

Socializing employees into a culture of health

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Abstract

Purpose – A culture of health within an organization offers benefits such as managing healthcare costs and supporting employees in becoming and staying healthy. This study aims to identify successful organization's strategies utilized to socialize employees into a culture of health.

Design/methodology/approach – In-depth interviews were conducted with 19 representatives from organizations recognized for their success in creating a culture of health. Grounded theory analysis of collected data was used to identify themes related to the goals of this study.

Findings – New employees are socialized into the culture of health during the recruitment process, at new employee orientation and throughout the early employment period. Existing employees are also continually socialized using a variety of on-going communication strategies. This process is consistent with Jablin's organizational assimilation model, and this study offers the opportunity to use this model to help understand organizational health.

Practical implications – Organizations desiring to create a culture of health can support this culture by incorporating socialization strategies into the recruitment, hiring and new employee on-boarding process.

Originality/value – Though strategies have been shown to be helpful in socializing new employees into organizations, limited research has explored the relationship between socialization and a culture of health. Results from this study offer insight into how organizations that have been recognized for their success in creating a culture of health socialize new and existing employees to create and maintain a culture that supports health and well-being. Also, this study applies socialization theories to health within the workplace, offering new insights both theoretically and practically.

Keywords Culture of health, Employee socialization, Organizational well-being, Workplace wellness, New employee socialization

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Introduction

Nearly half of worksites in the USA offer health promotion initiatives aimed at supporting the well-being of employees (Linnan *et al.*, 2019). This is largely the result of organizations financing a significant amount of health care costs and because good health can increase productivity and increase the likelihood of living a fulfilled life. On average, employees working five days a week spend more than 2,000 h at work per year (Department of Labor, 2020), making employees a potentially influenceable and relatively stable sub-population, offering the opportunity for public health action. Organizations have unique intentional and

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unintentional communication channels, allowing many people to be reached over an extended period of time (Lunenburg, 2010). Therefore, opportunities exist for organizations to foster a culture of health, defined as a culture that purposefully nurtures health (Health Enhancement Research Organization [HERO], 2016), to benefit both members and the organization.

For a culture of health to be effective, employees must buy-in to the notion that individual health and the health of the organization are valuable. This can lead to engagement in organizational health-promoting activities. To foster culture of health buy-in, organizational members need to be socialized to engage in health activities and adopt desired healthful behaviors. Socialization, as discussed related to American organizations, involves teaching newcomers “the norms and values of organizational culture that guide behavior and enhance the newcomer’s performance” (Anakew and Greenhaus, 1999, p. 316). As Ashforth and Saks (1996) stated, “socialization facilitates the adjustment of newcomers to organizations” (p. 149).

Socialization scholarship largely focuses on job satisfaction and other job-specific components. For example, researchers have explored the relationship between commitment in the workplace and socialization (Cohen and Veled-Hecht, 2010) and co-worker socializing and employee engagement at work (Al-Hawari *et al.*, 2019). Limited research, however, has explored the relationship between socialization and health, and instead has primarily focused on work–life balance (e.g. Riforgiate and Kramer, 2021). Though important, this approach to investigating health as it relates to work is not the same as exploring how employees are socialized into an organization’s culture of health. One such study (Burke *et al.*, 2017) to investigate this topic involved exploration of the association between health-related communication, socialization and health behaviors. Results indicated that social influence and social support within the organization positively affect health behaviors. This was also shown in a study specifically assessing why faculty and staff utilize (or do not) free on-campus fitness facilities, which are often one resource available in organizations that foster a culture of health (Brown *et al.*, 2014). Researchers discovered that not only was social support important but so too was the “motivational climate” (i.e. feeling valued and welcomed), which they suggested should be further explored because of their belief that this could be cultivated. Because increased organizational socialization has been associated with healthful behaviors (Burke *et al.*, 2017), it is important to understand how to do this effectively.

Though limited socialization and health research exists, two theoretical concepts offer perspectives for understanding the processes through which employees are socialized into a culture of health within organizations: organizational assimilation and the theory of organizational socialization.

Organizational assimilation

The stages of socialization that occur in organizations have been outlined in a model termed organizational assimilation (Jablin, 2001). This dynamic process socializes both new and existing members of an organization and involves four phases: anticipatory socialization, organizational encounter, metamorphosis and exit.

In the anticipatory phase, newcomers shape their expectations of the organization based on gathered information from sources such as friends, media, or job postings. Organizational encounter involves an employee entering the organization and tactics such as observing and asking questions assimilating them to norms and values. Metamorphosis eventually occurs, in which the employee adjusts expectations, develops their own role, and resolves organizational conflicts. The final phase, exit, is when the employee leaves the organization (Mumby and Kuhn, 2019).

