



FACULTY OF TECHNOLOGY

**IMPROVING THE NEW EMPLOYEE
ONBOARDING PROCESS IN A CASE COMPANY**

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ABSTRACT

Improving the New Employee Onboarding Process in a Case Company

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The purpose of this study was to improve the onboarding process of a case company operating in the field of information and communications technology. A literature review was conducted to form a theoretical foundation for the empirical study, which was then used to identify potential improvement areas in the process. Ultimately, recommendations were made, that the case company could act upon to improve their onboarding practices.

This research was conducted as a qualitative case study. The primary method of data collection were semi-structured interviews, which were conducted inside a specific organizational unit, which the research was focused on.

Based on the current theory, a model for onboarding was established, with uncertainty reduction theory and newcomer adjustment emerging as crucial concepts which to focus on when making improvements in an onboarding process. The case company's current onboarding practices were analyzed, and improvement areas were identified. These areas included equipment and tools, information supply and temporary accommodation of international employees, the effectiveness of the current onboarding plan, addressing role clarity and social acceptance in the onboarding process, and the assignment and communication of responsibilities of an onboarding buddy.

Actionable suggestions were made addressing each of the improvement areas. With respect to the onboarding plan, a new solution was developed and implemented to improve upon the features deemed insufficient in the previous version. Additionally, based on the individual recommendations, a standard process for the entry of a new employee, was suggested.

The results of this study are not generalizable to other domains, as they apply only to the specific case company under examination. The study does, however, provide value to the case company, and its results can be referenced in future studies conducted in similar conditions.

Keywords: human resource management, onboarding, newcomer adjustment, qualitative case study

TIIVISTELMÄ

Uuden työntekijän perehdytysprosessin kehittäminen kohdeyrityksessä

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Tämän työn tarkoituksena oli kehittää uusien työntekijöiden perehdytysprosessia kohdeyrityksessä, joka työskentelee tieto- ja viestintäteknologian alalla. Kirjallisuuskatsauksella luotiin teoreettinen pohja empiiristä tutkimusta varten, jonka avulla prosessista tunnistettiin mahdollisia kehitysalueita. Lopputuloksena tuotettiin joukko suosituksia, joita noudattamalla kohdeyritys voisi parantaa perehdytyskäytäntöjään.

Tämä tutkimus tuotettiin kvalitatiivisena tapaustutkimuksena. Ensisijaisena datankeruumenetelmänä käytettiin teemahaastatteluita, jotka toteutettiin tutkimuksen kohteena olleen organisatorisen yksikön sisällä.

Vallitsevan kirjallisuuden pohjalta, perehdytyksen peruspilareista laadittiin malli, josta tärkeimpinä käsitteinä nousivat esiin epävarmuuden vähentäminen sekä uuden työntekijän sopeutuminen. Kohdeyrityksen perehdytysprosessi analysoitiin ja mahdolliseksi kehitysalueiksi tunnistettiin laitteisto ja työkalut, ulkomailta palkattujen työntekijöiden informointi ja väliaikainen majoitus, nykyisen perehdytys suunnitelman tehokkuus, roolin selkeyden ja sosiaalisen hyväksynnän käsittely prosessissa sekä tukihenkilön nimittäminen ja hänen vastuidensa kommunikointi.

Tuotetut kehitysehdotukset suunniteltiin käsittelemään jokaista havaittua kehityskohdetta. Perehdytys suunnitelman kehittämiseksi suunniteltiin ja implementoitiin uusi virtuaalinen ratkaisu, joka paransi vanhassa versiossa riittämättömiksi todettuja ominaisuuksia. Lisäksi yksittäisten suositusten pohjalta tuotettiin ehdotus standardiprosessista, jota käytettäisiin, kun uusi työntekijä liittyy yksikköön.

Tämän työn tulokset eivät ole yleistettävissä muille aloille, sillä ne rajoittuvat tietyn kohdeyrityksen perehdytysprosessin kehittämiseen. Työ tuottaa kuitenkin arvoa kohdeyritykselle, ja tuloksia voidaan varauksella käyttää referenssinä tutkimuksissa, jotka tuotetaan samankaltaisissa olosuhteissa.

Avainsanat: henkilöstöjohtaminen, perehdytys, uuden työntekijän sopeuttaminen, kvalitatiivinen tapaustutkimus

FOREWORD

This thesis aims to explore the concept of onboarding and make concrete improvements in the onboarding process of a case company. The thesis was produced during a period of six months of being employed at the case company. The writing process was ultimately a very rewarding experience and a great demonstration of how ripping off a bandaid is much easier when done efficiently in six months under contract, rather than prolonging it eternally with no strict deadline, which admittedly was the case with my bachelor's bandaid.

I would like to thank my supervisors Päivi Kekkonen and Arto Reiman for their great feedback and encouragement during this process. The same applies for Annukka Mäntyniemi, who acted as a supervisor from the case company's side and provided invaluable support during my time working at the company. A big thanks also goes to all the interview participants, who gave their time to answer my questions and without whom this study would have been alarmingly void of content.

Perhaps most importantly, I want to thank my family and friends, who have always supported me in all my endeavors and are just nice people. Finally, a special thanks goes to my girlfriend who, during the entirety of my studies, has been the main reason I have kept my sanity while struggling to get the page numbers to line up correctly in Word.

