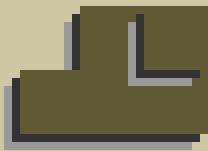


INTERGOVERNMENTAL STUDIES PROGRAM

PRIMER



*A Practitioner  
Guide to*  
**Role Transitions  
In Organizations**

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**Intergovernmental Studies Program Primer**

**Published September 2006**

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The transition to a new role or a new organization is rarely an easy task. Newcomers face a daunting level of novelty that extends from new information and processes to new faces and expectations. The organizations that hire them invest substantial resources in recruitment, training and development to socialize newcomers. Adapting to a new organization and professional responsibilities is a learning process that requires forging new definitions of one's self. In the transition to a new role, individuals develop a professional identity to define themselves within the expectations of the position and learn to project a professional persona that matches the role requirements. This process is a social learning process—individuals learn a set of appropriate and effective behaviors and attitudes for the position. This guide discusses the processes of adapting to a new professional role or organization. It is meant to clarify the dynamics of this transition and support the processes that yield effective employees.

Researchers who study socialization and role adaptation note that individual professional identity undergoes change with new jobs and career transitions.<sup>(1)</sup> A *professional identity* is a composite of the attributes, beliefs, motives, values and experiences people use to define themselves in a professional role.<sup>(2)</sup> In developing the new professional identity an employee learns who he or she needs to be, adapts to be effective in that role, and ultimately projects a persona or image that is appropriate for that role.

### What Do We Mean by Professional Identity?

#### Identities and Roles

In general, identity refers to the meaning attached to self<sup>(3)</sup>; it is the answer to the question “Who am I?” An individual's sense of self is composed of a *personal identity*, based on an individual's attributes and characteristics and traits, and a *social identity*, based on an individual's perception of membership in social categories (e.g. a profession, ethnicity, gender, etc.).<sup>(4)</sup>

Identity is constructed through interactions with other individuals; one's sense of self will be based, to a degree, on the perceptions and feedback of others.<sup>(5)</sup> An individual interprets cues from others that signal to him how they view him and how he should be—what identity he should enact.

Identity is closely related to a person's *role* or position within a group or organization. A *role identity* is comprised of the goals, values, beliefs, norms, and interaction styles associated with a role.<sup>(6)</sup> Like identities,

roles can be learned and developed from interactions between individuals. Individuals typically have more than one identity based on their different roles, such as mother, woman, and auditor, and each identity becomes salient within different social contexts. For the purposes of this guide, our focus is on an individual’s professional identity.

## What Is Organizational Socialization?

Organizational socialization is the process by which newcomers learn about the organizational milieu and the content of their new professional identity.<sup>(7)</sup> It begins when an individual crosses an organizational boundary and assumes a new role, and its culmination is marked by an individual’s passage from newcomer to insider; insiders are given broad responsibilities and autonomy, entrusted with “privileged” information, included in informal networks, encouraged to represent the organization, and sought out for advice and counsel by others.<sup>(8)</sup>

The organization has an active role in socializing newcomers; it develops programs, training, orientation, mentoring, etc. to shape the newcomers.<sup>(9)</sup> Table 1 summarizes six socialization tactics, or dimensions, that appear to be used across a wide variety of organizations as proposed by Van Maanen and Schein.<sup>(10)</sup>

**Table 1: Van Maanen and Schein’s Socialization Dimensions**

Socialization Dimension	Description
<i>Collective vs. Individual</i>	Collective socialization refers to putting a group of newcomers together through a common set of experiences, such as basic training in the military. In individual socialization, newcomers are isolated from one another and ‘processed’ separately, such as in an apprenticeship or “on-the-job” training.
<i>Formal vs. Informal</i>	In formal socialization, the newcomer is segregated from the rest of the organization while experiencing activities meant specifically for the newcomer, such as in a professional school. Informal processes merge the newcomer in with the rest of the organizational members and do not explicitly distinguish the newcomer’s role.
<i>Sequential vs. Random</i>	Sequential socialization refers to whether the organization develops a sequential series of steps that newcomers must go through, such as in medical training. In random socialization, there is no defined sequence of steps—they may be unknown, ambiguous, or continually changing (p. 241).
<i>Fixed vs. Variable</i>	This socialization tactic has a temporal dimension—in fixed socialization the newcomer knows how long it will take to complete a certain step in the process. With variable socialization, newcomers do not have a set timeframe for progression to the next step.
<i>Serial vs. Disjunctive</i>	In a serial socialization process, experienced organizational members in the same or similar position are paired with newcomers to groom them for that position; in essence, they are role models. Disjunctive socialization occurs when there are no role models or predecessors available.
<i>Investiture vs. Divestiture</i>	This tactic focuses on the degree to which the organization wishes the newcomer to retain or shed components of his incoming identity. Investiture socialization processes validate and confirm the incoming identity, wanting the newcomer to retain the identity he brings with him so that it can capitalize on it. Divestiture tactics focus on stripping away aspects of the newcomer’s identity so that the organization can rebuild it based on new assumptions.