Socialization into a culture of health might occur during multiple organizational assimilation phases. In the anticipatory phase, a newcomer may learn about an organization’s health initiatives and culture through individuals the organization currently employs,

previous encounters with the organization, or even the media. A newcomer may even be interested in joining an organization due to expectations surrounding a culture of health. During the organizational encounter phase, a newcomer may learn about the culture of health during formal orientation or new employee communication materials as well as via informal conversations and experiences. For example, a fellow employee may encourage a newcomer to attend a lunch-time fitness class, or a newcomer may notice that catered lunches offer healthful options. During the metamorphosis phase, an individual may adjust their outlook regarding a culture of health. For example, someone skeptical about belonging to an organization promoting health may come to appreciate the support in managing one's health. Furthermore, metamorphosis may involve determining how one fits into a culture of health. For example, an individual may become a "wellness champion" who works to support the culture of health and encourages others to take steps to improve their health. Organizational assimilation provides a theoretical framework that can support understanding of newcomer socialization into a culture of health.

The organizational assimilation model also outlines how newcomers seek information during the socialization process. Newcomer information seeking is dependent upon multiple factors including uncertainty, social costs, information sources, information content, individual differences and contextual factors (Miller and Jablin, 1991). These information-seeking factors can guide exploration, from the newcomer's perspective, of how they seek information regarding a culture of health.

Theory of organizational socialization

The socialization process not only involves individual actions but also organizational strategies. The theory of organizational socialization presented by Van Maanen and Schein (1979) offers a continuum including six tactics organizations use to promote socialization. The first tactic is collective socialization, referring to newcomers having several experiences as a group; this could include orientation and training. The second, formal socialization, involves segregating newcomers from other members for a period of time. Within an organization, newcomers may be required to be identified as such so others know to offer additional support. Sequential, another tactic, refers to the strategy of having a fixed sequence of steps for all newcomers. Within a culture of health, newcomers may first be asked to have a wellness physical and then be referred to enroll in an online wellness portal. The tactic fixed socialization includes a specific socialization timetable. A serial process comprises an existing member socializing a newcomer (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). This tactic can be especially effective as colleagues have been identified as the most helpful resource for newcomers (Louis *et al.*, 1983). The final tactic, investiture, affirms personal characteristics of the newcomer. The model asserts that the collective use of these tactics leads to effective socialization of a newcomer into the organization (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979).

Ashforth and Saks (1996) found that these tactics, along with an individualized approach, were positively associated with job satisfaction, commitment to the organization and organizational identification. Additionally, the use of socialization tactics positively correlated with performance on the job. The tactics were negatively related to role ambiguity, conflict, stress, intention to quit and role innovation. This study supports the intentional use of tactics to encourage socialization. Furthermore, the theory of organizational socialization may offer insight into how newcomers are socialized into a culture of health.

Purpose of study

Several organizations have demonstrated success at cultivating a culture of health and this has been evaluated and validated by the Wellness Council of Indiana (WCI). This WCI evaluation and validation process establishes that these organizations have met specified

criteria and earned the recognition termed 5-Star AchieveWELL. This investigation involved in-depth exploration of how employees are communicatively socialized into the culture of health at these organizations. Socialized employees may be more likely to engage in healthful activities and there may be a reciprocal effect as employees exert social influence, potentially supporting a culture of health. To better understand this phenomenon, the following research question was posed:

RQ. How are employees socialized by organizations to create a culture of health?

Methods

Design

Qualitative methods, specifically interviews, were used to facilitate in-depth understanding of socialization strategies used by organizations distinguished for fostering a culture of health. A qualitative approach aids in understanding participant views and experiences, which is important as participants have knowledge of and experience with their organization's culture of health. A thematic analysis driven by constructivist grounded theory (GT) methodology was used to identify themes related to culture of health socialization. GT is based on symbolic interactionism and is utilized to identify a psychosocial process and how it relates to a social context. This is done through simultaneous systematic collection and analysis of data. Data on the topic of interest is gathered from a group of individuals familiar with the phenomenon of interest and analyzed to identify emerging themes. Emerging concepts from the data offer insight into the phenomena of interest (Goulding, 2009). This project aimed to recognize themes related to socialization into a culture of health; GT offers a methodology to support thematic analysis. Though GT guided this project, the intention was not to develop a theory, but instead to identify communicative concepts fostering a culture of health. As Timonen *et al.* (2018) discussed, the core principles of GT can be utilized with or without creating a theory. Specifically, "significant process toward constructing categories, and spelling out links between them, with the view to achieving conceptual clarity, is a sufficient outcome for a GT study" (Timonen *et al.*, 2018, p. 4).

