



The relative importance of proactive behaviors and outcomes for predicting newcomer learning, well-being, and work engagement



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ABSTRACT

New employees can accelerate and optimize their socialization by behaving proactively, although the key behaviors vary across studies. Recent research suggests that newcomer proactive behaviors influence socialization through the mediating effect of corresponding proactive outcomes. This may partly explain differences across studies, along with possible variations in the relative importance of specific proactive behaviors. This study investigates further the mediating role of proactive outcomes, and the relative importance of different proactive behaviors and proactive outcomes in predicting newcomer learning, well-being, and work engagement. Based on a sample of 176 temporary agency workers, support for the mediating role of proactive outcomes was found, although some proactive behaviors were effective in their own right. Relative importance analyses revealed that different proactive behaviors were important for different socialization criteria. Practical and theoretical implications of these findings are discussed.

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Change is a constant in organizations, with restructuring, mergers and acquisitions, and voluntary turnover resulting in employees frequently being newcomers throughout their careers (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012a). In the US, workers aged between 20 and 40 years change jobs approximately every two years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012b), and even older workers show relatively high rates of job changes, with recent statistics showing 33% of 40–46 year olds staying in a job for less than a year (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012a). The majority of newcomers are experienced workers who rely primarily on their own actions to get up to speed (Carr, Pearson, Vest, & Boyar, 2006). There is consistent evidence that new employees can accelerate and optimize their socialization by being proactive, using behaviors such as direct inquiry, feedback seeking, role negotiation, and networking (Ashford & Black, 1996; Bauer et al., 2007; Kim, Cable, & Kim, 2005; Morrison, 1993a,b). Newcomer proactive behavior is associated with positive outcomes including greater learning, social integration, role innovation, job satisfaction, and lower intention of leaving (Ashforth, Sluss, & Saks, 2007; Saks, Gruman, & Cooper-Thomas, 2011).

While proactive behavior seems to hold much promise, with largely positive relationships with desirable outcomes such as task mastery and job satisfaction, results are not consistently positive (Cooper-Thomas & Burke, 2012). For example, while there is some evidence that direct inquiry is positively associated with task mastery and job performance (Ashford & Black, 1996; Bauer et al., 2007; Saks et al., 2011), there is some research showing no relationship (Fedor, Rensvold, & Adams, 1992; Gruman, Saks, & Zweig, 2006), while others have found a negative relationship (Settoon & Adkins, 1997). Saks et al. (2011) proposed the construct of proactive outcomes to explain these inconsistent results.

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Proactive outcomes reflect the extent to which a proactive behavior achieves its intended goal or outcome. Taking the proactive behavior of direct inquiry as an example, the related proactive outcome is the extent to which the newcomer received an answer to his or her inquiry. Saks et al. (2011) suggested that proactive outcomes act as a conduit determining the influence of proactive behaviors on socialization outcomes. To date, Saks et al. (2011) remains the only study to investigate the role of proactive outcomes and it consisted of a sample of students completing an internship.

The present study also examines proactive behavior and proactive outcomes, however, it makes four contributions to the literature. First, we investigate further the newly-proposed role of proactive outcomes in mediating the relationships between proactive behaviors and socialization outcomes. This provides important scientific evidence replicating this mediation role for proactive outcomes (Ferguson & Heene, 2012). Second, we investigate a broader range of proactive behaviors and proactive outcomes than Saks et al. (2011). They investigated six of each, whereas we investigate ten. This provides a more nuanced view on the role of proactivity during socialization as well as exploring the generalizability of proactive outcomes' nomological networks. Third, we investigate the relative importance of the proactive behaviors in the prediction of the three socialization outcomes through the use of relative importance analysis. This represents an important extension of the literature since it acknowledges the potential for some proactive behaviors to be more important than others for the prediction of certain socialization outcomes. Fourth, our sample consists of temporary agency workers (temps) as potentially expert onboarders due to the self-socialization they have to achieve at each placement. While neophyte student newcomers may provide a more convenient sample (Saks & Ashforth, 1997), veteran newcomers may show greater socialization adroitness (Beyer & Hannah, 2002). Temps are a potentially expert pool of newcomers given their frequent socialization, revealing proactivity at its full potential.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Proactive behaviors and outcomes