Oulu, 03.05.2022

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Study background

Over the years, the personnel needs of companies have become more fluid and workers more mobile. Today's employees change their place of work or position multiple times in their career and so, onboarding is an increasingly critical subject for companies, as they have more and more newcomers joining their organization. (Bauer et al. 2007)

When hiring new employees into an organization, it is necessary to select the right candidate for the right position. However, the optimal selection alone does not guarantee successful employment. Overall, there is a 25 percent chance that a new hire will leave their position during their first year of employment. While the recruitment process remains an important area for improvement, a crucial part of getting motivated and productive people working for an organization, and keeping them onboard, is what comes after the candidate has been recruited. (Harpelund et al. 2019)

A well-executed onboarding program can produce considerable, mutual benefits for the organization and the employee. These benefits can include increases in job performance, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, employee retention, and decreases in stress, time required to achieve full performance and intentions to quit. (Jones 1986; Bauer et al. 2007; Saks et al. 2007; Harpelund et al. 2019) High-quality onboarding can also positively impact well-being at work, as job satisfaction and stress are specifically mentioned in the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's (NIOSH) framework as factors affecting worker well-being. (Chari et al. 2018)

In the current literature, there are many informative resources discussing the concept of onboarding and even facilitating the designing of an effective onboarding program, such as the works by Bauer (2010) and Harpelund et al. (2019). However, along with other problems, COVID-19 came with additional complications in the realm of organizational socialization. Much like remote working itself, onboarding new employees in remote working conditions presents challenges that have not been explored as extensively as onboarding in its traditional, on-site state. (Rodeghero et al. 2021)

This thesis complements the current onboarding literature. It explores how the theory behind the concept can be applied to formulate practical suggestions for improving the onboarding process of a specific case company working in the field of information and communications technology. Additionally, the remote working conditions caused by the global pandemic, are considered in this improvement process.

1.2 Research problem

The aim of this study is to explore the concept of onboarding, examine the current onboarding process of the case company, and produce concrete recommendations for improving the company's onboarding practices, based on the current theory. The targets of the research can be boiled down to four research questions, which will be elaborated on below.

RQ1: What is the theoretical basis for an effective onboarding process?

The first research question is designed to address the theory of onboarding, in order to determine what would be the theoretical basis for designing or modifying an onboarding process. Also, characteristics and actions of an effective onboarding process are explored. The first research question is addressed and answered in the literature review of this thesis.

RQ2: How is onboarding executed currently in the case company?

The aim of the second research question is to establish the current state of the case company's onboarding process. The resources used to answer this question include material in the case company's internal network and the interview data produced in the empirical study. This research question is addressed in the empirical study section of this thesis.

RQ3: What are the areas in the onboarding process, where there are needs for improvement?

The third research question explores the case company's onboarding process further. The objective of this question is to identify the areas of the onboarding process in need of improvement, to make the overall process more effective. To be able to formulate concrete recommendations to the company, it must first be known, what are the issues, that the recommendations are designed to address. The third research question is answered by analyzing the data from the empirical study. The identified improvement areas are described in the results and discussion section of this thesis.

RQ4: What actions could the case company take to improve its onboarding process?

The objective of the fourth research question is to formulate the actual recommendations for the case company, to ultimately improve their onboarding process. This question is addressed by synthesizing the findings from the literature review and the empirical study. A major input here are the improvement areas identified with the previous research question. This question is answered with suggested actions for the case company, presented in the results and discussion section of this thesis.

1.3 Research process

The topic of this research emerged from a perceived need for improvement in the onboarding practices of the case company. Initially the focus of the study was to be on the development of a new solution for an onboarding plan. As the researcher was interested to study the entire process more holistically, after discussing the scope with the supervisors from the case company's and university's side, the final scope was determined to encompass the entire onboarding process, with the new onboarding plan being just one part of the research. After the scope was clear, initial research questions were formulated to describe the aims of the study.

The research began with a literature review of the topic to provide a foundation for the empirical research. Onboarding was studied from the current literature, and ultimately, a theoretical model was established, along with recommended practices for an effective onboarding process. This model was then used as a theoretical basis for making improvements in the onboarding process of the case company.

The empirical study began by establishing the research methods to be used. The methods were chosen on the basis of what would best serve the ultimate purpose of this particular research, while keeping in mind the available resources. The structure and questions for the interviews were designed based on the theoretical basis, as well as the initial notions of the onboarding process from the case company's side. In addition to the data extracted from the interviews, the case company's internal network was explored to establish the current state of the onboarding process.

By analyzing the interview data, potential areas for improvement were identified from the onboarding process. The improvement areas were also reflected on from the perspective of the findings from the literature review. The theory and the empirical study were synthesized, and concrete, actionable recommendations were suggested, so that the case company could make informed improvements in their onboarding process addressing relevant issues.

Finally, conclusions were drawn from the conducted research, summarizing the results and implications of the study. The limitations of the study were analyzed, and potential future research considered. The research process is illustrated in the form of a process chart in Figure 1.

