Toward a model of socializing project team members: An integrative approach

Saša Batistič [a],[*], Renata Kenda [b]

[a] *Tilburg University, Department of Human Resource Studies, PO Box 90153, 5000 LE, Tilburg, The Netherlands*
[b] *Tilburg University, Department of Organization Studies, PO Box 90153, 5000 LE, Tilburg, The Netherlands*

Abstract

Project work is becoming more and more important in everyday business, as is staffing the right newcomers for the project. Recognizing that not all new project team workers possess equally important specific knowledge, skills and abilities for the success of projects, we draw on project management, human resource management, and organizational socialization literature to develop a framework on how new project team members might be socialized, depending on their strategic value for the project. We specifically draw on the socialization tactics literature and propose how four categories of new employees – Internal specialists, External specialists, External generalists and Internal generalists; based on two dimensions – work task complexity and employment mode, can be socialized more effectively. Implications for theory and practice are discussed as well.
© 2018 Elsevier Ltd. APM and IPMA. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Projects; Project teams; Complexity; Employment mode; Organizational socialization; Socialization tactics

1. Introduction

Organizations are increasingly relying on alternative work arrangements, such as telework, virtual teams, contingent and project work, to maintain their flexibility and competitive advantage (Garsten, 1999). For example, the use of projects – which can be defined as time-limited teams that produce one-time outputs (Morris et al., 2012) – is rising in industries such as information technology, and the transit across work projects and organizations is much more frequent than ever before (Katz, 1997). Given the increasing level of employees' mobility, is understanding the effectiveness of newly joined project team members – newcomers – important for the success of projects. Better understanding the organizational socialization process – commonly viewed as the process by which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours to assume a work

role (Wanberg, 2012) – of project workers can mitigate the potential losses organizations may incur when socialization is ineffective, such as delays in the completion of projects, productivity, quality issues, and cost of selection and training (Kammeyer-Mueller and Wanberg, 2003).

Much of the theory and research on organization socialization in the past decades has focused on the relationship between a newcomer and his or her organization (Anderson and Thomas, 1996; Ashforth et al., 2007), and not on a more localized context – their workgroup (Anderson et al., 1999), where most of the working interactions and socialization occur. The scant studies examining newcomers' socialization in workgroups have focused on exploring more stable work arrangements, like permanent teams. Fisher (1986, p. 105) observed that socialization research has "tended to concentrate in the same few occupations", leaving plenty unanswered questions about the nonstandard working environment like project work. Ashforth et al. (2007, p. 54) highlight this problem nicely: "As the conditions confronting organizations–and

---

individuals' careers–become increasingly turbulent, particular research attention will need to be paid to task/project–and group-specific socialization".

Being a relatively new subdomain of the project management, not much is known about the socialization of project team members. Few studies that have explored this issue have found that socialization could potentially influence performance in various project contexts (e.g., open source software projects) (Carillo et al., 2017; Gemino et al., 2015; Steinmacher et al., 2015) and possibly enhance collaboration and cooperation between co-development projects team members (Xu et al., 2017) effectively making project teams more homogenous (Andersen, 2016) and leading to project performance through social alignment (Gemino et al., 2015). The few studies that explored socialization and project success are more or less aligned in suggesting that socialization is a key aspect when considering knowledge dissemination (Fernie et al., 2003) or knowledge alignment (e.g., document vs. people) (Gemino et al., 2015), as socialization directly influences social interactions and thus can help or hinder knowledge sharing.

However, two very relevant questions remain unanswered in the project literature. First, the socialization aspect of projects has been explored relatively superficially as noted by Andersen (2016). It is not clear which socialization initiatives can be used to make project teams more homogenous. There are probably combinations of such activities that have a more additive effect resulting in a better social integration which can results in various desired outcomes for the project (e.g., knowledge sharing) (Carillo et al., 2017). Second, project literature also suggests that projects might have a challenging combination of different project workers (e.g., technical vs. management teams) (Gemino et al., 2015). This classification or diversification also alludes to the issue that different project members might need a different socialization experience (Ashford and Nurmohamed, 2012; Batistič, 2017; Gemino et al., 2015). For example, technical members of a project might need socialization initiatives that can link them together, so they have a better understanding of how their expertise overlap and how they can share knowledge (Gemino et al., 2015). On the opposite side, management teams might be provided with specific activities aimed at enhancing different project management perspectives, such as leadership (Andersen, 2016). Overall, this indicates there might be different newcomers with different strategic values for the project, consequently needing different socialization experiences.

To address these voids in the project management literature, our primary purpose in this paper is to develop a typology of how newcomers joining projects can be socialized based on different strategic values that they can have for the organization and projects. This goes hand in hand with the notion that not all newcomers are the same, and different socialization mechanisms should be used for different cohorts (cf. Ashford and Nurmohamed, 2012; Batistič, 2017). We propose that such grouping may be related to two important dimensions: (a) work task complexity, and (b) employment mode. The first dimension is drawn from the project literature, which suggests that project complexity, specifically work task complexity, provides

organizations with suggestions how important newcomers might be for the success of the project (Baccarini, 1996; Zhu and Mostafavi, 2017). The second dimension is drawn from the human resource management (HRM) literature, which suggests that project work can be carried out by internal (insourced) or external (outsourced) newcomers (Lepak and Snell, 1999). Taking both dimensions together, we provide four cohorts of newcomers that may have different strategic value for the project and organization and might as such benefit from different tailored approaches that organization can offer for a more successful socialization. This can be realized through socialization tactics - "the ways in which the experiences of individuals in transition from one role to another are structured for them by others in the organization" (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979, p. 230). Particularly, we propose that specific socialization tactics can help socialize newcomers joining project work in organizations more effectively by providing newcomers with relevant resources – information and support.

By providing such framework, we aim to make two contributions to the literature. First, we go beyond the notion in the organizational socialization related to permanent teams which suggests that all the newcomers are more or less the same – proposing the one-fit-all approach (cf. Ashford and Nurmohamed, 2012; Batistič, 2017). This view neglects the fact that there might be differences among individuals in regard to their knowledge, skills, and abilities – their strategic value for projects. Integrating the literature of project management (Morris et al., 2012), and human resource (HR) architecture (Lepak and Snell, 1999, 2002), we developed a comprehensive taxonomy of how new project team members might be grouped when joining projects. Specifically, we argue that such newcomers could be grouped in cohorts based on their strategic value for the project. We draw such distinction based on project complexity literature (Baccarini, 1996; Ployhart and Moliterno, 2011), which suggests how project team members can be selected, focusing on complexity of work characteristics they need to master for the success of the project, and on HR literature (Lepak and Snell, 1999), which postulates that employees can be sourced internally or externally, based on strategic and cost/benefit considerations. Grouping project workers strategically might allow us to provide specific socialization tactics which might be more beneficial for one cohort rather than for another (e.g., key project members vs. peripheral project members) in achieving additive effects.

Second, the proposed project members' taxonomy suggests that there might be a more beneficial combination of socialization tactics (Andersen, 2016; Batistič, 2017) to socialize project team members. This suggestion acknowledges potentially different expectations and goals of project newcomers and organizations (cf. Ashford and Nurmohamed, 2012) and that certain socialization tactics might have more beneficial effects than others, leading to increased project success (Andersen, 2016; Carillo et al., 2017). Such classification is not yet present in the project literature, nor in the socialization literature, pertinent time-limited work arrangements (cf. Ashford and Nurmohamed, 2012). In order to determine which socialization tactic is more useful and effective, we provide an integration and foundation with a list of