GT involves on-going comparative analysis, as the researcher moves in and out of data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014). It is not a linear process but instead comprises iterative and comparative actions. Though GT is not linear, there is an overarching framework, starting with purposive sampling. Following identification of participants, the next step is collecting data; this study involved data collection primarily via interviews.

GT has multiple methodological genres, one being constructivist GT. This is based on how individuals construct meaning related to the target topic and assumes the researcher is involved in constructing the research process and results (Charmaz, 2014). This project employed constructivist GT, as the researchers actively constructed the research process and results.

Participants

Organizations designated as 5-Star AchieveWELL (a total of 30) were invited to participate in this study. AchieveWELL is an assessment, evaluation, and recognition program managed by the WCI. It includes multiple levels of recognition (3-, 4-, and 5-Star) with 5-Star signifying that the company has "cultivated a culture of wellness throughout the organization" (WCI, 2020). Only 5-Star organizations were included, given the focus on creating a culture of health rather than simply health and wellness programs.

This study did not intend to evaluate participating organizations as they have been evaluated and recognized during the 5-Star AchieveWELL process; therefore, these organizations have already demonstrated that they have a culture of health. Rather, the study intended to explore these organization's strategies utilized to socialize employees into a

culture of health. This sampling approach engaged a group of organizations with mature and effective health promotion programs and a proven culture of health, making it an appropriate sample for meeting the aims of this study. Consistent with GT, this approach employed purposive sampling, which involves selecting participants and/or data sources that will answer the proposed research question (Charmaz, 2014). In the case of this study, including 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations is purposive in that these organizations have been recognized for their culture of health, making them ideal for studying socialization into a culture of health.

Following institutional review board approval, the WCI facilitated initial contact with a representative at all 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations. The primary researcher followed up with those organizations expressing interest. A representative familiar with the health promotion initiatives at the organization, including socialization strategies, participated in this study. This offered a managerial perspective of the culture of health.

Table 1 provides an overview of participating 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations. The information in this table was solicited from each participating organization during the data collection process.

| | Frequency | % |
|------------------------------------|-----------|------|
| <i>Response</i> | | |
| Participated | 19 | 63.3 |
| Declined | 4 | 13.3 |
| No response | 5 | 16.7 |
| No contact information available | 2 | 6.7 |
| <i>Region</i> | | |
| Northern Indiana | 4 | 21.0 |
| Central Indiana (Indianapolis) | 7 | 36.8 |
| Central Indiana (non-Indianapolis) | 6 | 31.6 |
| Southern Indiana | 2 | 10.5 |
| <i>Work classification</i> | | |
| Construction | 1 | 5.3 |
| Finance | 2 | 10.5 |
| Healthcare | 5 | 26.3 |
| Higher Education | 2 | 10.5 |
| Insurance and Benefits | 4 | 21.0 |
| Manufacturing | 4 | 21.0 |
| Transportation | 1 | 5.3 |
| <i>Employer size</i> | | |
| Small (74 or fewer employees) | 2 | 10.5 |
| Medium (75–249 employees) | 3 | 15.8 |
| Large (250–999 employees) | 4 | 21 |
| Major (1,000 or more employees) | 10 | 52.6 |
| <i>Wellness Program Duration</i> | | |
| 4–9 years* | 5 | 26.3 |
| 10–14 years | 8 | 42.1 |
| 15–19 years | 1 | 5.6 |
| 20 + years | 5 | 26.3 |

Note(s): *The 5-Star AchieveWELL recognition requires five years of continuous program activity. However, one organization reported a wellness program duration of four years. This organization has had a program for at least eight years, though, during this time, stopped many offerings. The organization has now had continuous programming for four years

Source(s): Author's own creation

Table 1.
5-Star AchieveWELL
organization overview

Data collection

Semi-structured video interviews were conducted by the primary researcher. An interview guide was utilized, which was developed after a thorough review of the literature. To facilitate discussion surrounding socialization, the previously discussed theoretical frameworks (organizational assimilation and the theory of organizational socialization) were utilized to develop the interview guide. For example, the anticipatory stage of organizational assimilation occurs before a member joins an organization, so participants were asked if and how the culture of health is communicated to potential employees and if it is woven into recruitment strategies. Also, participants were requested to share if and how health and wellness is incorporated into new employee orientation, a theory of organizational socialization tactic. To ensure that appropriate questions were asked, these frameworks informed this study.

