

Article

Sustainable Career Development of Newly Hired Executives—A Dynamic Process Perspective

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Abstract: While prior literature indicated the positive outcomes of successful executive successions for both individuals and organizations, we still know little about the influencing factors and mechanisms of successful executive successions from the individual perspectives of newly hired executives. As prior research of executive succession suggested to consider the contextual change on the entire duration of executive employment, we adopted a qualitative research design to explore important experiences in the process of career development after an executive, who was newly hired from outside the company, joined a new organization with a dynamic perspective. Our goal was to help newly hired executives realize their career development process with key tasks and core competencies in distinct stages, in order to achieve sustainable career development in a new enterprise. There are also implications for enhancing process-oriented career development research and advancing career-development managerial practices.

Keywords: executive succession; sustainable career development; dynamic perspective; grounded theory

1. Introduction

Executives are high-level managers who are in charge of strategic administrative or managerial responsibilities within organizations [1]. They occupy powerful and prestigious positions and are generally regarded as key organizational members, as their strategic decisions and leadership behaviors have important influences on the performance of enterprises [2,3]. Due to the special value of executives for organizations, enterprises spend considerable time, money, and effort to hire executives with high-level skills and capabilities. Especially when companies seek strategic breakthroughs and innovation in a specific field, more companies choose to recruit new executives from external markets [4]. On the one hand, newly hired executives from outside the company hold diverse experience and knowledge compared with internal executives, which contributes to providing powerful external resources for implementing new business [5,6]. On the other hand, executives hired from outside the company have a stronger incentive to achieve their career development through making strategic breakthroughs and innovations.

Previous literature illustrated the positive effects of a successful executive succession from outside the company on strategic change and organizational performance [4,7,8], and also emphasized that a failure of succession will result in the organization missing strategic opportunities and bringing conflicts to the company's internal management team [9,10]. Therefore, it is important for both executives and enterprises to understand how to achieve successful executive succession and avoid a failure of employment. Some scholars demonstrated the contributions of organization culture [11], onboarding programs [12], and succession-management capabilities [13] that were present when

organizations accomplished successful executive succession. However, these studies mainly evaluated the antecedents of successful executive succession from the organization's perspective; there are relatively few studies that investigated the question from the individual perspective of newly hired executives. Although previous literature identified different chronological development stages for newly hired executives [14,15], the key processes and underlying mechanisms for achieving successful executive succession need to be further studied.

For a better understanding of the influencing factors and mechanisms of successful executive succession, it is critical to conduct a holistic investigation on the career-development process of newly hired executives from their individual perspectives. As it is recommended to analyze the research of executives succession in the context of its entire duration [15], we hoped to draw upon the existing research on sustainable career development from the dynamic perspective, and we supposed that the career development of newly hired executives is a dynamic process that varies over time and context. As different career development stages have distinct characteristics regarding aspects of the core tasks and corresponding competencies [14], a set of questions should be further taken into consideration: 1. When newly hired executives enter into a new organization, which important stages will they experience? 2. What are the key tasks in each stage? 3. What are the core competencies to cope with the key tasks in each stage?

The main purpose of this paper was to investigate the career development process of newly hired executives with key tasks and core competencies in distinct stages. As there is little existing research that provided recommendations in this area, we adopted a grounded research design to explore the dynamic process of a newly hired executive's career development and to investigate the undying key tasks and core competencies in each stage. The grounded research method is a systematic research methodology that generates theory through methodic collection and analysis of data. This exploratory, qualitative approach is suitable for understanding complex phenomena and for developing theory from the experience and perceptions of the respondents themselves [16].

In order to collect qualitative data addressing our research purpose, we conducted interviews with 20 newly hired executives from outside in China. Participants in our study were all employed in a new private firm from various industries over two years, to ensure that they had experienced long periods of career development in a new firm. Drawing from diverse industries also helped us to have a comprehensive understanding of the career-development experience of newly hired executives from outside companies in various work contexts.

Our research provided three theoretical contributions. First, it contributed to executive succession research by connecting with the literature of sustainable career development to investigate important experiences in the career-development process of newly hired executives from their individual perspectives. Second, our study strengthened our understanding of sustainable career development in the situation where newly hired executives from outside join a new organization. In addition, we identified newly hired outside executive distinct patterns of key tasks and core competencies in discernible development phases, and demonstrated our empirical understanding of the ways in which newly hired executives from outside strive for sustainable career development across various times and contexts.

2. Literature Review

In the literature review, we address and link the core concepts of this paper, including the concepts of a newly hired executive from outside the company and sustainable career development from a dynamic perspective.

2.1. *Newly Hired Executive from Outside a Company*

Newly hired executives from outside a company were defined as employees who were previously hired outside a organization and were then appointed as new executives within a organization [17]. Compared with internal successors, newly hired executives from outside a company have diverse

work backgrounds and experience [5] and possess broader knowledge and skills [6], which can help the organization acquire stronger external resources to develop new business [7]. Moreover, executives hired from outside a company have a strong motivation to inform strategic change in the organization [4]. The selection of newly hired executives is a salient indicator for implementing comprehensive organizational change and for conducting the enterprise to obtain continuous support from its stakeholders [4,18]. Certain scholars supposed that executive succession from outside positively impacts the accounting and market indicators of corporate financial performance and will contribute to an increase in the company's market value [5,19].