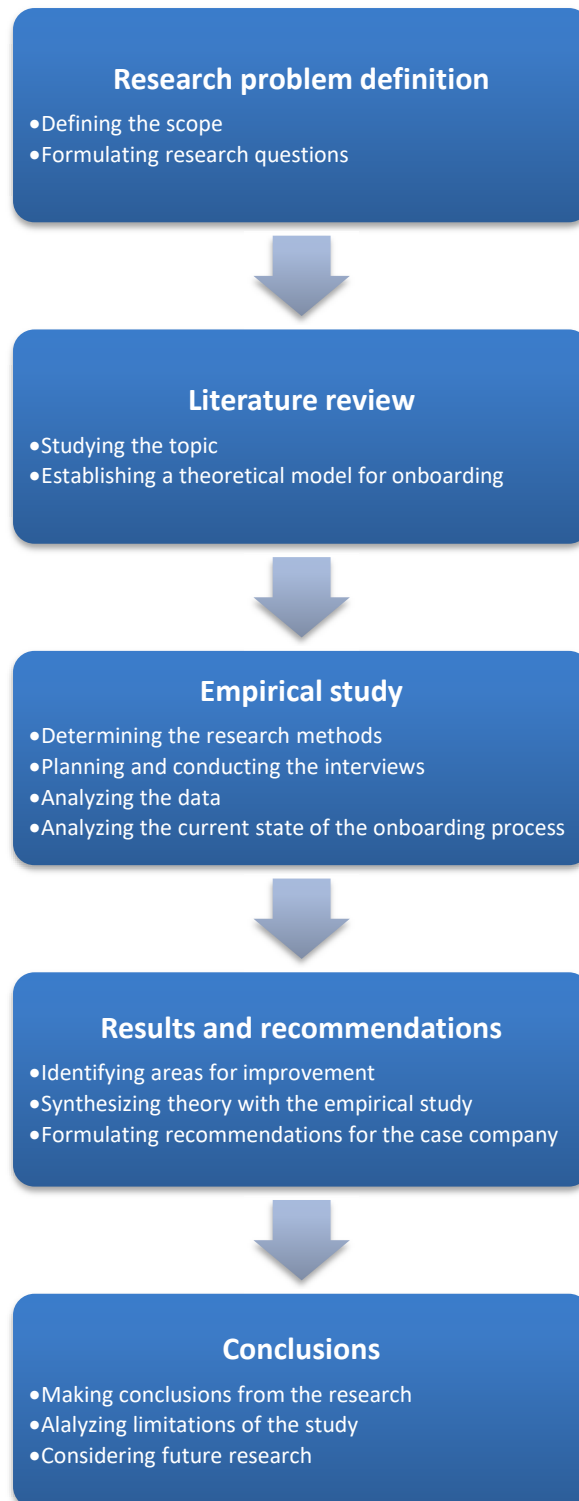


Figure 1: Research process

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Onboarding

The term that is used for the process of transforming an organizational outsider into an effective and integrated employee may vary depending on the organization and its location. Commonly the process can be referred to as “new hire training, new employee assimilation, employee adjustment, or employee induction”, for example. (Davila and Pina-Ramirez 2018) Other typical terms associated with the same process are “new employee development” (Holton III 1996), “organizational socialization” (Bauer et al. 2007; Bauer 2010), and “new employee orientation” (Wallace 2009). Though based on the literature, it is not exactly clear whether socialization can be equated to onboarding. Klein et al. (2015) argue that the two terms represent separate concepts. The reasoning is that onboarding consists of the actions of the organization that are designed to facilitate the socialization of the employee, whereas socialization is a longer process that occurs within the individual and is dependent on the efforts of the employee. Organizational socialization can be characterized as the process of a new employee beginning to feel that they belong in their new environment (Harpelund et al. 2019). Also, regarding the lastly mentioned term “orientation”, it seems to be dependent on the source in what capacity it is considered to encompass the process of welcoming and training the new employee. Harpelund et al. (2019) state that the concept of onboarding is often confused with orientation. While extremely important, an orientation program is just one part of the whole onboarding process, and the function of orientation is to engage the new employee into various activities in order to provide information about the organization they are working for. Based on today’s literature and business practices, however, the closest term to a universally accepted common name for the whole process is “onboarding” (Davila and Pina-Ramirez 2018), and it is the primary term that will be used in this thesis.

Onboarding consists of all the activities that follow the choosing of the candidate. The onboarding process should make the new employee feel welcomed to their new environment and ready them for the responsibilities of their position. (Harpelund et al. 2019) The process should consider both the social and performance point of view for the adjustment of the new hire (Bauer 2010; Klein et al. 2015). The onboarding process is

designed to enable and enhance newcomer adjustment, which is based on minimizing the uncertainty that an employee experiences when joining a new organization, thus helping them understand their new surroundings (Bauer et al. 2007; Klein et al. 2015). The core purpose of the onboarding process is, by engaging the new employee, to impart to them the necessary knowledge, skills and behaviors, and to minimize the time it takes for them to become a productive member of the team (Britto et al. 2018; Davila and Pina-Ramirez 2018). Klein et al. (2015) define onboarding as “formal and informal practices, programs, and policies enacted or engaged in by an organization or its agents to facilitate newcomer adjustment”.

