Identity and the Modern Organization

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CHAPTER 7

The Struggle to Establish Organizational Membership and Identification in Remote Work Contexts

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Prompted by market forces and the quest for innovation and responsiveness, a quiet revolution has taken place in the way that many organizations approach the design of work. Organizations have begun to relax the assumption that work is best accomplished through the physical colocation of their members, and employees increasingly perform an ever-widening set of work activities remotely from their supervisors and coworkers—at home, at clients’ and customers’ sites, and at satellite centers, among other places. Despite the advantages of these remote
work arrangements in allowing people to work together anytime and anywhere, they may also bring unanticipated challenges. One such challenge concerns employees’ ability to develop a strong sense of organizational membership.

Organizational membership is meaningful both as a social group to which people do or do not belong (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Elsbach, 1999; Kramer, 1991) and as a fluid state reflecting extent of inclusion within that group (Rafaeli, 1997; Tyler & Blader, 2002; Tyler & Lind, 1992). People therefore have perceptions about whether they are organizational members (yes or no) as well as their membership status (degree of respect and acceptance one holds as a member). A strong sense of membership thus means that people perceive that they belong and are highly respected members. This perception has important implications for the ways that employees relate to their work organizations and perform their jobs. It not only helps to create and sustain a cognitive connection to the organization that fosters identification (Pratt, 1998; Tyler & Blader, 2002), but also provides a set of lenses (i.e., cognitive schemas, behavioral scripts, and normative prescriptions) for interpreting information and events, determining proper decisions and actions, and regulating social interactions (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000).

Remote work arrangements potentially pose a challenge to creating a strong sense of organizational membership as a result of the way that employees’ social interactions are affected. It is well known that workplace interactions are occasions for people to create and validate their work-related memberships and identities (Ashforth, 1998; Elsbach, 2003; Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, 2000; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Yet relative to employees who are more centrally located, remote employees generally have fewer opportunities to discuss, observe, and engage in the organization’s work, practices, and routines. Remote employees often express concerns about missing out on formal and informal social interactions around the office, and fear that working remotely will leave them isolated and excluded (Cascio, 1999, 2000; McCloskey & Igbaria, 2003). The informal and interactive process through which people develop their membership perceptions are likely to be more constrained for remote employees than for those who work in traditional (i.e., collocated) settings. It is this proposition that we explore in this chapter.

Organizational research on remote employees has focused almost exclusively on employees who have transitioned from traditional work settings to remote work contexts (Igbaria & Guimaraes, 1999; Staples, 2001; Wiesenfeld, Garud, & Raghuram, 1999). Although remote employees are often organizational insiders who previously have spent time at centralized offices, practitioners report that a growing proportion of remote employees are recent hires who work outside of traditional settings on or soon after organizational entry. Remote employees may be especially difficult for recent hires because of the significant challenge associated with creating (as compared to maintaining) a sense of organizational membership without the benefit of knowing the mutual expectations, shared understandings, and common language that exist in collocated work contexts. Although recent
hires are organizational members in an official sense, their membership perceptions may not be fully established or elaborated, and they may have few occasions to take part in social interactions that help cultivate these perceptions. How recent hires experience their social interactions while working remotely, however, has not been the focus of scholarly inquiry. Given the vital function that social interactions serve in developing organizational membership perceptions, the effect of remoteness on employees’ experiences of these interactions is an important, yet understudied, question. We address this question by considering how remoteness might affect recent hires’ experiences of their social interactions, and, in turn, their organizational identification.

COMMUNICATING ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERSHIP IN REMOTE WORK CONTEXTS

Research has noted the lack of empirical attention paid to how perceptions of organizational membership emerge in workplace encounters (Deaux & Martin, 2003) and called for investigations of interpersonal and interactive forces (Bradbury & Bergman Lichtenstein, 2000; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Moreover, organizational research that portrays membership and identity as interpersonally constructed (Ashforth, 1998; Bartel & Dutton, 2001; Etzioni & Deaux, 1994; Polzer, Milton, & Swann, 2002; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003) has not fully explored how the physical context affects this interactive process, largely assuming that the parties involved are collocated and can easily send and receive tacit and explicit cues. However, remoteness creates barriers to social interactions that arise both from temporal and spatial distance and from the fact that communication tends to be technologically mediated in remote contexts (Hinds & Bailey, 2003). Research that focuses on both collocated and technologically mediated communication suggests that these factors influence people’s social interactions substantially, especially for recent hires who may lack the knowledge, experience, and common ground enabling them to adapt to the challenges of technologically mediated interactions (Kock, 2004). Uniting these two streams of research, the study of membership perceptions in a remote work context affords the opportunity to explore the role of the physical context and the challenges to social interactions it presents.

