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This is the authors' final, accepted and refereed manuscript to the article published in

***Journal of Workplace Learning, vol 16, No.7, 2004, pp. 396 - 409***

DOI 10.1108/13665620410558297

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# HOW NEWCOMERS USE ROLE MODELS IN ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION.

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This study examines how newcomers use colleagues as role models in organizational socialization, taking a multiple level approach to organizational socialization as individual, social and cultural learning processes. The newcomers' most important personal characteristics are expectations, experience, self-confidence and competitive instinct. These personal characteristics were affected by early experience during the first four to six weeks in their new job. The study shows not only the correlation between early experience and personal characteristics, but also reveals a strong correlation between early experience and organizational socialization outcome. Newcomers rely on role models, and as a result of interaction and observation they acquire different qualifications from several role models. The term "multiple contingent role models" is introduced to explain how newcomers use role models.

Keywords: learning, organizational socialization, role models, new employment, knowledge development

## **Introduction**

New employment is a challenge for the newcomer who faces new situations and is in need of acquiring knowledge and skills. New employment also represents challenges for the organization because there is a tendency towards increased mobility among employees. Moreover, competence is considered the most important resource in future organizations. Organizations therefore need increased knowledge of newcomers' learning processes and a necessary awareness of newcomers' differences with regard to personal characteristics and competence.

Two theoretical concepts, role models and organizational socialization, are used in order to analyze and discuss the influence that social interaction with, and observation of, colleagues and superiors have on newcomers' learning processes. The purpose is to outline the relationship between newcomers' use of colleagues as role models and organizational socialization outcome, taking a multiple approach to organizational socialization as individual, social and cultural learning processes.

## **Organizational socialization**

Organizational socialization is the process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills to assume an organizational role (Van Maanen and Schein 1979), transformed from "outsider to full member" (Feldman 1981, Wanous 1980), learning the culture (van Vianen 2000) and "learning to appreciate values, abilities, expected behavior and social knowledge" (Taormina 1997). Some critics state that the organizational socialization literature has mainly discussed stage models (Bauer, Morrison and Callister 1998), tactics that organizations use to inculcate newcomers (Cooper-Thomas and Anderson 2002), information seeking during organizational socialization (Miller and Jablin 1991), and how newcomers make sense of what they encounter during the socialization process (Louis 1980). Chao,

O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein and Gardner (1994) have more recently focused on the information-acquisition and feedback-seeking behavior of newcomers as an area of organizational socialization. The second area is what is actually learned during organizational socialization (Ostroff and Kozlowski 1993). And finally, the role of social network ties during the socialization processes has been addressed (Morrison 2002). Taking these areas of organizational socialization into account, little attention has been given the importance of supervisors, co-workers, and mentors for learning (Ostroff and Kozlowski 1992, Miller and Jablin 1991). In Cawyer's and Friedrich's (1998) study, newcomers stress the importance of being fully informed about all aspects of the job, since newcomers found differences between their expectations and their actual experience of the organization. They found less support than expected and their advice to other newcomers is to take the initiative in developing interpersonal relationships, both within and outside the organization. It is commonly agreed that newcomers enter the organization with personal prior knowledge and understanding (Tierney 1997). Expectations, experience, and self-efficacy seem to affect organizational socialization outcomes. However, research on the role of newcomers' previous experience requires development of more refined measures of pre-entry work experience (Adkins 1995). After the pre-entry process, organizational socialization tactics (Van Maanen and Schein 1979), information seeking (Miller and Jablin 1991), and the newcomer as proactive (Finkelstein, Kulas and Dages 2003), all contribute to an understanding of organizational socialization. However, it is acknowledged that each domain has a different focus, reflects multiple concepts (Kraimer 1997), and cannot be included as part of the same process (Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, Gardner 1994, Morrison 2002, Ostroff and Kozlowski 1993). It therefore seems worthwhile to develop socialization models that are specific for a few or even one domain (Kraimer 1997).