*Role transition* occurs when an individual disengages from one role (*role exit*) to engage in another (*role entry*). Role transition includes many different dimensions, discussed in this section, including entry shock, role learning and unlearning, role innovation, experimentation, and developing and using social networks.

### Entry Shock

When a role transition is voluntary and desired, an individual often has high expectations based on evidence derived from word of mouth, past experiences, or their own hopes and fears.<sup>(11)</sup> However, these expectations are sometimes unrealistic and are not always met. The discrepancy between expectations and reality results in *entry shock*. Surprises can be positive, in which reality exceeds their expectations, or negative, where reality falls short of their expectations, resulting in disappointment.<sup>(12)</sup> Unmet expectations can erode an individual's trust in the organization, and faith in his or her own judgment. Entry shock is not limited to new organizational members: individuals changing roles within the organization are as susceptible to entry shock as those entering from outside.<sup>(13)</sup>

Entry into a new role, and particularly entry shock, drives an individual to want to successfully adapt and be socialized, motivating the individual to:

- locate and learn their role within the organizational context (identity)
- make sense of the situation and discern a purpose for being there (meaning)
- recover a sense of self-determination (control)
- connect with others, particularly their peers (belonging)<sup>(14)</sup>

### Role Learning and Unlearning

An individual needs to have clear understanding of his role and the context in which he is situated to address these motives; *role learning* is necessary for effective transition.<sup>(15)</sup> Although the organization uses socialization tactics to shape a newcomer's learning, the newcomer is not a passive party to this process. Training, orientation, mentorship or 'buddy' programs supplement the information provided to newcomers and allow them to acquire their own information from diverse sources.<sup>(16)</sup> At the same time an individual is absorbing and assimilating information about a new role, he or she must also *unlearn*, or "selectively forget" previous roles and the goals, values, beliefs and norms that clash with the new role.<sup>(17)</sup> The process of selectively forgetting can be hard for the individual, especially if the employee derived great satisfaction and pride from the previous role, or closely identified with its substance.

Role learning is affected by three factors: role attributes, sources of support, and individual differences.<sup>(18)</sup> More complex roles with more sophisticated requirements present a steeper learning curve. Research has demonstrated that social support of peers, mentors, managers, family, and friends make role transitions easier. Individual differences in how one makes sense of things, governed in part by personality traits and prior experience, also affect role learning.

### **Role Innovation**

Sometimes, getting information about a role is not enough and a newcomer wants to shape the new role to better suit his own objectives or needs. This personalization of the role is *role innovation*.<sup>(19)</sup> It can range in magnitude from minor tweaks to an overhaul of the core nature of the role. Clearly, role innovation has implications for the organization as a whole, especially if the new shape of the role no longer fits the organization's needs (fulfills the organization's requirements).

### **Experimenting with Roles**

Adapting to a new role is not necessarily a sequential process, something managed as a 'once and done' effort. It can entail experimentation and trials of different identities and may entail faking it for a period.<sup>(20)</sup> One study of professionals in transition from technical to more senior roles found that as these individuals adapted to new roles, they experimented with different identities based on role models. These *provisional selves* gave the employees in transition the chance to use role models and try out different expressions of their professional identity; employees observed role models to identify potential different expressions of their professional identity, experimented with different identities, and evaluated the identities based on feedback.<sup>(21)</sup>

### **Social Networks and Identity Development**

Informal social networks developed by individuals in role transition can also shape the development of a professional identity and facilitate role transition. Newcomers form clusters of role models that shape the inventory of possible selves created and tested, and that can be thought of as social networks.<sup>(22)</sup> Network characteristics such as the number and diversity of role models, the closeness of relationships and the extent to which role models share salient characteristics with the newcomer can also influence the adaptation process by affecting which possible selves one is likely to try.<sup>(23)</sup> Individuals in transition may use networks to forge new connections that give access to additional possible selves while cutting ties that had been the basis for outdated identities.<sup>(24)</sup>