Interviews duration ranged from 36 min to 66 min ($M = 48$ min). All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Initial concepts that emerged were supported via theoretical sampling, per GT methodology (Charmaz, 2014), involving interviews, data analysis and then additional interviews and follow up based on developing themes. This process persisted beyond saturation, when new data did not provide new theoretical insights (Charmaz, 2014). Saturation occurred prior to all participants being interviewed; however, those who were willing to participate were still interviewed so their individual voices were heard.

Data analysis

Data collected during each interview was examined using GT methods to explore socialization within organizations. Data relevant to the specific topic of interest was coded, compared and categorized, per the constructivist GT stages (Charmaz, 2014). This began with initial coding, including line-by-line assessment of the data. A codebook was developed, including an inventory of codes with their descriptions alongside examples.

Using a codebook of emergent themes, a trained independent researcher verified initial coding. Discrepancies were discussed, resulting in minor reworking and clarification. Interrater reliability was calculated using Scott's pi. It was an acceptable 0.937 (Lombard *et al.*, 2002). The lead researcher then conducted focused coding, identifying the most frequently occurring codes and those most relevant to the aims of the study. These were sorted into categories to identify emerging concepts. Then the researcher conducted theoretical coding to relate codes to each other and identify properties in each category. Codes were compared to the concepts from the guiding theoretical frameworks to help make sense of the data surrounding socialization into an organization with a culture of health. A table of the most frequently occurring codes related to the research aim was created and then presented to the independent researcher (Charmaz, 2014). There was agreement that it adequately represented the data. Also, to ensure rigor during the GT process, reflexivity, depth of description and searching for alternative data interpretations were utilized (Goulding, 2009).

Results

An overview of the participating organizations is presented in Table 1. Of the 30 organizations, a total of 19 (63%) participated with employee counts ranging from 55 to 37,000 employees. Though participating organizations were located throughout the state, the majority were in central Indiana. Duration of wellness programs ranged from four to more than 20 years. Overall, the sample was representative of the 30 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations. The results are reflective of a managerial perspective of the organizational culture of health.

Socialization strategies

To create and maintain a culture of health, 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations must socialize newcomers, which involves teaching new employees about organizational standards that guide behaviors (Anakew and Greenhaus, 1999). Participants discussed culture of health socialization strategies and, through the GT-inspired analysis process, themes related to the research question were identified. These themes include (1) Introducing the culture of health during recruitment, (2) Incorporating the culture of health into new employee orientation (e.g. face-to-face discussions, presentations to new employees, emails to new employees), (3) Engaging employees in the culture of health during early employment and (4) Socializing existing employees continually. These themes are outlined in Table 2 and discussed below.

Introducing during recruitment. Even before an individual is a new employee, 5-Star Achieve WELL organizations begin the health and wellness socialization process. It is discussed with new employees to introduce the culture of health to potential employees. Helen [1], who works for a manufacturing company that has had a health and wellness program for 10 years, shared how extensively health and wellness is communicated during the recruitment process:

It is in all of our job descriptions, in anything about the role itself. It is on our Facebook page, we have all of that in there, and that is all part of the recruitment process. That “hey we have got the clinic. . . safety is our number one priority and that is one of our core values.” So, because of that, we try to put that everywhere. If you are applying for a job here you’re going to see that in there. Multiple times actually.

Similarly, Amber, who works for a transportation company that has offered health and wellness for five years, also reports using a variety of communication channels, such as job postings and the company website, to share health and wellness information during recruitment. Specifically, the message to potential employees is:

| Theme | Description | Exemplar quote |
|--|--|---|
| Introducing during recruitment | Integrating health and wellness into the recruitment process to expose potential employees to the culture of health | We do kind of advertise that we have a five star, you know, employee well-being program. And so yeah, we definitely use that as a marketing tool to our future employees |
| Incorporating into new employee orientation | Introducing new employees to the culture of health and encouraging participation in available offerings | I myself have like a minute presentation that I sit down with the new hires and go through, but I also spend a good amount of time with them on that onboarding process |
| Engaging employees during their early employment | Continually educating employees who have recently joined the organization and encouraging participation in health and wellness offerings | I go out again at 30 days and I meet with our new hires and thoroughly explain our wellness program as well as go over all the other benefits with them and how it relates to our wellness program or just general conversation about what our benefit program is |
| Socializing existing employees continually | Communicating on an on-going basis to existing employees to encourage buy-in and participation | Wellness committee members are having just face-to-face conversations with employees, encouraging them to either get on the wellness platform or take advantage of the yoga on Monday |

Source(s): Author’s own creation

Table 2.
Socialization strategies

This is the culture you would be joining, you know. This is who we are. So yeah, we share that paperwork, we have links to our benefits page that we have, so that is another way that they can just click, it is a click away, and you have everything right in front of you.

