

## In with the Old? Examining When Boomerang Employees Outperform New Hires



These days, many companies routinely hire former employees (“boomerangs”). How is this working out? How do rehires fare once on the job? And why? What does this mean for hiring managers?

To answer these questions, Cornell's ILR Studies Professors Keller, Kehoe, and their coauthors, compared the early job experiences of 2,053 boomerangs and 10,858 new hires in a large, U.S.-based health care organization (dubbed “Asclepius”) over a seven-year period. Here’s what they found:

- In general, hiring boomerangs paid off. Overall, the rehires significantly outperformed new hires during their first jobs with Asclepius – an average tenure of two-and-one-half years. (It is worth noting that internal hires – i.e., those promoted or transferred into these jobs – outperformed both groups over the same period.)
- Boomerangs performed especially well in two types of jobs. One involving relatively high levels of administrative coordination; i.e., in positions such as project manager and purchasing agent that encompass planning, goal setting, scheduling, and the application of organizational routines and rules (see Figure 1). The other entails a strong interpersonal orientation, which incorporates attributes such as showing concern for and cooperating with others; as shown in Figure 2 on page 2, new hires struggled in these types of jobs, while boomerangs excelled at them, especially as the interpersonal dimension increased in importance (e.g., in jobs such as public relations manager and human resource specialist ).

Figure 1: Interaction of boomerang status and administrative coordination.

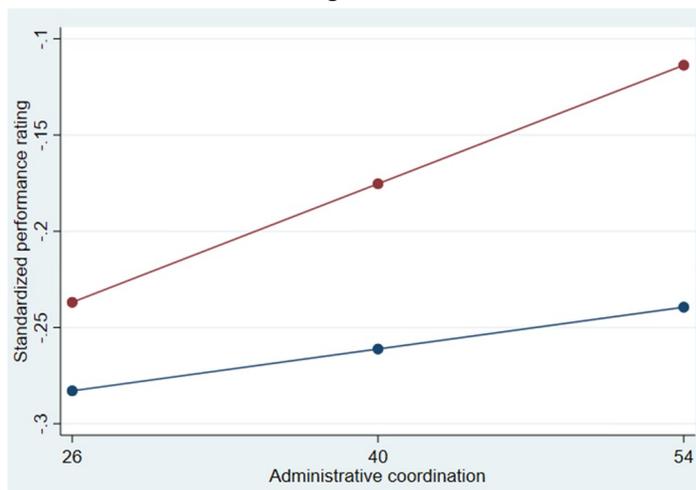
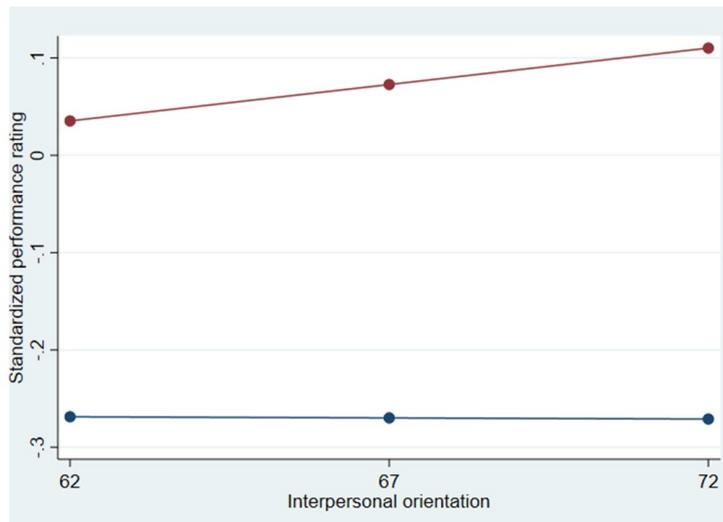


Figure 2: Interaction of boomerang status and interpersonal orientation



- Boomerangs’ superiority in these types of jobs probably stems from knowledge acquired during their first tours with Asclepius; in particular, a tacit understanding of how informal work procedures function, as well as a nuanced grasp of norms governing social relationships at the firm. Both are subtle but important insights that new hires don’t have. A word of caution, though. These advantages are likely to diminish the longer boomerangs are away from the firm and the more it changes in their absence.
- Boomerangs significantly outperformed new hires when working primarily with veteran employees and/or managers, but the two groups performed about the same when in work groups with many new members and/or assigned to managers who were relatively new to the firm (Figures 3 & 4 on pages 2 and 3).
- That is, boomerangs were more likely to face fewer social barriers and to be more readily accepted in situations that likely hadn’t changed much in their absence (see above), as well as in contexts where they were seen as less of a threat to the status quo. Boomerangs lost this edge in relatively fluid settings but still managed to hold their own with new hires probably because of their comparable professional skills.