However, a previous study indicated that newly hired executives face a higher risk of layoff in their early tenure [20]. If a newly hired executive cannot achieve the expected strategic changes and performance improvement in a period, they might lose the support of key shareholders and the authority empowered by the board. Contrasted to successful executive succession, which contributes to improvements in the performance of the organization, a failed employment will cause the organization to lose strategic opportunities and will generate conflicts among the company's internal management team [9,10].

Therefore, whether from the perspective of newly hired executives personally or regarding the long-term development of an enterprise, how to achieve a positive outcome with executive succession should be considered closely. Moreover, succession is not only an event, but also a demarcation point for the career-development process of a newly hired executive, which must be investigated in the context of its entire duration in order to draw a full picture [15]. Thus, we draw on the study of sustainable career development from a dynamic perspective to identify newly hired outside executive distinct patterns of key tasks and core competencies in discernible development phases, thereby facilitating executives to achieve positive outcomes of executive succession through sustainable career development.

2.2. Sustainable Career Development from a Dynamic Perspective

Sustainable careers have been conceptualized as "the sequence of an individual's different career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual" [21] (p. 7). This definition reveals four core dimensions of sustainable careers: time, social space, agency, and meaning. Time refers to the temporal character of sustainable careers, illustrating the distinct impact of career activities and events occurring in the past, present, and future. Social space reveals sustainable careers that differ in diverse contexts and underlines the influence of the external environment on sustainable careers. Agency refers to individuals who have the ability to make decision by their own wishes, which reflects the effect of individual difference on sustainable careers. The meaning dimension indicates sustainable careers comprising both skill development and meaning derived from career experiences and events [21]. In conclusion, the definition of sustainable careers illustrates that the construct is multidimensional and the dynamism between the dimensions of person, context, and time should be taken into consideration [22].

Building on the general concept of sustainable careers, the dynamic view of sustainable career development emphasized the significant roles of person, time, and context, which can be comprehended as a cyclical, self-regulatory process [23]. By adopting (positive and negative) experiences and events, an employee is enabled to acquire opportunities for 'dynamic learning' within complex personal and environmental contexts across time [24]. Inversely, through a comprehensive understanding of individual and environmental contexts, individuals can adapt to and have impacts on their career development. In this perspective, sustainable career development is not a constant state but rather a characteristic or a relevant parameter to demonstrate the progress of career development across time [24].

The dynamic view of career development suggests that career development of a certain type of worker group is a dynamic process that varies across time and contexts, and which some organizational

research relevant to career development verified. For example, Katz [25] indicated that an individual's interest in challenging tasks is different in distinct career phases and is higher in the early career stages and lower in the later career stages. Hambrick and Fukutomi [14] demonstrated that executives' pattern of attention, behavior, and organizational performance were different according to their career seasons. Contrasted to a static, transient perspective of individuals' work-related positions and experiences, the dynamic perspective of sustainable career development depicts how these positions and experiences evolve or how they remain stable over time [24]. Therefore, we suppose that there are discernible career stages within the sustainable career development process of newly hired executives from outside the company, and that these various stages consist of distinct patterns of key task and relevant core competencies.

3. Methods

Qualitative approaches are effective in exploring what constructs are involved in a sustainable career, which factors affect it, and how it develops across time [22]. This paper emerged from a qualitative research design aimed at investigating the career-development process of newly hired executives from outside a company. The grounded theoretical research method is the most widely used qualitative research approach in the study of social sciences, which enables scholars to identify new variables and relationships, to reveal and comprehend complicated processes, and to demonstrate the effects of the social context [26]. The data analysis procedure of the grounded theory method includes data collection, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, ultimately identifying the key concepts and building a theoretical framework [16].

3.1. Data Collection

The data collected from interviews are useful to better comprehend the perceptions that people hold regarding the process of sustainable career development, as well as which factors impact it and how it evolves across time [22]. Our research team interviewed a total of 20 newly hired executives from outside companies in China. As can be seen in Table 1, the sample involved different industries, career levels, and recommendation sources. To acquire enough samples addressed to our question, we invited people from our direct social networks into our research and asked them to suggest other participants in their own networks.

To ensure access to the information about participants' career development stages over a period of time, each participant selected by our research team had been employed by a new organization for more than two years. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min (average time was around 60 min) and were audio recorded and fully transcribed. Before the formal interview, we prepared an interview outline based on focal questions in our research. Consistent with the grounded theoretical research method, we asked interviewees to answer open-ended (but structured) questions about their career planning before entry, their career experiences in their current organization, and their key tasks and core competencies in each career development stage.

The interview outline included but was not limited to the following questions and prompts: 1. What is your position in your current company? Talk about the main job responsibilities of your position. 2. What were your expectations and plans before you entered this company? Is it now in line with your expectations and plans? 3. Talk about the experience of career development in your new company. Can it be divided into different stages? 4. What is the focus of your work at each stage and what performance have you achieved in each stage? 5. In your opinion, what are the key factors that contributed to your career development at each stage? The data collection enabled us to probe the process of participants' career development, as well as facets of key tasks and core competencies during each career development stage.

Table 1. Participant overview.

