

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**Newcomer Learning and Adjustment in Small Firms:
Social Networks as a Mechanism Underpinning the Socialisation Process**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Management

To Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

Robert Arthur Field

2015

ABSTRACT

Recognition of the increasing importance of organisational socialisation for individuals and organisations needs to be viewed against the background of the current challenges and changes facing employees and employers that include global competition, economic uncertainty, restructuring, labour mobility and attempts to attract and retain a talented workforce. The nature, scope and speed of these challenges are affecting the world of work and changing the nature of the employment relationship between employee and employer. These factors have resulted in a greater number of newcomers requiring more frequent socialisation to their new environments and organisations having to socialise newcomers more often, in ensuring newcomers learn and adjust to their new environment and are able to contribute to individual and organisational outcomes.

Small firms that represent the majority of businesses in most developed countries such as New Zealand and make a major contribution to economic development and employment generation are not immune to these challenges and changes. Given the capacity of the small firm sector to make a contribution to employment and economic growth and the importance attached to the effective and efficient socialisation of newcomers on individual and organisational level outcomes, from a small firm perspective it is argued that the key role of socialisation is just as, even if not more important and challenging in achieving desired outcomes. Underpinning the socialisation process is an implicit understanding that social networks formed through the interactions and relationships between newcomers and organisational insiders are a key factor influencing newcomer learning and adjustment and resultant individual and organisational outcomes.

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the role of social networks underpinning the socialisation factors influencing newcomer learning and adjustment and resultant outcomes in small firms. The research design adopted for the current study was a mixed methods approach that consisted of two phases. The first phase of the study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the role of social networks during the pre-encounter and encounter phases of the socialisation process and made use of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with newcomers and socialisation agents in small firms. The second phase of this study adopted a quantitative approach, using a survey questionnaire as the data collection method to examine the impact of social networks on the

relationship between the individual socialisation factor of newcomer proactivity and socialisation outcomes in small firms from a newcomer perspective.

Overall, the findings of the qualitative phase of the study provide evidence of the important role of social networks during the pre-encounter and encounter phases of the socialisation process in small firms. More specifically, during pre-encounter socialisation social networks consisting of individuals from newcomers' social and familial milieu play a key role in initiating newcomer socialisation. In addition, social networks contribute to facilitating information exchange during the selection process that contributes to newcomer learning and adjustment. During the encounter phase, social networks contribute to establishing and developing effective workplace relationships that facilitate socialisation and providing access to informational sources that influence newcomer learning and adjustment.

The findings for the quantitative phase of this study suggest that social networks do not significantly mediate the relationship between the individual socialisation factor of newcomer proactivity and socialisation outcomes. These findings raise the likelihood that there might be additional situational and contextual factors that play a role in determining the role of social networks as a mediator of the relationship between socialisation factors and socialisation outcomes.

The study is fairly unique in that, in contrast with most socialisation research being undertaken in large firms, the context of the study was the small firm sector. This study is also one of the first to integrate the socialisation and social network literatures and makes an important contribution by examining how social network and socialisation variables are linked, and what the possible effects of this are on newcomer learning and adjustment and resultant socialisation outcomes. A number of implications that can support newcomer learning and adjustment are outlined. Various limitations are identified and opportunities for future research that can assist in increasing understanding of the important role of social networks during socialisation that can be of benefit to researchers, organisations and society are discussed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the support, guidance and assistance of many others to whom I owe a debt of gratitude and thanks. First, I would like to offer special thanks to one of my research supervisors Professor Claire Massey who has been with me since the start of this journey and offered invaluable academic and personal support, guidance and encouragement. Many thanks also to Dr Alan Coetzer who took me under his wing from the start and helped establish a solid foundation that enabled me to progress my thesis under his tutelage until he passed on the baton to Dr Karl Pajo. My special thanks for Karl for his academic expertise for which I have the utmost respect.

