AN EXPLORATION OF COWORKER DISMISSAL:

UNCERTAINTY, MESSAGE CHARACTERISTICS, AND INFORMATION SEEKING

by

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ABSTRACT

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The dismissal of a coworker can create turbulence for organizations and remaining employees. This study explores the communication surrounding coworker dismissal, including the uncertainty experienced by remaining employees, the way they learn about the dismissal, the characteristics of the messages they receive from the organization, and their information seeking. Data gathered from 220 participants yielded several findings. Coworker dismissal is not associated with increased uncertainty, though statistical relationships exist between message characteristics and uncertainty. Reported messages surrounding the dismissal typically came from another coworker or the remaining employees' immediate supervisor via individual, face-to-face meetings with moderate formality at some point within a day of the dismissal. Several information seeking strategies are used by remaining employees and social costs were more predictive of the information seeking strategy used than was uncertainty. The findings are discussed, with note of their theoretical implications and practical applications, and limitations and future directions are described.

In Loving Memory of My Grandma

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ending employment is, for better or worse, an innate part of the organizational experience. An employee leaving the organization is a pivotal event, one that can be difficult, unpleasant, painful, relieving, or even joyous, depending on the circumstances. Often referred to as terminating, dismissing, disengaging, and firing or quitting, ending employment can be initiated by the employer or the employee. Employment relationships in the United States, almost entirely, are presumed to be "at-will," which ultimately means both employers and employees can lawfully end an employment relationship at any time, with or without notice, for any legal reason (National Conference of State Legislatures, n.d.). The very nature of at-will employment offers the chance for feelings of instability on the part of employers and especially employees.

In many instances, there are legitimate reasons organizations dismiss employees, but often, the reason an employee leaves an organization is unclear to all. With employers "moving in a different direction" and noting employees are "pursuing other opportunities," there can be great uncertainty surrounding a dismissal, both for those directly involved and for others in the organization. Remaining employees may have a variety of questions about the event, including reason(s) for the dismissal and how the change will impact them and their work unit moving forward. This necessitates effective communication, to provide a sense of direction for remaining employees and to increase their sense of stability.

An issue with employment at-will and employee dismissal is the potentially negative impact it may have on remaining employees. In addition to sustaining livelihoods, employment offers individuals the opportunity to achieve, use their creativity, improve their self-esteem, and self-realize (Linn, Sandifer, & Stein, 1985). Either insufficient or ineffective communication

about the dismissal of a coworker can impact individuals, work units, and the organization, and lead to uncertainty. The classical definition of uncertainty is "the difference between information available and information needed" (Goldhaber, 1993, p. 24). When individuals perceive either a lack of information or instability at work, these perceptions can negatively affect them at home and at work. It is unclear what contributes to remaining employees' uncertainty, what role an organization's approach to communicating a coworker dismissal plays, and whether and how remaining employees seek information. Understanding these elements of organizational life is essential to organizations in a variety of industries. This study also benefits the communication discipline by examining uncertainty in a new context and presents the opportunity to identify whether elements of information seeking present in organizational entry also exist in organizational exit. Therefore, the communication surrounding employee dismissal and its impact on remaining employees should be a chief concern to managers, employees, and communication researchers.

Existing research examining communication during organizational disengagement focuses on two key players: the terminated employee and the message carrier, often the employee's supervisor, a manager, or a member of human resources. Much of the research on the dismissal process aims to assist managers (Cox & Kramer, 1995). Topics of discussion include handling dismissals ethically and lawfully (Lisoski, 2013; Lynott, 2004), negotiating the dismissal (Zins, 2012), preserving employee dignity (Wood & Karau, 2009), the legitimacy of "expert" advice on employee dismissal practices (Karl & Hancock, 1999), fairness (Rousseau & Anton, 1991), and the impact of cultural influences (Segalla, Jacobs-Belschak, & Müller, 2001) and physical attractiveness biases (Commisso & Finkelstein, 2012) on which individuals in an

organization are terminated. Neglected in the current research on organizational disengagement is the impact of coworker dismissal on remaining employees.

The purpose of the current study was to explore the experiences of remaining employees after a coworker is dismissed. In this context, the term "remaining employee" refers to any individual that remains employed, permanently or temporarily, at an organization after a terminated employee (coworker) leaves. Coworker refers to another individual employed at the same organization as a remaining employee with whom the remaining employee interacted with at work (for work-related or social reasons) at least once a month, regardless of hierarchical differences. Justification for these criteria is provided in the method section.

The current study focused on the perspectives and experiences of remaining employees after a coworker dismissal. The study had six main objectives: 1) identify remaining employees' uncertainty after a coworker termination, 2) discover how remaining employees learn about coworker terminations, 3) uncover the features of the communication messages they receive from the organization about their coworkers' dismissal, 4) analyze the relationship between the message features and remaining employees' uncertainty, 5) explore how remaining employees seek to reduce or manage their uncertainty after a coworker dismissal, and 6) reveal if uncertainty and social costs serve as predictors of information seeking in this context.

To achieve these objectives, literature is reviewed examining employee dismissal, uncertainty in organizations, message characteristics, and organizational socialization and information seeking and two hypotheses and four research questions are presented. The method of data collection and analysis are explained the results are presented and discussed. Finally, a conclusion that describes the conclusions, theoretical implications, practical applications, limitations, and future directions is included.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee Dismissal

Because the current study focuses on the impact of a coworker dismissal on remaining employees, it is important to acknowledge that employee dismissal occurs for a variety of reasons. Dismissing (i.e., firing, letting go, walking out, or sacking) refers to an organization terminating an employment relationship against the employee's will. In other words, a dismissed employee leaves an organization involuntarily. As a result, dismissal does not occur when an employee retires or resigns on their own accord. If, however, an employee was persuaded to exit the organization, which prompted their self-selected retirement or resignation, the individual would still be considered dismissed by the current study. Dismissed coworkers, in the current study, do not include individuals released from their employment due to organization-level financial issues, like layoffs, downsizing, restructuring, and bankruptcy, as these changes are due to structural issues, often out of the organization and employees' control.

In many instances, dismissal occurs because of deviant workplace behavior. Employee deviance has been defined as "voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both" (Robinson & Bennett, 1995, p. 557); and organizational norms are "prescribed by formal and informal organizational policies, rules, and procedures" (p. 557). Remaining employees may or may not be aware of a terminated employee's deviant behavior. If the misconduct is unknown to others, a termination may be unsettling for remaining employees. If others in the organization are aware of the deviant behavior, a termination may be welcomed, but it still can create uncertainty. For example, if it is clear an employee was terminated for lewd comments made toward their coworkers but the organization does not take the opportunity to speak with the affected

individuals or reiterate the importance of their employees' safety and well-being, it could cause remaining employees to feel unsupported and even ignored.

As with deviant workplace behaviors, employees are also often dismissed for fair reasons. Fair reasons for employee termination are related to capability, misconduct, redundancy (being no longer useful or needed), illegality of the employment contract, or another substantial reason (McCarthy, 2005). In analyzing unfair dismissal cases heard before the Australian Industrial Relations commission, Southey (2010) found that employees explain their misbehavior using three categories of reasoning: workplace related reasons, personal-inside reasons, and personal-outside reasons. Workplace related reasons pertain to the workplace directly or indirectly and include accepted employer practice, poor communication, poor employer policy or practice, influence from another person, job changes, faulty equipment, and unreasonable performance expectations; personal-inside reasons were considered non-tangible and included denial, felt inequity or tension, self-defense, mistake, intentional behavior, ignorance of employer policies or rules, frustration, and atypical behavior; and personal outside reasons are associated with physical aspects around the employee, including health issues, family commitments, mood altering substances and addictive behaviors, personal tragedy, and financial pressures (Southey, 2010). If terminated employees expressed some of these reasons to remaining employees, remaining employees may feel discomfort. For example, if one employee experiences felt inequity or tension, it is likely that other may feel the same way. Furthermore, if remaining employees also believe their terminated coworker was unfairly dismissed, it could create contention in the workplace or lead them to feel unstable in their own employment.

Last, it is important to mention that sometimes individuals are terminated and provided only a vague explanation for the decision. Dismissed employees are told that their services are no

longer needed, even though the position will likely be refilled, or that the organization is going in a different direction. If remaining employees become aware of these seemingly (or actually) illegitimate reasons, it is likely to impact them negatively.

Uncertainty in Organizations

As mentioned, the communication surrounding a coworker dismissal can produce uncertainty. Uncertainty has been widely studied in the communication discipline and in business. Predictability allows organizations to prosper (Kanter, 1977) and with uncertainty, predictability is at a low. Messages are said to be produced and distributed among employees by the organization to reduce uncertainty (Goldhaber, 1993), which grants employees a better ability to predict. Weick (1979) and other scholars have argued that organizational communication, with its numerous facets and purposes, serves the single, overarching goal of reducing uncertainty. However, a certain level of uncertainty can sometimes be beneficial (Eisenberg, 1984). For instance, an organization may not share that an employee was fired for lewd comments, but may instead tell remaining employees their coworker is leaving the organization, to not further perpetuate the issues associated with inappropriate workplace banter, and remind them what constitutes proper workplace communication.

Uncertainty, in an organizational setting, has been defined as "the perceived lack of information, knowledge, beliefs, and feelings – whatever is necessary for accomplishing the organizational task and the personal objectives of communicators in the organization" (Driskill & Goldstein, 1986, p. 45). Within this definition, the idea of perception is important. Management may believe employees have everything they need to be successful in their work, but if employees do not hold the same belief, the opportunity for uncertainty arises. Another key element of this definition is the notion of necessity. Again, employees may feel they need to

know a certain piece of information, but management may not view sharing that information as beneficial overall. For the current study, perception and necessity are united to define uncertainty as the perceived or actual difference between information desired and information available.

In their prominent piece on uncertainty in organizational communication, Driskill and Goldstein (1986) identified unique uncertainties that exist at three levels in organizations: corporate, departmental/unit, and individual. At these separate levels, groups and individuals have different ideas about what information is necessary to achieve goals and how personal ideas shape the perception of events. The addition and subtraction of one or more employees is likely to influence remaining employees on individual and departmental/unit levels. For example, individuals may wonder how the responsibilities of their position may change and how the functions or cohesiveness of their department may be altered. One significant setting in which uncertainty exists in the workplace is during organizational change. Employee dismissals are typically small in scale, unlike true organizational change, but literature on changing organizations provides a clear foundation for studying uncertainty.

Uncertainty in changing organizations. When an individual is terminated, remaining employees may wonder if they will be next to go. This is especially prevalent in organizations that may be changing, restructuring, or downsizing. The rhetoric of layoff messages has been closely studied (e.g., DeKay, 2010; King, 2010; Sisco & Yu, 2010; Warnick, 2010). With a substantial body of existing research on "survivors" of layoffs, coworkers terminated due to organizational change, on a structural level, are not included in the current study. Changing organizations provide a clear lens through which uncertainty in organizations can be understood.

There are three categories of uncertainty in changing organizations: strategic, structural, and job-related uncertainties (Bordia, Hobman, Jones, Gallois, & Callan, 2004). A parallel exists

among these categories and Driskill and Goldstein's (1986) three levels where uncertainty occurs: corporate, departmental/unit, and individual. Bordia et al.'s (2004) three categories of uncertainty fit neatly within Driskill and Goldstein's (1986) three levels where uncertainty exist. Strategic uncertainties exist at the corporate level and revolve around organizational-level issues, including planning, future directions, and sustainability (Bordia et al., 2004). Upon the dismissal of a coworker, remaining employees may wonder if the dismissal is due to an extenuating circumstance or if there is a larger issue at the organization level, with funding or vision, which may have a more widespread impact. Uncertainty associated with an individual being terminated likely does not extend to the corporate level to the extent that it exists at the departmental/unit and individual level. Unless the terminated employee plays a pivotal social or task role, the entire enterprise is likely unshaken by a single dismissal. Regardless, organizational rhetoric is relevant.