Number	Career Level	Industry	Recommendation Source
A1	Director	Manufacturing	Indirect social network
A2	Vice Director	Consulting	Direct social network
A3	Director	Financial	Indirect social network
A4	Vice General Manager	Real Estate	Indirect social network
A5	Director	Real Estate	Indirect social network
A6	Vice General Manager	Food	Direct social networks
A7	Director	Medical Service	Indirect social network
A8	General Manager	Financial	Indirect social network
A9	Vice Director	Financial	Direct social network
A10	Director	Real Estate	Indirect social network
A11	Director	Hotel	Indirect social network
A12	Director	Technology	Direct social network
A13	Director	Jewelry	Indirect social network
A14	Director	Cosmetic	Indirect social network
A15	Vice General Manager	Consulting	Indirect social network
A16	Vice President	Chemical	Direct social network
A17	Vice General Manager	Tourism	Direct social network
A18	Vice General Manager	Chemical	Direct social network
A19	Director	Chemical	Indirect social network
A20	Vice Director	Financial	Indirect social network

3.2. Data Analysis

Similar to Stein et al. [27], Harrison and Rouse [28], and Reay et al. [29], we started with reading through our notes and discussing our initial ideas based on the preliminary data. After that, we carried out a preliminary analysis of the initial text data by Nvivo 11.0 (a qualitative data analysis software). We followed the analysis procedure recommended by Corbin and Strauss [16], whereby we conducted (1) open coding (identifying and categorizing different kinds of statements to develop first-order concepts), (2) axial coding (finding relationships between first-order concepts to identify theoretical categories), and (3) selective coding (aggregating theoretical dimensions to construct a theory). The coding procedure was first performed by the third author of this paper, and then the second author of this paper examined the initial coding result. The two authors discussed the inconsistencies together and formed the final coding result until the two authors fully agreed with the result.

During open coding, we broke down the preliminary data and then categorized them to develop first-order codes. First-order coding indicated the participant descriptions of their career process after being hired by a new organization, the main tasks during their career development, and the core competencies in their career process. For example, a participant indicated:

“I have stayed in this group for about three years. It was very difficult to build trusting relationships with employees at the beginning. To improve mutual understanding with my subordinates, I talked with everyone separately and invited them to have dinner together after work sometimes. It took a lot of time to be familiar with my subordinates.” [A3]

The description of this participant was interpreted into first-order concepts of the category “Enhance relationship with subordinates”.

Axial coding is a process of higher-level induction of the initial concepts generated by open coding, which establishes a relationship between the initial concepts following certain rules to form a theme [16]. We drew on the existing literature to help us understand the thematic relationships and contrasts between first-order concepts and to integrate them into theoretical themes. For example, the descriptions of primary tasks in early career-development stages indicated an emphasis on a subset of characteristics that were interpreted in the existing literature on interpersonal relationships [30].

In the selective coding, we further solidified our understanding by analyzing the relationship between the theoretical themes generated in axial coding. Then we integrated second-order themes to aggregate dimensions based on the chronological sequence of career development. Three key career-development stages emerged: (1) the embeddedness stage, (2) the symbiosis stage, and (3) the cocreation stage. In Figure 1, we present our data structure including the first-order codes, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions.