Figure 3: Interaction of boomerang status and % recent hires

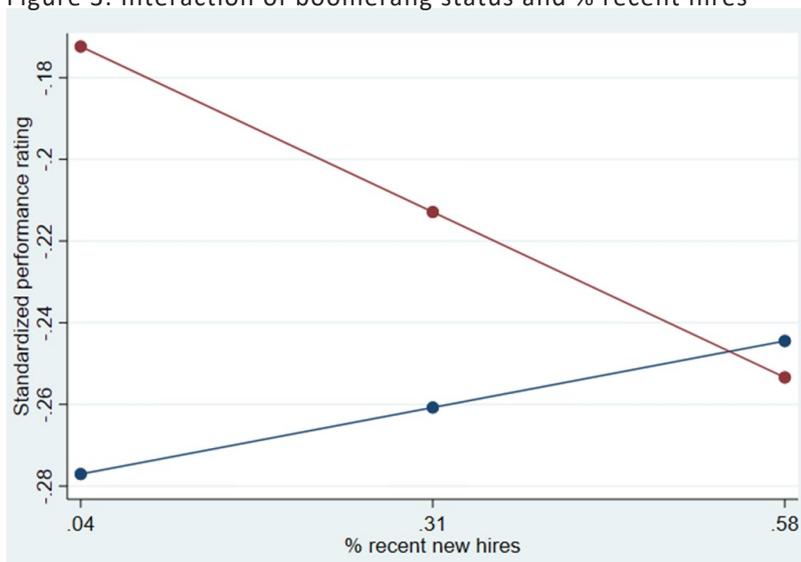
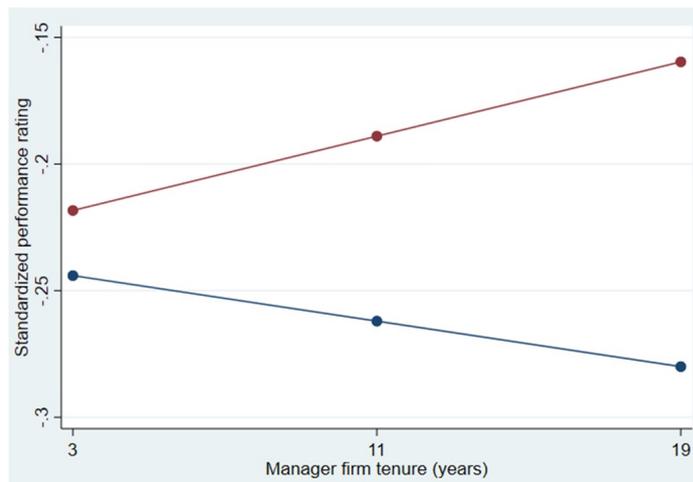


Figure 4: Interaction of boomerang status and managerial firm tenure



- With respect to outcomes other than performance, boomerangs and new hires were equally likely to quit during their initial assignments at Asclepius. Boomerangs were significantly more likely to be promoted out of these assignments, which no doubt reflects their superior performance levels. But they also were more likely to be fired, although not demoted, which may indicate that supervisors are less willing to cut boomerangs some slack if their performance levels fail to live up to initial expectations.
- As always, there is a need for further research to dig more deeply into some of the questions raised by this study. Why are internal hires more effective than external hires? What learnings from an initial hitch with a company are especially helpful during a second tour? For how long? What job characteristics other than those explored here are particularly suited to – or challenging for – boomerangs? Why are long-term employees and supervisors more receptive to boomerangs than to new hires? What can be done about this? Readers interested in obtaining answers to these and related questions – and thus enhancing their evidence-based approaches to sourcing high quality job candidates – are encouraged to contact the authors of this study to explore options.



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