Structural uncertainties exist at the secondary or departmental/unit level and stem from changes to the organization's inner workings, including the structure and responsibilities of different departments (Bordia et al., 2004). When a coworker leaves a job, the relational and task roles of a work unit may change, shaking the structure of established group norms and expectations. Lastly, job-related uncertainties exist at the individual level and include concerns about changing roles, job security, and promotion. Remaining employees may be left wondering what direct impact the dismissal of a coworker has on them. Here, uncertainty is influenced by change and the unknown and focuses on "whether a job will be performed differently, under changed conditions, or – the ultimate uncertainty – whether it will be performed at all" (Driskill & Goldstein, 1986, p. 45). Structural and job-related uncertainty, at the departmental/unit and individual levels respectively, are key in the current study.

Although an employee dismissal does not necessarily mean an organization is undergoing drastic change, it does mean the organization changes in some way or another. For remaining employees, the details of this change can be unknown. Employees may be left with many questions: Why was the employee terminated? Is the organization restructuring? Who will be next to go? Also unclear is how the void left by a terminated employee will be filled: Will remaining employees be tasked with more work? Will any changes made be temporary or permanent? Who will absorb the terminated employee's social role? These questions may lead to uncertainty for remaining employees and their work units. Conceptually, uncertainty is the "inability to predict or explain" (Salem & Williams, 1984, p. 76). Research by Cox and Kramer (1995) provides a strong foundation for the current study, because it explores communication surrounding employee and coworker dismissal, but does so from the perspective of managers. It is critical to examine how remaining employees experience the dismissal of a coworker, though.

Uncertainty reduction and management. Dealing with uncertainty has been widely researched in communication, especially with regard to how individuals use information seeking strategies in unfamiliar situations to reduce their anxiety. Focusing their attention on initial interactions taking place between strangers, Berger and Calabrese (1975) analyze the development of interpersonal relationships and provide a theoretical lens through which communication can be explored: uncertainty reduction theory (URT). URT posits that anxiety accompanies uncertainty and that in order to reduce anxiety, individuals attempt to reduce their uncertainty. Thus, acquiring knowledge about a coworker dismissal from the organization and from informal communication networks may reduce uncertainty for remaining employees.

It is unclear how the approach an organization takes when communicating a coworker dismissal impacts remaining employees, but communication messages, or lack thereof, appear to

be key. URT, in addition to information economics, suggests that uncertainty is reduced by information (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Conversely, some theories hold that communicating information can be a source of uncertainty in itself, because more than explicit content is conveyed (Levinson, 1983). As an organization provides more information about the reasons for a coworker dismissal and explains how to move forward, it seems likely that uncertainty would decrease. Equally, it is possible that more information could cause individuals to feel more uncertain. For example, if a coworker was terminated for low output, it could cause remaining employees to question if their level of output is sufficient.

More information does not necessarily mean less uncertainty, which leads to the idea of uncertainty management (UM). UM not only addresses reducing uncertainty, but how individuals cope with feelings of uneasiness, in general. UM acknowledges that individuals do not always want or seek complete certainty, because remaining unsure may allow them to maintain hopefulness by avoiding information that is certain, but potentially adverse (Brashers, Goldsmith, & Hsieh, 2002). For example, if a remaining employee thinks highly of a terminated employee, but heard rumors of misconduct, they may not seek information that confirms the rumor, in order to maintain their positive feelings toward the terminated employee. In contrast, it is possible that the employee may seek as much information as possible, in order to understand the reason an employee was terminated.

In moving toward a general theory of uncertainty management, Lind and Van den Bos (2002) advocate for the connection between uncertainty and fairness. They suggest that fair treatment of employees enables the management of uncertainty, because it gives individuals confidence that they will eventually receive favorable outcomes and reduces the anxiety associated with the possibility of loss. Their theory proposes that people look for signs of

fairness to help them psychologically deal with the stress surrounding uncertainty. Thus, treating employees fairly can enable them to more effectively cope with their uncertainty. An example of this, related to the current study, may be remaining employees looking for an indication that their coworker's employment was terminated for a legitimate reason. Lind and Van den Bos's (2002) proposed theory of uncertainty management suggests that the extent to which fairness is needed can be determined by measuring the level of uncertainty experienced by employees. Thus, it becomes even more necessary to measure levels of and to identify sources of uncertainty.

The impact of coworker dismissal on remaining employees has not yet been studied. As demonstrated by Cox and Kramer's (2015) study, coworker dismissal can yield structural and job-related uncertainty, causing employees to question their own work quality and the status of both their position and the position of the terminated employee, as perceived by managers. The first hypothesis seeks to evaluate the degree to which a coworker dismissal yields uncertainty:

Hypothesis 1: The dismissal of a coworker creates uncertainty for remaining employees.

Message Characteristics

There are several widely-recognized elements of an interaction found in most general models of communication, including the source or sender of the message, the medium or channel through which the message is sent, the message and its content, the receiver of the message, noise that may interfere with the interpretation of the message, feedback in the form of a response to the message, and the context or environment in which the communication event occurs. In moving beyond basic understanding, exploring how key features of communication messages operate in specific, organizational contexts will reveal how employees decode and experience messages and can help organizations communicate more effectively. These features of communication are fundamental and may influence how remaining employees interpret

messages related to their coworker's dismissal and have the potential to influence their uncertainty. Organizational change literature provides a foundation for understanding the communication surrounding a coworker dismissal and revealing what characteristics may influence the interpretation of the message and associated uncertainty.

Communicating change. Change refers to "any alteration or modification of organizational structure or processes" (Zorn, Christensen, & Cheney, 1999, p. 10). Change can be large in scale, like in a merger or rebranding situation, or small, like introducing a new position or safety procedure. Relative to mergers and other large-scale change efforts, the dismissal of an individual employee is likely rather small in scale; however, the size and importance of a terminated employee's role may increase the scale of the change. Change can also be described as planned or unplanned. According to Lewis (2011), planned changes are "brought about through the purposeful efforts of organizational stakeholders who are accountable for the organization's operation" (p. 37), whereas unplanned changes are due to uncontrollable or outside forces, or simply emerging interactions and processes. Unless prearranged or strategized, the exit of an employee is best defined as an unplanned, small-scale change, because organizations seek to retain their human capital and do not typically plan long in advance the dissolution of an employment relationship. Typically addressing planned, large-scale movement, research addressing organizational change begins to reveal how companies communicate during changing times. Considerations here include assessments of the message's source, medium, timing, formality, and content.

Source. First, the source of information is key to understanding the communication process. Within organizational communication, there are three relevant directions in which messages flow: upward, downward, and horizontal (Goldhaber, 1983). Upward communication

refers to messages that travel up the organizational hierarchy, such as from employees to their supervisors or employees to human resources; while downward communication moves from upper levels down the organizational hierarchy, like from managers to supervisors and supervisors to employees. A final direction is horizontal, which is peer-to-peer communication. Regarding organizational change, employees identified the primary source of change-related information most often as "the implementation team (30.3%), followed by top management (27%), middle management (16.9%), line supervisors (10.1%), human resources (4.5%), experts or consultants (3.4%), and coworkers (1.1%)" (Lewis, 1999, p. 60). In the case of a coworker dismissal, human resources may be considered the implementation team, due to their role in personnel management. However, supervisors and managers may be the most common message senders, because they may have more contact with remaining employees. Coworkers often are in even closer contact with each other, so gossip may be prominent. Thus, it is unclear who is the primary source of dismissal-related messages from the organization.

Medium. Change scholars often isolate two types of media (or channels) used to convey messages: interpersonal and mediated (Dewhirst, 1971; Fidler & Johnson, 1984; Lewis, 1999; Rogers, 1995). Interpersonal channels are comprised of mostly face-to-face (FTF) interactions, and mediated channels involve technology or mass media (Lewis, 1999). To disseminate information during organizational change, FTF channels are most commonly used, followed by mediated channels (Lewis, 1999). A study examining strategic internal communication by Men (2014) revealed which specific channels employees prefer companies and leaders to use when disseminating information: companies of medium to large size most commonly used email, then employee meetings, and then print media to communicate new changes, events, decisions, and policies; while leaders at all levels in these companies most commonly used FTF, then email,

and then phone and voice mail to communicate with employees. Interestingly, employees preferred to receive information from the company and leaders in the same orders as listed above, with the exception of the third most common channel used by companies: print media. Employees preferred interpersonal communication with their immediate manager over print media. The dismissal of an employee is certainly an event that leads to change and decision-making on the part of the organization. Thus, it may be likely that when communicating a coworker dismissal, companies most frequently use email and leaders most frequently use FTF channels.

Timing. Another element of communication messages during change is their timing. Based on discussions with senior executives at companies with excellent internal communication, Young and Post (1993) purport that organizations should communicate what they know as soon as they know it and not wait until all elements of a change are resolved before talking with employees. They suggest loss of trust, anger, and dissatisfaction are costs of lack of timeliness. In the event of a coworker dismissal, it would be prudent for organizations to communicate with remaining employees shortly after their conversation with the affected employee occurs.

Formality. The formality of the interaction is also important when communicating change. Formal communication is considered "official" and includes moving conversation up and down the organizationally designated chain of command, in addition to much of an organization's written communication, while informal communication tends to be more personal and is not bound by the organizational hierarchy (Johnson, Donohue, Atkin, & Johnson, 1994). Varying levels of formality can also be found in the content of messages. About the importance of informal and formal information sharing regarding organizational change, Papa and Papa

(1990) assert that more research is needed in order to understand how formality functions in change. With regard to disseminating information about organizational change, one study found the two most frequently used channels were small, informal discussions and general informational meetings (Lewis, 1999), the latter of which likely had a more formal structure. Furthermore, employees have been found to evaluate informal channels more highly than formal channels (Johnson, et al., 1994). The formality of the interaction's structure used to communicate coworker dismissal may contribute to the thoroughness of the interaction and remaining employees' ability to ask questions.

Content. Closely related to formality is content. Officially, remaining employees probably only need to know that their coworker will not be returning to work. Unofficially, though, remaining employees may want or need to know more. With regard to the current study, the type and depth of information is shared by the organization when a coworker is terminated is unclear. For example, are remaining employees made aware of why their coworker is leaving? Do they know if and when their coworker's position will be filled? Is it clear how their coworker's duties will be absorbed temporarily or permanently? Are they made confident that their own employment relationship is strong? Not having the answer to these questions may lead to uncertainty for remaining employees. As a result, it is important to explore what type and amount of information is shared by organizations when a coworker is terminated.

Medium and source have been considered simultaneously in previous research. Consistent with the discussion above, empirical studies have revealed employees prefer FTF communication with management over mediated communication (Cameron & McCollum, 1993; White, Vanc, & Stafford, 2010). Furthermore, when they perceive their manager to communicate via more FTF channels, employees tend to experience greater organizational satisfaction (Lewis,

1999). Finally, managers at companies with excellent internal communication programs have strongly endorsed upper management using FTF channels when communicating with employees, particularly about sensitive issues and large-scale change (Young & Post, 1993). All of this contributes to the need to explore different elements of the communication surrounding a coworker dismissal.

Communicating dismissal. Communication research has not yet addressed how remaining employees learn about a coworker dismissal from the perspective of remaining employees. To date, one study, by Cox and Kramer (1995) touched on how managers communicate coworker dismissal. A small portion of this study analyzed the communication that takes place between managers and remaining employees, from the perspective of managers, after a coworker is terminated.