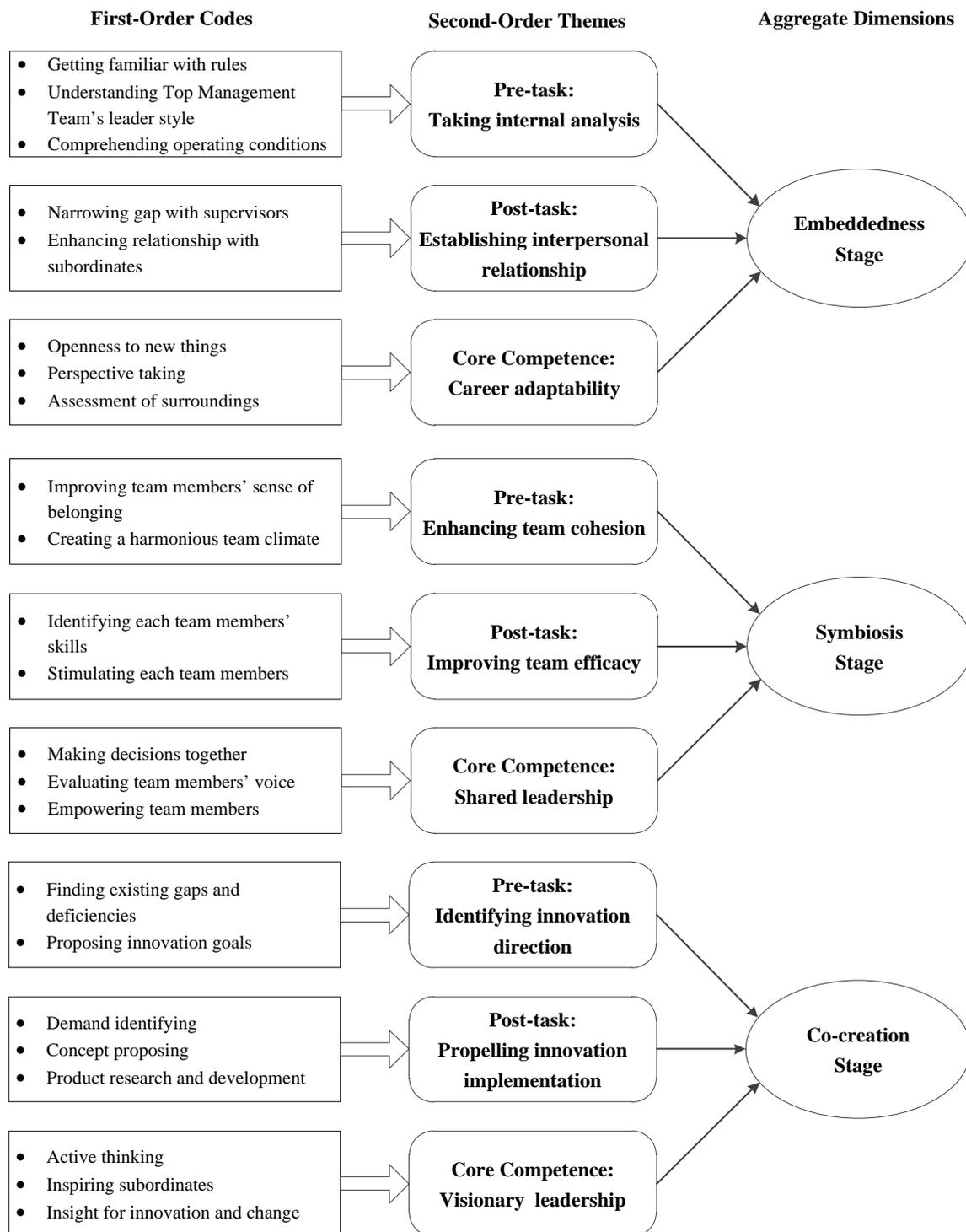


Figure 1. Overview of the data structure.

4. Findings

We demonstrated an integrated framework that described the relationships between the core variables in Figure 2. Our research identified three aggregated theoretical dimensions from the data: the (1) embeddedness stage, (2) the symbiosis stage, and (3) the cocreation stage. Our data analysis indicated the implicit process of career development of our respondents. We further outlined various dynamic core competencies coping with distinct key tasks in different executive career-development stages by deeply understanding these inherent relationships. In the following part, we present and discuss our findings specifically with illustrative data.

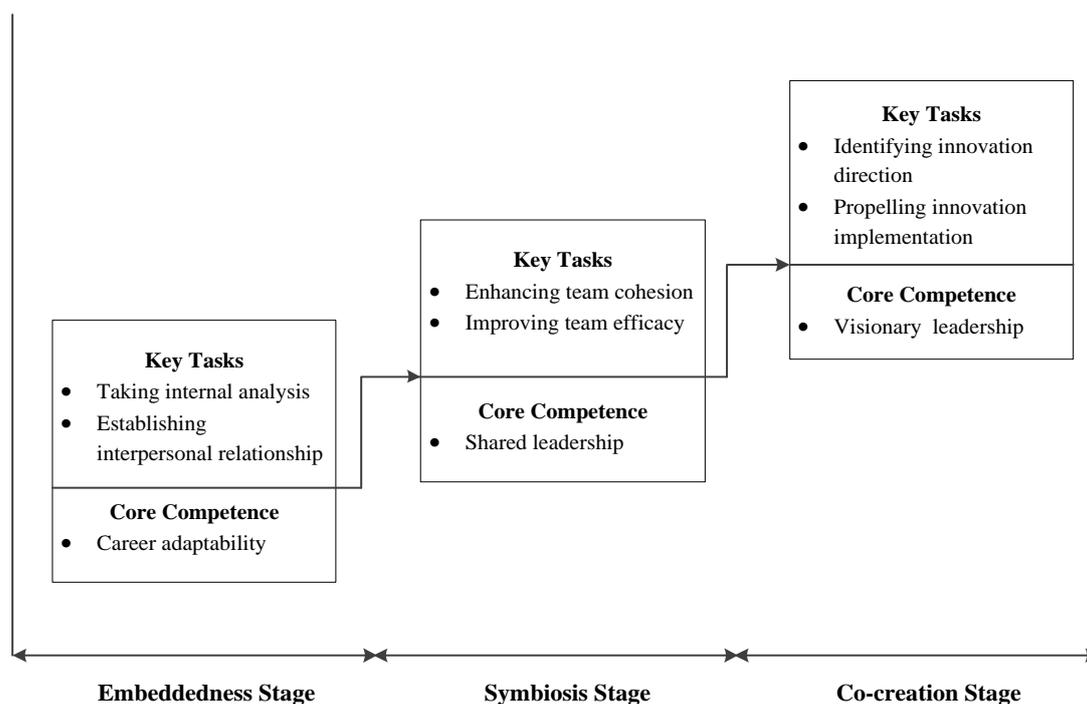


Figure 2. Our proposed theoretical framework.

4.1. Embeddedness Stage

The embeddedness stage is the initial phase in the process of sustainable career development of newly hired executives from outside the company, which is the most difficult period for executives entering a new organization. Newly hired executives typically have to cope with high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty inherent to an unfamiliar work environment. They attempt to identify patterns and relations between elements in order to develop an implicit, cognitive model of behavior [31]. The new job challenges for newly hired executives arise from both the unknown work context and unfamiliar interpersonal relationships. For instance, one respondent mentioned:

“Although I investigated the information regarding the new company before joining in detail, and I talked with the HR (Human Resources) director regarding my new supervisors and subordinates, I still feel it is a completely strange environment, which requires lots of time and effort to adapt to it.” [A8]

Even though this respondent had worked for a former company in the same industry for more than 20 years and he had made a series of preparations before entering the new company, he still could not easily adapt to the new work in the beginning. That is to say, abundant work experience and early preparation seemed to be not enough for newly hired executives from outside companies to adapt to new jobs at the initial stage of career development. No matter how confident newly hired executives are about their abilities, joining a new organization means starting over socially and learning new

job responsibilities [32]. Thus, it is critical for executives to be acquainted with the new environment and to establish harmonious interpersonal relationships with unfamiliar subordinates after they join a new enterprise.