Compared to collocated interactions, technologically mediated interactions tend to occur less frequently, have shorter durations, contain less social content, and the intensity and richness with which information is exchanged is weaker (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Daft, Lengel, & Treviño, 1987; Griffith, Sawyer, & Neale, 2003; Kiesler & Sproull, 1992). Although long-term employees may adapt to these differences with time and experience (Kock, 2004; Orlikowski, Yates, Okamura, & Fujimoto, 1995; Walther, 1992), the effect of technologically mediated interactions is likely to be acute among new hires, who lack experience and
familiarity with the context. Recent hires who engage in technologically mediated interactions in their work arrangements may have difficulty establishing the kinds of social interactions that facilitate a strong sense of membership.

The interactive social process through which organizational membership perceptions emerge has been elaborated by Bartel and Dutton (2001). These researchers theorize an interpersonal process that consists of verbal and behavioral acts aimed at claiming and granting membership. Membership claims are attempts to assert and affirm one’s sense of belonging and inclusion in the organization by sending cues encouraging other members to recognize and respect one as a member. Other members, in turn, reciprocate (or not) with membership granting to signal their view of a person’s belonging and inclusion. These interactions can take many forms and range from being highly consensual to highly contested. A person may claim high belonging and inclusion, for example, which others may accept or reject. The process therefore has a negotiated quality, with initial acts followed by a sequence of exchanges in which people either claim membership for themselves or grant or deny membership to others. Ideally, people striving to have their membership claims socially validated (Swann, 1987). Social validation occurs when people act to claim membership and perceive that others reciprocate with membership granting that signals support for the desired degree of belonging and inclusion. Such exchanges suggest to people that their membership perceptions are accurate and provide reliable lenses through which to view and make sense of their work context (Polzer et al., 2002; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). When people perceive insufficient membership granting by others in response to their claims, they may be confused about how others view their membership, or, even worse, may believe that others do not support their membership claims.

Remoteness is likely to affect the ability of recent hires to engage in membership claiming and detect membership granting from others. People’s perceptions of their own and others’ membership are based on multiple factors. Specifically, perceptions of the degree to which a person belongs and is a respected member of the organization derive from how well he or she fits the prototypical qualities and characteristics of the organization and is able to partake in its cultural, relational, and professional activities (Kunda, 1992; Louis, 1980; Van Maaren & Schein, 1979). Actions that characteristically define membership claiming and granting therefore include efforts to signal particular qualities that a person possesses or aspects of his or her participation in the organization’s work (tasks, practices, and routines), culture (shared symbols, language, and customs), and relational landscape (patterns of relationships between individuals based on authority, power, friendship, and the like; see Bartel & Dutton, 2001 for a review). Yet, such information may be difficult to convey from a distance (Cascio, 1999; Davenport &Pearlson, 1998; Griffith et al., 2003), especially for newer employees who may not have learned how to adjust their demeanor and behavior to the demands of remoteness (Walther, 1992). This may undermine remote employees’ efforts to both claim membership and to detect cues from others about whether such claims are granted. This suggests the following propositions:
Proposition 1. Greater remoteness from the organization will be associated with less membership claiming among recent hires.

Proposition 2. Greater remoteness from the organization will be associated with less perceived membership granting among recent hires.

IMPACT OF MEMBERSHIP CLAIMING AND GRANTING ON IDENTIFICATION

Employees who exhibit substantial membership claims and perceive that others exhibit sufficient membership granting in return are likely to develop perceptions indicative of a high degree of both belonging and respect. Such a pattern of interaction thus is likely to affect outcomes that are commonly associated with strong membership perceptions, such as organizational identification.

When people identify strongly with an organization, they perceive its essential qualities as self-defining (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Pratt, 1998) and become personally invested in its successes and failures (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Membership claiming and perceived membership granting may contribute to remote employees’ organizational identification through two pathways. First, a pattern of membership claiming and granting may increase the cognitive connection that is a necessary precondition for identification (Deaux & Martin, 2003); that is, categorizing the self as an organizational member (Pratt, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Such interaction patterns signal support for and recognition of one’s belonging and inclusion in the organization, reinforcing one’s readiness to categorize the self as an organizational member when it is situationally appropriate to do so. Low levels of membership claiming and granting, in contrast, may weaken tendencies to use the organization as a category to define the self, thereby impeding identification.