As for how the news of a dismissal is delivered, Cox and Kramer (1995) found that most managers communicatively addressed the informational needs of the terminated employees' work group. Forty-two percent of managers reported speaking with the employee's supervisor; another 42%, often in smaller organizations, informed all members of the work group; and some relied on the grapevine, or informal communication networks between employees. Some managers were reluctant to discuss any issues related to the dismissal and some answered only basic questions. The needs of remaining employees other than information needs, like social support, were unmentioned. Being that Cox and Kramer's study was conducted from the perspective of managers, the perspective of remaining employees should also be considered. Who sends communication messages and through which medium is of particular importance, but it is also essential to look at the timing of their delivery, the formality of the interaction's structure, and the information the message contains.

Uncovering how coworker dismissals are communicated to remaining employees will help grant a deeper understanding of the experience of having a coworker leave the organization and why it may be associated with uncertainty. With an employee dismissal, organizations lose a worker and have a gap, varying in size and prominence, in the organization's structure. Remaining employees may need to know if and how that gap will be filled in both the short-term and long-term. In these circumstances, it can also be important for remaining employees to feel stable in their own employment relationship, have accurate information, and know how the organization is supporting them through the change. If uncertainty exists, performance, employees' mental states, and morale may suffer. The lack of research surrounding this topic necessitates two research questions. The first explores how remaining employees initially discover a coworker has been terminated. The second seeks to pinpoint how organizations communicate coworker dismissal to remaining employees, with special attention to the features of the communication message discussed previously:

> Research Question 1: How do remaining employees initially learn about the dismissal of a coworker?
>
> Research Question 2: What are the characteristics (i.e., source, medium, timing, formality, and content) of messages received by remaining employees from the organization when a coworker is dismissed?

When exploring the features of communication during the implementation of organizational change, it becomes clear that these characteristics may influence how remaining employees interpret and understand the surrounding events. It seems possible that a variety of characteristics are less associated with uncertainty than others. For example, thorough, yet informal, messages from supervisors and managers delivered face-to-face shortly after a

termination may be related to decreased uncertainty. Casual messages from reliable sources may lead remaining employees to feel less tension and more at ease seeking additional information, thus reducing their uncertainty. Contrarily, if the organization sends a long, detailed, mass email about a coworker termination and how the dismissed individuals' duties will be covered, employees may have more information, but feel less comfortable asking questions. The first hypothesis, mentioned earlier in the manuscript, sought to confirm the extent to which uncertainty exists for remaining employees after a coworker dismissal. The third research question builds on that notion, addressing the relationship between remaining employees' level of uncertainty and the features of the communication surrounding the coworker dismissal:

> Research Question 3: How do the characteristics of a dismissal-related message (source, medium, timing, and formality) relate to perceptions of uncertainty?

Organizational Socialization and Information Seeking

As discussed previously, it is probable that uncertainty will accompany the dismissal of a coworker. Not only may remaining employees wonder the reasons for the dismissal, but they also may feel uneasy about how the change will affect them. Consistent with URT and UM, individuals may attempt to reduce their uncertainty through information seeking. Literature analyzing information seeking during the process of organizational assimilation provides a foundation for the current study.

When individuals join, participate in, and leave organizations, they take part in socialization (Kramer & Miller, 2014). Organizational socialization is "the process by which newcomers make the transition from being organizational outsiders to being insiders" (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007, p. 707). In the 1980s, Jablin (1984) highlighted communication as the means through which socialization occurs and suggested a four-phase

model of assimilation: anticipatory socialization, encounter, metamorphosis, and exit. If socialization is the process of moving from an outsider to the inside, organizational exit can be looked at as the reverse: insiders moving to the outside. With communication as a key component of socialization, one that involves new and existing employees, assimilation is relevant. Organizational socialization and, more broadly, assimilation provide an excellent context in which to study uncertainty during the organization entry and exit processes and explore how remaining employees seek to reduce or otherwise manages their uncertainty.

Almost exclusively, socialization research concentrates on newcomer experiences during the entry process, chiefly their uncertainty and information seeking practices (e.g., Forward, 1999; Heiss & Carmack, 2012; Holder, 1996; Teboul, 1997, 1999); More recently, though, the entry of new employees has been found to create uncertainty not only for the new hire, but for veteran employees as well, indicating that organizational socialization is an organization-wide concern, not merely an individual experience (Gallagher & Sias, 2009). To reduce issues of uncertainty and stress associated with organizational entrance – experienced by both newcomers and veterans – and create norms and expectations, humor is frequently used by organizational members (Heiss & Carmack, 2012). These findings indicate that the addition of one or more new employees yields uncertainty, for new and existing employees alike. Thus, it seems probable that removing one or more employees yields uncertainty for remaining employees, as well. In either instance, employees may feel unsure about how their role may change, what to expect in the future of their work unit, and the details about their new or terminated coworker's situation.

The information provided by an organization or informal communication networks is not always sufficient for remaining employees experiencing uncertainty. Therefore, individuals may look for ways to reduce their uncertainty. Information seeking, which must be intentional or

purposeful, is a primary way individuals reduce their uncertainty (Miller & Jablin, 1991; Morrison, 1993).

Miller and Jablin (1991) proposed newcomers seek information in seven ways during the organizational entry phase of assimilation. Information seeking strategies include: overt questioning, indirect questioning, third parties, testing limits, disguising conversations, observing, and surveilling (Miller, 1988; Miller & Jablin, 1991). Overt questioning involves soliciting information directly from the primary source of the information; while indirect questioning allows one to more covertly ask the primary source for information, often through hinting and when attempting to save face. An example of overt questioning may be an employee asking their manager if they are meeting the organization's expectations for sales productivity. The same information could be gained indirectly if the employee asked how sales productivity was going. Using third parties allows one to ascertain information from a secondary source, particularly when the primary source is unavailable. An example of third party questioning would be employees talking with their remaining coworkers to gain new information and confirm or clarify what they already know. Disguising conversations allows individuals to engage in typical conversation, with both primary and secondary sources, and subtly encourage others to sharing information. This can occur through jokes, like teasingly asking "I'm not next, am I?" and self-disclosures. Finally, surveilling is related to monitoring the situation and identifying signals that may reveal information. Testing limits and observing are likely not relevant to the current study, because they are more specific to assessing what behaviors are appropriate in an organization.

Related to uncertainty, if an individual does not experience a perceived or actual difference between information desired and information available, their need to seek additional

information diminishes. If a difference does exist, individuals need to decide whether to seek information and then select a tactic. Two important dimensions, or predictors, of information seeking are uncertainty and social costs, which are primarily relational (e.g., loss of interpersonal attraction and perceived expertise; Miller, 1988). When evaluating their options, individuals must consider information sources, individual differences, and contextual factors, but chiefly social costs. In some circumstances, seeking information has the potential to jeopardize interpersonal relationships and lead to negative outcomes. Potential social costs when seeking information include risk of face loss, overstepping boundaries, and revealing unbecoming details about a remaining employee's terminated coworker. Depending on the approach used, consequences of seeking information could be appearing nosey, incompetent, or snobbish, in that employees may feel entitled to information that should not be of concern to them.

As Miller (1988) suggested, the social costs of information seeking are largely interpersonal and social, and perceived social costs greatly influence newcomers' information seeking behaviors. Direct (i.e., overt) strategies are more likely to be used by newcomers when low social costs are perceived; while indirect strategies are more likely to be used when high social costs are anticipated (Miller, 1996). Pertaining to the current study, it is unclear whether remaining employees generally perceive high or low costs associated with information seeking after a coworker is terminated. However, it seems likely that individuals may tread cautiously given the nature of at-will employment and the desire not to lose face with others.

Information seeking has been a topic of study for communication scholars, particularly with regard to how new (Forward, 1999; Miller, 1996) and veteran (Gallagher & Sias, 2009) employees seek information during the organizational entry phase of socialization. Information seeking has also been studied in retirement communication (Lemus, 2007), critical care planning

for aging adults (Clarke, Evans, Shook, & Johanson, 2005), and customer service (Fonner & Timmerman, 2009). Examining the information seeking strategies used by remaining employees after a coworker dismissal is particularly important in the current study, because it offers an understanding of how individuals actively manage their uncertainty.

Related to information seeking, in Cox and Kramer's (1995) study, remaining employees expressed self-interest, asking managers about their own responsibilities and performance and if a replacement was going to be hired. Although overt questioning was found by Cox and Kramer, it is unclear what other information seeking strategies may be used. This brings to light the necessity of Research Question 4 and Hypothesis 2, which explore how information is sought after a coworker is terminated and what predicts information seeking:

> Research Question 4: What information seeking strategies do remaining employees use after a coworker is dismissed?
>
> Hypothesis 2: Uncertainty and social costs are related to information seeking strategy use.

III. METHOD

Sample

The population of interest for the current study is any individual who has experienced the dismissal of a coworker in the past five years, meaning their coworker left the organization involuntarily for reasons other than organization-level financial issues (e.g., layoffs, downsizing, restructuring, and bankruptcy). Participants and their dismissed coworker must have been employed at the same organization at the same time, regardless of their positions or departments. The dismissed coworker need not have been a peer coworker, meaning the two individuals may have had formal authority over each other and do not need to be hierarchically the same (Sias, 2009). The only relational obligation is that participants must have worked with or interacted with their dismissed coworker at work (socially or for work purposes) at least once a month prior to the dismissal. At the time of the dismissal, participants and their terminated coworker could be either part-time or full-time employees. Putting only minor stipulations on the population allowed the researcher to explore this relatively unstudied domain with fewer restrictions. By not specifying the reason for a coworker dismissal (e.g., employee deviance), the researcher gathered more data from more remaining employees and viewed the topic of coworker dismissal more holistically. The once monthly interaction component ensured the two individuals maintained some type of contact, as it seems likely that if participants had no interaction with a dismissed employee, they would be far less impacted. Finally, having the employee dismissal occur in the past five years reduced the chance for misremembered or misreported experiences.

Participants

At the end of the survey, participants were asked to provide demographics and information related to their employment situation at the time of the coworker dismissal: their sex,

highest level of education, occupation, whether they and their coworker worked part-time or full-time, the size of the organization, and whether they were still employed with that organization. Data were collected from 220 individuals who self-identified as meeting the above criteria (see Table 1). The participants ranged in age from 18 to 66 (M = 29.27, SD = 12.35). A total of 152 respondents were female (69.10%), 67 were male (30.45%), and one preferred not to identify (0.45%). For their level of education, a majority of participants indicated they had attended some college (n = 125; 56.82%), earned a Bachelor's (n = 38; 17.27%), Associate degree (n = 21; 9.55%), Master's (n = 16; 7.27%), or high school diploma (n = 14; 6.36%).

Participants worked in a range of occupations, including food services (n = 32; 14.55%), retail (n = 31; 14.09%), education (n = 23; 10.45%), sales (n = 23; 10.45%), health (n = 16; 7.27%), information technology (n = 16; 7.27%), financial (n = 14; 6.36%), manufacturing (n = 10; 4.55%), government (n = 6; 2.73%), and other (n = 48; 21.82%), which included marketing, entertainment, and customer service among others. The size of the organizations participants worked at when their coworker was dismissed was rather evenly distributed, ranging from 0-19 employees (n = 39; 17.73%) to 1,000 or more employees (n = 48; 21.82%) with most at organizations of 20-49 employees (n = 55; 25.00%). Over half were still employed at the organization from which their coworker was dismissed (n = 130; 59.09%).

