Organizational Entry, Sense Making, and New Professional Employees in Academic Libraries

Janice Simmons-Welburn and William C. Welburn

In a recent article written for the *Harvard Business Review*, Robert Eckert wrote that as the new chief executive officer of Mattel Toy Company he had to do everything possible to reduce the potential for tension in each new encounter with employees. “Surprisingly,” he found, “in each situation, recognizing my own lack of knowledge about the company’s people and culture actually helped me lead.”1 Entering a new organization, whether as CEO, manager, or an entry-level employee, triggers a process of making sense of a new and unfamiliar organizational culture. It follows that in successful organizations—those organizations that are innovative, productive, and committed to organizational learning2—managers are concerned about the entry and socialization of new employees, concerned enough to create strategies designed to overcome the uncertainties of adjustment to a new organizational culture.

This paper describes formal and informal processes designed to ease the transition of new librarians and professional staff in academic libraries. Using previous research on newcomer adjustment to organizations grounded in Meryl Louis’ theory on the surprise and sense making3 that newcomers experience in an organization, this paper will combine recent research on organizational entry with data collected from an exploratory study of the experiences and perceptions of human resource (HR) administrators in academic libraries concerning their respective libraries’ strategies employed to aid in the socialization of librarians and other staff. Specific questions considered here involve the extent to which libraries:

• are poised to get the best from their new employees;
• address issues of socialization of new employees;
• have created strategies as administered by library human resources directors that are aimed at reducing turnover based on unmet or unrealized expectations

Sense Making and Organizational Entry

When libraries and other organizational units in colleges and universities hire new employees, they en-
gage in a psychological contract, a term used since the early 1960s to describe the employer-employee relationship. In their review of the development of the idea of a psychological contract, Hall and Moss have found that the very nature of the contract has changed as organizations have less of an effect on career management than employees have on determining the directions of their own careers. As a consequence, the image of the organization man—the long-term, loyal employee—has faded in favor of the protean career, “a process which the person, not the organization, is managing.”

There are profound implications of a shorter-term, transactional relationship between employees and organizations at the point of organizational entry, particularly in academic libraries where employees are hired for an array of professional expertise. As Edgar Schein has noted in a discussion of the impact of change versus stability in the socialization of professional managers, “So long as we have a pluralistic society that itself values some degree of diversity, more individuals may be better able to operate in industries that thrive on innovation. Organizations that are more conformist may have a hard time finding people willing to make the necessary psychological contract.”

In other words, the capacity of an organization to be successful in the process of socialization of new employees—especially those who bring new professional expertise that is critical to the desire of the organization to change—may be contingent upon the extent to which the culture of the organization affects its psychological contract with new employees. By extension, success in socialization may also be affected by the capacity of new employees to make sense of the new organization, what is expected of them and what they can contribute in return, and how they will build their careers within the organization.

According to Meryl Louis, there are two prominent perspectives on organizational entry: socialization and turnover. New employees will leave an organization prematurely because of either unmet or unrealistic expectations. Organizational entry is a major phase of organizational socialization, in which a new employee defines his or her relationship to the organization.

Sense making has generally been applied in library and information science to study information need and use in its broadest sense, and in particular, in the information search process of library users. Yet, sense making is also significant to the study of organizational life and organizational identity. As Karl Weick has written:

Organizations resemble puzzling terrain because they lend themselves to multiple, conflicting interpretations, all of which are plausible. Sensemaking in the broadest sense is a metaphor that focuses attention upon the idea that the reality of everyday life must be seen as an ongoing accomplishment, which takes particular shape and form as individuals attempt to create order and make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves... Individuals are seen as engaged in ongoing processes through which they attempt to make their situations rationally accountable to themselves and others... The sensemaking metaphor encourages an analytical focus upon the process through which individuals create and use symbols.

Sense making can occur at various levels of organizations and in different situations. An entire campus may engage in sense making to understand its relationship as a public university to state legislative budgetary decisions. A teaching hospital or biomedical research program may be challenged to make sense of new regulations from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services or from the National Institutes of Health. A unit within a library may experience the cycle of sense making based on changes within another unit in which it maintains frequent contact. Long-term library employees may be challenged to adapt to the leadership style of a new director or by changes in personnel policies mandated by the campus human resources.

