

‘Welcome Aboard’

Theoretical and Empirical Advancements in Understanding Dynamics of Organisational Socialisation in Start-Ups and the Role of Knowledge Communication

We have all been there: Going through the unsettling process of settling in at a new workplace. Louis (1980) notes that it is probably inevitable that newcomers will experience unmet expectations and surprise when they enter unfamiliar organisational settings (p. 228). However, newcomers in start-ups face the double challenge of not only settling in at a new workplace, but doing so in an emerging environment. This is likely to have consequences for the newcomers in becoming knowledgeable about their new workplace and job. Kowtha (2011) observes that: “Given that socialisation is a learning process, an important factor in socialisation is job-related knowledge.” (p. 747). But how do newcomers become knowledgeable about their new job and new organisational context, i.e. ‘learn the ropes’, in organisations that are still under construction, and what are the challenges?

This dissertation focuses on dynamics of organisational entry in Danish ICT (information and communication technology) start-ups, with a particular view to the intersection between organisational socialisation (OS) and organisational knowledge communication (OKC, which integrates aspects of organisation studies, knowledge management and communication theory). I explore how newcomers in start-ups experience their organisational entry, and what managers connect with getting newcomers successfully on board.

The research has both theoretical and practical groundings. As regards the theoretical, there has been little focus on OS in start-ups, despite its importance for performance, and despite the challenges connected to human resource management, including OS, in small businesses and new ventures identified in the literature. Issues such as uncertainty and lack of structure are likely to present challenges to OS in start-ups and newcomers’ knowledge construction of their new workplace and job. However, although knowledge is central in OS, it remains a ‘black box’. I therefore developed a framework integrating OS and OKC, to help understand how the start-up context influences newcomers’ efforts to settle in and to begin to unravel knowledge as a ‘black box’ in OS in general.

As regards the practical groundings, socialisation is considered important in helping newcomers be able to function and perform well in an organisation (e.g. Chao, 1997; Van Maanen, 1976). This is equally important for start-ups, if not more so. The recruitment process and potential for mis-hiring is costly for all companies, which means that successful socialisation is especially important for start-

ups, since high employee turnover would necessitate using a lot of their scarce resources on recruiting. It might not be a problem for renowned companies with the required finances to attract people with valued skills. But new organisations which have yet to become known often find it more difficult to attract skilled employees (Williamson, Cable, & Aldrich, 2002). When newcomers do enter these organisations, it is often of vital importance that they can quickly be integrated into the company. Quite often, the owners' own money is at risk, and getting newcomers off to a good start not only benefits both newcomer and company, but is also crucial to the company's chances of surviving. The former Danish minister for research and education, Tommy Ahlers, stressed that we should have more start-ups in Denmark. My contribution in that regard is learning what new employees in start-ups need to get off to a good start, benefitting both them and the start-ups.

ICT start-ups present an interesting setting as knowledge-intensive companies in an industry with unique labour force challenges. In Denmark, the demand for IT specialists has far outgrown the supply (see e.g. Hvilshøj, 2016, p. 26). Thus, the recruiting and resource challenges mentioned above can be even more critical when there is a shortage of people with the necessary skills and the 'war for talent' is tough. In an economy where these professionals can easily get a job in another company, getting newcomers on board well is even more important.

Considering these theoretical and practical aspects, it is paramount that we understand OS in the context of ICT start-ups better. Even if unmet expectations and surprise (Louis, 1980) cannot be fully prevented, we can learn more about the challenges that newcomers in start-ups face, and what they need to be able to deal with these.

Given the focus on dynamics related to OS in start-ups and their consequences for newcomers' knowledge construction, the agenda was to identify how and where relevant links between OS and OKC could be made, and to investigate how managers and newcomers in ICT start-ups talk about issues related to OS in their accounts of experiences of newcomer entry, with a specific focus on knowledge. I developed the following theoretical (RQ1) and empirical (RQ2) research questions and sub-questions to guide my exploration:

RQ1: *How can the field of organisational knowledge communication be integrated in organisational socialisation to help us better understand and work with organisational socialisation as a process where knowledge communication takes place?*

RQ2: *How are accounts of organisational entry in Danish ICT start-ups constructed?*

Sub-question 1 - Newcomers: *How does communication of task-specific and organisational knowledge during organisational entry in Danish ICT start-ups affect newcomers' perception of the processes?*

Sub-question 2 - Managers: *What do the ICT start-up managers consider the role of organisational knowledge communication to be in the context of organisational entry processes, and which ways of communicating are relied on and considered important for knowledge communication with newcomers in ICT start-ups?*

In order to answer RQ1, I develop a synthesis of OS and OKC. I show how OS can be understood as a knowledge process, I argue that the interactionist perspective in OS is a central anchor for integrating OKC in OS, and I show that OKC can nuance the way we understand knowledge communication in OS, by helping us understand organisations and organisational phenomena as dynamic, appreciate knowledge as complex (being situated, contextual and relational), and model communication as transactional, as opposed to viewing organisations as stable entities where knowledge is transferred to newcomers as a bounded object through communication understood as transmission.