Four questions about the nature of their relationships with their dismissed coworker were provided to determine relative closeness (see Table 2). At the time of their coworker's dismissal, 118 participants were employed full-time (53.64%) and 108 were employed part-time; their dismissed coworkers were also more often full-time (n = 145; 65.91%) than part-time (n = 73; 33.18%). In 179 (81.36%) instances, the participant and their dismissed coworker worked in the same department. There was an even split between participants who were at the same level in the

organization as their dismissed coworker (*n* = 118; 53.64%) and participants who were either at a higher (*n* = 51; 23.18%) or lower (*n* = 52; 23.64%) organizational rank. The frequency of participants' in-workplace interactions (e.g., via email or face-to-face) with their dismissed coworker prior to the dismissal ranged from every hour (*n* = 51; 23.18%) to every month (*n* = 4; 1.82%), with most interacting every day (*n* = 55; 25.00%) or every week (*n* = 60; 27.27%). Participants' out-of-workplace interactions (e.g., social) ranged from every few hours (*n* = 5; 2.27%) to never (*n* = 88; 40.00%), the most common being every week (*n* = 42; 19.09%).

Procedure

With a broad population, the researcher sought to recruit a diverse sample of employees containing individuals in various industries, at different ages, and in diverse position levels. Institutional Review Board approval was gained before recruitment began. Snowball and convenience sampling (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011) were used. Beginning with the researcher's personal contacts, the snowball method was used to recruit employees who had experienced coworker dismissal. A recruitment message, shared via email, Facebook, and LinkedIn, aided the researcher in gathering participants. Family, friends, and colleagues (from a Communication program at a large Midwestern university) of the researcher were also asked to share the recruitment message with their personal contacts via email and Facebook.

Second, students enrolled in communication courses (at a large Midwestern university) were offered the opportunity to take part in the study for extra credit. To receive one unit of extra credit, students were asked to: 1) complete the survey (if they met the study criteria), and 2) supply the email address of an individual (who was 18+ years old and had experienced a coworker dismissal as a full-time employee) who agreed to complete the survey on their behalf. The participant recruited by the student had to be a full-time employee to offset the high number

of undergraduate, part-time workers in the sample. A supplemental alternative assignment was offered for students who completed one of the two tasks and a full alternative assignment was made available for those who completed neither. Although an extra credit incentive was offered to students, participation was completely voluntary.

The message sent to potential participants contained a link to the online survey where data were collected through both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The data for this paper was generated using Qualtrics (2017) survey software. Before individuals began the survey, they were provided an initial message asking them to confirm their informed consent. This message offered information to aid them in deciding whether to participate and outlined the purpose, length, and voluntary nature of the study, risks/benefits of taking part in the study, and confidentiality. If individuals agreed to the informed consent message and self-determined that they met the requirements of the study, they could continue with the survey.

Measures

At the start of the survey, participants indicated if they met the study criteria, based upon the following prompt, to further establish the sample's consistency with the intended population:

> Please think about a time when one of your coworkers was dismissed from an organization where you both worked. Dismissing, often called firing, letting go, discharging, or sacking, refers to an organization terminating an employment relationship against the employee's will. A coworker is considered another individual employed at the same organization as you with whom you interacted with at work (online, via telephone or face-to-face for work-related or social reasons for social or work purposes as a temporary, part-time, or full-time employee) at least once a month, regardless of hierarchical differences. The dismissal must have been initiated by the organization, but it

must not have been associated with layoffs, downsizing, restructuring, or bankruptcy. However, you do not need to know the exact reason why your coworker's employment ended. Have you experienced a coworker dismissal of this nature in the last five years? Once eligibility was determined with this question, participants could proceed into the bulk of the survey where variable data was collected.

Uncertainty. Uncertainty was measured using items from two different sources. The three types of uncertainty mentioned previously (i.e., strategic, structural, and job-related) were measured using items provided by Bordia et al. (2004). Examples of these modified items included the level of information related to the "direction in which the organization is headed," the "role/function of different work units within the organization," and the "future of your position in the organization." In addition, uncertainty was measured using modified items from a measure offered by Salem and Williams (1984), which contained similar items to those used by Penley (1982). Included in the measure were items focused on task, human, and maintenance elements of message uncertainty. Task items addressed the responsibilities and information specific to the participant's job; human items addressed personal concerns, especially about evaluation; and maintenance items addressed organization-wide concerns and policies (Salem & Williams, 1984). Examples of items in the measure included "My job responsibilities," "How well I am doing in my job," How I am being evaluated," and "How organizational decisions are made that affect my job." Responses were reported on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from *1-Much Less Certain* to *5-Much More Certain*, with a mid-point of *3-No Change*, to follow the natural progression of lower numbers being associated with less certainty and higher numbers with more certainty. Responses were reverse-coded prior to analyses to measure uncertainty, with higher mean scores indicating greater uncertainty.

Prior to hypothesis testing, factor analysis was used to assess whether items clustered in a manner consistent with Bordia et al. (2004) or Salem and Williams' (1984) measures of uncertainty. Factor loadings at .60 or greater were considered strong (Guadagnoli & Velicer, 1988). Eight items did not clearly load on a single factor at the .60 level, with no additional loadings at or above .40, and were removed from further analysis. Three types of uncertainty were revealed and examined for reliability. Table 3 provides the items, descriptive statistics, and Cronbach's alpha for each measure. Two of the three factors mirrored, rather consistently, the types of uncertainty suggested by Salem and Williams: work uncertainty (M = 2.74, SD = .68, α =.87) contained four items from Salem and Williams' task uncertainty, and personal uncertainty (M = 2.93, SD = .61, α = .85) contained four of their human uncertainty items. The third factor, organizational uncertainty (M = 2.85, SD = .74, α = .94), combined items from Salem and Williams' maintenance uncertainty with items from Bordia et al.'s (2004) strategic and structural uncertainty. An overall measure of uncertainty, using all the items in the above three variables, was also calculated (M = 2.84, SD = .60, α = .94).

Initial learning. Participants were prompted to recall the communication surrounding their coworker's dismissal and offered a detailed description of the types of interactions of interest in the current study: initial messages and messages from the organization (See Appendix). To begin exploring how remaining employees first learned their coworker was dismissed, an open-ended question inquired about how participants initially found out that their coworker's employment was terminated. Participants then reported the characteristics of the message: source, medium, and timing. Several potential sources, media, and time frames were listed in closed-ended questions, with participants having the opportunity to select "other" and indicate a source or medium that was not listed. Participants also rated the formality of the

interaction on a five-point Likert-type scale – ranging from *1-Strong Disagree* to *5-Strongly Agree*, with a mid-point of *3-Neither Agree nor Disagree* – using seven items created by the researcher, that were based upon qualities of formality found in Stobl and Redding (1987). Examples of items in the formality scale included, “The message seemed prepared in advance (rather than spontaneous),” “The source of the information was a person of authority,” and “The information in the message used very proper language (rather than casual language).” The reliability of the formality scale was tested using Cronbach’s alpha (M = 2.62, SD = 1.03, α = .85). Lastly, an open-ended question inquired about the information contained in the message.

Organizational message. After reporting how they first heard about their coworker’s dismissal, participants were asked to identify whether that message (i.e., the way in which they first heard about the dismissal) was from an organizational source or someone or something else:

> Thinking about the way that you first heard of the coworker's dismissal (the one you were thinking about when filling out the items above), would you describe the source of this information as being "from the organization?" That is, did the message originate from someone in your organization who is in a position that would be in charge of telling you this information (e.g., human resources stating that the coworker's employment ended, a phone call from your coworker’s former boss to keep you in the loop, or a meeting with your boss to discuss the termination and how you will move forward)?

Participants indicated whether the message was organizational or not using the following response options: “Yes, I first heard of the dismissal ‘from an organizational source’ (e.g., human resources, supervisor or coworker's supervisor)” or “No, I did not first hear of the dismissal "from an organizational source." It was someone or something else.” If the way they initially learned about their coworker’s dismissal was not an organizational source (i.e., they

answered, “No”), participants were asked to recall the time they first heard about the termination from an organizational source. If the way they initially learned about their coworker’s dismissal was “from an organizational source” (i.e., they answered, “Yes”), they were asked to recall the second organizational source that delivered a message related to the termination. Similar message characteristic questions as those outlined in the initial learning section (related to source, medium, timing, formality, and content) were asked about the organizational messages.

In many instances, participants reported they initially learned about the dismissal from non-organizational sources (n = 115; 52.3%), but in many other instances, they initially heard from a source they identified as being organizational, or on behalf of the organization (n = 105; 47.7%). Via the “other” option provided when asking about the second message source, 23 participants (7.7%) indicated there was no other message about the dismissal of their coworker from the organization, meaning there was either no message from the organization about the dismissal at all or no additional message from the organization, and 26 participants did not answer (8%). Thus, 49 participants (15.1%) did not offer an additional message for analysis. All other responses in the second set of questions and those organizational sources from the first set of questions were combined for the analysis of the organizational messages (n = 276).

Information seeking. A 28-item scale created by Miller (1996), to measure new hires’ information seeking during an organizational encounter, was modified to fit the organizational exit context and used to explore the information seeking tactics used by remaining employees after their coworker’s dismissal (see Table 4). Examples of items on this scale included, “I did not ‘beat around the bush’ in asking for the information” (Miller, 1996, p. 76) and “I would find out the information by keeping my eyes and ears open to what was going on around me” (p. 77). Four new items specific to the organizational exit context were added, including “I looked for

my coworker's items, like their vehicle, lunch, coat, or things on their desk" and "I checked the schedule and/or the calendar for any personnel, meeting, or project changes." Factor analysis of the 32 items yielded a 7-factor structure with eigenvalues above 1.00 that account for 70.59% of the variance. The factors were largely consistent with those found in Miller (1996): surveilling (M = 2.81; SD = 1.22; α = .84), overt (M = 2.33; SD = 1.07; α = .80), third party (M = 2.23; SD = 1.16; α = .84), observing (M = 2.05; SD = 1.09; α = .80), indirect (M = 1.92; SD = .90; α = .88), locating (M = 1.89; SD = .94; α = .77), testing (M = 1.38; SD = .76; α = .85). Locating is the factor with new items specific to organizational exit. Items with the highest mean values were the information seeking strategies most commonly used by remaining employees.

Social costs. If experiencing uncertainty, individuals may want to seek information. Social costs present a potential barrier to information seeking (Miller, 1988). To measure the perceived social costs associated with information seeking by remaining employees, Miller's (1988) Factor Structure Revised Social Costs Scale was used. This scale was modified, from addressing newcomer information seeking, to fit the current context. "A remaining employee, like myself, would be thought of negatively for seeking this information" and "I would not be embarrassed to seek this information" are examples of items included in the survey. Participants recalled how they felt about seeking information following their coworker's dismissal using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from *1-Strongly Disagree* to *5-Strongly Agree*, with a mid-point of *3-Neither Agree nor Disagree*. The measure of social costs was reliable (M = 2.79, SD = .72, α = .76), and descriptive statistics from the six items in the scale can be found in Table 5. The average social cost associated with seeking information was used to identify whether and how perceived social cost serves as a predictor of information seeking tactic use.

IV. RESULTS

Uncertainty

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the dismissal of a coworker would prompt uncertainty for remaining employees. Uncertainty was measured with a set of items asking if participants experienced greater uncertainty when learning of the dismissal. The response options for the items were configured on a 5-point scale with a mid-point value of *3-No Change*. A factor analysis revealed three types of uncertainty: organizational uncertainty (M = 2.85, SD = .74, α = .94), work uncertainty (M = 2.74, SD = .68, α = .89), and personal uncertainty (M = 2.93, SD = .61, α = .85). Organizational uncertainty is associated with understanding the organization on a larger scale, like what direction the organization is headed, existing policies and hierarchies, and the way different work unites operate and contribute to the whole. Work uncertainty is related to concerns specifically about the individual's job and the work they do on a day-to-day basis and personal uncertainty is related to performance and compensation.