Proactive behaviors are self-initiated, future-focused, and involve taking control to bring about change (Parker & Collins, 2010). In the context of newcomers, proactive behaviors are aimed at improving person–environment fit by changing the person – that is the newcomer – or the environment – the new work context – or both (Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010; Parker & Collins, 2010). The proactive behavior of newcomers was first investigated in the 1990s, with Ashford and Black's (1996) research being seminal (see also Morrison, 1993a,b; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992). They identified seven proactive behaviors: Information seeking, feedback seeking, general socializing, networking, build relationships – boss, negotiation of job changes, and positive framing, and investigated their relationships with job performance and job satisfaction (Ashford & Black, 1996). Their analyses revealed that different and multiple proactive behaviors were important in predicting these two criteria.

Subsequent research has confirmed an important role for proactivity in predicting socialization outcomes including learning, social integration, task mastery, organizational commitment, and intent to remain (Ashforth et al., 2007; Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003; Kim, Hon, & Crant, 2009; Major, Turner, & Fletcher, 2006). In line with this, a recent review of newcomer proactive behaviors shows that, in the main, proactive behaviors are associated with positive outcomes (Cooper-Thomas & Burke, 2012), although there are variations. Proactive behaviors which are more consistent predictors include feedback seeking, general socializing, relationship building – boss, positive framing, reading, and monitoring (Gruman et al., 2006; Saks et al., 2011; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000). Other proactive behaviors have shown mixed results of either weak positive or null relationships. These proactive behaviors include direct inquiry, networking, role modeling, and changing work procedures. It is plausible that proactive behaviors which have more varied relationships with socialization outcomes across studies may depend on mediation via proactive outcomes. In particular, this second set of proactive behaviors showing more varied results have a greater reliance on input from insiders, for example in responding to a direct inquiry or agreeing on changes to work procedures. These proactive outcomes are harder to achieve, and hence mediation is less likely. In contrast, other proactive behaviors such as general socializing and positive framing may show stronger relationships with socialization outcomes because they are more directly under newcomers' control. It is also possible that such proactive behaviors have benefits regardless of whether proactive outcomes are achieved, that is a behavior such as general socializing results in positive outcomes directly.

Saks et al. (2011) examined six of the seven proactive behaviors originally proposed by Ashford and Black (1996) (they did not include positive framing). Subsequent research by Cooper-Thomas, Anderson, and Cash (2012) has identified nineteen proactive behaviors that newcomers use to facilitate their socialization, which they classified into three categories. These were later refined by Cooper-Thomas and Burke (2012), comprising mutual development (e.g., general socializing); change self (e.g., feedback seeking); and change role or environment (e.g., change work procedures). We chose ten proactive behaviors, comprising the full set of seven behaviors outlined by Ashford and Black and an additional three. As Ashford and Black (1996) highlight, it is important to investigate multiple strategies at once to give a more accurate view of relationships, in this case between proactive behaviors, proactive outcomes, and socialization success. If only a narrow range of behaviors is chosen, their relative importance may be over-estimated. However, for pragmatic reasons of survey length we did not include the full range of proactive behaviors. Specifically, we measured feedback seeking, general socializing, relationship building – boss, positive framing, monitoring, reading, direct inquiry, networking, role modeling, and changing work procedures. First, note that the first six of these ten behaviors listed are those which have yielded consistent evidence of positive relationships with socialization outcomes, while the last four of the ten behaviors have less consistent relationships with socialization outcomes, with positive, weak or negative relationships found. Second, these ten include proactive behaviors across the three categories of mutual development, change self, and change role or environment (Cooper-Thomas & Burke, 2012; Cooper-Thomas et al., 2012), although primarily in the

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