Research on information seeking and on the newcomer as a proactive party, contributes to a discussion of how newcomers use role models in an organizational socialization process. The elements of an organizational socialization process i.e. what newcomers learn during organizational socialization (Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein and Gardner 1994), suggest that important categories include task mastery, role clarification, acculturation and social integration (Morrison 1993, Ostroff and Kozlowski 1992, Kraimer 1997, Griffin, Colella and Goparaju 2000). Research suggests that superiors, co-workers, peers and secretarial staff, as interpersonal sources, are important sources of information for newcomers (Feij, Whitely, Peiró 1995, Anakwe and Greenhaus 1999, Taormina 1997, Thomas and Anderson 1998, Morrison 1993, Louis, Posner and Powell 1993, Nelson, Quick, Eakin and Matuszek 1995), which indicates how important it is for newcomers to engage in relationship-building (Adkins 1995, Griffin, Colella and Goparaju 2000, Morrison 2002, Bauer and Green 1994, Saks and Ashforth 2000, Chan and Schmitt 2000). So clearly, established members as role models represent an important knowledge source for the newcomer.

### **Role models**

Established members of the organization have an important effect on the newcomer's organizational socialization process. It is also suggested that newcomers tend to seek job-related information from supervisors, and emotional information from co-workers (Miller and Jablin 1991, Morrison 1993). Moreover, supervisors can be relied upon as interpersonal sources in all domains, while co-workers may help as sources in group domains (Feldman 1981, Louis 1980, Louis, Posner and Powell 1993, Miller and Jablin 1991, Ostroff and Kozlowski 1992, Kram 1985). And finally, newcomers also turn to non-interpersonal sources, such as written material, vicarious observations and experimentation (Kram 1985, Ostroff and

Kozlowski 1993). However, none of the mentioned studies explores how these sources are used, and to what extent these interpersonal sources of information may be considered to be role models.

A role model emerges when we choose another person as a model (Fisher 1988). Role models are described in the literature as having a variety of functions, as living evidence that certain achievements are possible, and as models for emulation in achieving and maintaining certain social positions. Although it has been recognized that role models are important in organizational socialization (Hackett, Esposito and O'Halloran 1989, Nauta and Kokaly 2001), the defining characteristics of role models and exactly how they influence, remains somewhat unclear (Hackett, Esposito and O'Halloran 1989, Jung 1986). Bucher and Stelling (1977) found that newcomers use colleagues, but in a partial way. They claim that a number of newcomers only used colleagues as partial models, selecting particular characteristics or traits, which they admired and sought to emulate (Bucher and Stelling 1977). Implications of Gibson's and Cordova's (1999) studies are that women were less likely to use total role models. Accordingly, Shapiro, Haseltine and Rowe (1978) illustrated the limitations of searching for total role models. They argued that such modeling processes are extremely rare. Gibson (1995) found that no single person possessed all the qualifications the observer sought, so therefore the observer used multiple sources. And finally, Fisher (1988) claims that adopting a role model involves conceptualizing an activity by selecting certain features. This implies that individuals choose role models by selecting features that best suit their own interests.

In order for the newcomers to teach role models tacit knowledge, they must be able to interact with and observe established members of the organization (Polanyi 1996, Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995). Bandura argues, within a cognitive approach to learning, that observation of role models is sufficient. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue, within a social and cultural approach to learning, that newcomers learn through active participation in a social practice, and as a result of interaction between newcomers and established members. Observation without being able to interact with role models is insufficient. Individual and collective knowledge is an active, socially constructed process (Berger and Luckman 1966) and knowledge is mediated, situated, provisional, pragmatic, and contested (Blackler 1995). Furthermore, tacit knowledge is personal and contextual, and can only be revealed through practice, involving close social interaction, a mutual understanding and trust (Lam 2000).

## **Methods**

The research question of this particular study is how newcomers use established members as role models in organizational socialization. The study was conducted in a real estate agency with eleven newly appointed employees, each newcomer representing one exploratory, qualitative case. The data collection was a result of 52 in-depth interviews, observations, informal interviews and notes. The data collection also included interviews with their superiors and observations of the newcomers at the office and out on assignments. The data collection started 4 weeks after the newcomers started in the agency and lasted for twelve to sixteen months. With a combination of in-depth-interviews and observation, each newcomer was contacted every two months. The data included one in-depth interview with their superior after 6 months, but also informal conversations with them and the newcomers' other colleagues in the newcomers' everyday activities. The sample of eleven newly appointed real estate agents consisted of newly educated real estate agents. They all had rather limited working experience, some within sales and as real estate agent assistants during their

education. Their ages spanned from 23 to 36 years old. Two were women, which was representative of the number of female real estate agents within this organization. The agency had nineteen branch offices and the newcomers represented ten of them.