Participants indicated that they did not experience more uncertainty after the dismissal of a coworker (M = 2.84, SD = .60, α = .94). All mean uncertainty levels were below the mid-point, which was no change in uncertainty, indicating the dismissal of a coworker may be associated with decreased uncertainty. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported (see Table 3).

Initial Learning

Research Question 1 sought to determine how remaining employees initially learn about the dismissal of a coworker. Frequencies for the source, medium, and timing of the message (see Table 6), and mean scores and standard deviations for the formality of the interaction are reported (see Table 7). Finally, a description of message content is offered.

Source. The first message characteristic reported is source (see Table 6). Another coworker (*n* = 92; 41.82%) was the most frequent source of information when remaining employees first heard about the dismissal of a coworker, followed by the participant's immediate supervisor (*n* = 65; 29.55%). In 27 instances (12.27%), the participant's dismissed coworker was the source from which they first heard of the dismissal and, in 15 instances (6.82%), participants indicated that learning about the dismissal was not something they heard, but something they saw. Less common initial sources of information included someone at a higher rank than the participants' immediate supervisor or manager (*n* = 8; 3.64%), the dismissed coworker's supervisor or manager (*n* = 5; 2.27%), human resources (*n* = 5; 2.27%), or other (e.g., "a friend who worked for a different company" or an unspecified other; *n* = 3; 1.36%).

Medium. Employees initially heard about the dismissal of their coworker through a variety of media (see Table 6). A majority indicated they first learned about their coworker's dismissal in an individual FTF meeting (*n* = 128; 58.18%). The second and third most common media used were text/instant messaging (*n* = 28; 12.73%) and group or departmental FTF meetings (*n* = 26; 11.82%). Group or departmental emails (*n* = 11; 5.00%), other (e.g., "casual talk in the break room" and "automated request to disable software login"; *n* = 11; 5.00%), company-wide FTF meetings (*n* = 4; 1.82%), company-wide emails (*n* = 4; 1.82%), telephone calls (*n* = 4; 1.82%), individual email (*n* = 3; 1.36%), and written memos (*n* = 1; 0.45%) were rarely media through which remaining employees first heard of their coworker's dismissal.

Timing. Most employees initially learned about the dismissal of their coworker at some within a day of the event (see Table 6). Specifically, 37 participants indicated they first heard about the dismissal within 15 minutes (16.82%), 31 heard within an hour (14.09%), 93 within a

day (42.27%), and 48 heard within a week (21.82%). First learning of the dismissal within two to four weeks (n = 5; 2.27%) or within a month (n = 4; 1.82%) was uncommon.

Formality. The formality of the interaction through which remaining employees initially heard about the dismissal of their coworker was on the low side of moderate (M = 2.62, SD = 1.03, α = .87), but significantly less than the mid-point of *3-Neither Agree nor Disagree*, t (219) = -5.48, p < .01. The means for each item in the formality scale are reported in Table 7. Although the general level of formality was moderate, the mean scores for several qualities of formality were statistically less than the mid-point of the range of response options (*3-Neither Agree nor Disagree)*: the interactions seemed prepared in advance (M = 2.52, SD = 1.21), t (219) = -5.87, p < .01, used very proper language (M = 2.75, SD = 1.29), t (216) = -2.84, p < .01, were publicly stated (M = 2.47, SD = 1.39), t (218) = -5.66, p < .01, were disclosed during a scheduled meeting/conversation (M = 2.03, SD = 1.22), t (218) = -11.70, p < .01, and were shared using an official communication method used frequently in the organization (M = 2.42, SD = 1.42), t (217) = -6.00, p < .01.

Content. Of the 220 participants, all but 26 (11.82%) provided a response when asked what information the message about the dismissal contained. The content of the messages varied widely, but many participants indicated the interaction contained minimal information. Forty-three participants (22.16%) used the word "just" in their recall of the information that was provided in the message: "It was just a casual conversation with my other co-worker along the lines of 'Hey did you hear that [the dismissed coworker] got fired'" or "Just that [the dismissed coworker] was going to be fired due to breaking the attendance policy." Although commonly-used in the English language, the use of the word "just" by participants discounts the prominence of the message and seems to perpetuate the idea the way the information was conveyed was not

remarkable. Many messages contained information related solely to the status of the dismissed coworker's employment. In some instances, participants indicated sources remained vague about who ended the employment relationship by stating that the dismissed coworker "was no longer with the company" or that they "were no longer working." In other instances, the words "fired" (*n* = 57) and "let go," (*n* = 24), "canned," and "walked out" were used, indicating the organization likely ended the employment.

Messages also provided additional information related to the dismissal. Additional information often came in the form of the reason why their coworker was dismissed: "A detailed description of what had happened and reasoning behind the dismissal" or "The employee was fired for using drugs in the workplace." Another form of additional information was related to how the organization would proceed, though this was far less common: "That [my dismissed coworker] was no longer serving the agency and to reach out to our president with any questions" or "[The source] just let me know that it wasn't working with [my dismissed coworker] and that she had to let her go and that it was necessary for me to step up now and take care of everything." Also less common was a third form of additional information related to emotion: "[My dismissed coworker] was fired and going crazy" or "It contained the reasoning behind the dismissal and an angry rant from my coworker, who found the situation unfair." Generally, the initial messages about the coworker dismissal seemed to contain little information.

Organizational Message

Research Question 2 sought to assess the features of communication exchanges (e.g., source, medium, timing, formality, and content) in the messages that remaining employees receive related to the coworker dismissal from the organization. In Table 8, the source, medium,

and timing of the message are reported using frequencies, and formality is reported using means and standard deviations in Table 9. Lastly, a summary of the content of the messages is offered.

Source. Remaining employees offered a range of responses when asked who delivered the dismissal-related message from the organization (see Table 8). Participants' immediate supervisors were most often the source of information (*n* = 136; 45.48%), followed by another coworker (*n* = 51; 17.06%), their dismissed coworker's supervisor or manager (*n* = 30; 10.03%), or someone at a higher rank than their immediate supervisor (*n* = 27; 9.03%).

Medium. Table 8 provides the results for the medium through which participants reported the organizational source communicated with them about their coworker's dismissal. The most frequently used media were individual FTF meetings (*n* = 149; 53.99%), which was also the most frequently used media for the way they initially heard, and group or departmental FTF meetings (*n* = 43; 15.58%). Company-wide FTF meetings were rarely used (*n* = 4; 1.45%). Conversely, individual emails (*n* = 2; .72%) were the least used medium, but group or departmental email (*n* = 20; 7.25%) and company-wide email (*n* = 14; 5.07%) were used more frequently. Text/instant messaging (*n* = 10; 3.62%) was used more often than both telephone calls (*n* = 5; 1.81%) and written memos (*n* = 3; 1.09%).

Timing. Consistent with the way participants initially heard, most employees received their first and/or second message from the organization about the dismissal of their coworker at some point within a day of the event (see Table 8). Messages from the organization commonly occurred almost equally within a day (*n* = 91; 33.33%) or within a week (*n* = 90; 32.97%) of the coworker's dismissal. Less common, but again almost equal, were receiving a message from the organization within less than 15 minutes of the dismissal (*n* = 35; 12.82%) or within an hour of the dismissal (*n* = 34; 12.45%).

Formality. The formality of messages from the organization was higher than the formality of the messages through which participants initially heard about the dismissal. The formality of the messages from the organization remained moderate (see Table 9; $M = 3.07$, $SD = 0.94$, $\alpha = .85$), but was significantly greater than the mid-point of the scale, which was *3-Neither Agree nor Disagree at the .10 level* ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 0.94$), $t\ (275) = 1.26$, $p = .07$. The mean scores for three qualities of formality were statistically lower than the scale's mid-point: that the messages came from an officially designated source of information ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.27$), $t\ (274) = 7.43$, $p < .01$, came from a person of authority ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.24$), $t\ (273) = 11.54$, $p < .01$, and used very proper language ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.24$), $t\ (273) = 2.19$, $p < .05$. Contrarily, the mean scores for three qualities of formality were statistically lower than the scale's mid-point of *3-Neither Agree nor Disagree*: that messages were publicly stated ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.37$), $t\ (275) = -2.55$, $p < .05$, disclosed during a scheduled meeting/conversation ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 1.29$), $t\ (274) = -8.13$, $p < .01$, and shared with an official communication method used frequently in the organization ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.44$), $t\ (274) = -1.93$, $p = .06$.

Content. Consistent with the way participants initially heard about the dismissal of their coworker, the information provided in organizational messages was wide-ranging. Frequently, participants indicated they received information related solely to the status of the dismissed coworker's employment. The word "just" was used only 45 times in organizational messages (15%), which may indicate that participants felt they received more or more prominent information from organizational sources. More commonly, though, participants' descriptions of the information contained in organizational messages included additional information. Among others, the reason why their coworker was dismissed, how the organization would proceed (on varying levels), and emotion were all topics mentioned by participants.

Message Characteristics and Uncertainty

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated to evaluate the differences in message uncertainty across the message characteristics (source and medium; see Table 10). The relationship between the message characteristics (timing and formality) and uncertainty was evaluated using a Pearson's correlation (see Table 11).

Source. There are differences in uncertainty levels that can be attributed to the source from which the information was received (see Table 10). The *F* test for source and the first type of uncertainty, organizational uncertainty, was significant, F (8, 405) = 2.94, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .55$. Post hoc Tukey tests indicated that organizational uncertainty was greater when the message came from the dismissed coworker (M= 3.24, SD = .75) than from the remaining employees' supervisor (M = 3.24, SD = .75, $p < .01$). There is evidence, although not statistically significant, that organizational uncertainty is greater when messages are received from the dismissed coworker (M = 3.30, SD = .86) than from the dismissed coworker's supervisor or manager (M = 2.71, SD = .62, p = .054). Finally, evidence suggests, though not statistically significant at .05, that organizational uncertainty is greater when messages are received from another coworker (M = 2.95, SD = .64) than from the remaining employees' supervisor (M = 2.69, SD = .66, p = .09).

Although work uncertainty did not differ by source, there were significant differences for personal uncertainty. First, for work uncertainty, the *F* test was not significant, F (8, 405) = .83, p = .58, $\eta^2 = .02$. There was no statistical difference in work uncertainty between sources. The *F* test for source and personal uncertainty was significant F (8, 405) = 2.77, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Post hoc Tukey tests indicated personal uncertainty was significantly greater when the message was something the remaining employee saw (M = 3.35, SD = .91) than something that came from a source deemed "other" (M = 2.50, SD = .53, $p < .05$). Although not statistically significant, there

is also evidence that personal uncertainty may be greater when the message was something the remaining employee saw (M = 3.35, SD = .91) than if in a message from their immediate supervisor (M = 2.87, SD = .58, p = .09) or someone at a higher rank than their immediate supervisor (M = 2.78, SD = .78, p = .09). Finally, for source and overall uncertainty, the F test was significant, F (8, 405) = 2.67, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Overall uncertainty is greater when messages are received from the remaining employee's dismissed coworker (M = 3.16, SD = .68) than from the remaining employees' supervisor (M = 2.72, SD = .54, $p < .05$).

Medium. There were some minimal differences in uncertainty levels across the different media used to convey the dismissal information (see Table 10). The F test for medium and organizational uncertainty was not significant, F (10, 380) = 1.59, p = .11, η^2 = .04, nor was the F test for medium and personal uncertainty, F (10, 380) = 1.08, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .03$, or the F test for medium and overall uncertainty F (10, 380) = 1.78, p =.38, $\eta^2 = .04$. For medium and work uncertainty, though, the F test was significant, F (10, 380) = 2.28, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .06$. Work uncertainty, when receiving a dismissal-related message via written memo (M = 1.67, SD = .58) was significantly lower than if receiving the message via telephone call (M = 3.19, SD = 1.19, $p < .05$). Though not statistically significant, there was some indication that work uncertainty could be lower when receiving a dismissal-related message via written memo (M = 1.67, SD = .58) than company-wide FTF meetings (M = 3.19, SD = .88, p = .10), company-wide emails (M = 2.95, SD = .68, p = .08), and "other" media (M = 3.04, SD = .69, p = .053).