When a new employee arrives at the workplace, they naturally need the basic practicalities taken care of. These might include a suitable workstation, working equipment and access to the necessary platforms and physical facilities, for instance. This, however, is just a small part of the entire onboarding process. In larger scale, effective onboarding should be about giving an accurate impression of the company culture, helping build productive relationships with colleagues, and communicating the requirements and expected results for the particular position in question. (Harpelund et al. 2019) Klein et al. (2015) identify three fundamental perspectives of how onboarding practices are expected to facilitate the entry of a new employee. These perspectives can be considered the reasons, why specific onboarding practices are implemented in the first place. Firstly, the onboarding process should minimize the uncertainty that the new employee is bound to experience when operating in a new environment. Secondly, the newcomer should be familiarized into this new environment, so that it would be easier for them to make sense of it. Lastly, during the onboarding process the new employee should be provided with the necessary resources to operate effectively in their target role as a functioning member of the organization. These resources include tangible aspects, such as the actual skills and knowledge associated with their role, and intangible aspects, such as the establishment of important interpersonal relationships with members of the organization.

Davila and Pina-Ramirez (2018) divide onboarding into two separate components: general onboarding and role-specific onboarding, of which they deem general onboarding more prevalent. While the two components can be differentiated from each other, they are complementary, and both needed in the onboarding process. General onboarding

contains aspects common to all employees in the organization, irrespective of the specific position. These might include the already mentioned company culture, extended with its mission, vision, values and history, and practicalities such as organization-wide rules, policies, and procedures, as well as general transactions related to human resource functions, for instance. The focus of role-specific onboarding is narrower and centered around the culture of a specific unit or department. It is designed to enable the new employee to gain sufficient knowledge and master the needed skills for their role as quickly as possible. The role-specific onboarding process is specialized for each position individually. (Davila and Pina-Ramirez 2018) Current literature states that even the recruitment phase should be integrated into the onboarding process, which, in many organizations, is not the case. The recruitment phase is a great opportunity to provide the newcomer with important information and involve stakeholders early, to facilitate better results for the whole process. (Britto et al. 2018)

Onboarding can be divided into four sections or levels: “compliance”, “clarification”, “culture” and “connection”. “Compliance” is the most basic form of onboarding where the object is for the new employee to grasp the necessary rules and regulations that have to do with laws and policies to be complied with. “Clarification” is the next level and consists of making sure the employee is fully aware of the responsibilities and expectations for their new position. (Bauer 2010) This level has much in common with the concept of role clarity, which is addressed in several studies on the topic of onboarding such as the one by Bauer et al. (2007), and is explored later in this thesis. “Culture” refers, quite predictably, to the culture of the organization. It is to do with conveying the company norms and practices, both formal and informal, to the new hire. The fourth and final element is “connection”, which includes the building of necessary relationships and establishing appropriate information networks within the employee’s new environment. (Bauer 2010)

Based on these four factors, the onboarding strategy of a given organization can be categorized into one of three levels. Level 1 is called “passive onboarding” which is the case when only compliance-based issues are addressed thoroughly in an onboarding process. There can be elements of role clarification but there are no formal procedures in place for communicating the organizational culture or cultivating meaningful interpersonal connections. When moving to level 2, the onboarding strategy is

characterized as “high potential onboarding”, where the first two onboarding areas, compliance and clarification, are executed at a high level with formal standards. Additionally, some elements of culture and connection are present, but typically there is no systematically implemented onboarding process established across the entire organization. Finally, the best performing organizations can be considered to practice their onboarding strategy at level 3: “proactive onboarding”. In this case every one of the four elements of onboarding are systematically integrated into the company-wide onboarding strategy and the process is functioning at a high level. (Bauer 2010) Historically, the typical introduction period for new employees has been observed to be considerably shorter than truly needed. On the basis of current information, it is advised that at least three to six months of time is reserved for a comprehensive onboarding period. (Harpelund et al. 2019)

2.2 Characteristics and actions of effective onboarding

2.2.1 Socialization tactics

Between several organizations the onboarding process might look completely different, in terms of formality and content (Bauer 2010). What the process entails, depends on the onboarding tactics used by the organization. In their paper, van Maanen and Schein (1979) explore these tactics in order to develop a theory of organizational socialization. The paper has since been used as a basis for further studies on the subject such as the one by Saks et al. (2007).

There are six dimensions of socialization tactics presented in the original paper by van Maanen and Schein (1979). The first dimension is *collective vs. individual* socialization. Collective socialization is a tactic where newcomers go through a common set of onboarding actions together in a group. In individual socialization the new hires have their own, unique actions that are experienced in isolation from other recruits. When the position in question is considered a complex role, the most likely alternative to be used is individual socialization, in which case more emphasis is usually on the operational aspects of the role rather than the new hires’ collective identity. The second dimension is *formal vs. informal* socialization. In a formal socialization process there is a specific, predetermined series of actions, which the new employee goes through, often in isolation

of some capacity from the existing members of the organization. Informal socialization refers to more of a “trial and error” type of approach to the onboarding process. There is not a strong emphasis on the specific role of the new employee, and they are operating amongst their peers right from the beginning. (van Maanen and Schein 1979) It has been established that the most successful companies, in terms of their onboarding, have a formal onboarding program in place. (Bauer 2010) The third dimension concerns *sequential vs. random steps* in the socialization process. This dimension has much in common with the formality of the socialization process, as sequential socialization refers to an onboarding process where there are distinct, ordered steps to reach the target role, such as the many stages of training, spanning over multiple years, that medical professionals have to complete in order to practice their profession. With random socialization, the steps are not known, they are not clearly defined, or they are changing on a regular basis. (van Maanen and Schein 1979)