My acknowledgment and thanks to the library staff at the Eastern Institute of Technology, especially Linda Mellor and Sharon Johansen for their willingness and efficiency in accessing resources that supported my studies. I am also grateful to Dr Javlon Kadirov and Dr Art Thomas for their assistance with quantitative aspects of my work. Sadly, Art passed on before completion of this thesis.

Acknowledgement and thanks are also due to the owner/managers and employees of small firms who offered up their precious time to participate in this study and their willingness to provide me with the necessary information required to complete my thesis. Without their support and willingness to participate in my research, I would not have been able to undertake this study.

Many thanks are also due to my church family, led by James Major, for keeping me in their thoughts and prayers. Without my faith, I definitely would not have been able to complete this part of my life's journey.

Last, but definitely not least, I would like to acknowledge and thank my family. Especially, my wife Madeleen and my son Ryan for their patience, understanding, continual support and the sacrifices they were willing to make while I completed this thesis. This thesis is dedicated to them. Also, my mother Rose who always showed an interest in my endeavours, supported me and set the necessary example that enabled me to follow my dreams. Although Rosie sadly passed on in February 2013 before completion of this thesis I will be eternally grateful to her for all she has done and meant to me.

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

- Field, R. (2010). Conducting research using the critical incident technique: Application of the technique in a business study. *Proceedings of the New Zealand Applied Business Education Conference*. Napier, New Zealand.
- Field, R. (2012). The role of social networks in newcomer learning and adjustment during socialisation in small firms. In M. Van Gelderen (Ed.). *Proceedings of the 57th World Conference of the International Council for Small Business*, (pp. 186-187). Wellington, New Zealand.
- Field, R. (2012). The nature and significance of newcomer socialisation in small manufacturing firms: A newcomer perspective. *Proceedings of the 30th International Congress of Psychology*, (p. 37). Cape Town, South Africa.
- Field, R. (2013). The role of proactive personality in newcomer learning and adjustment during socialisation in small firms. In B. De Raad, D. Barends & D. Meiring (Eds.). *Proceedings of The 1st World Conference on Personality*. (p.65). Stellenbosch, South Africa.
- Field, R., & Coetzer, A. (2008). The effects of organisational socialisation on individual and organisational outcomes: A review of the literature and directions for future research. In P. S. Morrison (Ed.). *Proceedings of the Thirteenth Labour Employment and Work Conference/Australian Labour Market Research Workshop*, (pp. 524-533). Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University.
- Field, R., & Coetzer, A. (2010). Expectations, experiences and resultant outcomes during the socialisation of newcomers in small manufacturing firms: A socialisation agent perspective. In P. S. Morrison (Ed.). *Proceedings of the Fourteenth Labour Employment and Work Conference*, (pp.1-29). Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University.
- Field, R., & Coetzer, A. (2010). The nature and significance of the organisational socialisation process and resultant outcomes in New Zealand small manufacturing firms. *Proceedings of the 24th Australia and New Zealand Academy of Management Conference*. Adelaide, Australia.
- Field, R., & Coetzer, A. (2011). Newcomer socialisation in New Zealand small manufacturing firms: A socialisation agent perspective. *Small Enterprise Research*, 18(1), 80-96.

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Tables

| | | |
|----------|--|-----|
| Table 1 | Research Objectives and Specific Research Questions | 48 |
| Table 2 | Factor Analysis Results for Items that Loaded | 78 |
| Table 3 | Reliability Analysis for Composite Measures..... | 80 |
| Table 4 | Summary of Findings of Categories and Themes | 119 |
| Table 5 | Demographic Characteristics of Respondents | 122 |
| Table 6 | Means and Standard Deviations for Study Variables | 123 |
| Table 7 | Correlation Analysis for Study Variables | 125 |
| Table 8 | Results of Regression Analysis for Socialisation Outcomes on Newcomer Proactivity..... | 128 |
| Table 9 | Mediation Analysis for Newcomer Proactivity on Task Mastery through Social Networks..... | 130 |
| Table 10 | Mediation Analysis for Newcomer Proactivity on Social Integration through Social Networks..... | 131 |
| Table 11 | Mediation Analysis for Newcomer Proactivity on Organisational Commitment through Social Networks..... | 132 |
| Table 12 | Mediation Analysis for Newcomer Proactivity on Intention to Quit through Social Networks..... | 133 |