Timing. A Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationship between the timing of the dismissal-related message and uncertainty. Table 11 provides the bivariate correlation matrix for timing and uncertainty. No significant relationship existed between the time when a message was received and dismissed coworkers' uncertainty.

Formality. A Pearson correlation tested the relationship between message formality and uncertainty (see Table 11 for a bivariate correlation matrix). A significant negative correlation exists between formality and all three types of uncertainty and uncertainty overall ($p < .01$). Less formal messages are associated with greater levels of all the measured variations of uncertainty.

Information Seeking

Research Question 4 addressed the types of information seeking strategies used by remaining employees after a coworker is dismissed. The means for each strategy are reported in rank-order, according to the means, in Table 4. The items grouped consistently with Miller's (1996) Information Seeking Tactics, except for disguising conversation, which did not load into any categories. Locating included new items, related to looking for the dismissed coworker, their dismissed coworker's items, and schedule changes. As summarized in Table 12, ranking (from most used to least used) of the mean values for the information seeking strategies is as follows: (1) surveillance, (2) overt, (3) third party, (4) observing, (5) indirect, (6) locating, and (7) testing.

To determine whether significant differences existed among the rankings, dependent samples *t*-tests were computed. Each higher rank differed from the next lower rank with two exceptions: overt did not differ significantly from third party, $t\ (219) = 1.20$, $p > .05$, and indirect did not differ significantly from locating $t\ (219) = .543$, $p > .05$. Surveilling is used more often than overt and third party, which were both used similarly. Overt and third party were used more often than observing. Observing was used more often than indirect and locating, which were both used a similar amount. Lastly, indirect and locating were used more often than testing.

Uncertainty and Social Costs as Predictors of Information Seeking Strategies

Hypothesis 2 predicted that uncertainty and social costs are related to information seeking strategies. Regression results are reported in Table 12. First, a significant portion of the variance

for surveilling was not accounted by uncertainty and social costs at the .05 level, F (2, 219) = 1.54, p = .22, R^2 = .01. However, examination of correlation coefficients did note an inverse relationship between surveilling and social costs, β = -.04, p = .09, though not at the .05 level. Uncertainty was not associated with surveilling. Second, uncertainty and social costs accounted for a significant proportion of variance in overt information seeking, F (2, 219) = 5.72, p <.01, R^2 = .05. Uncertainty was not associated with overt information seeking, but social costs were inversely related, β = -.22, p < .01. Third, variance in third party information seeking was not accounted for by uncertainty and social costs at the .05 level, F (2, 219) = 2.93, p = .055, R^2 = .03; uncertainty was, however, inversely related to third party information seeking, β = .14, p < .05, while uncertainty was social costs were unrelated. Fourth, uncertainty and social costs did not account for a significant proportion of the variance in observing at the .05 level, F (2, 219) = 2.32, p = .10, R^2 = .02. Although uncertainty was not related, a positive relationship between observing and social costs existed, β = .15, p < .05. Fifth and sixth, the variance in indirect information seeking, F (2, 219) = .09, p = .92, R^2 = .00, and locating, F (2, 219) = .71, p = .49, R^2 = .01, were not associated with uncertainty or social costs. And seventh, while testing was not associated with uncertainty and social costs at the .05 level, F (2, 219) = 2.41, p = .09, R^2 = .02, there was a positive relationship between social costs and testing, β = .14, p < .05.

Thus, perceptions of social costs are associated with use of surveilling, overt strategies, observing, and testing to gain information. Social costs are positively related to observing and testing and negatively related to surveilling and overt strategies of information seeking. Uncertainty is positively related to using third parties to seek information.

V. DISCUSSION

Learning about the uncertainties that may exist for remaining employees after a coworker's dismissal, the messages they receive related to their coworker's dismissal, and their information seeking after a coworker is dismissed helps grant a better understanding of how termination impacts organizational life. To develop this literature, an exploratory study assessed responses from 220 participants. Employees who experienced the dismissal of a coworker were asked to provide information about their uncertainty after the dismissal of their coworker, the characteristics of the messages they received after the dismissal of the coworker (e.g., source, medium, timing, formality, and content), including the way they first heard about dismissal and messages from the organization, and the ways in which they sought information related to their coworker's dismissal. The following sections describe the study's conclusions, theoretical implications, practical applications, and limitations. Last, future directions are presented.

Conclusions

Analysis of the current study's data indicated that: (1) The dismissal of a coworker is not associated with an increase in uncertainty, (2) Remaining employees often first hear of the dismissal of their coworker from another coworker or their immediate supervisor via an individual FTF meeting with moderate levels of formality at some point within a day of the dismissal, (3) Organizational messages received by remaining employees are most often from their immediate supervisor in an individual FTF meeting with slightly greater (yet still moderate) formality, again, at some point within a day of the dismissal, (4) Several relationships between message characteristics and uncertainty exist, (5) Several information seeking strategies, though not often, are used by remaining employees when a coworker is dismissed, and (6) Social costs, and to a lesser extent uncertainty, are related to the use of specific information seeking strategies.

It is important to note that the low levels of uncertainty found by the current study may be due to the fact that most remaining employees seemed to have received some sort of communication related to the dismissal. Higher levels of uncertainty may have existed if a coworker was dismissed and the dismissal was never discussed with or by remaining employees.

Uncertainty. Interestingly, the findings of this study related to uncertainty after a coworker is dismissed do not coincide with existing knowledge indicating that new employees are a source of uncertainty for veteran employees (Gallagher & Sias, 2009). Although the existing literature suggests that a coworker dismissal would be associated with an increase in uncertainty, the current study did not support this hypothesis. A key reason why lower levels of uncertainty were reported could be that participants were asked how they learned about the dismissal and how the dismissal was communicated to them by the organization, instead of the being asked about the circumstances leading up to the communication event. Simply having received communication about the dismissal could be a reason why participants did not indicate experiencing higher levels of uncertainty.

Another reason remaining employees may not have experienced greater uncertainty is that they may have known the reason why their coworker was dismissed. To encourage the recollection of specific messages and pieces of information they received after their coworker's dismissal, participants were asked to describe how they initially found out their coworker was dismissed and how the organization communicated the dismissal to them. In many instances, participants seemed attuned to specific reason(s) their coworker was dismissed: "[The message] explained why [my dismissed coworker] was being fired, and that they need someone to come in and take the rest of [my dismissed coworker's] shift" or "I was told in person with all of my coworkers and our boss just said the coworker wasn't keeping up with the contract and was

breaking rules so they let her go. A lot of the coworkers saw it coming." If a remaining employee knows why their dismissed coworker was terminated and feels confidently they are not at risk of being terminated for a similar reason, uncertainty may logically be lower.

A related reason why coworker dismissal may not be associated with greater uncertainty is deviant workplace behavior. Robinson and Bennett (1995) created a typology of deviant workplace behaviors that were configured into four categories based on two dimensions: the extent to which an act is harmful and serious and whether it is interpersonal (harmful to individuals) or non-interpersonal (harmful to organizations). Serious and organizationally harmful deviant workplace behaviors are classified as property deviance. These behaviors include damaging equipment, accepting bribes, lying about logged hours, and stealing from the organization. Behaviors that are harmful to the organization, but are relatively minor offenses are categorized as production deviance and include leaving work prematurely, taking long or undue breaks, purposefully working slowly, and wasting resources. Minor offenses that are interpersonally harmful are classified as political deviance. These behaviors include gossiping about and blaming coworkers, displaying favoritism, and competing in nonbeneficial ways. Finally, behaviors that are serious and interpersonally harmful are categorized as personal aggression and include stealing from and endangering coworkers and sexual and verbal harassment and abuse. Many of these categories of deviant workplace behavior were mentioned in the open-ended questions, and it is possible that these behaviors are associated with the termination more often than explicitly indicated by participants, because many did not state the exact reason for the dismissal, but simply said they were aware of situation or motive.

Remaining employees did not often indicate they had an issue with the termination itself, which is consistent with published research findings. In post-dismissal conversations, managers

perceived their employees to be supportive or in agreement with the decision to terminate the employee in 50% of the cases (Cox & Kramer, 1995). Further, Lind and Van den Bos (2002) advocated for the connection between uncertainty and fairness. They suggest that fair treatment of employees enables the management of uncertainty, because it gives individuals confidence that they will eventually receive favorable outcomes and reduces the anxiety associated with the possibility of loss. Their theory proposes that people look for signs of fairness to help them psychologically deal with the stress surrounding uncertainty. If employees know the reason why their coworker was dismissed, are in support of or can see fairness in the dismissal, and are not engaging in similar deviant workplace behavior, they may be confident in their position, assured the organization is operating fairly, and experience lower levels of uncertainty, as a result.

Both previously explained reasons for a lack of increased uncertainty are related to knowledge and awareness. As noted in Tables 6 and 8, messages about the termination typically come relatively quickly after the dismissal of a coworker. URT suggests that uncertainty is reduced by information (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), which may explain why uncertainty in the current study was lower. Also, findings from the current study related to timing appear consistent with the suggestion of Young and Post (19983) that organizations should communicate change to employees as soon as possible. Messages were received by remaining employees relatively quickly. It is possible that employees had access to the information they desired and needed to feel secure.

Message characteristics. With regard to the characteristics of the dismissal-related messages, little research has been conducted. This study found that common sources for dismissal relate messages are other coworkers and remaining employees' immediate supervisor. The prominence of messages from other coworkers is consistent with Cox and Kramer's (1995)

finding that managers sometimes relied on the grapevine, or informal communication networks among employees, to address the informational needs of terminated employees' work groups. Interestingly, participants often identified messages from another coworker as being "from an organizational source," which may provide support for the idea that organizations use informal networks to communicate more formal information. With the survey asking participants if the information was "from the organization" and if the message originated "from someone in your organization who is in a position that would be in charge of telling you this information," it is unclear why participants categorized their coworkers as organizational sources on first glance. However, employees may believe organizations use informal communication networks purposefully to distribute information or may feel that it is a good coworker's duty to pass on work-related information to other employees as they become aware of it. The current findings related to message source are not consistent Lewis' (1999) study of organizational change. Lewis found change-related information was most often shared by the implementation team, which in the case of the current study might be considered the dismissed coworker's supervisor or manager or human resources. Neither of these were prominent sources of information related to the dismissal for remaining employees.

Lewis (1999) also examined media-use in change-related messages and found FTF channels are more commonly used than mediated channels. The current study supports that finding, in that most interactions occurred in one-on-one FTF meetings. Also supported by the current study are Men's (2014) findings that leaders of companies undergoing change most commonly use FTF channels when communicating change-related information with employees. Previous research related to timing, formality, and content is sparse. The current study revealed that messages are shared about the dismissal rather quickly after the dismissal occurs (at some

point within a day of the event) and that these messages have a low to moderate level of formality. This might suggest that grapevine plays a more prominent role in information dissemination than previously thought. Lastly, the content of the messages proved rather varied, but in many cases, some form of additional information about the dismissal was included in the interaction. The amount of information shared in message, though, seemed largely situational, making generalization difficult.

