. Socialization as Acquisition of Appropriate Role Behaviors
2. Socialization as the Development of Work Skills and Abilities
3. Socialization as Acquisition of Group Norms and Values

5.1 Socialization as Acquisition of Appropriate Role Behaviors

Regarding Feldman's (1981) “socialization as the acquisition of a set of appropriate role behaviors” we have the following statement: *“Then we got a plan for the first week, and I was in a team with a mentor. So, if you have a problem or need some advice, there is someone to feel safe to talk with.” (respondent 7, newcomer)*

This implies that they feel taken care of and that they are introduced to a mentor that will again introduce the newcomer into the way they work in order for the newcomer to as quickly as possible obtain the expected level of competence and skills needed to experience mastery in the work tasks in question. It also implies that the organization has succeeded with providing the newcomer with a sense of safety and belonging. The group may resemble a CoP as described by Lave and Wenger (Lave and Wenger 1991). The newcomers will have a legitimate peripheral participation in the group where the mentor is the centre of knowledge. They have understood their role in the organization (Feldman 1981) and they are in the process of finding out whether they have the skills and competence to master the job they are being described by the organization. Here, Feldman stresses the importance of the organization to present the work tasks and who they are as an organization, and

that the newcomer present themselves as honestly as possibly to avoid a mismatch between expectations and outcomes.

5.2 Socialization as the Development of Work Skills and Abilities

The second phase is about socialization as the development of work skills and abilities. Feldman (1981) states the importance of both the workplace and the employee being realistic about the work and what is expected of either side. If there is a mismatch between skills and abilities, what is required at the job and what the job requires, it is also about how to develop the skills and abilities at the workplace. One of the newcomers states: *"At first when starting the training, I tried to do the same as the other [mentor] but I have found my own procedure that works, and I have customized it so it fits in, so [when having a customer] I ask about the things I need to know in the right order."*(respondent 7, newcomer).

This suggests that they get the training they need to do the job, and they are also capable and able to develop their own way of handling the job in question.

This is confirmed by the mentor: *"And there I think, to let them go, to find their own way. The person whom I train has to find their way of doing things, how they will organize their three screens and stuff, to make them find their own solutions to solving things, but still go by the rules."* (respondent 6 mentor)

This statement shows how the mentor supports the newcomer regarding developing themselves and their skills within the work setting. This is also informal learning in practice; the mentor shows the newcomer and then encourages the newcomer to find their own "best practices". The mentor shows and tells how to do the work, but lets the newcomers learn not only from them, but also from trying different approaches themselves. The mentors and the newcomers form what is similar to a CoP (Lave and Wenger 1991). They also work closely together and allow for tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1967) to become explicit in the way they communicate and socialize in the group. The newcomers combine this with their previous knowledge and internalize the new knowledge, and thus follow the SECI - model (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995). In this way the newcomer can obtain a commitment (Nonaka 1994) towards his or her job. This also points towards a learning culture at the workplace that embraces development of skills and abilities.

Even over time, the "newcomers" (now more experienced) are positive towards the onboarding and feel that they can work more independently and feel that he/she can rely on the extended work group. A statement that shows this is: *"I think the onboarding program has worked very well. And still I can ask my mentor even now if I need to. And everyone else here is ready to help, so there is always someone to ask."* (respondent 4 newcomer)

5.3 Socialization as Acquisition of Group Norms and Values

The previous statement also points towards an adjustment process towards a coordination of norms and values. It is accepted that the newcomers can adapt their ways of executing their work.

It is also a matter of trust (Feldman 1981). Within the workgroup often consisting of both newcomers and mentors, it needs to be a level of trust. One statement that confirms this is: *"Yes I find it's good to be in a team, ...because you work with someone for maybe 7 days in a row,... then you get to have colleagues to feel safe with and talk to. And that's like, you maybe share the same humour - you have some people to talk with."* (respondent 7). This shows that the socialization process is in line with what Feldman (1981) portrays. There is trust amongst the work group and they are adjusting to each other as a group.

Further statements support this: *"But, I think that some of the criteria for its success, is that the culture among the customer coordinators has been dominating in the development of the onboarding program, (Respondent 1, operational manager), and "One way to developing a learning culture is to accept making mistakes", (Respondent 1, operational manager).It will always be a challenge to get the employees to have the right mind set and perform self- management. When and where can I get help. To err is acceptable, but you have to learn from your errors".* (respondent 2, senior manager). This points towards both trust and that an adjustment within the group and a socialization process is taking place. The latter also show how the learning within the group takes place, by letting the newcomers learn from their mistakes.

6. Conclusion

Feldman's (1981) theory on the phases of organizational socialization has proved to be applicable even today. The organizational socialization process takes place in the form of the combination of an onboarding programme and the group processes. Through the three phases, the tacit knowledge in the organization is shared. The newcomers are being assigned a mentor, a team and a team leader, all which contributes towards the socialization process through, adapting role behaviour, through developing skills and abilities, and through the acquisition of group norms and values.

The group processes that can be compared to CoP's are arenas for sharing tacit and explicit knowledge. Through what is described in the SECI-model (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995), the tacit knowledge is being explicit through a socialization process, then the explicit knowledge is being combined with the newcomers previous knowledge and then the new knowledge is being internalized. This contributes to a successful socialization of the newcomers.

6.1 Further research

Expanding on this topic, we would suggest including other approaches to studying organizational socialization. E.g. Van Maanen and Schein (1977) present other aspects of the organizational socialization than we have included here. They propose six dimensions of how approaching newcomer socialization. Bauer et al. (2007) present yet another approach that may have been interesting as they look at antecedents and outcomes of newcomer adjustments during organizational socialization. These are only a few of the different approaches that have spurred new research. The "new" research includes e.g. the role of extroversion versus introversion and information seeking (Fetherston 2017).

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