Newcomer Information Seeking: Exploring Types, Modes, Sources, and Outcomes

The journal by Morrison concerns the forms of information seeking conducted by newcomers to an organization. Through an extensive study of 205 accountants that spanned roughly in excess of 6 months, Morrison was able to accumulate results of which bases the majority of her arguments and was able to illustrate several theories. Much of her study was based on Organizational Theory, (defined as the process whereby newcomers learn the behaviors and attitudes necessary for assuming roles in an organization), as she alleged that current research in the area was lacking in that it did not address ways in which newcomers may take a proactive role and the ways in which they obtained information in an organization. (“Newcomer information seeking”, Elizabeth Wolfe Morrison, New York University)

Morrison proposes that newcomers who take a proactive role in an organization seek information as a way of reducing uncertainty and as it enables them to compensate for the fact that they are often not provided with the information that they need to master their jobs and become integrated into their organization (“Newcomer information seeking”, Elizabeth Wolfe Morrison, New York University). Morrison’s proposal is well supported by Johnson who goes on to state that there are 2 sources of influence on an individual, the first being the functional imperative that demand certain levels of information seeking by the individual that relate to task requirements. The second influence relates to the set of forces embedded in an individual’s immediate physical and social environment, which stimulate an individual to seek certain types of information they would not otherwise actively seek. (“Information Seeking”, J. David Johnson, 1996, Quorum Books)

Morrison categorizes the types of information newcomers seek into 5 main groups, technical information, referent information, normative information, performance feedback and social feedback (“Newcomer information seeking”, Elizabeth Wolfe Morrison, New York University). Johnson defines information as something that represents something new, thus a measure of information is the “surprise value” of a message. (“Information Seeking”, J. David Johnson, 1996, Quorum Books)Technical information relates to information about how to perform certain job tasks, referent information is information about role demands and expectations, normative information being information about expected behaviors and attitudes, performance feedback relates to information about how others are perceiving and evaluating their job performance, and social feedback being information about the acceptability of their non-task behavior. (“Newcomer information seeking”, Elizabeth Wolfe Morrison, New York University)

Morrison proposes two major forms of gathering information, monitoring and inquiring. She goes on to state that inquiry entails directly asking another person for information whereas monitoring involves attending to a situation, the behavior of others, or both, to obtain information cues. Inquiring incurs the disadvantage of ruining the seeker’s public image as it is a public event and differentiates those who possess a lot of self-confidence as opposed to those who do not. Monitoring incurs the penalty of misinterpretation and cues about how to perform a specific job task can be obtained through monitoring only if someone else is performing a similar task and that task is observable. Morrison found through the study that (hypothesis 1) newcomers will seek referent information, normative information, performance feedback, and social feedback through monitoring more often than through inquiry. She also found (hypothesis 2) that newcomers will seek technical information through inquiry more often than through monitoring. (“Newcomer information seeking”, Elizabeth Wolfe Morrison, New York University)
Organizations have various sources of information and it is up to the information seeker on who or what type of source/s to approach, although an option is not always available. Johnson argues that the arrangement of an individual’s information field limits the degree to which that individual can act on his/her dispositions and that the information field an individual is located in constrains the very possibility of selecting particular sources of information. Morrison identifies the most important of these sources as being experienced peers and direct supervisors. Through the study conducted, Morrison found that (hypothesis 3) newcomers will ask peers for technical information, normative information, and social feedback more frequently than they will ask supervisors and that (hypothesis 4) newcomers will ask supervisors for referent information and performance feedback more frequently than they will ask peers. (“Newcomer information seeking”, Elizabeth Wolfe Morrison, New York University)

Morrison acknowledges that employees can obtain information from impersonal sources such as written, electronic, or task-generated sources. She goes on to say that such a source can aid the seeker avoid the social risks inherent in inquiry and that such sources may be extremely important in an environment where asking questions is discouraged. Furthermore, Morrison explain that such impersonal sources eliminate the opportunity of acquiring information that is biased or opinionated and that information conveyed verbally tends to be tangled up with irrelevant information. Nevertheless, impersonal sources are often more difficult to obtain and a great deal of information is informal and is understood or applied without being stated. Thus, information conveying simple or quantitative information such as numerical data is best sought through impersonal sources. Having said this, Morrison found that (hypothesis 5) newcomers will ask other persons form information more frequently than they will consult impersonal sources. (“Newcomer information seeking”, Elizabeth Wolfe Morrison, New York University)

Morrison, in her journal, also identifies the affect extensive job sustainability has on the level and forms of information being sought. At first newcomers are most concerned about fitting in socially, and later they become more preoccupied with how well they are performing. The changes of a newcomers’ concern is likely to influence and vary the types of information that they need. Morrison also mentions Louis’s proposal that as time progresses, newcomers engage in increasing amounts of enquiry. This is understandable because as newcomers become more comfortable with the organization, they would tend to approach an information search through enquiry with added confidence. Mentioned in the journal an interesting proposal that suggested as status or standing increases, individuals will be less likely to seek information because seeking may “undermine their standing as confident and self-assured veterans”. There have been arguments however that not only do experienced individuals seek information, but also that they in fact seek more often due to the increased level of job requirements and expectations. Johnson states that “the greater one’s expertise, the more likely they are to be successful in finding information, but the less likely that information is to be information in this sense of information” (“Information Seeking”, J. David Johnson, 1996, Quorum Books). From the research Morrison found that (hypothesis 6) the frequency of newcomer information seeking will be positively related to satisfaction, (hypothesis 7) the frequency of newcomer information seeking will be positively related to performance, and (hypothesis 8) the frequency of newcomer information seeking will be negatively related to intentions to leave and organization. (“Newcomer information seeking”, Elizabeth Wolfe Morrison, New York University)

To conclude, the result of Morrison’s study is surprising in some aspects more than others, albeit it doesn’t come as a total shock. Her arguments are well presented and supported although it would be interesting to see and compare the results of this study with another study of the same caliber, albeit an entirely different organization.