Message characteristics and uncertainty. With partial support for the hypothesis predicting a relationship between message characteristics and uncertainty, several interesting findings emerged out of the analysis. Notably, the source of a message was significantly related to organizational uncertainty, personal uncertainty, and overall uncertainty and work uncertainty was significantly related to the message's medium. This finding may indicate that uncertainty stemming from more bureaucratic issues, like organization-level abiguity and concerns related to one's tenure and promotion, may be most influenced by the message source, potentially because of the authority that individual might have in the organization. Whereas, uncertainty stemming from task-related and job specific concerns may be most influenced by the channel through which a message is shared, potentially because of the existing (or non-existing) paper trail left by certain channels. Although it would seem that learning information about a coworker dismissal sooner rather than later would decrease uncertainty, the current study did not support that idea; however, findings do indicate that messages with lower formality are associated with greater uncertainty. This finding is interesting, given that Johnson et al. (1994) found employees evaluate informal channels more favorably than formal channels. The findings, related to use of the grapevine or gossip when receiving dismissal-related messages, appear somewhat contradictory. Possibly, the information shared in these interactions in informal communication

networks could be viewed as unreliable or hearsay until they learn more or the information is confirmed by the organization.

Information seeking. The information seeking strategies found in this study align consistently with those used by organizational newcomers (Miller, 1996). Except for disguising conversations, all of Miller's seven information seeking strategies were identified in the current study. The additional item, locating, accounts for instances when remaining employees may have looked around for physical indications of their dismissed coworker's absence or presence.

The general ranking of information seeking strategies from most used to least used again seem to align with those found by Miller (1996). Surveilling, or monitoring a situation for clues that may expose information (Miller, 1988), was most commonly used, while testing, or intentionally messing up or pushing boundaries, was least commonly used. Miller (1996) found that new hires use overt questioning and observing a considerable amount, followed by third party and indirect questioning moderately, and testing infrequently. As with the case of new hires, it is possible that given the at-will nature of employment, individuals would not want to test limits in the organization in case of negative repercussions. The items in the factor for surveilling (i.e., "I went about my tasks, but if any new information came my way, I was sure to pay attention to it" and "I found out the information about my coworker's dismissal by keeping my eyes and ears open to what was going on around me") may indicate that employees went about organizational life as usual after the dismissal of a coworker, while staying aware of what was happening in the workplace. Overt questioning and third party being the next most common strategies may indicate employees feel comfortable asking for information they need and want.

Uncertainty and social costs as predictors of information seeking strategies. Interestingly, uncertainty and social costs were not strongly associated with the use of specific

information seeking strategies. The current study supports Miller's (1996) finding that, when perceived social costs are low, direct (i.e., overt) strategies are more likely to be used and that, when perceived social costs are high, covert (i.e., indirect) strategies are more likely to be used. Social costs were associated negatively with overt questioning, meaning that remaining employees' seeing a greater potential for loss of face or perceived knowledge is associated with directly asking questions less frequently. Similarly, social costs were associated positively with observing and testing, meaning that higher social costs were related to more covert approaches to seeking information. In general, though, information seeking after the dismissal of a coworker was not common and the social costs associated with seeking information about the dismissal of a coworker are relatively low or neutral.

Theoretical Implications

The current study begins to shed light on an infrequently studied form of organizational communication. The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of research that indicates elements of organizational entry, like information seeking, can work similarly in other stages of socialization, particularly organizational exit. Theoretically, the current study builds on URT and UM by exploring uncertainty in coworker dismissal, and analyzing the relationship between uncertainty and how remaining employees initially heard about the coworker dismissal and what messages they received from the organization. URT suggests that information reduces uncertainty. Because participants in the current study report relatively low levels of uncertainty after the dismissal of their coworker, it may indicate that they had access to the information they felt they needed. Also, the frequent use of the word "just" and apparent lack of details in the messages surrounding the dismissal may indicate that participants did not need a lot of information to experience certainty. The connection between uncertainty and fairness (Lind &

Van den Bos, 2002) is supported by the findings of the current study. As noted from observation of the written descriptions of the terminal offenses, deviant workplace behavior seemed to play a frequent role in the termination of dismissed coworkers. Uncertainty may have been low, in part, because remaining employees felt the dismissal was fair. If such deviance were absent yet an employee was dismissed, it is possible that learning of the dismissal could intensify uncertainty due to the perception that "even those who follow procedures can get fired."

This study also extends current knowledge of organizational assimilation by applying elements of organizational entry, like information seeking, to organizational exit and principles found in changing organizations to the dismissal of a single coworker rather than a more systemic, organization-wide change. Although information seeking was relatively low, the current study adds evidence to support to Miller's (1996) Information Seeking Tactics in contexts other than organizational entry. Particularly, the preference for direct strategies in the organizational assimilation process is supported. Finally, the current study builds on an abundance of research analyzing information seeking and social costs and uncertainty as potential predictors of the strategies used. Support is provided by the current study for Miller's (1996) finding that direct strategies are used more commonly when perceived social costs are low and indirect strategies are used more when social costs are high.

Practical Applications

This study has many practical applications. Of particular importance is understanding how organizations approach the communication surrounding the dismissal of a coworker. Turnover is a significant part of organizational life. As a workplace loses one employee, it is important to focus energy on retaining remaining employees with the goal of keeping work units and workplaces functioning properly. Open and thorough communication may be the key to

helping remaining employees manage their uncertainty and to assisting work units as they deal with losing a member. The current study can help organizations manage and communicate coworker dismissals more effectively with remaining employees.

In communicating coworker dismissals, organizations must be aware of the strong role the grapevine (informal communication networks) plays in the distribution of information. More often than they hear from individuals in formal leadership roles or the dismissed coworker themselves, remaining employees first learn about coworker termination from another coworker. Gossip in the workplace has the potential to contain true information, but it is also likely that gossip is false, or at least inaccurate in one or more ways. Supervisors and managers would be prudent to ensure employees are provided with appropriate and accurate information. Further support for the idea that supervisors should check in with their remaining employees after a coworker dismissal is provided by the finding that employees experience significantly greater organizational and overall uncertainty when receiving messages about the termination from their dismissed coworker than their immediate supervisor. Moreover, increases in message formality are associated with decreases in uncertainty for remaining employees. All of this emphasizes the importance of formal, downward communication after a termination, though it can be perceived as only a small-scale organizational change.

By revealing the three types of uncertainty that may be associated with a coworker dismissal, this study aids organizations in providing satisfactory information to their employees. Addressing organizational uncertainty, work uncertainty, and personal uncertainty may help employees feel more comfortable and secure in the organization. Experiencing a gap between the information remaining employees need and the information they want or desire may lead them to spend valuable work time worrying and thinking about potential outcomes related to a

coworker's dismissal. For instance, remaining employees may wonder if they will be responsible for more work and/or if they will be the next one terminated. Feelings of uncertainty may lead to decreased job satisfaction, lower quality work, less output, or be a reason why individuals may seek employment elsewhere. This study may also help organizations prepare for the types of information seeking their employees might engage in after a coworker is terminated and create planned and appropriate responses to employees' concerns.

Limitations

The current study has several limitations, particularly regarding the sample and data collection. With the sample, the study's broad population of interest, non-random sampling method serve as potential limitations. The broad population of interest may lead to comparisons across dissimilar coworker relationships (e.g., the dismissal of a participant's supervisor vs. a close coworker vs. a more distant one) and other dissimilar reasons for the coworker dismissal (e.g., employee deviance vs. the organization "moving in a different direction"). Furthermore, the non-random sampling method may have led to homogeneity in the sample, particularly in location, age, and occupation. Potentially due to data collection occurring in a university setting, many participants had attended some college, worked in retail and food services, and were fairly young (M = 29.27).

The method of data collection also serves as a potential limitation, especially the retrospective and exploratory natures of the study. The retrospective nature of the study (up to five years) may have prompted participants to have trouble remembering specific information, feelings, and experiences. Knowing now whether their position was stable in their work environment and how their work unit and organization actually moved forward after the coworker termination may have influenced and lowered participants' recalled uncertainty.

Furthermore, with very little existing research on coworker dismissal, the researcher was required to make a variety of assumptions related to message characteristics. When giving participants the options of selecting a message's source, medium, and timing, these response options were generated based on what the researcher thought might be common. These items were more heavily geared toward information coming from the organization through formal channels, but the data indicates that messages were more informal and were exchanged between coworkers. This assumption may have led to the response categories not aligning as closely with participants' lived experiences.

Future Directions

In addition to resolving the limitations noted above, future research should continue examining the communication surrounding end of employment. The experiences of remaining employees after a coworker is dismissed, despite the current study finding relatively no change in uncertainty, are important because these employees are an organization's resources for success. More specific dismissal situations, like in cases of employee deviance or when a coworker leaves the organization for unknown reasons, should be examined. Furthermore, the dismissal of the coworker may not necessarily increase uncertainty, but losing a coworker, especially one who a remaining employee is friends with, may be associated with lower levels of work satisfaction or increased stress to due taking on more responsibility. Just as organizational entry has been a major focus of communication research, organizational exit should be, too. The termination process should not be taken lightly in organizations. Devoting scholarship to this context will help organizations and employees experience change more successfully.

This study focused upon the communicative experiences of remaining employees after a coworker is dismissed, particularly remaining employees uncertainty, the characteristics of the

message they received when first learning about the dismissal and of organizational messages, and their information seeking. Despite coworker dismissal not being associated with greater levels of uncertainty, statistical relationships existed between message characteristics and uncertainty. The most common sources for dismissal-related messages were another coworker or the remaining employees' immediate supervisor. The interactions typically occurred face-to-face at some point within a day of the dismissal and had moderate formality. Remaining employees used several information seeking strategies and uncertainty was less predictive of the information seeking strategy used than were social costs. With interesting theoretical and practical applications, scholars should continue exploring the communication of employee dismissal.

VI. TABLES

Table 1

Sample Demographics

Demographic Characteristic	Mean	SD
Age	29.27	12.35
	Frequency	%
Sex		
Female	152	69.10
Male	67	30.45
Prefer not to identify	1	.45
Education		
Some high school	2	.01
High school diploma	14	6.36
Some college	125	56.82
Associate degree	21	9.55
Bachelor’s	38	17.27
Master's	16	7.27
Professional	3	1.36
Missing	1	.45
Occupation		
Retail	31	14.09
Information technology	16	7.27
Manufacturing	10	4.55
Sales	23	10.45
Education	23	10.45
Government	6	2.73
Financial	14	6.36
Health	16	7.27
Food services	32	14.55
Other	48	21.82
Missing	1	.45
Organization Size		
0-19 employees	39	17.73
20-49 employees	55	25.00
50-99 employees	29	13.18
100-499 employees	38	17.27
500-999 employees	10	4.55
1,000 or more	48	21.82
Missing	1	.45
Still Employed		
Yes	130	59.09
No	90	40.91

Table 2

Coworker Relationship Information

Demographic Characteristic	Frequency	%
Work Status		
Full time	118	53.64
Part time	101	45.91
Other	1	.45
Work Status of Coworker		
Full time	145	65.91
Part time	73	33.18
Other	2	.91
Same Department as Coworker		
Yes	179	81.36
No	38	17.27
Unsure	3	1.36
Organizational Rank of Coworker		
Coworker higher rank	52	23.64
Participant higher rank	51	23.18
Same level	117	53.18
Frequency of In-Workplace Interactions with Coworker		
Every hour	51	23.18
Every few hours	42	19.09
Every day	55	25.00
Every week	60	27.27
Every two to three weeks	8	3.64
Every month	4	1.82
Frequency of Out-of-Workplace Interactions with Coworker		
Every few hours	5	2.27
Every day	14	6.36
Every week	42	19.09
Every two to three weeks	26	11.82
Every month	20	9.09
Once a year	25	11.36
Never	88	40.00