Furthermore, many organizations advertise to potential employees that they have earned the 5-Star AchieveWELL designation to demonstrate commitment to employee health and wellness. Exposing the culture of health to individuals before they join the organization allows individuals to understand norms before their first day and begins the socialization process. They are prepared to learn about available health and wellness offerings.

The 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations communicate health and wellness during recruitment to not only socialize employees but also to attract individuals that value their health as well as appeal to talented employees. Attracting employees who value health and wellness has the potential to further develop the culture of health, an important benefit to the organization. In a competitive job market, an individual may select an employer that offers resources supportive of personal health goals, rather than an employer lacking such benefits. Additionally, should an individual valuing health join an organization, they may have a positive influence on others' health, contributing to the organization's overall culture of health.

Sarah, who works for a benefits company that began offering health and wellness programs nine years ago, shared how conversations about health are woven into the recruitment process:

Starting with recruiting saying, "hey we want people who are engaged and care about their health because we want to model that for others and model for our clients." So we engage from recruitment. We ask, you know, "How do you relieve stress? What do you do for, you know, staying healthy?" And just really trying to understand them as a whole person.

Potential employees learning about health and wellness resources is consistent with the first phase of organizational assimilation: anticipatory socialization. Recruiters and others involved in the recruitment process provide the information, educating potential employees about the culture of health and attracting talent and individuals that value health, making it beneficial for the employer.

Many participants reported that potential hires, especially those who are younger in age, expect their employer to offer health and wellness resources and benefits, such as reimbursement for gym memberships and incentives for practicing healthful behaviors. This demonstrates the importance of having a health and wellness strategy and conveying it during the recruitment process. Communicating about the culture of health and robust wellness offerings is a strategy used by 5-Star AchieveWELL companies to entice talented employees to join their organization.

Incorporating into new employee orientation. Health and wellness messaging during new employee orientation is a key strategy utilized by 5-Star AchieveWELL companies to socialize new employees into the culture of health. New employees have numerous things to learn when joining an organization, such as responsibilities and tasks as well as technology systems and, of course, names and faces. Discussing health and wellness alongside other important new employee topics sends a message that this is a top priority within the organization.

All participants shared that health and wellness information is provided during new employee orientation. It is typical for there to be dedicated time in new employee orientation to discuss health and wellness. Many study participants take part in this, often providing an overview of programs, resources, and the organization's overall approach to health and wellness. This discussion of health and wellness during new employee orientation is an example of the first tactic of the theory of organizational socialization: collective socialization.

Educating about health and wellness is a priority during orientation, though each organization approaches this differently (e.g. meeting with new hires individually, speaking to a group of new employees).

Additionally, this strategy demonstrates the second phase of organizational assimilation, organizational encounter, as a primary way that many organizations educate and engage new employees. During this phase, new employees are also learning about the culture of health through communication and observations. For example, some 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations stretch together before the workday and others have regular walking breaks. Observing others participating in health and wellness activities helps new employees become assimilated to norms within the organization.

One approach that is especially important is face-to-face communication during orientation. Haley, who works for an insurance company that began offering health and wellness programs more than 20 years ago, reported meeting with every new employee individually:

I sit down with every new employee, regardless of what department they are in. . . and walk them through the [Program Name] so they have a full introduction. It is not just in a stack of papers that says, "well here is your benefits."

While smaller organizations may have someone meet one-on-one with new employees, larger organizations discuss health and wellness in a group setting. This involves an individual speaking to the group or, occasionally, a pre-recorded video. 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations make it a priority to expose new employees to health and wellness and make a point to cover this topic in every orientation. Katie, who works at a construction company that has offered health and wellness for 15 years, shared some of the topics discussed during orientation:

When they get hired on with us, I am one of the first people that they get to meet during orientation and I just kind of explain. . . things like our EAP [employee assistance program] and our telemedicine that they have immediate access to, but I also tell them about our health coaching and our [wellness] challenges.

At one healthcare organization, the CEO discusses health and wellness with new employees. As Susan, who works at a healthcare organization that has had wellness programs for 12 years, shared, "[Our CEO] talks openly about it. He makes everybody get up and get active during this hour and a half presentation." Overall, participants expressed that they feel "lucky" to have health and wellness included in orientation as other departments within the organization are not given this same opportunity, demonstrating the priority that 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations place on health and wellness.