## Results

The newcomers' personal characteristics affect how they use role models and how they use role models is crucial to organizational socialization outcome. The personal characteristics that were found to have the largest influence were the newcomers' expectations, experience, self-confidence and ability to compete. These characteristics adjust to the reality that the newcomer faces concerning the organizations' demands and expectations, training and social relations with established real estate agents. On the one hand, early experience in their new jobs leads to reduced expectations, reduced self-confidence and insecurity when it comes to belief in their own ability to compete and the importance of their previous knowledge and experience. On the other hand, early positive experience increases self-confidence and the belief of being able to meet expectations, and a positive evaluation of own ability based on previous experience and competitive instinct. The study shows that personal characteristics are affected by early experience, especially the first 4-6 weeks. The newcomers "adjustment" due to early experience affected how they used role models in the whole process of organizational socialization. So the categories of newcomers as "super", "good", "below average", "insecure" and "own enemy" early in organizational socialization, were the same categories after 6-12 months, as organizational socialization outcome.

The study shows that newcomers use supervisors, co-workers and even secretarial staff more or less actively through observation, interaction and communication. When it comes to "identification", "idols" and "role models", the newcomers are quite unconscious of these terms. They admit that the terms are difficult to recognize in their organizational socialization, and furthermore many of them claim not to use role models. On the contrary, they claim not to pay much attention to what other established real estate agents do, but want to create their own style. Accordingly, they explain that they do not identify with anyone in particular. They suggest that not all information required is possible to observe in others, so they have to trust themselves, and make their own experiences. Some of them explain:

"No, I do not have any person that I think is a role model. I have quite a good picture of what qualifications I think are important in order to do well. I am trying to take the best out of several others, actually. People work very differently".

"I do not identify myself with anyone in particular. I do not have any role models, not really".

"No, no! I do not! Actually I do not have that many role models in general either, I think....I do not recognize any concrete role models, no".

However, there is quite an inconsistency between their explanations and their behavior. Most of them are quite convinced that they do not have role models, or co-workers that they identify with. But observations suggest that they do. Why this contradiction?

First, there was a lack of awareness among the newcomers. Over a period of time they became more conscious of their use of co-workers, and recognized their co-workers as role models with whom they identified. Clearly, some of the increased consciousness was a result of their participation in the research project. Secondly, as a result of experience, they found it necessary to obtain knowledge through observation and interaction, especially in order to obtain tacit knowledge. In general, they argued that they only acquired positive qualifications

from established real estate agents, but they observe both negative and positive characteristics. This indicates that we must talk about 'negative models', or at least the selective nature of role modeling, also when it comes to identification. This is clearly stated in the following definition from one of the newcomers:

“ A role model is a person you look up to and learn from, based on some personal characteristics, behavior in some situations, and/or his relationship with others. The role model serves as a positive example in a situation, with consequences the observer wants for himself, but also as a negative example with consequences the observer does not want”

The study supports the insufficiency of total role models. The newcomers do not search for or recognize total role models. So when it comes to how newcomers use role models in organizational socialization, the answer is that they use several role models. They select different qualifications from several role models in order to create their own personal style and role behavior. One of them explains:

“I have not found the ideal type, the perfect real estate agent. Many real estate agents do not match my ideal. There are many real estate agents who are quite different from the type of real estate agent I want to be. I enjoy talking to several agents, listening to what they do, and I “pick up” some characteristics from several sources”.

