



How to get ahead in your job when you don't know anyone

A study finds that new recruits with limited or no managerial connections, but who have strong ties with their co-workers and favourable self-evaluations, are just as successful in adjusting to their new roles as those with connections. **BY RUOLIAN FANG AND DANIEL MCALLISTER**

YOU'VE aced a daunting interview process and landed yourself in an amazing new job; but as you contemplate your first day, the dreaded new job jitters set in.

Starting a new job can be nerve-racking, even for the bravest recruit. One way to ease the transition into your new role is to leverage your connections with people high up in the company.

However, many new starters won't have such connections. So what are the alternatives to help you settle in and navigate your way to new opportunities to grow and prove yourself? And for companies that face increasing new-hire turnover rates, what can they do to help their new recruits succeed?

Our research has found that, for new employees, "who you know" does matter – but it doesn't necessarily have to be senior managers and executives. In a joint study between NUS Business School and a colleague at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management, we found that forging strong connections horizontally – in other words, with co-workers on a similar level – can be just as effective at helping newcomers gain access to the information and resources that they need to perform their jobs well and understand the circles of influence within their company.

In fact, because connections with co-workers tend to be less formal than supervisor-subordinate relationships, newcomers can more easily share their personal vulnerabilities to overcome core challenges. We found that this is especially the case for those new recruits who have favourable self-evaluations and thus are self-confident and believe in their abilities to make the best use of available resources.

Previous research has shown us that new recruits with connections to high-level organisational insiders can use those connections – known in China as *guanxi* – to gain a wider range of resources. These could include performance feedback, training, developmental job assignments and direction, professional opportunities, and more.

The reality, however, is that many new hires don't have such connections, and building them takes time and energy. So, we explored a critical issue for the vast majority of new-

comers – succeeding on the job when you don't have high-level connections.

For our study, we followed the progress of 153 business graduates from a university in Southern China. After six months in their new jobs, we measured their communication networks, looking at whether they had established connections with senior executives or if they had built strong links with their co-workers.

Three months later, we assessed how the connections they had developed had helped them absorb the knowledge and resources that they needed to be productive and master their jobs, and how well they were integrating.

Interestingly, our study found that newly hired employees who had limited or no managerial connections, but did have both strong ties with their co-workers and favourable self-evaluations, were just as successful in adjusting to their new roles as those with connections to senior managers.

While we predicted that newcomers with senior-level connections would embed themselves quickly into their new roles, we were surprised to find that these high-status connections did not help them forge strong relationships with their co-workers. This could be because co-workers see protégés who have senior-level backing as "sidekicks" who are unable to succeed without mentor support.

Rather than endorsing a one-size-fits-all approach to helping new recruits, our research showed that no single approach to learning and assimilation is equally effective for all new employees. Instead, it highlighted that a flexible and engaging environment which encourages networking with co-workers and self-evaluation as well as access to senior staff, can give newcomers a range of options to quickly embrace the company culture, become productive and identify opportunities for professional growth.

Our research has particular relevance for newly hired recruits in Asia, where forming and maintaining connections with senior-level executives is often considered essential to gaining the knowledge and resources to succeed. Our findings challenge this thinking with important implications both for companies' on-boarding strategies and new recruits stressed about making a success of their new role.

For nervous new starters, these findings suggest that you should think about how you can

channel your energy into relationships with co-workers who can help you through your learning curve. It is hard to get to know others inside your company if you spend every day having lunch at your desk or with the same people.

Instead, be proactive and extend your connections beyond your immediate team. This can help you understand the various social nuances of the company's culture and improve your skills and career opportunities.

For companies and human resources (HR) practitioners that believe in the value of their people, the sink-or-swim approach to newcomer onboarding may not make good business sense. Increasingly, the evidence points to the benefit of approaches that help newcomers get up to speed quickly and become confident and competent employees who are happy in their jobs.

These could include "buddy" systems, networking events, online social networks and new-hire portals, all designed to help newcomers build connections with co-workers and management, while also learning about the company and its culture.

Many forward-thinking companies are designing open and flexible workplaces that facilitate employee engagement across the ranks. Companies such as Apple, which has built a circular campus to encourage groups to meet each other, and Zappos, which lets employees work from local restaurants where the company pays for Wi-Fi, are leading the way in giving people the flexibility to meet easily and work together.

The reality is that most people take on new jobs to progress their careers. If they feel that they are not assimilating into their new company or getting new opportunities for growth that they desire, they may look elsewhere.

Workplace initiatives that encourage managerial and co-worker connections as well as favourable self-evaluations can help prevent talented newbies leaving because they feel they just do not fit in.

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