

Established employees need adjustment period with new work colleagues

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Businesses often invest significant time and money to onboard new hires

at work and help them adjust to their new environment, but it remains largely unclear how team insiders navigate the same period of adjustment with their new co-workers, especially those who may be different from them.

According to a new paper co-written by a University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign expert who studies newcomer socialization and work teams, integrating "new blood" into an established work team can have a multitude of consequences for long-standing employees.

Factors such as how similar or different the new hire is to the team in relational attributes such as likeability or functional attributes such as work or [educational background](#) play an important role in smoothing over or exacerbating workplace dynamics when a new hire is recruited to join an existing team, said Yihao Liu, a professor of labor and employment relations and of psychology at Illinois.

"Creating a more diverse and inclusive workforce is one of the most important trends in the workplace right now, and employers are definitely doing a much better job in investing in the recruitment and hiring of more diverse employees," he said. "But that's only the first step. To truly achieve a sustainable workplace with diversity and inclusion, employers also need to properly onboard these diverse new hires for them to stay longer. And at the same time, they can't overlook the need for an adjustment period for established workers who suddenly have a new teammate who may be different from them."

Using data collected from two different types of team settings, including a laboratory simulation and a field survey, the researchers investigated whether, when and how the entry of newcomers to a team affected existing team members and team functioning as a whole.

The findings suggest that adding to a team has a distinct effect on

established employees, but one that depends upon various characteristics of the newcomer as well as the existing team dynamic.

"Overall, established employees react more negatively toward the entry of a relationally dissimilar newcomer in terms of attributes such as likeability and other more observable demographic attributes such as gender and race, which can trigger negative affective reactions and impair team functioning," Liu said. "At the same time, long-time employees generally reacted more positively toward the entry of a functionally dissimilar newcomer—that is, someone who had a different background or educational experience from the group."

These relationships are found to be further influenced by the level of team performance prior to newcomer entry, according to the paper.

"In underperforming teams, team members feel more concerned about dealing with interpersonal friction such as those due to personality differences," Liu said. "That, in turn, generates more [negative feelings](#) among team insiders when they socialize with relationally dissimilar newcomers but, conversely, more positive feelings when they socialize with functionally dissimilar newcomers, because having these newcomers onboard may help the team improve its current situation.

"By contrast, in better-performing teams, the reactions of established [team members](#) toward relationally or functionally dissimilar newcomers were much more muted."

The implications of the research suggest that managers should be mindful of the time and resources needed for the adjustment period for newcomers and more-seasoned employees alike.

"Managers should ensure the team knows why the new [employee](#) has been hired and try to emphasize what unique skills, expertise and

perspectives they can bring to the team, just to capitalize on the positive impact of functional dissimilarity," Liu said. "Moreover, managers can identify team insiders who share more relational similarity with the newcomers and appoint them as mentors to the newcomers, making them their first connection to the team. Then, over time, the newcomers can gradually integrate themselves with the rest of the team."

Having an honest assessment of the state of the team when adding newcomers is also key to successfully integrating newcomers with team insiders, Liu said.

"If the team has been underperforming and a new member needs to be added, managers can conduct a performance review with the team before the newcomer's entry and provide the necessary support and resources to help the team improve and clear hurdles to their success," he said. "Doing so can reduce team insiders' negative reactions toward relationally diverse newcomers due to concerns about the team's poor performance."

The paper was published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

More information: Yihao Liu et al, Feeling negative or positive about fresh blood? Understanding veterans' affective reactions toward newcomer entry in teams from an affective events perspective, *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0001044](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001044)

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