First, newly hired executives should develop an overall understanding of the surrounding environment in the new workplace, such as the rules in the organization, the TMT (Top Management Team) leader style, and the operating conditions of the company. After joining a new enterprise, newly hired executives from outside the company may experience adjustment of their roles and may need to reposition themselves corresponding to the new environment. It is important for newly hired executives to become familiar with the rules in the organization. Most prior research identified behavioral legitimacy as the foundation upon which organizational participants described how they interpreted and responded to puzzling or unfamiliar situations [33,34]. As one participant stated:

“In addition to understanding the rules by browsing the company intranet, I talked with the staff in my department about details in the rules that needed extra attention. It helped me to make fewer mistakes in my later work.” [A12]

Moreover, newly hired executives need to grasp whole work processes by explicitly explaining the informal procedures and ambient environment. This kind of information seeking allows individuals to anticipate otherwise ambiguous future situations and to develop appropriate responses to them [35]. Accordingly, when the most appropriate behavior is unclear, descriptive norms may provide insight into the most justifiable and least risky action for the situation [36]. Another executive in our study found the direction and focus of his future work through understanding the TMT’s leader style and comprehending operating conditions of the new company. This is displayed in the following statements:

“During the period, I also communicated with the company’s top level about their management style, the company’s strategic priorities, and issues that need to be resolved in the near future, so that I could better grasp the direction and focus of my future work.” [A7]

Furthermore, unfamiliar interpersonal relationships urged newly hired executives to become closer with their subordinates and TMT members in the organization. When most people think back to their first days on a new job, they are prone to recall the positive and negative social interactions [37]. There are significant impacts from these early interpersonal interactions, thus establishing the foundation for future attitudes and job behaviors. Drawing upon the leader–member exchange theory [38], establishing high-quality exchange relationships contributes to helping executives be recognized as in-group members by supervisors and to acquire high-quality trust, support, and resources from supervisors, rather than be considered as out-group members and receive lower quality trust, support, and resources.

Due to the shortage of time and resources, it is impossible for TMT members to establish high-quality exchange relationships with every executive, especially regarding newly hired executives from outside a company with a low degree of familiarity. Thus, newly hired executives from outside a company should narrow the gap between supervisors to establish high-quality exchange relationships with supervisors and should obtain multiple support relationships in a short period. For instance, one of our participants mentioned:

“Due to the short period of time, I had not constructed a stable relationship with the TMT members at the very beginning. The lack of trust might lead to misunderstandings without sufficient communication. Therefore, I tried to communicate with TMT members about my idea regarding my work planning. Fortunately, I obtained affirmative answers and valuable advice from most of the TMT members, and further support in the later implementation. I really appreciated their assistance in the early stage of my career development.” [A9]

In the same way, it is also beneficial for newly hired executives to establish high-quality interpersonal relationships with their subordinates. Receiving positive feedback and identity affirmation from organizational insiders and having many subordinates follow them within the organization is directly related to the degree of social support and wide acceptance [39]. Close interpersonal relationships enable newly hired executives to achieve trust and respect from their

subordinates, and further contributes to sustainable support for future work coordination. Meanwhile, these interpersonal experiences may be used to impart values, norms, and beliefs that center on “the way things are done around here” [40]. As one respondent suggested:

“When I first came here, I talked with my subordinates regarding which matters they were most concerned about. These matters were from both the workplace and nonworkplace. I tried to consider these matters in their standing and describe my ideas about how to resolve them. This approach was really helpful, we had a successful time when we worked together.” [A15]

As discussed above, taking internal analysis and establishing interpersonal relationships are two key tasks for newly hired executives from outside a company in the embeddedness stage. Our participants then narrated their ideas about the core competencies to cope with key tasks for accomplishing sustainable career development at the initial phase. Based on their memory of career development in the new workplace, our participants depicted several valuable experiences in dealing with challenges in the embeddedness stage, such as “openness to new things”, “perspective taking”, and “assessment of surroundings”. We summarized these experiences and referenced a theoretical concept termed as “career adaptability”, which refers to “a psychosocial construct that denotes an individual’s resources for coping with current and anticipated tasks, transitions, and traumas in their occupational roles” [41] (p. 662).

A high degree of career adaptability helps newly hired executives from outside a company adapt to a new work environment and to achieve excellence work performance in a short period, resulting in more organizational support, development opportunities, and, ultimately, personal career development [42]. Such newly hired executives are clear about their own role in a new organization due to openness traits, have developed cordial relationships with colleagues owing to perspective taking, and their assessment of their surroundings can be better adjusted and contribute to both the organization and immediate work group [43].

Under the effect of strong career adaptability, it is easier for newly hired executives to achieve a high level of consistency between individuals and organizations. Drawing upon the person–environment fit theory, the match between an individual and the environment can generate positive attitudes and behaviors, such as a higher degree of job satisfaction, willingness for job retention, job performance, and career success [44]. Therefore, we argue that career adaptability is the core competence for newly hired executives from outside a company in the embeddedness stage of sustainable career development.

4.2. Symbiosis Stage

The increasing complexity of tasks and decision issues faced by today’s organizations has motivated the extensive use of teams at all hierarchical levels [45]. Experienced through the embeddedness stage, newly hired executives from outside a company adapt to a new environment and establish reliable interpersonal relationships. They then enter the symbiosis stage in their career development and begin to seek opportunities to advance their team’s performance. Newly hired executives ensure that the work progresses as planned through monitoring the team to solve problems and to clarify task-related knowledge [46]. There are two key tasks that were recognized for newly hired executives to establish a high-performance team in this career-development phase: enhancing team cohesion and improving team efficacy.