The study also explores the importance of learning by experience. Do newcomers need to fully understand the role models' attitudes, personal characteristics and the reason for the role models' behavior? Can it be that role modeling occurs when a role model's particular behavior suits the newcomer's own personal characteristics and attitudes in his process of developing a personal style? Depending on the qualifications, role modeling is a complex process that incorporates action, thought and feeling. Normally, there are many variables involved, which is why interaction and observation are necessary. But in some cases, role modeling is imitation of some behavior, which does not involve complex learning processes. Learning how to answer the phone, how to operate the copy-machine, and so forth involves simple role modeling processes, which easily can be achieved by imitation

A newcomer's perception of real estate agents' positive qualifications results in role modeling of these qualifications. This is also according to a newcomer's perception of what it takes to become successful. Newcomers use role models for identification, and for their ability to learn qualifications, in order to create their own personal style. Two of them explain:

“I want to find my own way of doing things. I cannot do things as Smith, Jones or Lee do them. And I am not sure if they do things the same way, either. I have to find out what is me, and I think that is important”

“I have met several real estate agents...I adopt different qualifications from different real estate agents, trying to take the best out of what people do well”.

Role models are used as partial models, as “multiple contingent role models”. It is interesting and relevant to differentiate between the role model's purpose for the newcomer. The best selling real estate agents are in a position to inspire newcomers as success models. Supervisors and real estate agents who do well can be referred to as motivation models. And finally, secretarial staff and real estate agents at an average level are role models who indicate what to expect in terms of information and advice on practical day-to-day problems, as survivor models. Who the newcomers use as role models, and how they use role models, affect organizational socialization outcome, and resulted in the following categorization of the newcomers:

The “super sellers” are strategic in their use of best sellers as the most important role models. They are aware of their goal to be among the best, and in order to succeed they experience and learn their new job in interaction with best sellers. They also use other available role models in the office, survivor models as well as motivation models. But when it comes to their perception of the most successful qualifications within this occupation, they clearly focus on learning from a success model. Success depends on the observer’s ability to integrate “lectures” from several model types, which is recognized in this study.

Some of the “good agents” use of role models is quite similar to that of the “super sellers”. They recognize and observe a success model, but not quite as much as the best sellers. Newcomers who are able to interact with success models, instead of just observing, are more likely to succeed. For all of them, they are active in using available role models, including motivation models and survivor models. They are conscious of what qualifications are most important, and therefore more strategic in which qualifications they want to emulate and adapt. Previous characteristics affect their ability to be able to “control” their own organizational socialization. Only a few of them have relevant experience, but they are self-confident and motivated, which inspires their role models. This is important. Role modeling is based on informal relationships between newcomers and role models, and is not always recognized as role modeling by the participants. But forming these relationships requires that role models want to be available to the newcomer. It is important to establish an understanding regarding how role models are actively engaged with those who select them.

There are no available success models for the “below average” agents, only motivation models and survivor models. They take no initiative to connect with any other established real estate agents. They seem satisfied with the situation, and not very ambitious. They did what was expected of them and their use of role models was more to copy some of their actions, instead of creating their own personal style. It suggests that an individual exposed to a low-performing model outperformed and had a lower goal acceptance and satisfaction than an individual exposed to a high-performing role model.

For the “insecure agents”, the situation is to some extent the same as for the below average agents. They are exposed to motivation models and survivor models, not success models. They were quite passive in their use of role models, and had a tendency to mostly rely on survivor models. Their self-confidence was reduced as a result of a poor start. They did not take the necessary initiative in their own learning process, which was confirmed by their supervisor. In previous discussions it was argued that a correlation between self-confidence, pro-activity, and motivation leads to positive results. Clearly, the insecure agents are not self-confident enough, which leads to passivity, which again leads to some negative results and reduced motivation.

Their “own enemy agents” are more difficult to understand. Their problem is that they claim to be more self-confident than they actually are. To some extent they are active, but they have all the answers themselves, or at least they behave as if they have. Their supervisors explain that they agree with them, but then do quite the opposite. They interact with success models as personal friends. So in sum, they have a lot of available role models to observe and interact with. One suggestion is that they are convinced of having to rely on themselves, and are afraid to explore their lack of knowledge, so therefore they do not learn enough from available role models. Or at least, they do not use obtained knowledge sufficiently or in accordance with established norms attached to role behavior.