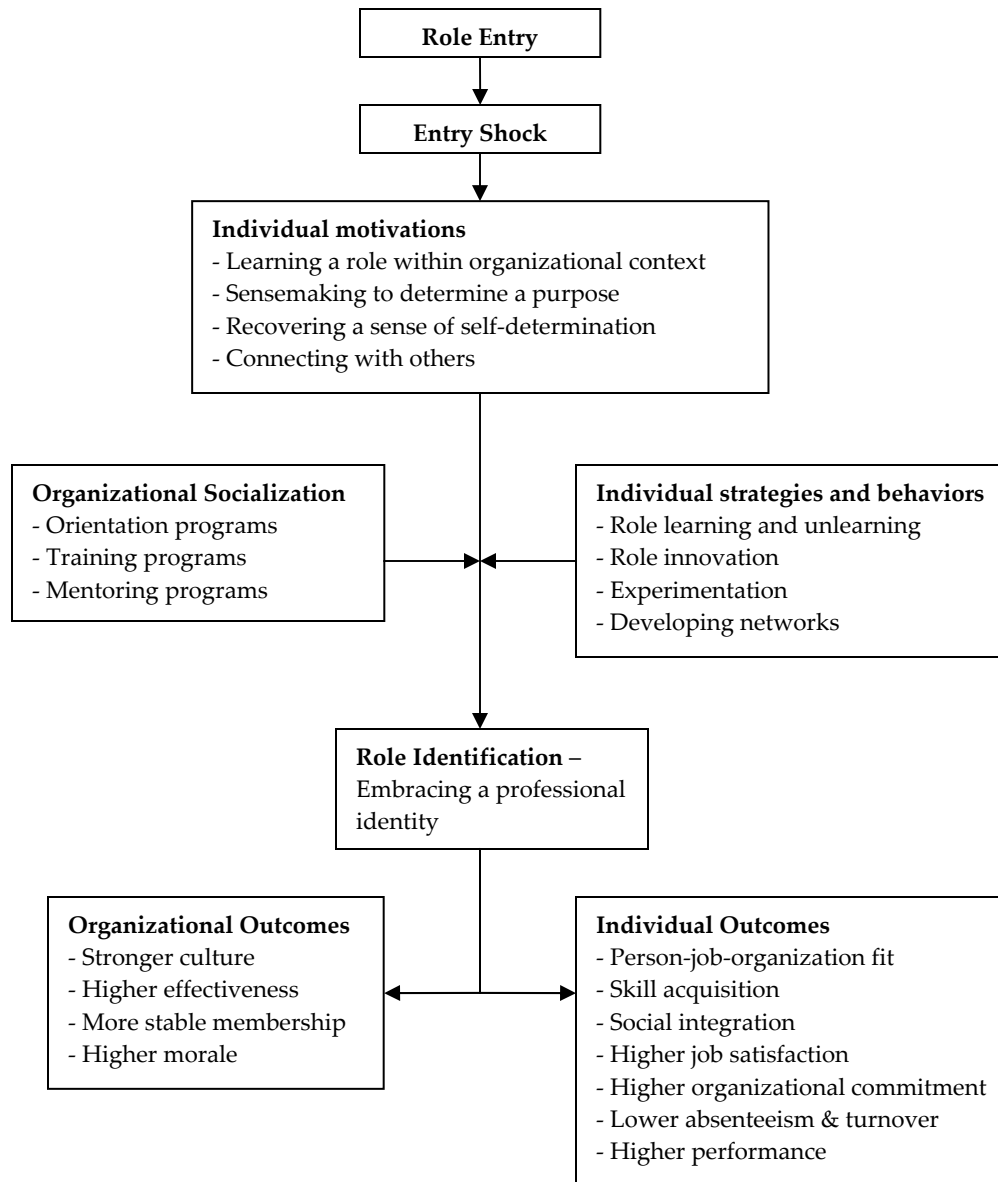
The transition from an individual contributor to manager is not an easy one. New managers must shed prior identities to forge a new professional identity. In particular, the individual contributor must shift from being a self-reliant producer to being a new manager who relies on others to produce.<sup>(25)</sup> As Linda Hill found in her study of 19 new managers over their first year of management in a securities firm and a computer company, many struggle with the transition from “specialist and doer” to “generalist and agenda-setter.”