The fourth dimension is *fixed vs. variable* socialization, which concerns the timing of the onboarding activities. In a fixed socialization process, there is a clear time schedule for the different actions in the process, which the organization complies with and communicates to the new employee. In variable socialization processes the temporal definitions of the onboarding activities are more ambiguous, and the new recruit may not be aware of when they should have made enough progress to advance through a given phase of the process. The fifth dimension is *serial vs. disjunctive* socialization. Serial socialization refers to a process in which the new employee is trained under an experienced peer, who works in a similar role to the one that the new hire is expected to fill, and thus, can act as a role model to the newcomer. In a disjunctive socialization process, there are no clear role models to guide the new employee, and they themselves must take much of the responsibility of finding their way. The sixth and final dimension is *investiture vs. divestiture* socialization, which has to do with how the identity of the new recruit is considered when entering the organization. In an investiture socialization process the new employee is encouraged to express their inherent skills, values and attitudes, as their personal characteristics are seen as an asset that can be built upon and used as an advantage. An investiture socialization process’ aim is not to fundamentally change the new recruit to conform to the existing values and norms of the organization, which conversely, is the case in a divestiture socialization process. In this sort of process, the new employee’s natural qualities are not prioritized in the same way, and personal

characteristics must give way to the prevailing culture in the organization. (van Maanen and Schein 1979) Very much in line with investiture socialization, is a theory called “personal-identity socialization”, which focuses on the individual identity of the employee. It is based on the premise that a new employee is less likely to leave their position shortly after their hiring if the onboarding process supports authentic self-expression and the new employee can present their natural best self at work rather than adapt their personality to the culture of the organization. This approach not only improves employee retention, but also has a positive effect on employees’ performance level, job satisfaction and engagement to their work, as the new hire doesn’t have to allocate mental resources into altering their identity to comply with the company norms. (Cable et al. 2013)

The presented tactics can be classified into different categories, which may simplify their analysis. In their paper, Jones (1986) illustrates a clear classification where the pairs of socialization tactics are divided into three categories based on their subject matter. The categories are “context”, “content” and “social aspects”. The first category “context” includes tactics that consider the circumstances and conditions where information is provided for the new employee. These tactics are *collective vs. individual* and *formal vs. informal*. In the “content” category, the tactics are *sequential vs. random* and *fixed vs. variable*. These tactics are concerned with the content of the information that is provided for the newcomer during their onboarding process. The third category “social aspects” consists of the tactics: *serial vs. disjunctive* and *investiture vs. divestiture*, which address the socialization process from an interpersonal and social point of view.

Additionally, the pairs of socialization tactics can be divided into “institutionalized” and “individualized” tactics. The pairs of tactics are phrased so that the first mentioned tactic in the pair belongs to the “institutionalized” category and the second tactic to the “individualized” category. For instance, in the case of *collective vs. individual*, “collective” is an institutionalized tactic, and “individual” a corresponding individualized tactic. (Jones 1986) It is important to note, that there have been studies with contradicting results on the subject of investiture socialization and it is not exactly clear whether this tactic is institutionalized or individualized in nature. (Bauer et al. 2007)

One area that the used tactics can have an effect on, is role orientation, which is defined as “the manner in which individuals perform their roles and adjust to task requirements”. (Jones 1986) Organizations may vary the socialization tactics used in their onboarding process depending on the role of the new employee. For example, when onboarding an executive-level employee, the process is likely to entail more informal, nonsequential and individual tactics, compared to when onboarding a lower-level employee. (Klein et al. 2015) Executive positions are often filled with the idea that the new hire will make changes in the organization rather than learn to execute a set of predetermined tasks. They will encounter more complicated situations that require solutions for which there are no clear instructions, and their onboarding process should reflect that. (Harpelund et al. 2019) It has been observed that institutionalized tactics are negatively correlated to an innovative role orientation. Conversely, individualized tactics have been found to relate to innovative role orientations, as well as higher levels of role conflict and ambiguity, which seem to go hand in hand with innovative roles. By using institutionalized socialization tactics, it is likely, that the role orientation of the new employee is custodial in nature. (Jones 1986)

Another finding, relating to the effects of particular socialization tactics to personal outcomes, has been that, when onboarding has been conducted with institutionalized tactics, the newcomers have expressed more satisfaction and commitment to their work, and less intention to quit. This may be a result of the probable relationship that institutionalized tactics have with the reduction of uncertainty in new employees. When using institutionalized tactics, it appears that tactics in the “social aspects” category have the most significant effect on the new employee’s role orientation and their transition into the organization. (Jones 1986) The categorization of the socialization tactics and their corresponding role orientations are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Socialization tactics presented in categories, with expected role orientations (Jones 1986)

	INSTITUTIONALIZED	INDIVIDUALIZED
CONTEXT	Collective Formal	Individual Informal
CONTENT	Sequential Fixed	Random Variable
SOCIAL ASPECTS	Serial Investiture	Disjunctive Divestiture
ROLE ORIENTATION	Custodial	Innovative

2.2.2 Newcomer adjustment

In his paper, Feldman (1981) presents a model for organizational socialization, which has since been supported and utilized in further studies on the subject, such as (Bauer et al. 2007). The model depicts organizational socialization as a process with three phases. The first phase, “anticipatory socialization”, takes place before the newcomer actually joins the organization. The next phase is called “encounter”. In this phase the new employee gets the first realistic view of the organization and can begin to take in the relevant skills, and prevailing attitudes and values. In the third phase, “change and acquisition”, the newcomer experiences the most significant long-term changes, in terms of becoming able to successfully fulfill their role demands. (Feldman 1981)