In order to answer RQ2 and the sub-questions, I developed a research design couched in a social constructivist position, employed an abductive, reflexive approach and a qualitative case study methodology, conducted interviews with managers and newcomers in five ICT start-ups, and subjected the material to a multi-step analysis.

With regard to RQ2, I found four central repertoires in the newcomers' and managers' accounts of organisational entry in start-ups. These repertoires are patterns of different aspects highlighted as central, tensions and challenges and opportunities that the informants talk about in distinct ways, i.e. patterns where the informants talk in similar ways about the same topic. The repertoires were labelled 'Social', 'Balance', 'Acceptance and alignment', and '(Opportunity to) influence and challenges', the latter of which is related to a connection between, on the one hand, freedom and the opportunity to influence decision-making in the start-ups, and on the other hand, challenges and insecurity connected to the newness and size of the start-ups. This tension is central in understanding organisational entry in start-ups, and knowledge and knowledge communication are central to the relationship between freedom and insecurity. While some challenges might also be present in larger or more mature firms, they are accentuated in this context.

As regards sub-question 1, the repertoires identified for newcomers ('Balance', 'Influence', 'Acceptance' and 'Social') construct various aspects as good or bad in relation to their entry. For task knowledge, the 'Balance' repertoire is especially relevant, since the newcomers emphasise the value of quickly starting with specific tasks as something to hold on to in a situation that can be chaotic. This repertoire also pertains to the balance between task- and organisation-focused introduction. On a broader organisational note, some newcomers mention a lack of introduction to 'the bigger picture', and also highlight the social aspects of entry. The newcomers point to opportunities for influencing both their tasks and more overall organisational aspects. This is related to acceptance, in that, because the newness and smallness of the start-ups present opportunities, there are other aspects connected to the start-up situation that are accepted (to some extent). The different challenges newcomers mentioned are also relevant to this sub-question, since several of these can be seen as knowledge challenges, especially the challenges that have consequences for task mastery and role clarity. These are proximal outcomes which, including social integration, in turn are interrelated and influence each other.

As regards sub-question 2, the managers construct knowledge communication as related to both getting newcomers started on their tasks and, in a broader sense, ensuring alignment and understanding of the organisation and conditions connected to working in a start-up. Several ways of communicating are mentioned in this regard, including job interviews, introductions, direct contact between the newcomer and different actors, and various ICT tools such as databases and intranets where different pieces of information are stored. The repertoire across managers on 'Opportunities to influence and challenges for newcomers' covers a pattern of talking about the upsides and downsides of entering a start-up in relation to each other, including that freedom can in itself be a challenge.

In the discussion, I focus on the implications of OS under start-up conditions, including important knowledge aspects and challenges related to the OS proximal outcomes of role clarity, task mastery and social integration, which emerged as empirically and theoretically relevant.

As regards my theoretical and practical contributions, 1) In relation to the theoretical lens, besides knowledge challenges connected to OS outcomes in start-ups and the interrelatedness of proximal outcomes, I point to the explainability value of integrating OKC in OS, in that it provides a specific framework for approaching knowledge and knowledge communication in OS; 2) As regards OS in general, I indicate that the proximal outcomes are linked and comment on what this means for research; 3) My contributions to OS theory in relation to start-ups lie in the context-related insights I

gained from identifying and reflecting on the repertoires, understanding the challenges related to proximal outcomes, and highlighting how aspects of the start-up context affect the possibility for and use of different socialisation tactics; 4) As regards contributions to practice, I presented specific recommendations that start-ups welcoming new employees can implement and drew attention to potential pitfalls that managers need to be aware of.

Thus, by focusing on the intersection between OS and OKC in general, and OS in a start-up context and related knowledge challenges in particular, this theoretical and empirical work has paved the way for both theoretical and practical insights that help us understand and nuance knowledge and knowledge communication in OS, OS in the context of ICT start-ups, and the related knowledge challenges.

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