Engaging during early employment. Though communicating with new employees from the start is important, 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations also recognize that intentional follow-up with new employees is valuable. Therefore, socialization extends beyond new employee orientation. Susan made clear that health and wellness is communicated frequently to new employees during their first few months: "It gets presented like in your face the entire 90 days of your orientation." This "in your face" communication includes emails, mailers to the home, and individual discussions. A large healthcare organization follows up with new employees by sending emails and postcards regarding health and wellness offerings. Additionally, at another healthcare organization, existing employees are expected to follow-up with new employees. Joel, who works for a healthcare organization that began to offer health and wellness programs more than 20 years ago, explained that:

We have culture champions embedded in our units so if you are a new employee your culture champion that is in your unit is going to be also reinforcing what you learned in orientation, encouraging you to check your email for notifications about programs and [Program Name] points, things like that.

This approach is consistent with the theory of organizational socialization serial process tactic, which consists of being socialized by an existing member. The 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations find this to be very effective, with some organizations having a dedicated individual within each department that is responsible for informing new employees about health and wellness. This is consistent with previous research findings that colleagues are the most helpful resource for new employees (Kent *et al.*, 2016).

Finally, many 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations allow employees to engage in health and wellness initiatives from their first day. This socializes employees by getting them used to participating. Jessica expressed how important this is: “We go over all of our wellness initiatives, you know, and programs kind of start getting them engaged from day one.” Similarly, Kristin, who works at a financial company that has had a health and wellness program for more than 10 years, shared that “from day one, they have access to our well-being portal so they can go in and start looking at that information, earning incentives, connecting with our vendors.” For 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations, no time is wasted in engaging new employees.

Socializing existing employees continually. Interview responses surrounding socialization strategies focused primarily on introducing new and potential employees to the existing culture of health. However, interviewees also commented on how it is equally important that current employees continue to buy-in to and participate in the culture of health. Employees are socialized on an ongoing basis with the support of various communication strategies. The organizational assimilation stage metamorphosis can help to understand this continuous socialization. Socialization occurs throughout an employee’s tenure at the organization, as the employee participates, or chooses not to participate, in health and wellness activities. The 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations continually socialize employees by offering a wide variety of health and wellness programs and communicating about these offerings using various strategies and messaging channels. Metamorphosis is ongoing through one’s employment; for example, in year one, an employee may not participate; in year two, they may begin attending yoga classes and using a financial wellness tool; and in year three, they may become a wellness champion. The metamorphosis phase is dynamic throughout an individual’s time as a member of the organization; from the perspective of health and wellness, their experience can continually change based on interest, health, motivation and other personal factors.

One important communication strategy to keep employees informed is to use multiple communication channels (e.g. emails, postcards, announcements at meetings, digital displays and text messages). Additionally, messages are shared via various channels multiple times. Most 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations distribute health and wellness messages on a weekly basis. Communications are created and shared by internal partners, such as health champions, supervisors, and marketing, and by external partners (i.e. vendors). Leveraging internal and external partners is an important strategy to inform employees about health and wellness.

An additional strategy to socialize existing employees is communicating leadership support of the culture of health. Examples of this include leaders sending an email to kick off a wellness program and a manager leading a weekly walking group. Other strategies are having health-promoting policies and norms (e.g. healthy catering, daily stretch breaks, smoke-free campus), and creating a built environment that supports health (e.g. on-site fitness facility, walking paths). These send the message to existing employees that the organization prioritizes health and well-being.

Creating and nurturing a culture of health requires change and adaptability. Though these companies have received the top level of recognition from the WCI, participants did not report that they have achieved the goal and can now simply maintain a status quo. Rather 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations continue to strive for further success, adjust based on

changing employee needs, and implement strategies to reach more employees. To maintain a culture of health and keep employees engaged in the culture of health, 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations survey employees regularly and incorporate employee feedback into health and wellness strategy and programs. Once again, this is consistent with the theory of organizational socialization tactic investiture (i.e. affirming personal characteristics of the newcomer). Investiture is especially important to create a culture of health, as personal goals, interests and health status are considered and respected.

Overall, to create and maintain a culture of health, 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations continually socialize employees. This begins early and continues throughout an individual's employment. This on-going process demonstrates other theory of organizational socialization tactics: sequential (i.e. a fixed sequence of steps for all newcomers) and fixed socialization (i.e. a specified socialization timetable). In general, a potential employee receives specific health and wellness information during recruitment, additional information is provided at orientation, follow-up messages are sent at regular intervals during the initial weeks, and then a representative has a discussion with the individual. The timetable for socializing new employee is often during the first 30–90 days of employment. After employees receive this specific new employee information, then they receive the health and wellness information shared with all employees.