Meryl Louis provides guidance for the adaptation of sense making in the context of newcomers and organizational entry when she defined sense making as “attributing meaning to surprise.”

In order to assess the special needs of newcomers during sense making, we compare their situation in general with that of insiders. The experiences of newcomers differ in three important ways from those of insiders. First, in-
siders normally know what to expect in and of the situation...Second, when surprises do arise, the insider usually has sufficient history in the setting to interpret them more accurately...Third, when surprises arise and sense making is necessary, the insider usually has other insiders with whom to compare perceptions and interpretations.8

Research on individual and organizational perspectives on career transitions and organizational entry, whether focusing on formal or informal support for socializing the newcomer to the organization, its processes, procedures, and culture, all point to the needs of newcomers to attribute meaning to experiences. College and university libraries are especially challenged with a duality of socialization into the library and its parent institution and into the profession with the potential for conflicting values, needs, and requirements. Not only does the process of organizational entry entail such technical requirements as learning the layout of the library system, the intricacies of benefits packages, negotiating parking, and the requirements for promotion. New professionals are also challenged to develop professional relationships, understand organizational culture and campus traditions, and to become comfortable with the landscape presented for continuous learning by the library.

Information Seeking or Meaning Engagement
There is a substantial body of research in the disciplines of human communication and organizational psychology on the role that information-seeking behavior plays among people in organizations, focused primarily on the ways in which employees cope with organizational uncertainty, especially when related to change. These studies tend to center on different facets of information need and use resulting from task complexity9 to uncertainty10, and several have linked sense making and human information behavior in an effort to promote “the discovery of people’s strategies, expectations, attitudes, and anxieties as they live and work in their life worlds.”11

Morrison has attempted an integrative employee information seeking model that links feedback-seeking and organizational newcomer behavior. In her review of a substantial number of recent studies of newcomer information seeking, Morrison found that types and modes of information sought suggested that newcomers are strategic in their quest for information, and that newcomers sought information in a quest for personal control and in response to the feeling that they had not adequately mastered their jobs. The succession of research also found that newcomers shift from formal to informal strategies as the social cost of not knowing increased.12 Finally, a consistent patterned relationship can be observed between organizational socialization and information seeking among newcomers.

Studies of information seeking behavior among newcomers points to two important issues of practical value for library human resources. First, there is an ever-present linkage between the individual employee’s quest for information and organizational socialization that suggests that to some degree the information-seeking context may be key to the effort of the newcomer to establish organizational identity13. Second, as we shall see later, responding HR administrators in our exploratory study reported a clear emphasis on the provision of basic information as a common way of orienting new employees.

Yet the information seeking approach to responding to sense making and organizational entry among new professionals in libraries may have its limitations. Mokros and Aakhus have argued that within the information-seeking perspective, “becoming an expert is treated as a problem of developing technical competence, and intervention improves the acquisition, retention, and translation of a body of technical literature and procedures.” Conversely, meaning engagement practice may provide a different perspective on organizational entry. Meaning engagement practice is “where becoming an expert involves creating a new identity and rearranging social relationships over and above learning how to instrumentally match technical solutions to problems...meaning engagement practice calls for becoming a member of a professional community that cultivates standards and presuppositions, and it means interpreting and judging professional action.”14 This approach, with its focus on social relations and context, not only has utility for the researcher’s understanding of what happens in organizational entry, but has practical value for HR administrators seeking to revise their approaches to orienting new employees in a way that enhances the process of socialization. Such a consideration can be further explored by examining exploratory

Janice Simmons-Welburn and William C. Welburn

ACRL Eleventh National Conference
data in the form of the perceptions of library HR administrators. Five themes emerged from our exploratory survey of human resource administrators subscribing to the ACRL Personnel and Staff Development Officers Discussion Group electronic list. Similarities and differences occur on how practical strategies are employed in organizational entry of new employees in academic libraries, including how libraries prepare for newcomers, the role of mentoring in relation to other support mechanisms for socialization, how new employees receive orientation to both library and campus, and distinctions made between new and seasoned professionals and between librarians and other staff.