## Discussion

This study recognizes the importance of taking a multiple approach to newcomers' organizational socialization in order to analyze the importance of established colleagues for newcomers' learning processes. Traditionally, theory and research within organizational socialization has focused on these processes as individual cognitive processes and only including the learning of norms, values and expected behavior. Also within the role model literature, the main focus has been on individual cognitive processes, including the rational perspective that often addresses the use of total role models (Bandura,1986). Within this approach the importance of knowledge development between members of the organization has been recognized, but more as an individual knowledge transformation and not as a social engagement and interaction among participants in different communities of practice. The main contribution of this study is to acknowledge that newcomers' organizational socialization must be focused on as social and cultural learning processes, and therefore organizational socialization includes all learning from when a new member enters the organization and until he or she becomes an established member of the same organization. Within a social and cultural perspective, it will be extremely difficult to differ between organizational socialization and newcomers' learning processes. The newcomer's knowledge development will be a result of participation and interaction in social communities. As a consequence, knowledge is shared among the participants, as part of everyday experiences, and not as individual knowledge processes. Some new research results within organizational socialization have focused on relations among colleagues as a match between newcomers' preferences and organizational culture (van Vianen 2000), the role of social network ties (Morrison 2002), and pro-activity (Chan and Schmitt 2000). This study, however, represents new knowledge on why and how these relationships are built, and outlines established colleagues as the most important knowledge source for newcomers in the organization.

When relating the term role model to the concept of organizational socialization, the importance of established colleagues in learning is confirmed, which also has been recognized in previous studies (Morrison 2002, Louis, Posner and Powell 1993, Ostroff and Kozlowski 1992,1993). The use of the term multiple contingent role models represents a contribution to how newcomers use established colleagues in knowledge development. Newcomers use several role models, adopting different qualifications in order to create their own personal style. In accordance with the partial use of role models, the implication is that the newcomer is part of experiences and observations within a social community, and that these learning processes are a result of these social and cultural relations. This is according to Lave and Wengers' (1998) approach, and their statement that newcomers learn through interactions among participants in a social community. Observation and interaction through practice is also stated as necessary in order to learn the tacit knowledge of established real estate agents (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995). The newcomers need own experiences in order to develop own tacit knowledge. Established real estate agents represent the organization's tacit knowledge and therefore the newcomers need to have their own experiences in relations with established real estate agents to be able to develop their own personal style as real estate agents. In practice, the newcomers that succeed the most use several role models in a partial way, as multiple contingent role models. Total role models are not recognized in this study, and also identified as extremely rare in previous studies (Shapiro, Haseltine and Rowe 1978, Gibson 1995 and Fisher 1988). The term "multiple contingent role model" can hopefully help the concept of role models from being a theatrical dinosaur and also help recognize the importance of identification when it comes to whom the newcomers use as role models. The study outlines the meaning of recognizing potential survival models, motivation models and



success models. When it comes to organizational socialization outcome, and how well the newcomers succeed in the new organization, it is not just a question of how they use role models but it is extremely important who they use as role models.

The newcomer's ability to build relationships with established colleagues differs. The importance of pro-activity has been outlined by previous research (Morrison 2002, Chan and Schmitt 2000, Finkelstein, Kulas and Dages 2003). In this study the importance of pro-activity is recognized in relation to the newcomer's self-confidence and how self-confidence is of importance to their ability in and motivation for being proactive in building relationships. The newcomer's most important personal characteristics were expectations, experience, self-confidence and competitive instinct. These characteristics are affected by the organization's social and cultural context and within these contexts the importance of identification with established members affect whom the newcomers used as role models.

### **Practical and managerial implications.**

The focus on organizational socialization and how new employment is a continuing challenge for the newcomer, organizations and society is important, and is a reminder of the consequences if we do not take these learning processes seriously. The importance of social-cultural conditions is recognized, as is the importance of interaction with co-workers in order to obtain tacit knowledge. This may represent a different approach to the more traditional approach on individual learning processes and training based on superior communication and teaching explicit knowledge. Newcomers' previous knowledge, especially expectations and self-confidence, is reduced or increased in early organizational socialization. Awareness of the first four to six weeks, and how early experience affects organizational socialization outcome, along with a recognition that organizational socialization is a process that lasts at least six months, imply the importance of allowing a newcomer to be new. When facing new situations, several available role models help their learning process and their need for creating own role behaviour. They personally have to experience trial and error as a result of interaction with several role models. Identification when it comes to role modeling implies that a newcomer not only needs several available role models, but s/he prefers to observe and interact with co-workers that s/he identifies with. Newcomers engage in informal communities of practice, and total role models are not recognized. They want to create their own unique style as real estate agents as a result of learning positive characteristics and behaviour from several established real estate agents. Management can be strategic by providing a newcomer with available role models who at the same time have some personal characteristics, attitudes and behaviour that they want the newcomer to learn and emulate. And furthermore, awareness of role models as success models, motivation models and survival models may serve as guidance for a newcomer's ability to move to different levels of knowledge and skills during organizational socialization.