In the heart of the model are three process variables in the “change and acquisition” phase of the socialization process: resolution of role demands, task mastery and adjustment to group norms and values. These variables can be interpreted as the successful execution of the three major tasks connected to organizational socialization. Bauer et al. (2007) have

conducted a meta-analytic review on newcomer adjustment during organizational socialization, which bases on, and supports, the three process variables proposed by Feldman (1981). The meta-analytic review tests three main indicators of newcomer adjustment, which have been used often in organizational socialization research, and can be compared to the three process variables in Feldman's model. The indicators are "role clarity" (resolution of role demands), "self-efficacy" (task mastery) and "social acceptance" (adjustment to group norms and values). (Bauer et al. 2007) Bauer (2010) refers to these indicators as "levers that organizations can use to maximize their onboarding success" and, in addition to the already mentioned three, presents a fourth lever: knowledge of and fit within an organizational culture. However, this fourth category touches closely to the subject of social acceptance. Therefore, for clarity, this study focuses on the well-established model presented in the meta-analytic review by Bauer et al. (2007) with the indicators: role clarity, self-efficacy and social acceptance.

Role clarity means that the new employee understands their job role, in terms of tasks, their priorities and allocation of time (Bauer et al. 2007). It has been observed that when new employees are given information about their role requirements and how they can progress in the future, the uncertainty that they experience is reduced (Jones 1986). Knowing you can perform the tasks that are required of you is a major catalyst for goal accomplishment. Therefore, clearly communicated responsibilities and expectations for a given role are likely to increase an employee's work performance. (Bauer et al. 2007) Role clarity is a crucial aspect of socialization and should be taken into account even in the recruitment of the new employee. When the role and its responsibilities are made as clear as possible already at the beginning, it may lead to more rejected job offers, but in the long run employee retention is improved. (Bauer 2010)

Self-efficacy is to do with the newcomer's confidence that they can perform well in their role. An obvious requirement for this confidence is to learn the execution of tasks connected to their new role. (Bauer et al. 2007) One thing that can influence the self-efficacy of a new hire is the timing of when they are given actual practical tasks. It may prove beneficial for their adjustment if the newcomer feels like they can truly contribute to their new organization already in the early phase of the onboarding process. It is important to note, however, that the tasks given to a newcomer early on should be appropriate to their skill level. The tasks should be challenging enough to stimulate

development, but simple enough so that the newcomer can realistically succeed in completing them. (Harpelund et al. 2019) It seems that self-efficacy also has an impact in role orientation. It has been observed that new employees with high self-efficacy have the ability and confidence to interpret situations independently even when their onboarding path has involved institutionalized socialization tactics, which usually produce predominantly custodial role orientations and more desire for guidance in evaluating situations. (Jones 1986)

Social acceptance refers to the newcomer feeling like they belong in their work group. In order to achieve social acceptance, they should feel accepted and liked by their peers. The feeling of social acceptance from peers has been observed to positively impact performance. (Bauer et al. 2007) The organization should provide help and opportunities to build relationships in the work environment, but here the newcomer should also be proactive and take advantage of these opportunities. (Bauer 2010)

The factors that build into the three indicators of newcomer adjustment seem to be newcomer information seeking and the previously presented organizational socialization tactics. (Bauer et al. 2007) Newcomer information seeking is based on uncertainty reduction. When put in a strange situation, people have an innate desire to reduce their uncertainty and make sense of their surroundings by demonstrating information seeking behavior. (Berger and Calabrese 1975) Newcomer information seeking can be categorized into three areas that each correspond to one indicator of newcomer adjustment. Referent information is to do with role clarity, so the requirements of the job and understanding how to succeed in the role. Appraisal information relates to self-efficacy. It concerns the newcomer's ability of succeeding in fulfilling their role requirements. Relational information is connected to social acceptance and is to do with interpersonal relationships and their quality inside the new organization. Similarly, specific categories of socialization tactics have also been found to relate to certain areas of newcomer adjustment. Content tactics correspond to role clarity, context tactics to self-efficacy and social tactics to social acceptance. (Bauer et al. 2007)

2.2.3 Onboarding practices

Regardless of the specific socialization tactics employed, it has been established that in order to practice effective onboarding there must be a formal onboarding program in place. This means that there is an organizational plan, with defined procedures and policies done in writing, that is designed to get the new employee onto the right track, in terms of adjusting to their new surroundings. (Bauer 2010) In their study, Klein et al. (2015) conclude that when onboarding practices are conducted formally, meaning that completing them is required as opposed to encouraged, new employees are more likely to perceive these actions as more helpful.

When examining specific onboarding practices, it may be wise to divide them into categories to improve clarity. This can be done by categorizing the practices according to their primary purpose. This method was used by Klein and Heuser (2008, according to Klein et al. 2015), who developed the Inform-Welcome-Guide (IWG) framework on the basis that there are three primary purposes, and thus, categories of onboarding practices. There are practices that aim to inform the new employee, practices that welcome them and practices that are designed to guide them.