**Formal Orientation**

A clear pattern surfaced in respondents regarding formal orientation plans for all new professional employees. Fourteen out of fifteen usable responses indicated their libraries had formal orientation for newcomers. Typically, library HR administrators disbursed packets of information detailing technical requirements of employment, and some held orientation sessions. Respondents also indicated a substantial unit-level role for departments and their supervisors in managing orientation of newcomers with the support of the library HR office. At one public university, it was the expectation that “associate directors would work with direct reports to ensure that orientation plans for professional staff were comprehensive.” At another, an assigned mentor and the department head used a checklist to ensure that a number of topics were covered.

Where librarians held faculty status, efforts were made to incorporate sessions on promotional guidelines. Where there was a clear faculty governance structure, such as a senate or assembly, those bodies were involved in meeting with new employees as mentors or other welcome activities.

Formal orientation plans satisfy one aspect of organizational entry, that of information need in the face of uncertainty. Yet as Morrison found in her review of research on the information needs of newcomers, “overt forms of information seeking become less frequent and indirect forms become more frequent” as the social cost of information seeking increases. Louis, Posner, and Powell also found that formal orientation had little effect on the socialization process of new workers. Instead, support from peers and supervisors through informal channels seem to have greater impact on job satisfaction and professional commitment to the organization.

In ten of the responding libraries, formal orientation plans originated in the library HR office. In one library, “the Personnel Librarian provides a checklist but supervisors have wide latitude to adjust the checklist in creating orientation plans.” Two respondents placed responsibility for orientation plans with the newcomer’s unit, two balanced responsibilities between the supervisor and library HR administrator, and one reported no formal expectations for orientation.

It is clear from the responses we received that the role of the HR administrator is that of a point person on orientation, providing information to the new employee and resource support to supervisors. It is also apparent that regardless of whether or not the HR administrator or the supervisor take the lead with new employees, both collaborate on formal orientation. One private university library reported, “We expect that unit managers will provide orientation at the unit, department and divisional level, but some unit managers do more than others to orient new staff.” At a public university, “there is a combination of plans that are developed by the university (for orientation to university services, process, procedures), library administration (for orientation to library-wide systems, processes and ‘culture’) and by the area head (for nitty-gritty job related orientation).”

**Role of Mentoring**

There are mixed models reported on the routine assignment of mentors. Four respondents reported that their libraries assigned mentors to new employees. However, eight had no mentoring program, and three reported informal, voluntary mentoring practices. It appeared that mentoring had a greater role where librarians had faculty status. One library faculty committee at a public university facilitated “the assignment of a mentor if the new professional staff employee desires,” while in another public university library, the “library faculty are assigned a mentoring committee to assist with the tenure process.” In yet a third public institution, “faculty are assigned mentors. Sometimes this becomes a long term relationship, other times it’s just a matter of getting through the orientation checklist and the first few months.”
Interactions with the Campus Community

When asked what steps were taken to introduce newcomers to the campus community, all respondents reported that their librarians, professional, and support staff attend appropriate campus orientation activities. In their descriptions, campus orientation programs tended to be benefits-oriented, or serve to introduce the history and organization of the campus. One library HR administrator at a private university wrote that the university had an orientation for new professionals and managers that covered “University policies and practices, University organizational structure, compensation structures, [and] basic management issues.”

Where librarians were invited to new faculty orientation, other useful information was covered. At one public university “annual campus orientation for new faculty lasts three days and covers teaching methodology, using technology systems, tenure, meeting campus officials, etc.” At another public institution, “There is a new faculty orientation held annually in the fall; also a bus tour of [the state] for new faculty.”

Differences by Prior Experience and Level of Employment

When asked what differences were there in orientation for newcomers with no prior experience and those with prior experience, generally the library HR office made no distinctions. One library HR administrator at a private university wrote, “No distinction [is] made formally. My office spends more time with the newcomer with no prior professional experience.” Another wrote, “All staff are offered the same orientation; I would say those with prior experience in libraries are less likely to participate.”