Second, engaging in membership claiming and perceiving membership granting may lead employees to value their organizational membership and thus to identify more strongly with the organization. Recent theorizing suggests that one’s social desirability within a group bolsters identification because people are motivated to identify with groups in which they feel included and respected for self-enhancement reasons (Tyler & Blader, 2002). Perceptions of belonging and respect implied by membership claiming and perceived membership granting may bolster remote employees’ estimates of their inclusion and respect within the organization, providing a self-enhancement basis for stronger identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

In sum, we propose that recent hires who are remote throughout their employment face substantial obstacles to experiencing the social interactions so critical to cultivating a strong sense of organizational membership, and, in turn, higher levels of organizational identification. Thus, we suggest that the potential dangers of remote work stem from its effect on employees’ efforts to claim organizational membership and to detect others’ efforts to grant membership. Membership
claiming and perceived membership granting should therefore mediate the negative effect of remoteness on organizational identification. This suggests the following propositions:

Proposition 3. Greater membership claiming will be associated with stronger organizational identification among recent hires.
Proposition 4. Greater perceived membership granting will be associated with stronger organizational identification among recent hires.
Proposition 5. Membership claiming and perceived membership granting will mediate the negative effect of remoteness on organizational identification.

ILLUSTRATIVE EVIDENCE FROM A FIELD STUDY

A field study that we conducted recently (Bartel, Wrzesniewski, & Wiesenfeld, 2006) provides preliminary evidence in support of our propositions. We collected survey data from 326 employees in one division of a large technology firm who began their employment within the last 9 months. The organization designs and manufactures a wide range of technology products and also provides technology-related services to clients. Remote work is a common work arrangement for employees, regardless of tenure. Project assignments often require that employees spend time away from the office, working on the road and at clients’ offices. The study’s participants represented various specializations, including financial services, programming, “e-business” integration, and communications.

We used existing (i.e., organizational identification; Mael & Ashforth, 1992) and newly created measures (remoteness, membership claiming and granting) to assess independent and dependent variables. We conducted interviews at the local organization with supervisors, managers, and employees who worked in remote settings on or soon after organizational entry to gain insight into how they experienced their social interactions. These interviews informed our measures of remoteness, membership claiming, and perceived membership granting. Specifically, we used three items to measure remoteness that captured the percentage of time that participants spent away from (a) coworkers with whom they worked interdependently and interacted socially; (b) supervisors who established their goals, evaluated them, and served as their liaison to management and higher levels of the organizational bureaucracy; and (c) total time spent in an isolated setting, away from the symbolic representations of the organization (e.g., physical office, artifacts, and service and support mechanisms). We averaged their responses to construct an overall measure of remoteness.

We complemented theoretical work identifying tactics that people use to negotiate perceptions of membership and identity (Bartel & Dutton, 2001; Swann,
with interviews at the focal organization to determine specific ways in which employees claim membership and perceive that others grant membership. Consistent with prior theorizing, interviewees noted that recent hires proactively seek opportunities to participate in, contribute to, and make known their involvement in various work-related activities. We created five items to capture these actions; for example: “Whenever there is a chance to get actively involved, I take it” and “I attend voluntary functions or activities that help the organization.” Also consistent with prior research, interviewees noted that actions that signal inclusion involve verbally stating recent hires’ value to the organization or otherwise taking action to involve them in important task activities. We created seven items to capture recent hires’ perceptions of such actions; for example: “People I work with make me feel that my skills and abilities are valued.”

Overall Findings

Table 7.1 displays descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for all variables. The correlation results are consistent with our hypotheses: remoteness was negatively correlated with reported membership claiming, perceived membership granting, and organizational identification. Furthermore, membership claiming and perceived granting were positively correlated with organizational identification. There were no systematic differences in participants’ reports as a function of gender, area of specialization, or home office location.