The socialization strategies were utilized by 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations because they were motivated to create and maintain a culture of health to care for employees and manage healthcare costs. As Jessica, who works at an insurance company that has offered health and wellness for more than 10 years, shared, “Our people are our biggest asset, and we want to keep them happy and healthy. They’re not a number, they are human beings, and we treat them like human beings.” Besides caring for employees as humans, it is also not surprising that organizations are seeking to manage healthcare costs, given that more than 50% of health insurance coverage for the US population is covered by employers (Berchick *et al.*, 2018). As Dean, who works for a manufacturing company that has offered health and wellness for 20 years, shared, “We drilled really deep into, you know, what’s causing medical costs increases, and then we said, ‘What can we do about this?’ And so that’s how we came to wellness.”

Overall, the objective of 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations is consistent with HERO's definition of a culture of health: a culture that intentionally encourages health (HERO, 2016). The 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations have intentionally worked to create a workplace supporting health and wellness, offering an opportunity to identify best practices. Creating a culture of health is a goal of participating organizations and socializing employees into the culture is important to shape and maintain this culture.

Discussion

This study sought to identify specific strategies successful organizations use to socialize employees into a culture of health. Findings from this study contribute to existing research related to culture of health strategies to promote socialization. Based on these results, practical implications are presented for organizations to further develop their culture of health and for organizations aspiring to create a culture of health. Additionally, theoretical implications from this study are discussed as well as strengths, limitations and future research opportunities.

Practical implications

The findings of this study have practical implications for organizations striving to create or maintain a culture of health. Previous research has indicated that socializing new employees

can positively affect health behaviors (Burke *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, socialization helps new employees learn and adopt cultural norms and values (Anakew and Greenhaus, 1999). This study supports the importance of socializing new employees into the culture of health; this is a priority at 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations, demonstrated by the specific strategies in place to facilitate socialization. Strategies include exposing new employees to health and wellness offerings during recruitment, continuing to communicate in the initial weeks and months of employment, and leveraging wellness champions to offer continuing support. Overall, educating new employees about the organization's commitment to health and wellness is an on-going process, not a singular handout or presentation.

The 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations' socialization surrounding health and wellness is comprehensive and an on-going process. Research indicated that organizational socialization is important for both the employee and the employer (Burke *et al.*, 2017) and the results of the current study suggest that this holds true in regard to the culture of health as well. Social influence and social support benefit the employee because they are associated with healthful behaviors. The benefit for the employer is a healthier workforce. This socialization starts at recruitment, is a high priority during new employee orientation, and continues through various communication channels and health and wellness programs offered to existing employees.

The conversation with new employees regarding health and wellness should begin not on their first day, but during the recruitment process. This can involve including health and wellness information in recruitment materials and discussing the topic during the interview process. Health and wellness should be included in orientation, led by an individual highly familiar with available resources and programs. Ideally, new employees can begin participating on their first day and then continue to receive support in the coming months to encourage engagement. Though the specific approach taken by each organization will vary, overall, socializing new employees into a culture of health requires a high touch approach (e.g. one-on-one follow-up with new employees and regularly sharing health and wellness information with new employees).

Theoretical implications

Results from this study have multiple theoretical implications related to socialization. The theories of organizational socialization and organizational assimilation help make sense of the socialization strategies used by 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations.

Theory of organizational socialization. The theory of organizational socialization (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) has typically been utilized to guide and explore general organizational socialization and how this influences job performance. However, this study demonstrates that this theory is also relevant to the more specific topic of organizational health and wellness. As discussed, five of the six tactics of the theory of organizational socialization (i.e. collective socialization, sequential, fixed socialization, serial process and investiture) are used by 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations to socialize new employees into the culture of health.

The formal socialization tactic, which involves segregating newcomers from other members for a period of time, is not a norm at 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations. On the contrary, new employees are often encouraged to begin engaging in health and wellness initiatives from day one with existing employees. Should a new employee desire to join a health and wellness challenge on their first day, most organizations would welcome their participation. In the case of health and wellness, avoiding segregation may support socialization into the culture of health. Overall, outside of formal socialization, the theory of organizational assimilation offers a framework for viewing the strategies used by 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations to socialize new employees into the culture of health.

Organizational assimilation. The four phases of Jablin's model of organizational assimilation (Jablin, 2001) offer an additional lens for viewing the socialization process into a 5-Star AchieveWELL organization's culture of health. As discussed, new employees are socialized using the first three phases: anticipatory socialization, organizational encounter and metamorphosis.

These phases, however, may not be straight-forward, given that some employees may be perceived as resisting the culture of health through non-participation or criticism of health and wellness. Therefore, new employees may receive contradictory messages during the assimilation process. Organizational messages and policies as well as communication from leaders may encourage engagement in health and wellness. At the same time, non-participation of fellow employees can suggest that participating in health and wellness initiatives is not important. This risk of contradiction is consistent with recent organizational work-life balance research (Riforgiate and Kramer, 2021) indicating that messaging does not always align with norms. Such discrepancies within the assimilation phases demonstrate the challenges of the socialization process.

