

'Social capital' key to workers' success on the job, study says

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(Phys.org) —The quality of the social relationships that newly hired people develop with other employees in their work groups is critical to newcomers' job satisfaction, learning their responsibilities and their ability to fit in to the workplace culture, a new study suggests.

Often taken for granted by people within organizations, overlooked when training new people and not addressed in college courses, the social/political/cultural realm of the [work environment](#) has a pervasive influence over employee learning and performance, say researchers Russell Korte and Shumin Lin.

"There is a relational structure that is very powerful in the work group, but it's not given much recognition and it's typically ignored or undervalued in how we help newcomers learn to do their jobs," said Korte, a professor of human resource development in the College of Education at the University of Illinois. "New hires tend to learn the norms of their work mostly through trial and error, and then we wonder why some people are not performing or integrating very well. Traditionally, we blame the new person for not learning how to fit in when, in fact, the culture or the relational structure of the work group was part of the problem."

Although human resource managers often consider new employee [socialization](#) the responsibility of the new employee's manager, the researchers suggest that it's actually a communal process, with responsibility shared by the work group and the new hire.

"The work group has enormous responsibility for helping that new person get on board," Korte said. "In many cases, the new hires in the study had very little contact with their managers, and the vast majority of their learning and interaction was with their co-workers."

Korte and Lin interviewed 30 recently hired engineers at a manufacturing organization that had been struggling with high attrition rates among new hires. The researchers examined the impact that the social capital embedded in work groups' [social relationships](#) had on the new employees.

For the engineers in the study, learning how to perform job tasks was highly dependent on their knowledge and understanding of the formal and informal social systems in the workplace. Higher quality relationships with members of the work group translated into greater access to information and resources – or greater "social capital" – that enhanced newcomers' job performance and eased their transition from "outsider" to "insider" status.

From the beginning, the newcomers' primary job task was building relationships with other members of their work groups, and their success or level of difficulty at building those relationships was the primary determinant of their learning, performance and [job satisfaction](#), the researchers found.

For the first several months to two years, having a co-worker in the work group who takes an interest in new employees' success is critical. New hires benefit from having an informal mentor who knows the job, has insight into the "unwritten rules" and knows the socially and politically appropriate ways of getting things done.

Employees who feel accepted into the group early on are more engaged and feel a greater sense of belonging and enthusiasm about their jobs

than those who are unsure or confused about their positions within the social hierarchy.

Even much of the technical work that people perform is embedded within and governed by the relational structures and social norms of their work groups and organizations, Korte said.

"Very similar jobs are done quite differently in different groups, and the work is judged quite differently too," Korte said. "Relationships have a huge impact on how employees interpret, analyze and gather data and how they model workplace problems. These kinds of things tell me that the social system is really controlling and governing what people do and how they do it."

Experienced professionals may have difficulty integrating into a work group if the work habits that they developed at a previous job aren't a good fit with the new organization or group. Thus, seasoned workers may have to "unlearn" old habits and be flexible and willing to adapt to new ways of doing things.

To cultivate those crucial relationships with others in the work group, the researchers suggest that newcomers be open to collaborating with others and willing to go above and beyond their job requirements. Accordingly, co-workers need to ensure that newcomers feel accepted into the group and have productive mentoring relationships, meaningful work to do and frequent interaction with their managers.

Organizations may need to re-evaluate their new hire orientation processes, particularly if theirs is a "sink or swim" approach that doesn't give new hires much support and help navigating the social subcultures of the workplace, the study suggests.

"Unless you're building these relational factors into your method, you're

risking failure in many cases because you've overlooked some very important parts of the process," Korte said. "I think there's a very strong message for industry and education about how we're preparing people to go out into the working world. Social/cultural/ political systems really have a huge effect on how people learn and work, and they're often underestimated or underappreciated in what higher education is teaching students to do."

Developing political skills, as well as professional skills such as communication, teamwork and negotiation, would help better prepare college students for the social/political milieu of the workplace, Korte said.

Korte has a similar study under way in Mexico and is finding interesting cultural differences. While workers in Mexico highly value their workplace relationships, Americans tend to be task-oriented, viewing the social aspects of their jobs as less important and pushing them to the sidelines.

"Nobody that I interviewed in Mexico had a problem feeling part of the group, unlike in the U.S.," Korte said. "Because Latin cultures are typically more relationally oriented, they view their work groups as family. Several people in the Mexican study said they would sooner miss a deadline than disrupt the harmony of the relationships in their work groups. Americans would rarely say that, if ever."

The study was published in the journal *Human Relations*.

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