If distinctions were made between professional and clerical staff within the organization, they were made at the departmental level or, in the case of professionals, the inclusion of information or sessions devoted to performance appraisals. One library HR administrator at a public university wrote, “The differences have to do with the different nature of their appointments.” Another wrote, “Our library orientation program does not differentiate between faculty, professional staff and classified staff.”

Introduction to Performance Appraisal

Finally, some effort was made to explore the integration of information seeking and evaluation. When asked at what point newcomers are introduced to the libraries’ performance appraisal system, six library HR administrators reported that the performance appraisal system was discussed prior to the newcomer accepting employment with the library and two did not specify when the performance appraisal system was introduced. One HR officer at a private university library wrote, “Candidates receive basic information at the interview stage and more in depth explanation on their first day of employment.” An HR officer at a public university library wrote, “Copies of the promotion document are sent to candidates before they arrive for interviews. The document is discussed with the candidates during the interview. The rank and promotion system is again reviewed with the new employee during their meeting with the library personnel unit member on the first day.”

Seven responded that the performance appraisal system was reviewed after the new employee either accepted or began employment in the library. One public university library reported “new employees are offered training regarding promotion after they’ve started employment.” Another library HR administrator at a public university wrote, “Library faculty are sent a packet of information that includes a sample evaluation form as soon as they sign their letter of offer.” A private university library responded, “Most information is given once the employee is in place. Information about the performance review cycle is included in the orientation checklists, to be reviewed by the supervisor.”

Summary and Conclusions

In her paper on the process of building professional identity in work transitions, Herminia Ibarra wrote, “Socialization researchers have long noted that identity changes accompany career transitions. Because new roles require new skills, behaviors, attitudes, and patterns of interactions, they may produce fundamental changes in an individual’s self-definitions.” Organizational entry can be viewed as a socialization process for new employees in which making sense of the organization plays a major role for the employee and the organization. The psychological contract between the library and the new employee implies negotiation and meaning engagement, the consequence of which is either establishment of an employee’s professional identity with the organization or the disso-
olution of the newcomer due to unmet and unrealistic expectations.

We have found in a preliminary inquiry that one of the ways in which libraries cope with organizational entry is to anticipate newcomers’ needs to develop technical competence in their employment through mastery of specific sets of knowledge of the library and its parent institution. In some instances—especially where professional governance structures are present—this model is extended into other forms of socialization, through mentoring and informal meetings with staff and administrators.

What is less certain is the attention given to the development of newcomers’ identities within the organization. As Ibarra noted, “In assuming new roles, people must not only acquire new skills [quoting Jon Van Maanan and Edgar Schein] ‘but also adopt the social norms and rules that govern how they should conduct themselves.’”19

While the results presented here are only exploratory, they point to the need for more comprehensive study of the formal and informal processes of socialization of newcomers in academic libraries. Specifically, further investigation is required into the differences across organizational environments and cultures, and to the differences between new and experienced employees especially concerning socialization to both the organization and to employees’ chosen profession and to similarities and distinctions between the levels of employment within the organization.

There are also significant implications for human resource management in academic libraries, implications that are contingent upon whether or not the library gives primacy to information acquisition or development of social relations as the reason for orientation and how libraries think about the place of the individual as a working, transitioning professional in the organization. Particularly important is where the locus of planning and implementation of orientation resides and how that locus is negotiated between administration and departmental units, how one thinks about the formal and informal processes of socialization, and the role and value of mentors.

If, as Hall and Moss stated, the old psychological contract “was with the organization, the protean contract is with the self and one’s work...organizations that have succeeded in creating a new contract for the new business environment have recognized that the career of the future is a continuous learning process,”20 a process that begins during new employees’ transition when sense making is crucial.

Notes
13. Michael G. Pratt has noted, “Organizational identification occurs when ‘an individual’s beliefs about his or her organization become self-referential or self-defining’...organizational members who identify with their organizations are more likely to make decisions and engage in sense


15. The authors interacted with HR administrators at sixteen academic libraries. Although limited in number, respondents reflect diversity in geographic location and in mission. Four were private research universities and ten were public research universities. The remaining two were public non-research institutions. Data reported here reflect an exploratory study rather than a methodologically scientific survey of institutions.


19. Ibid.