First, enhancing team cohesion is one of the key tasks for newly hired executives from outside a company in the symbiosis stage, and this is considered a strong predictor of team behavior. Team cohesion indicates a state of social relationships between the team members, which is defined as the degree to which the members of a team are attached to each other and are motivated to maintain their membership [47]. Cohesive team members hold deeper feelings, more trust, and higher levels of satisfaction for other members, and they also maintain emotional appeals to the entire team. Team cohesion motivates team members to present a high degree of concern and appreciation for each other, to carry out effective communication and exchanges, and to produce positive work outcomes [48]. A highly cohesive team will effectively generate the synergy needed for a high level

of team performance, which will be more conducive to the sustainable career development of both the team leader and members.

In the symbiosis stage, newly hired executives already realized embeddedness in a new environment; to achieve long-term career development, they should pay attention to the performance improvement at the team level. In interdependent team settings, employees may need to develop strong social exchange relationships with their teammates, which are marked by the mutual exchange of desirable resources and a heightened sense of team commitment and trust [49]. Hence, team members can be motivated to reciprocate the benefits they receive with higher identification with colleagues and increased citizenship behavior benefiting the collective [50,51]. The narrative of our participants revealed that it was effective to enhance the team cohesion in terms of improving the team members' sense of belonging and creating a harmonious team climate. As one of the respondents stated:

"I am proud for my team. We shared a common vision that we would become the best performing sales team. Everyone saw themselves as part of the team community. We were enthusiastic about achieving our goals and accomplished this through united teamwork. As a reward, we went on vacation together in Singapore and enjoyed a pleasant trip. It is really wonderful!" [A5]

Secondly, improving team efficacy is another key task for newly hired executives from outside a company in the symbiosis career-development phase. Team efficacy is the perception of team members regarding their ability to complete tasks [52], which reflects the degree of the collective confidence of team members to achieve team targets. Team efficacy can positively drive members' motivation for achievement, which in turn promotes members to put more effort into team tasks. A high degree of perception of team efficacy enables team members to possess confidence to cope with complex team tasks, which will further motivate team members to set more challenging goals and to finally complete sophisticated team tasks with high performance. Therefore, the improvement of team efficacy significantly impacts coping with challenges, completing team tasks, achieving team goals, and ultimately accomplishing a high level of team performance.

When structuring and allocating work projects, given the complexities involved in group dynamics, questions about how to ensure high levels of effective decision-making and collective learning have captured research attention [53]. Team efficacy is implicitly linked to the degree to which team members can be integrated and utilized in a team's value-creating activities, in that employees contribute to the organizational performance by bringing in diverse knowledge and skills [54]. When an employee voluntarily joins a team, even if the staff leaves eventually, their skills and knowledge, which were part of the team's total human capital resource, remain. Team efficacy is formed in the interactional process between team members' collective cognition and behavior; thus, the role of each team member should not be ignored. Successful experiences in improving the team efficacy of our participants revealed the significance value of identifying each team members' skills, and the effect is reflected in the following statements:

"After working together for a while, I had known the skills of each member and assigned work based on this information. As a consequence, everyone could do their own part of the teamwork well, and we were becoming more confident in achieving our goals." [A9]

Other respondents in our study achieved a high degree of team efficacy through stimulating each team member. From a motivated social-information processing perspective [55], team members could gather information and feedback from their colleagues to understand each other's value, and gradually generated a shared knowledge regarding how encouragement from their own team leader motivated their behaviors. If one team member believed that they could effectively accomplish their personal goals, it was possible for them to share the confidence with other team members, which affected the team's judgment of the task goals and improved the holistic perception of team efficacy. In contrast, individuals with low self-efficacy may cause other team members to lose confidence in completing team tasks, thereby affecting the performance of the entire team. As one of respondents mentioned:

"I recorded their tasks on a whiteboard, and updated the progress every day. I knew who did well and who had troubles in their work. Excellent team members would be praised, while team members

who encounter difficulties could obtain others' help and encouragement to deal with these troubles. I tried to convince every team member that they can accomplish their tasks." [A10]

Through the initial adaptation in the embeddedness stage, newly hired executives from outside a company had received trust and support from their supervisors and subordinates in a new organization. In the subsequent career-development phase, the mission of newly hired executives transitions to completing various team tasks and to achieving a high level of team performance. However, faced with highly relevant and complex team tasks, it is unrealistic for newly hired executives to lead and guide a team to complete such tasks with only their own knowledge and abilities.

Newly hired executives need to cooperate with their team members and fully take advantage of the knowledge, technology, and capabilities of each team member to complete complex team tasks. Our respondents described their experiences in building a collaborative and productive team at the symbiosis stage as "making decisions together", "evaluating team member voices", and "empowering team members". We summarized these experiences and introduced a theoretical construct, named "shared leadership", which refers to "an emergent team property that results from the distribution of leadership influence across multiple team members" [56] (p. 1218).

Drawing upon prior literature illustrated how shared leadership contributed to encouraging team members to participate in team actions and decisions symbiotically [57]. We further deduced that shared leadership positively influences team cohesion and team efficacy in a team. Newly hired executives influence the team performance involving the determination of members' shared decisions, influence the evaluation of member voices in the pursuit of shared objectives, and influence the team maintenance and culture by empowering them. Therefore, we propose that shared leadership is the core competence for newly hired executives from outside the company in the symbiosis stage.