Managerial implications, in accordance with empirical contributions from this study, are therefore basically:

1. The newcomer's personal characteristics, (expectations, experience, self-confidence and competition instinct), must be clarified in the process of recruiting and "getting to know" the newcomer, in accordance with giving the newcomer a correct "picture" of the organization's reality.

2. The importance of early experience, the first 4 to 6 weeks, and how strongly early experience can affect organizational socialization outcome, can help management to arrange training and involve co-workers in the newcomer's organizational socialization.
3. The newcomer's possibility of obtaining tacit knowledge means that management must arrange for the newcomer to be able to observe and practice their new job in social interactions with established members of the organization.
4. Management needs to involve colleagues as available role models. This suggests that not only the newcomer's supervisor is responsible for organizational socialization but several colleagues as survival models, motivation models and success models are involved in that responsibility.
5. The management must have necessary awareness of who they "connect" the newcomer with as role models, which again can help management in what qualifications they want the newcomer to learn.
6. The management must consider informal "communities of practice" and how their participation affects the newcomer's organizational socialization. Additionally, they need to understand identification as important with regard to whom the newcomer forms relationships with. Again, this awareness can help management in trying to "control" what the newcomer learns in relation to whom they learn from.
7. The newcomer needs to be appreciated as "new" and that he is "new" for about twelve months. During that period he must be able to practice in his new job, including being able to experience trial and errors.

### **Limitations of the study**

There are several limitations to this study related to my research design; (a) the nature of the case study method, (b) the data collection procedures, (c) the characteristics of the participants, and (d) the role of researcher in participant observation. When using eleven qualitative exploratory case studies, each newcomer represents one case. The cases are linked to previous research contributions, but still the possibility of analytic generalization depends on its similarity with the cases and its social and contextual conditions. The cases contribute a new understanding of how newcomers use co-workers as role models in organizational socialization, but they cannot necessarily predict role-modeling behaviour in other newcomers. However, the findings also represent a general knowledge of multiple contingent role models and a definition of organizational socialization, which there is reason to believe will be recognized in most organizations. The second limitation is that observation and in-depth interviews were designed to obtain as much data as possible during organizational socialization. However, findings were limited to what was observed and focused on in the in-depth interviews. A third limitation to consider is related to the role and approach of the researcher. Informants may dissemble, present an ideal self, or tell a researcher what they think s/he wants to hear. This is especially important due to the increased consciousness newcomers have concerning the term role model and how they use role models as a result of their participation in the project. To some extent these limitations are met through observations. The researcher may also affect the collection of data and the analyses and the

researchers approach represents some main focuses, which may also result in biases concerning the interpretation.

## **Conclusion**

This study has focused on how newcomers use colleagues as role models in organizational socialization, taking a multiple level approach to organizational socialization as individual, social and cultural learning processes. The study shows that newcomers use established colleagues as “multiple contingent role models” in organizational socialization. They depend and rely on role models in observations and interactions and learn different qualifications from several role models in the process of learning both tacit and explicit knowledge, in order to create their own attitudes, personal style and role behavior. The newcomer’s most important personal characteristics are expectations, experience, self-confidence and competitive instinct. These personal characteristics are affected by early experience during the first four to six weeks in their new job. The study shows not just the correlation between early experience and personal characteristics. It also suggests a strong correlation between personal characteristics and how newcomers use role models and the affect their use of role models has on organizational socialization outcome. This can be related to self-confidence as a result of early experience, but also how self-confidence results in pro-activity. Newcomers who are proactive use success models, motivation models and survival models among established real estate agents and have several potential role models available for own knowledge development. They clearly have an advantage because their pro-activity results in being able to interact and observe different qualifications from several role models, as multiple contingent role models, and are self-confident enough to create their own personal style as real estate agents.

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