Table 3

Uncertainty Variables, Descriptive Statistics, and Reliabilities

Variables and Items	Mean	SD	α
Uncertainty	2.84	.60	.94
Organizational Uncertainty • Direction in which the organization was heading (G) • Business environment in which the organizational had to exist (G) • Overall objective/mission of the organization (G) • Organizational goals and objectives (M) • Organizational policies (M) • Organizational reward system (M) • Organizational successes and failures (M) • Existing reporting structures (i.e. the chain of command in the organization) (S) • Role/function of different work units within the organization (S) • How your work unit contributed to the overall mission of the organization (S)	2.85	.74	.94
Work Uncertainty • Your job responsibilities (T) • How to actually perform your job (T) • The goals of your job (T) • The quality of work that was expected (T)	2.74	.68	.89
Personal Uncertainty • Chances for advancement (H) • How well you are doing in your job (H) • Organizational benefits (H) • Promotion and bonuses (H)	2.93	.61	.85

Note: Bordia et al. (2004) – (G) = strategic, (S) = structural
Salem & Wilson (1984) – (M) = maintenance, (T) = task, (H) = human

Table 4

Information Seeking Strategies and Descriptive Statistics

Variables and Items	Mean	SD	α
Information Seeking Strategies Overall	2.02	.69	.91
Surveilling	2.81	1.22	.84
• I went about my tasks, but if any new information came my way, I was sure to pay attention to it.			
• I found out the information about my coworker's dismissal by keeping my eyes and ears open to what was going on around me.			
Overt Questioning	2.33	1.07	.80
• I asked specific, straight to the point questions to get the information related to my coworker's dismissal.			
• I identified that I didn't know and asked for information related to my coworker's dismissal.			
• I went directly to my supervisor/coworker and asked for information related to my coworker's dismissal.			
• I did not "beat around the bush" in asking for the information related to my coworker's dismissal.			
Third Party	2.23	1.16	.84
• I asked somebody who I knew was acquainted with my dismissed coworker information related to their dismissal.			
• I checked with someone else before speaking to my supervisor/coworker.			
Observing	2.05	1.09	.80
• I paid close attention to how my supervisor/coworker acts toward me and try to relate these actions to my coworker's dismissal.			
• I consciously made mental notes about what my supervisor/coworker told others about my coworker's dismissal.			
Indirect Questioning	1.92	.90	.88
• I tried my supervisor's/coworker's patience, "just a little bit," to seek how he or she would respond.			
• I did one or two things to get on my supervisor's/coworker's nerves in order to see how he or she would react.			
• I humorously remarked about my coworker's dismissal with my supervisor/coworker to see what kind of response I would get.			
• I used "uh-huh" frequently to encourage my supervisor/coworker to keep talking about the information I wanted.			
Locating	1.89	.94	.77
• I tried to find my coworker.			
• I looked for my coworker's items, like their vehicle, lunch, coat, or things on their desk.			
• I checked the schedule and/or the calendar for any personnel, meeting, or project changes.			
Testing	1.38	.76	.85
• I "messed up" on something related to my coworker's dismissal to see how my supervisor/coworker would respond.			
• I ignored a rule or guideline related to my coworker's dismissal to see how my supervisor/coworker would react.			
• I tried my supervisor's/coworker's patience, "just a little bit," to seek how he or she would respond.			
• I did one or two things to get on my supervisor's/coworker's nerves in order to see how he or she would react.			

Table 5

Social Costs Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Variables and Items	Mean	SD	α
Social Costs Overall	2.79	.72	.76
• I would not be embarrassed to seek information related to my coworker's dismissal.	2.73	1.11	
• The costs of seeking information related to my coworker's dismissal would outweigh any benefits derived from obtaining it.	2.88	1.02	
• A remaining employee, like myself, would be thought of negatively for seeking information related to my coworker's dismissal.	2.76	1.13	
• If I were to seek information related to my coworker's dismissal, I would make myself and the person I approached uncomfortable.	2.76	1.11	
• I'd have little to lose in seeking information related to my coworker's dismissal.	2.88	1.05	
• By seeking information related to my coworker's dismissal, I would be violating social norms.	2.73	1.02	

Table 6

Initial Message Source, Medium, and Timing Descriptive Statistics

Message Characteristic	Frequency	%
Source		
• My dismissed coworker	27	12.27
• Another coworker	92	41.82
• My immediate supervisor	65	29.55
• Someone at a higher rank than my immediate supervisor	8	3.64
• My dismissed coworker's supervisors or manager	5	2.27
• Human resources	5	2.27
• It was not something I heard, but something I saw	15	6.82
• Other	3	1.36
Medium		
• Individual meeting (face-to-face)	128	58.18
• Group or departmental meeting (face-to-face)	26	11.82
• Company-wide meeting (face-to-face)	4	1.82
• Individual email	3	1.36
• Group or departmental email	11	5.00
• Company-wide email	4	1.82
• Telephone call	4	1.82
• Text/instant messaging	28	12.73
• Written memo	1	.45
• Other	11	5.00
• Missing	1	.45
Timing		
• Less than 15 minutes	37	16.82
• Within an hour	31	14.09
• Within a day	93	42.27
• Within a week	48	21.82
• Within two to four weeks	5	2.27
• Within a month	4	1.82
• Missing	2	.91

Table 7

Initial Message Formality Descriptive Statistics

Variable and Items	Mean	SD	α
Formality	2.62	1.03	.87
• The message seemed prepared in advance (rather than spontaneous).	2.52	1.21	
• The information came from an officially designated source of information in the organization.	2.98	1.47	
• The source of the information was a person of authority.	3.20	1.55	
• The information in the message used very proper language (rather than casual language).	2.75	1.29	
• The message was publicly stated to employees (rather than told to a select few in private comments).	2.47	1.39	
• The information was disclosed during a scheduled meeting/conversation (instead of an unscheduled conversation).	2.03	1.22	
• The information was shared with an official communication method that is used frequently in the organization (e.g., spoken in the meeting room, announced over work-sanctioned email).	2.42	1.42	

Table 8

Organizational Messages Source, Medium, and Timing Descriptive Statistics

Variable and Response Options		Frequency	%
Source			
• My dismissed coworker		2	.67
• Another coworker		51	17.06
• My immediate supervisor		136	45.48
• Someone at a higher rank than my immediate supervisor		27	9.03
• My dismissed coworker's supervisors or manager		30	10.03
• Human resources		14	4.68
• It was not something I heard, but something I saw		8	2.68
• Other		8	2.68
• No other source		23	7.69
	Total	299	
Medium			
• Individual meeting (face-to-face)		149	53.99
• Group or departmental meeting (face-to-face)		43	15.58
• Company-wide meeting (face-to-face)		4	1.45
• Individual email		2	.72
• Group or departmental email		20	7.25
• Company-wide email		14	5.07
• Telephone call		5	1.81
• Text/instant messaging		10	3.62
• Written memo		3	1.09
• Other		6	2.17
• Multiple channels		20	7.25
	Total	276	
Timing			
• Less than 15 minutes		35	12.82
• Within an hour		34	12.45
• Within a day		91	33.33
• Within a week		90	32.97
• Within two to four weeks		17	6.23
• Within a month		6	2.20
	Total	273	

Table 9

Organizational Messages Formality Descriptive Statistics

Variable and Items	Mean	SD	α
Formality	3.07	.94	.85
• The message seemed prepared in advance (rather than spontaneous).	2.91	1.26	
• The information came from an officially designated source of information in the organization.	3.57	1.27	
• The source of the information was a person of authority.	3.86	1.24	
• The information in the message used very proper language (rather than casual language).	3.16	1.24	
• The message was publicly stated to employees (rather than told to a select few in private comments).	2.79	1.37	
• The information was disclosed during a scheduled meeting/conversation (instead of an unscheduled conversation).	2.37	1.29	
• The information was shared with an official communication method that is used frequently in the organization (e.g., spoken in the meeting room, announced over work-sanctioned email).	2.83	1.44	

Table 10

Comparisons of Uncertainty across Message Characteristics (Source, Medium)

	Uncertainty			
	Organizational	Work	Personal	Overall
Source				
My dismissed coworker	3.30[a]	2.86	3.12	3.16[a]
Another coworker	2.95	2.77	2.99	2.92
My immediate supervisor	2.69[a]	2.67	2.87	2.72[a]
Someone at a higher rank than my immediate supervisor	2.85	2.70	2.78	2.80
My dismissed coworker's supervisors or manager	2.71	2.68	2.81	2.72
Human resources	2.76	2.58	2.73	2.71
It was not something I heard, but something I saw	2.82	2.95	3.35[a]	3.14
Other	3.13	2.83	2.50[a]	2.75
No other source	2.85	2.91	3.05	2.91
F	2.94**	.83	.77**	2.67**
Medium				
Individual meeting (face-to-face)	2.81	2.68	2.87	2.79
Group or departmental meeting (face-to-face)	2.70	2.75	3.01	2.78
Company-wide meeting (face-to-face)	2.95	3.19	3.13	3.04
Individual email	2.74	2.08	2.50	2.54
Group or departmental email	2.87	2.83	3.04	2.90
Company-wide email	3.29	2.95	3.06	3.16
Telephone call	3.24	3.19[a]	3.16	3.21
Text/instant messaging	2.91	2.73	2.87	2.86
Written memo	2.30	1.67[a]	2.42	2.19
Other	3.18	3.04	3.02	3.11
Multiple channels	2.90	2.73	3.08	2.91
F	1.59	2.28*	1.08	1.78

Note: **Significant at the 0.01 level; *Significant at the 0.05 level

Table 11

Bivariate Correlation Matrix for Message Characteristics (Timing and Formality) and Uncertainty

		1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Timing	1.00					
2.	Formality	.07	1.00				
3.	Organizational Uncertainty	.04	-.26**	1.00			
4.	Work Uncertainty	.03	-.14**	.56**	1.00		
5.	Personal Uncertainty	.00	-.15**	.54**	.58**	1.00	
6.	Overall Uncertainty	.03	-.24**	.94**	.76**	.74**	1.00

Note: **Significant at the 0.01 level. *Significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 12

Regression Results: Predicting Information Seeking Strategies from Uncertainty and Perceptions of Social Costs

Information Seeking Strategy	Uncertainty (β)	Social Costs (β)	R^2
Surveilling	.12	-.04*	.01
Overt	-.02	-.22***	.05**
Third Party	.14**	.07	.03*
Observing	-.03	.15**	.02
Indirect	.03	.00	.00
Locating	.02	.07	.00
Testing	-.06	.14**	.09*

Note: ***Significant at the 0.01 level; **Significant at the 0.05 level; *Significant at the 0.10 level.

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VII. APPENDIX

Recall the communication surrounding your coworker's dismissal. In the following three sections, you will be asked to provide a description of the ways you learned about your coworker's dismissal. Sometimes remaining employees hear juicy gossip about why their coworker was dismissed and how the coworker is emotionally handling it, while other times employees don't end up finding out about a termination until they realize their coworker is no longer on the schedule. Sometimes organizations provide very brief statements about an employee termination, like "Jane is no longer with the company. Please direct marketing questions to John," while other times, they provide detailed messages about the termination, how employees should proceed, and what plan the organization has for dealing with their absence (like hiring a new employee or re-distributing work).

Of particular interest to the current study are two main communication events:

1. The way you first found out that your coworker was dismissed and
2. Any notification the organization provided about your coworker's dismissal

The first set of questions asks you to recall how you <u>initially learned</u> about your coworker's dismissal. Possible ways to learn about the termination of a coworker include messages from the dismissed coworker, from another coworker (i.e., gossip or the grapevine), from an all-staff email, or from seeing your coworker leave before work was over.

The second set of questions asks about a message <u>from the organization</u>. Examples of notification you may have received from the organization could include a brief email from human resources stating that their employment ended, a phone call from your coworker's former boss to keep you in the loop, or a meeting with your boss to discuss the termination and how you will move forward.