4.3. Cocreation Stage

Hiring new executives tends to emerge through critical necessity [58]. By employing executives from outside the company, TMT members anticipate breakthrough outcomes, such as introducing new technologies, enhancing management experience, and improving operating profits for organizations. Through the embeddedness stage and the symbiosis stage, newly hired executives adapt to the new work environment and establish a collaborative and productive team with their subordinates. After this, they enter the cocreation career-development stage.

In the cocreation phase, the feeling of being an "outsider" is gradually eliminated, while TMT members begin to consider newly hired executives as part of the organization, enabling them to undertake more important tasks. In order to realize the original intention of hiring from TMT members, newly hired executives from outside a company need to identify future innovation directions based on the status of the enterprise, reform the existing deficiencies in product, service, and management, achieve positive effects from organizational innovations, and then ultimately improve the performance level of the enterprise. This is revealed in the following statements:

"This is a system with a clear division of labor. What an individual can do is try his best to influence the whole process by his different perspectives and knowledge, so as to promote the transformation of the entire system and organization." [A18]

Our participant narratives indicated two key tasks for newly hired executives from outside a company in the cocreation stage: identifying an innovation direction and propelling innovation implementation.

First, newly hired executives should identify innovation directions for organizations in the cocreation stage. Technological innovations are concerned with the introduction of changes in technology and productive processes relating to each organization's main business, while management innovation reflects changes in the way management work is done, involving a departure from traditional practices and structures [59]. Because of the diffuse and difficult-to-replicate attributes of the identifying process of specific innovation directions, [59], newly hired executives need to use various channels and methods to grasp information about environmental changes, thereby discovering

the gaps or deficiencies in a company's products, services, and management systems. By linking their observations and previous knowledge, newly hired executives can find ways to narrow the gaps, recover deficiencies, and identify innovation directions that may bring new products, services, and management systems in the organization. For instance, one respondent from the jewelry industry discovered deficiencies in aspects of product design in the organization:

"I am a design director in my company. We launched 10 new products in one year after I came here, but our sales performance still mainly came from the classic products. I thought there must be some problems with our direction of design, so I carried out market research to find out these deficiencies. The feedback of the market research indicated the product style was too traditional and did not meet the taste of young consumers." [A13]

The pace of new product introduction and production is a function of the search and identification of innovation goals [60]. Newly hired executives often serve an important role in that search process. New product introductions increase the ability of organizations to meet new market demands and help them establish their position in new technological generations [61]. Certainly, a team that more effectively searches and acquires new goals and information is able to make better strategic decisions, innovate, and grow its organization [62]. Only innovative organizations can obtain higher profitability, greater market value, superior credit ratings, and greater chances of survival [59]. In the following, the aforementioned respondent proposed an innovation goal based on existing gaps and deficiencies:

"My following work direction was focused on enabling the company's products to be innovative and in line with young consumers' aesthetic perspectives, therefore I proposed a product innovation goal in my department. Our goal was to design new products listed in top ten sales, and for achieving this goal, I invited Italian designers to provide remote guidance for my team. As consequence, the new products had become increasingly in line with the international route with the efforts of our team, and market feedback in the past two years was better than before I proposed the product innovation goal." [A13]

Propelling innovation implementation is another key task for newly hired executives from outside the company in the cocreation stage. The diffusion and implementation of innovations are driven by the interplay of rational assessments and isomorphic pressures. Theories of rational action emphasize the formal and informal channels through which information regarding the demands of innovation spreads and encourages new concepts [63]. To reap the benefits of innovational ideation, newly hired executives eventually need to decide which concepts to develop or discard. The narratives of our participants revealed the process of innovation implementation included "demand identifying", "concept proposing", and "product research and development". For example, in order to improve service quality and efficiency, one respondent from the financial industry implemented an online loan-service project. The adoption of an online loan service utilizing mobile-internet technology optimized the bank's service process and user experience, thereby forming a long-term competitive advantage in the financial market. As this respondent stated:

"In order to simplify the process of asset evaluation and loan approval in the loan business, we wanted to design an innovative personal loan service. Through the use of the internet and big data, online applications, assessments, and approvals, we hoped to satisfy customers' all-round financing needs, like car purchase, decoration, and business operation. Our idea was approved by the top management team in the bank, and we (the product sales department) invited the information technology department, business approval department, and asset evaluation department to help us in accomplishing the research and development of this service. With our joint efforts, our new service was appreciated by consumers and created better performance for the bank after being released onto the market." [A3]

As stated above, to improve organizational performance, the mission of newly hired executives in the cocreation stage should be to prompt innovation through identifying innovation directions and propelling innovation implementations. Our participants discussed their ideas regarding the core competencies that contributed to identifying innovation directions and propelling innovation

implementations at the cocreation stage. The narratives of our participants depicted multiple capabilities utilized in the process of identifying innovation directions and propelling innovation implementations, such as “active thinking”, “inspiring subordinates”, and “insight for change and innovation”.

We concluded their narratives and referenced a theoretical concept, named “visionary leadership”, which was considered as future-oriented leadership [64]. Visionary leadership focuses on identifying the key factors in the environment, and this can help leaders discover future opportunities and propose a common vision that inspires other individuals. Moreover, visionary leadership motivates subordinates to focus their efforts on achieving the vision [65], which profoundly influences innovation performance. Newly hired executives with visionary leadership can undertake decisions under conditions of great uncertainty; they possess the characteristics of being proactive, innovation seeking, and of being able to maintain effective organizational performance through communicating a shared vision [66]. Therefore, we propose that visionary leadership is the core competence for newly hired executives from outside the company in the cocreation stage.