Unlearning the identity of an individual contributor steeped in technical expertise to learn the identity of manager with a strategic focus challenged each manager in the study. Their new reliance on networks of people cut to the core beliefs, values and attitudes each manager had fully embraced and enacted. Managing staff that were neither as capable nor as productive as they had become posed a different set of problems. These new managers underwent periods of stress, self-doubt, uncertainty and self-questioning as they lamented each mistake and celebrated each small success in their role transition. New managers experienced severe entry shock as they realized that their expectations of control, power and autonomy were not entirely valid and would not be met.

How can an organization use this knowledge? As shown on the next page in Figure 2, both the organization and the individual are active participants in role transition. Individuals engage in role adaptation and build a professional identity through proactive and reactive behavior. Organizations spend time and resources to facilitate employee socialization.<sup>(25)</sup> Both parties have a responsibility in this process to ensure the likelihood of a successful transition. When organizational managers understand how individuals engage in role transition, they are better prepared to design effective socialization tactics and implement programs to ease a newcomer’s transition.

Investing resources in well thought out transition programs can produce a return on investment. Effective socialization into an organization or a new role can improve the person-organization fit, increase the rate of skill acquisition, lower individual stress, absenteeism and turnover, and enhance performance.<sup>(26)</sup> Studies have demonstrated that when organizations formalize socialization methods, rather than leaving newcomers to their own tactics, newcomers experience less role ambiguity and role conflict. Moreover, they exhibit decreased inclination to quit, and higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment.<sup>(27)</sup> Organizations benefit by gaining a stronger culture, more stable membership and higher morale.<sup>(28)</sup> By understanding the dynamics involved in role transition leaders become more discerning observers of the process and more adept at responding to emerging conditions.

**Figure 2: Processes of Role Transition and Organizational Socialization**  
 Adapted from Ashforth (2001, p. 54) and Saks and Ashforth (1997, p. 239)



- (1) Ibarra, H. (1999). Provisional selves: Experimenting with image and identity in professional adaptation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44, 764-791; Louis, M. R. (1980). Surprise and sense making: What newcomers experience in entering unfamiliar organizational settings. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 25, 226-251. (p. 235).
- (2) Schein, E. H. (1978). *Career Dynamics: Matching individual and organizational needs*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, as cited in Ibarra, 1999.
- (3) Gecas, V. (1982). The self-concept. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 8, 1-33.
- (4) According to "social identity theory," one's sense of self is made up of these two identities. Tajfel, H. & J. Turner. (1985). "The social identity theory of intergroup behavior." In *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, 7-24, edited by Stephen Worchel & William G. Austin. Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers.; Ashforth, B. & F. Mael. (1989). "Social Identity Theory and the Organization." *Academy of Management Review*, 14 (1), 20-39.; Ashforth, B. (2001). *Role transitions in organizational life: An identity-based perspective*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- (5) Researchers term this perspective of identity construction as "symbolic interaction." Gecas (1982); Goffman, E. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday.; Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self & society from the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.; Stryker, S. (1980). *Symbolic interactionism: A social structural approach*. Menlo Park, CA: The Benjamin/Cummings Publishing Company.; Ashforth (2001).
- (6) Ashforth (2001).
- (7) Ashforth (2001); Ashforth & Mael (1989).
- (8) Louis (1980, p. 231).
- (9) Ashforth (2001); Ibarra (1999).
- (10) Van Maanen, J. & Schein, E. H. (1979). Toward a theory of organizational socialization. In B. M. Staw (Ed.) *Research in organizational behavior* (Vol 1, pp. 209-264). Table summarizes pp. 230-253.
- (11) Ashforth (2001).
- (12) Ibid; Louis (1980).
- (13) Ashforth (2001).
- (14) Ibid, p. 162.
- (15) Ashforth (2001).
- (16) Ibid.
- (17) Ibid, p. 190.
- (18) Ibid.
- (19) Ibid.
- (20) Ibid.
- (21) Ibarra (1999).
- (22) Ibid.

- (23) Ibarra (1999); Ibarra, H., M. Kilduff, & W. Tsai. (2005). Zooming in and out: Connecting individuals and collectivities at the frontiers of organizational network research. *Organization Science*, 16, 359-371.
- (24) Ibarra, H. (2003). Working identity: Identity construction and the dynamics of career transition. *Academy of Management Meeting*, Seattle, WA, as cited in Ibarra, Kilduff & Tsai (2005).
- (25) Hill, L. (2003). *Becoming a manager: How new managers master the challenges of leadership*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- (26) Saks, A. & Ashforth, B. (1997). Organizational socialization: Making sense of the past and present as prologue for the future. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 51, 234-279. (p. 239).
- (27) Ibid., p. 239.
- (28) Ibid., p. 239.