The first category of the three, inform, consists of actions that are designed to provide the new employee the materials, information and experiences necessary for their adjustment. This category differs structurally from the other two as it's divided further into three sub-categories: communication, resources and training. This is due to the wide range of onboarding activities applicable to it. The "communication" subcategory consists of providing information in one-way messages to the new employee, and also two-way conversation opportunities, where the newcomer can raise their concerns. The "resources" subcategory includes more indirect communication practices, that provide the new employee with information resources designed to aid with the socialization process, such as various information repositories on the organization's intranet, for instance. (Klein et al. 2015) The resources can also be more concrete and quite simple, such as making sure that the newcomer's workstation and equipment are ready on their first day, which helps the newcomer feel welcome when joining. (Harpelund et al. 2019) The third subcategory, "training", consists of more interactive practices designed to

impart the necessary skills and knowledge, that the newcomer may need in their target position. This can be orientation training, for instance. (Klein et al. 2015)

The second primary category, “welcome”, consists of practices that are targeted more towards the emotional and social needs of the new employee. The aim of these practices is to make the newcomer feel welcome and appreciated in their new surroundings and help their integration by providing them with practical opportunities to meet other members of the organization. (Klein et al. 2015) Generally, making the new employee feel important and appreciated helps guide the emotional experience of operating in a new environment in the right direction. (Harpelund et al. 2019)

Finally, the practices classified under the third category, “guide”, are designed to actively assist the newcomer in their transformation journey from an organizational outsider to a well-integrated employee. This category can include, for example, providing the newcomer with a designated buddy, who can act as a first point of contact during the onboarding period. (Klein et al. 2015)

Buddy systems are in fact becoming more and more popular, and with good reason, since they can be very beneficial to a newcomer’s socialization process. A buddy can reduce a lot of uncertainty that a new hire might experience by helping them learn how to operate and solve problems in the organization. A buddy can also aid the new employee in connecting with their peers and accessing tacit knowledge in the workplace. (Davila and Pina-Ramirez 2018; Harpelund et al. 2019) This sort of mentor can be a more easily approachable source of support for the newcomer, as approaching a manager with questions may create anxiety in certain situations if the employee fears that there’s a chance of appearing incompetent. Mentoring programs have been observed to strengthen the internalization of information during the onboarding period. (Bauer 2010) In a study by Klein et al. (2015), having a fellow associate as a buddy, was determined very beneficial to new employees in their onboarding. When selecting an appropriate buddy for a new employee, a few things should be considered. A buddy should be someone who is comfortable in that role, meaning motivated, empathetic and a good communicator. Additionally, if possible, they should apply for the role by their own volition. (Harpelund et al. 2019)

Research shows that offering more onboarding practices leads to better socialization, but the organization must determine at what point adding more practices ceases to be sensible, considering the needed resources. The IWG framework can act as a guideline in determining the variety of the offered onboarding practices. Since the five categories each represent a different objective of onboarding, it is advised that an organization offer multiple practices included in each category. (Klein et al. 2015)

An important support tool for onboarding is the use of a written onboarding plan. This is a formal, documented item that provides a framework for the whole onboarding process, that the new employee can easily follow. It includes the timeline, goals, responsibilities and available support for the newcomer. An onboarding plan should be in written form, effectively communicated inside the organization, applied in a consistent way and followed up regularly. (Bauer 2010) It is beneficial to design this sort of program individually for each position, with the goal of the new employee understanding their role and providing sufficient training for them to succeed in the role (Davila and Pina-Ramirez 2018).

It is important to note however, that onboarding activities are more than just a checklist of items that should be completed as quickly as possible in order to get the new employee working in their planned role. It is ultimately the newcomer's experience of the process that defines the success of onboarding. The timing of onboarding activities should be planned with this in mind. A series of intense introductory meetings right after joining the organization can feel overwhelming and in such case, it may be wise to spread the activities over a longer period of time. (Harpelund et al. 2019) In order for the new employee to actually internalize the information supplied to them through an onboarding activity, there must be a timely need for the knowledge. If an onboarding activity is conducted after the newcomer has already gained the knowledge from a different source, it has very little value. Also, if the activity happens too early, when there is no clear need for the information yet, the onboarding activity is likely to prove ineffective. (Klein et al. 2015)

In addition to all the mentioned aspects applicable to any standard onboarding process, there are some special issues that should be taken into account when onboarding in a global organization, where many new employees arrive from abroad. When recruiting

from a different country, it is crucial that the culture differences of the two countries are considered carefully. For example, the dynamic between a manager and an employee can be totally different in a different culture. It is also important to make a clear distinction of what parts of the onboarding are handled locally rather than on a global standard, since the respective laws and customs of a particular country may have a significant impact on the onboarding program. Digital solutions designed for onboarding have the potential to simplify and standardize the process, irrespective of the country from which the newcomer operates or originates. (Harpelund et al. 2019)

2.2.4 Remote onboarding

When conducting onboarding in a virtual environment, there are various crucial aspects that should be taken into account. Remote onboarding creates a challenge in producing a favorable emotional experience for the newcomer, which is an integral part of the whole process. In remote working conditions the organization should invest in being able to convey the feel of the company culture and work environment, and to facilitate the building of social relationships, through virtual solutions. This can include, for instance, providing videos of the offices and promoting the consistent usage of live video in virtual meetings. (Harpelund et al. 2019) Relating to this, in a study by Rodeghero et al. (2021), where the topic was the onboarding of software development teams in a remote work setting, one of the recommendations made was precisely to encourage the employees to turn their cameras on in virtual meetings to facilitate bonding with one another. Also, managers should set an example for the teams and keep their own cameras on in meetings.