The final phase, exit, is when an individual leaves the organization and is therefore not qualified to participate in health and wellness programs. Though part of Jablin's model of organizational assimilation, this study did not focus on the exit phase as the goal was to assess socialization into an existing culture of health.

Whereas previous research has focused on topics such as work-life balance (Riforgiate and Kramer, 2021) and internships (Dailey, 2016), this study enriches and extends organizational assimilation research by examining organizational health and wellness. Results confirm that the assimilation process into a culture of health is supported by various assimilation phases, providing a framework to help understand health and wellness socialization. For organizations, it can be helpful to view health and wellness socialization using these phases, to ensure that strategies are in place to support employees during all phases.

Overall, the theories of organizational socialization and organizational assimilation are supported by the socialization strategies used by 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations. These also offer frameworks for guiding employee socialization into a culture of health. Just as there are various job-related benefits associated with socialization practices (Ashforth and Saks, 1996; Louis *et al.*, 1983), there are advantages related to creating and maintaining a culture of health.

Strengths and limitations

This study has several strengths, one being the sample. Participants represent a pre-defined group of organizations that have proven successful in creating a culture of health through the AchieveWELL process. Characteristics of organizations with the 5-Star AchieveWELL recognition varies, so results are applicable to various types of organizations. The high response rate is another strength of this study with 19 of the 30 current 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations participating in this study (63.3%).

Another strength is the use of GT methodology which has specific guidelines, including systematic data analysis which guided the development of themes relevant to the study aims. Additionally, rather than having assumptions or an existing hypothesis, GT encourages data-centered discovery. Employing GT allowed for in-depth exploration of the topic of interest: socialization to support a culture of health.

This study only includes organizations located in the state of Indiana; therefore, the results cannot be generalized to all states or regions. Another limitation is that although 5-Star AchieveWELL companies have proven commitment to, and accomplishment in creating, a culture of health, there are likely other Indiana companies that would be appropriate to include in the study sample. However, only organizations recognized that have

gone through the voluntary AchieveWELL process were included. Finally, this research offers the managerial perspective of organizational culture of health, specifically, the viewpoint of the individual participating in this investigation. Therefore, results from this study may not represent employees' actual experiences.

Directions for future research

Given that only the experience of one individual (typically a wellness coordinator) was used to capture an understanding of socialization into a culture of health, future studies could include supplementary perspectives. As an example, a future research opportunity is exploring the employee perspective of culture of health socialization to assess if their perceptions are consistent with the managerial perspectives demonstrated in this study.

Potential employees' and new employees' experiences could be explored to better understand organizational health and wellness socialization. The organizational assimilation model, outlining how new employees seek information during the socialization process, offers a framework for understanding new employees' experiences with learning about health and wellness within an organization. This study explored health and wellness socialization from a managerial perspective. Investigating this from the employee perspective, particularly a new or potential employee, may offer insight into factors affecting employee information-seeking behaviors as well as strategies that are most effective in encouraging engagement. Furthermore, given the changing dynamics of organizations, it would be beneficial to explore culture of health socialization within a hybrid workplace.

Additionally, future research could quantitatively explore 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations to identify socialization strategies leading to the highest engagement levels. This study assumes that all participating organizations have a successful socialization strategy, given their recognition. Though all organizations may be experiencing success, it may be valuable to define the optimal approach, such as the ideal number touchpoints for new employees. Furthermore, to test the effectiveness of socialization strategies, a longitudinal study including an intervention could be used to determine if the strategies lead to a change in the culture of health. It would also be interesting to test these strategies in other group settings outside of the workplace, such as faith-based organizations, retirement communities, or educational settings. Finally, because there are three AchieveWELL levels (3-Star, 4-Star, and 5-Star), future research could examine socialization strategies used by each level to assess progress.

Conclusion

A culture of health within an organization is important to individuals as it influences health and overall quality of life by reducing health risk factors and decreasing medical costs. A culture of health is also important to organizations as it helps to control health care costs and increases productivity. Employee engagement in health and wellness initiatives is essential to fostering a culture of health. The studied organizations have demonstrated a dedication to health, recognized by their status as 5-Star AchieveWELL organizations. This project has identified socialization strategies utilized to create and support a culture of health. These strategies include introducing the culture of health into recruitment, incorporating the culture of health into new employee orientation, engaging employees during early employment and socializing existing employees continually. Results from this research contribute to existing organizational health and wellness literature and provide guidance to organizations seeking to create a culture of health.

Note

1. All names have been changed to protect participants' identities.

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