5. Discussion

This paper adopted a grounded research approach to investigate the career-development process of newly hired executives from outside a company. Drawing upon 20 interviews with newly hired executives from various industries, our analysis indicated three discernible career development stages: the (1) embeddedness stage, (2) the symbiosis stage, and (3) the cocreation stage.

5.1. Theoretical Contributions

Our study provided three theoretical contributions. First, we contributed to executive succession research by connecting with the literature of sustainable career development to investigate important experiences in the career-development process of newly hired executives from their individual perspective. As the previous literature mainly investigated the antecedents of successful executive succession from the organizational perspective [11–13], this research provided insight for the influencing factors and mechanisms of successful executive succession from the individual perspectives of newly hired executives.

As the executive succession was analyzed in the context of its entire duration [15], we understand the career development of the newly hired executives from outside a company as a process of adopting the dynamic perspective. The results of 20 interviews with newly hired executives depicted a holistic framework of a sustainable career-development process, which enhanced our understanding of the process of executive succession.

Our study strengthened our understanding of sustainable career development in the situation where newly hired executives are from outside a company. We investigated the unique context in which different worker group sustainable careers evolved [22], specifically examining the sustainable career-development process of newly hired executives. By investigating what makes up a sustainable career, what affects it, and how it develops across time in the context of newly hired executives entering a new organization, our study contributed to the understanding of career sustainability in a particular worker group and context. The findings of our study verified the sustainable career development of newly hired executives as a dynamic process and consisted of distinct patterns of key tasks and relevant core competencies in the different development stages [24].

We also identified newly hired executives’ distinct patterns of key tasks and core competencies in discernible development phases, and demonstrated our empirical understanding of the ways by which newly hired executives strive for sustainable career development across various time and contexts. Overall, three discernible career development stages were identified in our study: (1) the embeddedness stage, (2) the symbiosis stage, and (3) the cocreation stage.

In the embeddedness stage, conducting internal analysis and establishing interpersonal relationships were two key tasks for newly hired executives, and career adaptability was considered as the core competence to cope with key tasks in this stage. Next, newly hired executives stepped into

the symbiosis stage, where enhancing team cohesion and improving team efficacy were identified as the key tasks, and shared leadership was regarded as a core competence in this phase. Finally, newly hired executives entered the cocreation stage, where identifying innovation directions and propelling innovation implementation were considered as the key tasks, and visionary leadership was identified as the core competence for achieving career sustainable development in this stage.

Therefore, we accomplished the goals of this study and contributed conceptually and empirically to executive succession and career sustainable development research by providing empirical data on the development process of newly hired executives and by depicting a framework for illustrating distinct patterns of key tasks and core competencies in the newly hired executives' discernible development phases.

5.2. Limitations and Further Directions for Research

Our study has several limitations that should be noted. First, the sample size of the study was relatively limited, considering that there are more than tens of millions of companies in China. Therefore, we conducted a theoretical saturation test to ensure the collected data had reached the marginal utility of information until no further new findings were found from the interviews. Second, collecting data only in a Chinese context raises matters about the generalized nature of our findings. Future research could replicate our study in other culture contexts to investigate the extent to which our findings can be utilized in other culture settings.

Third, the subjective traits of interview data might influence the reliability of the research findings. The interview results might be driven by unobservable executive characteristics and incentives [67,68]. Future research could synergistically utilize subjective data and objective data to improve the credibility of the research results. Moreover, considering that opinions of newly hired executives might change across time, it is reasonable to utilize longitudinal research design to capture the changes of newly hired executives' views about how to achieve sustainable career development.

Fourth, future research could adopt quantitative research methods to test the relationships suggested in our study. We hope that future research can verify our findings by statistically testing the relationships between key tasks and core competencies in the discernible development stages by utilizing techniques such as computational modeling.

Finally, our study mainly investigated the influencing factors and mechanisms of successful executive succession from the perspective of the newly hired executive's individual career development. However, as executive succession is recommended to be investigated in the full context of its entire duration [15], it is not comprehensive enough to consider this complex issue only from an individual's perspective. Future research should consider the synergetic impact of both macrocorporate governance and microindividual career development on executive succession.

This study can be extended by investigating the perspectives of corporate governance, which are proven to positively relate to stock returns, firm value, and operating performance [69]. Several governance mechanisms should be taken into consideration, such as the effect on executive succession of market competition [69], the interactions between internal executives [70], the interactions between external executives [71], inside debt [72], and compensation incentives [73]. These inside and outside contextual factors might have separated or integrated influences on the outcomes of executive succession. For a comprehensive understanding of the influencing factors and mechanisms of successful executive succession, the interactions between the career development of newly hired executives and corporate governance deserve to be further studied.

5.3. Practical Implications

Despite these limitations, the present study has a number of important practical implications for individuals and organizations. Our findings offer practical guidelines for newly hired executives from outside a company to achieve sustainable career development. Our findings reveal that newly hired executives from outside a company experience three career development stages, namely

the embeddedness stage, the symbiosis stage, and the cocreation stage, which consist of distinct key tasks and require different core competencies. Therefore, focusing on discernible key tasks and flexible use of various core competencies in different career-development phases can enable newly hired executives to accomplish sustainable career development across time and context.

A comprehensive understanding of sustainable career development provides insights for top management team members, who play a supervisor role in the process of executive succession. Before making a decision to hire an executive from outside a company, top management team members should conduct an in-depth investigation on the core competencies possessed by the executive to judge whether the executive could handle key tasks in the future work.

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