Regarding Propositions 1 and 2, regression analyses revealed that remoteness was negatively related to both membership claiming (Adjusted R² = .05) and perceived membership granting (Adjusted R² = .11), controlling for the influence of tenure and overall utilization (i.e., billable projects) within the organization. Regression analyses also provided support for Propositions 3 and 4; membership claiming and perceived membership granting were positively associated with organizational identification when controlling for tenure and utilization (Adjusted R² = .24). The three-stage mediated regression approach recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986) also revealed that remoteness was negatively associated with organizational identification, but was no longer a significant predictor when entered simultaneously with reported membership claiming and perceived membership granting. The effects of membership claiming and granting remained significant and relatively unchanged, suggesting that these social interaction variables fully mediated the effect of remoteness on organizational identification, thus supporting Proposition 5.

Insights from the Qualitative Data

Of the 326 participants in the study, 162 (50%) provided responses to open-ended questions about their remote work experiences. We found strong evidence that
remote employees often feel insecure about aspects of their organizational membership. Common concerns included feeling excluded, being out of the loop, and not being respected as a member. For example, a participant noted the following:

I feel separated from the others and from my unit. Because my [i.e., remote employees] are not included in the head count immediately, we don’t show up on the org chart and we don’t always get put on the distribution list. For the past 6 months I have felt like there were practice members and there were ‘others’; us. I don’t like not being a part of the team, and I would have preferred to come directly into my practice, assigned to a manager I can work with, and with my own little spot on the org chart that clearly shows I am full-fledged member.

Participants often tied such concerns to their ability to take part in various work activities, noting that they participated in activities hesitantly, reluctantly, or inconsistently. Such comments provide suggestive evidence that membership perceptions partly derive from employees’ ability to engage in the essential work of the organization. This point is evident in the following comment from a participant:

It’s been very frustrating not to work on anything substantive and challenging. Basically, many of us [recent hires] are glorified research assistants and it’s been a constant battle to get integrated with our practices. Without project experience, it’s hard to have credibility. I feel VERY removed and in an organization as big as this, it’s important to feel connected. I feel I’m part of a detached group.

Participants also offered comments that can be interpreted as evidence of their efforts to claim membership, yet noted the difficulties of such communications in remote contexts. For example, participants noted the following: “It was difficult to initiate contact in the beginning as we were almost invisible,” and “It has been a frustrating
experience for me. I really don’t have the exposure that I need to find my own projects.” Interestingly, participants offered substantially more comments about their perceptions of supervisors’ and coworkers’ membership granting efforts than about their own claiming efforts. This suggests that membership claims alone are insufficient to cultivate a strong sense of membership, and that, for recent hires, developing such a perception is particularly sensitive to others’ efforts to signal their belonging and respect in the organization. For example, a participant noted the following:

I get less respect and have less say and less credibility than others [who are less remote]. Imagine how hard it is to get staffed on a project and as a result feel included and able to keep up our excitement about this company. Many of us, myself included, are left frustrated, angry, and wondering why we don’t count as much as we thought we would in this company.

Yet, remoteness may interfere with recent hires’ ability to detect such cues, as suggested by a more remote participant who noted the following:

The resources for finding projects are ineffective, it is nearly impossible to get clear information. The tools and resources necessary to do my work are not there. My dissatisfaction stems from always feeling out of the loop, not having enough useful resources, and not getting respect while on projects because I am so remote. The work environment is very fragmented and I feel separated from the other professionals and from my business unit.

Consequently, participants’ efforts to develop a strong sense of membership through membership claims are undermined when they do not perceive comparable membership granting from others. Membership negotiations of this sort were expressed by many participants; see the following, for example:

Being remote has made it extremely difficult for us to get any attention or respect from our division. We are not viewed as really being a part of [the division] and therefore are given no consideration for meaningful roles on projects. If utilized at all, it is in roles such as note taking or creating Power Point slides. After six months of being viewed in this capacity, others only see you as being fit for these types of functions. This has been, and continues to be, one of the most frustrating experiences of my life. For six months I have had to beg and grovel to be given any sort of role in any legitimate project. I just want some meaningful work and a chance to prove myself. Is that so wrong?

**IMPLICATIONS**

Establishing a sense of organizational membership can be a serious challenge for recent hires in remote work contexts. We proposed and offer illustrative evidence
that remoteness was associated with weaker organizational identification among recent hires. This outcome is partly due to how remoteness affects employees' experiences of social interactions that provide important cues about their belonging and respect in the organization. Notably, the more remote recent hires are from the organization, the less likely they are to proactively claim organizational membership and to detect cues from others that such claims are granted.