Figure

| | | |
|----------|---|----|
| Figure 1 | Social Networks Mediating Newcomer Proactivity and Socialisation Outcomes..... | 49 |
|----------|---|----|

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

| Key Terms | Definitions |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Organisational Socialisation | The process by which a newcomer learns and adjusts to their new environment in order to function as fully effective members of the organisation (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). |
| Newcomer | A label or status applied to an individual who is employed in a new job, in a new work environment, who undergoes socialisation (Ashford & Nurmohamed, 2012). |
| Socialisation Agents | An employee of the organisation who plays an important and integral role in facilitating newcomer socialisation (Bauer, Morrison & Callister, 1998). |
| Socialisation Tactics | Approaches and activities initiated by the organisation to facilitate newcomer learning and adjustment to their new environment during the socialisation process (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). |
| Newcomer Proactivity | Newcomers who play a proactive role in facilitating their own socialisation through engaging in behaviours that include information seeking, displaying imitative and building relationships (Cooper-Thomas & Burke, 2012). |
| Pre-encounter Phase of Socialisation | The first stage of the socialisation process that occurs before a newcomer enters into the organisation, when newcomers are prepared for and provided with indications of what life in the organisation is like and expectations are created (Feldman, 1981; Fisher, 1986). |

| | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Encounter Phase of Socialisation | The second stage of the socialisation process that occurs from the time a newcomer enters the organisation and the early period thereafter, when a newcomer experiences what the organisation is really like (Feldman, 1981; Fisher, 1986). |
| Adaptation Phase | The stage in the socialisation process during which newcomers learn and adjust to their job, work group and the organisation as they become integrated into their new environment (Ashford & Nurmohamed, 2012). |
| Proximal Outcomes | Primary outcomes of the socialisation that are direct indicators used to assess the effects of socialisation on newcomer adjustment that precede the more distal outcomes (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo & Tucker, 2007). |
| Distal Outcomes | Secondary outcomes of the socialisation process that are influenced by and are subsequent results of the more proximal outcomes (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo & Tucker, 2007). |
| Social Networks | A specified set of people and their relationships, interactions and the positions they hold in a workplace setting (Jokisaari & Nurmi, 2012). |