These findings offer several insights into how employees establish strong membership perceptions; notably, the vital role that the physical context plays in how remote employees interpersonally construct perceptions of inclusion and respect through membership claiming and granting acts. The physical context of work provides the backdrop for employees' workplace activities, yet it is not often noticed or addressed (Pfeffer, 1998). Nonetheless, it affects how employees perceive and enact their tasks and interact with others. As such, organizational research increasingly has recognized the symbolic role that the physical work context serves in shaping employees' self-perceptions as organizational members (Elsbach, 2003; Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001; Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2003; Sundstrom & Altman, 1989). We suggest that remote work contexts may have dramatic effects on how recently hired employees develop perceptions of belonging and respect as organizational members. We cannot fully understand how recent hires establish and view their organizational membership in remote contexts without considering the social processes involved. This requires studying remote employees' experiences of the actions that they and others take on the job.

Our findings extend perspectives on the social processes involved in creating self-perceptions within the workplace. From the vantage point of the remote employee, we take into account the complexities of the interpersonal context and provide a window onto how membership perceptions emerge and evolve. We suggest that future research also investigate the process from the perspective of interaction partners. Although what matters most to the development of employees' membership perceptions is how they interpret others' granting acts rather than the actual intentions behind such behaviors (Tice & Wallace, 2003), capturing others' experiences enables the exploration of collective and social effects of this process. For example, employees who participate in the selection and socialization of new hires often benefit psychologically from such activities (Sutton & Louis, 1987). In the same fashion, it is possible that membership granting acts benefit grantors by strengthening their own sense of belonging and inclusion in the organization.

We recommend that future research further unpack the dynamics of membership claiming and granting. We suggest that such behaviors trigger one another, taking the form of a call and answer process that begins when claimers (recent hires) meet grantors (organizational members). Membership claims that are answered with grants can create a cycle of interactions that promotes perceptions of belonging and inclusion. As well, recent hires who receive others' invitations for membership (i.e., grants) can respond with acceptance (i.e., claims). Future
research could explore how this call and answer process begins, and its impact on outcomes associated with strong membership perceptions. For example, do the implications for organizational identification vary by whether the process begins with membership claiming or with membership granting? Do interaction partners respond differently to different degrees or forms of membership claims?

Our emphasis on creating (rather than maintaining) membership perceptions is also relevant to perspectives on organizational socialization. Bauer and colleagues (1998) recently noted that as organizations continue to externalize work and rely increasingly on employees who work outside of traditional office arrangements, it is important that researchers assess how variables such as technology affect newcomer socialization. These researchers noted the following: “socialization may be a particularly great challenge for telecommuters, because they lack regular contact with coworkers . . . but to our knowledge, this is an unexplored area” (pp. 169–170). Our research speaks to this issue, suggesting that traditional office contexts, represented by the low degree of remoteness in which some of our study participants worked, play a valuable yet underrated role in newcomers’ experience of the organization. Relative to recent hires in highly remote settings, recent hires who had the benefit of physical collocation showed evidence of more successful socialization. Our results suggest that organizations could strive to make members more sensitive to and proactive about creating or capitalizing on opportunities to grant inclusion and belonging to remote (and colocated) recent hires as part of their socialization.

CONCLUSION

More than ever, organizations are experimenting with modifications to the traditional physical context of work. Such organizations frequently operate in changing and competitive markets that place demands on them to continually bring in talented people and deploy them in the field where the work is accomplished. The future of organizations that experiment with or rely heavily on these work forms may depend on developing strategies for effectively managing employees on entry. In this regard, enabling recent hires to develop a strong sense of organizational membership is an important concern. Perceptions of belonging and respect provide a lens through which employees interpret information and events, and formulate decisions and actions that are organizationally appropriate and beneficial. In this way, a strong sense of membership compensates for formal coordination and control systems that weaken when employees are dispersed and thus fortifies an organization’s capacity for flexibility, coordination, and control (Weick, 1995). Yet, our results suggest that traditional office and remote work contexts are differentially conducive to constructing organizational membership perceptions due to their effects on employees’ social interactions. The obstacles involved with signaling belonging and respect in a remote context combined with
the absence or imperceptibility of cues from others that support such views, in turn, can cause employees to become less identified with the organization. Employees lacking strong membership perceptions surely do little to fuel organizational flexibility, resilience, and performance. This pattern of findings raises the stakes for understanding how employees construct their organizational membership, particularly in modern work contexts that present challenges to meaningful social interaction.

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