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|------|
| ABSTRACT..... | i |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | iii |
| LIST OF PUBLICATIONS | iv |
| LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES..... | v |
| DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS | vi |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS..... | viii |
| | |
| CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY | 1 |
| 1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY | 1 |
| 1.2 ORGANISATIONAL SOCIALISATION IN THE SMALL FIRM CONTEXT..... | 7 |
| 1.2.1 The Importance of Organisational Socialisation in Small Firms..... | 7 |
| 1.2.2 Small Firm and Large Firm Employee Practices | 9 |
| 1.2.3 Small Firm Approaches to Organisational Socialisation and their Significance | 12 |
| 1.2.4 Defining the Small Firm | 17 |
| 1.3 GAPS IN THE SOCIALISATION LITERATURE | 19 |
| 1.4 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS STUDY | 22 |
| 1.5 ORGANISATION OF THE THESIS STRUCTURE..... | 25 |
| | |
| CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE | 27 |
| 2.1 THE NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ORGANISATIONAL SOCIALISATION | 27 |
| 2.1.1 The Nature of Organisational Socialisation | 27 |
| 2.1.2 The Significance of Organisational Socialisation | 28 |
| 2.2 STAGES OF THE ORGANISATIONAL SOCIALISATION PROCESS | 31 |
| 2.2.1 The Pre-encounter and Encounter Phases of Socialisation | 32 |
| 2.2.2 Adaptation Phase and Outcomes of the Organisational Socialisation Process | 34 |
| 2.3 THE ROLE OF ORGANISATIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL SOCIALISATION | |
| FACTORS DURING THE SOCIALISATION PROCESS | 35 |
| 2.3.1 Socialisation Tactics..... | 36 |
| 2.3.2 Newcomer Proactivity..... | 38 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| 2.4 SOCIAL NETWORKS AS A MECHANISM UNDERPINNING NEWCOMER SOCIALISATION | 41 |
| 2.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS | 47 |
| CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY | 51 |
| 3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN FOR THE STUDY | 51 |
| 3.2 METHODS USED IN THE QUALITATIVE STUDY..... | 55 |
| 3.2.1 Overview | 55 |
| 3.2.2 The Critical Incident Technique..... | 55 |
| 3.2.3 Pre-testing Procedures..... | 58 |
| 3.2.4 Sampling and Pre-interview Procedures | 59 |
| 3.2.5 Data Collection..... | 62 |
| 3.2.6 Data Analysis | 64 |
| 3.3 METHODS USED IN THE QUANTITATIVE STUDY | 66 |
| 3.3.1 Overview | 66 |
| 3.3.2 Design of the Questionnaire..... | 66 |
| 3.3.3 Research Measures | 67 |
| 3.3.4 Pre-testing the Questionnaire | 73 |
| 3.3.5 Sampling and Implementation Procedures..... | 74 |
| 3.3.6 Data Analysis | 75 |
| 3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS | 80 |
| CHAPTER FOUR: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS DURING THE SOCIALISATION PROCESS | 81 |
| 4.1 THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS DURING PRE-ENCOUNTER SOCIALISATION | 82 |
| 4.1.1 Initiating Socialisation | 82 |
| 4.1.2 Establishing Newcomer-Organisation Fit via the Selection Process | 88 |
| 4.2 THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS DURING ENCOUNTER SOCIALISATION | 93 |
| 4.2.1 Establishing and Developing Effective Workplace Relationships..... | 94 |
| 4.2.2 Providing Access to Informational Sources | 107 |
| 4.3 SUMMARY | 118 |

| | |
|---|---------|
| CHAPTER FIVE: SOCIAL NETWORKS AS A MECHANISM UNDERPINNING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NEWCOMER PROACTIVITY AND SOCIALISATION OUTCOMES..... | 121 |
| 5.1 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS..... | 121 |
| 5.2 CORRELATION ANALYSIS..... | 124 |
| 5.3 REGRESSION ANALYSIS AND MEDIATION ANALYSIS | 127 |
| 5.4 SUMMARY | 133 |
| CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION OF QUANTITATIVE RESULTS | 135 |
| 6.1 AGGREGATE RESULTS..... | 135 |
| 6.2 CORRELATION ANALYSIS..... | 139 |
| 6.3 REGRESSION ANALYSIS AND MEDIATION ANALYSIS | 140 |
| 6.3.1 Relationship between Newcomer Proactivity and Socialisation Outcomes | 140 |
| 6.3.2 Effects of Mediation on Task Mastery..... | 142 |
| 6.3.3 Effects of Mediation on Social Integration | 144 |
| 6.3.4 Effects of Mediation on Intention to Quit | 146 |
| 6.3.5 Effects of Mediation on Organisational Commitment..... | 147 |
| 6.3.6 Overall Effects of Mediation on Socialisation Outcomes..... | 148 |
| CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS | 153 |
| 7.1 RESEARCH FINDINGS | 154 |
| 7.1.1 Social Networks during Pre-encounter Socialisation..... | 155 |
| 7.1.2 Social Networks during Encounter Socialisation..... | 157 |
| 7.1.3 Social Networks underpinning Newcomer Proactivity and Socialisation Outcomes..... | 160 |
| 7.2 CONTRIBUTIONS | 164 |
| 7.3 IMPLICATIONS | 168 |
| 7.4 LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH..... | 170 |
| 7.5 CONCLUSION..... | 172 |
| REFERENCES..... | 173 |
| APPENDICES | 201 |