Virtual onboarding may require more onboarding tasks to compensate for the lack of activation, that the newcomer might experience due to not being onboarded in the physical offices. In a virtual environment it is especially important that the learning path is structured very clearly, and the process includes effective follow-up and monitoring of progress. (Harpelund et al. 2019) A manager should arrange frequent meetings with a new employee in a consistent manner to provide support and to ensure that the newcomer is not getting stuck in their onboarding tasks. (Rodeghero et al. 2021)

It is helpful to a new employee if they have a clear picture of their onboarding activities when they begin the onboarding process. A useful solution for this is a well-designed

digital onboarding portal, which provides a clear overview of the timing and content of the process. (Harpelund et al. 2019) Computer-based information systems are useful tools, as they can make the orientation more consistent, even if it is conducted in several different locations and at varying times. (Bauer 2010) Also, the portal can show the newcomer's progress as they go through the activities, which may have a positive effect on their motivation. (Harpelund et al. 2019) These sort of technology solutions can provide a practical way of following a newcomer's progress and taking notice if they may need more support. (Bauer 2010) When all the resources that the newcomer may need during their onboarding have been compiled in a single repository, in the form of a digital onboarding portal, it can act as an extremely useful tool that the new employee can use as a fundamental source of information early in their socialization process. (Harpelund et al. 2019)

2.3 The significance of onboarding

When implemented effectively, a well-designed onboarding program can yield substantial benefits to both, the new employee and the organization they are joining. It has been observed that effective onboarding has multiple positive effects such as an increase in new hire commitment, job satisfaction and retention rates, and a decrease in stress and time it takes for the newcomer to reach full performance. (Harpelund et al. 2019) In their study, Bauer et al. (2007) present outcomes of newcomer adjustment, which can be considered comparable to the outcomes of organizational socialization, and thus, the effects of onboarding. These outcomes include performance, job attitudes and employee retention. Outcomes related to job attitudes can be refined further into job satisfaction, organizational commitment and intentions to remain. The mentioned outcomes overlap heavily with the benefits identified by Harpelund et al. (2019).

In their study, Saks et al. (2007) present a comprehensive list of newcomer adjustment outcomes, which are classified into two categories: proximal outcomes and distal outcomes. The logic behind the classification is based on the fact that some outcomes presented in the literature can be considered direct indicators of newcomer adjustment and some are more indirectly related. The proximal outcomes act as mediators for the distal outcomes and can be considered comparable to the indicators of newcomer adjustment presented by Bauer et al. (2007). These proximal outcomes are role conflict,

role ambiguity, and perceived fit. The distal outcomes consist of organizational commitment, job satisfaction, job performance, intentions to quit, and role orientation. (Saks et al. 2007) The same outcomes are presented also by Jones (1986). For the purposes of this study, these distal outcomes are deemed ultimately more relevant, in terms of examining the significance of onboarding. The outcomes have been compiled together in table 2.

There are theories that aim to explain why an onboarding process yields particular outcomes. Saks et al. (2007) base their study in two distinct theories, that provide a link between socialization tactics and outcomes of newcomer adjustment. These theories are uncertainty reduction theory and person-environment fit theory. Socialization tactics are used to influence how new employees perceive and react to their new surroundings. A major objective of this influence is to reduce the uncertainty that the newcomers experience in the entry process. (Jones 1986) According to uncertainty reduction theory people naturally strive to reduce uncertainty in unfamiliar situations, which leads them to seek information (Berger and Calabrese 1975). Reduced uncertainty is connected to lower levels of role ambiguity and role conflict, which then again affect the distal outcomes of onboarding (Saks et al. 2007). Person-environment fit is defined as “the compatibility between an individual and a work environment that occurs when their characteristics are well matched”. This approach involves several different areas and can be studied from the perspective of compatibility with job, organization, work group or supervisors. There is strong evidence, that these types of person-environment fit are important in determining employees’ attitudes and behaviors associated with their work. (Kristof-Brown et al. 2005) Socialization tactics have been observed to improve perceptions of person-environment fit, in terms of compatibility with job and organization. These types of fit have again been connected to positive distal outcomes of newcomer adjustment. (Saks et al. 2007)

Table 2: Outcomes of effective onboarding (Jones 1986; Bauer et al. 2007; Saks et al. 2007; Harpelund et al. 2019)

Increase in:

- Job performance
- Organizational commitment
- Job satisfaction
- Intentions to remain
- Employee retention

Decrease in:

- Stress
- Time to full performance
- Intentions to quit

Employees whose roles are defined too vaguely and experience ambiguity in their responsibilities may suffer from stress, which may even lead to burnout. Consequently, a failed adjustment period may result in decreased satisfaction in work, lower levels of commitment to the organization and a desire to leave the position or company altogether. (Bauer et al. 2007) Naturally, these outcomes are unwanted also from the perspective of the organization. In the case of lower-level employees, failed onboarding processes have clear negative effects on the organization, but these effects intensify, if the newcomer is higher up in the organization chart. It is crucial that the onboarding process of a senior executive, for example, is well executed, given the role's visibility and effects on strategy and financials. (Harpelund et al. 2019) When an employee trusts in their own abilities and gets the needed social support from their work environment, the aforementioned attitudes are affected positively. Onboarding is a crucial area of focus for any company that values employee retention, as decreases in premature turnover is one of the main outcomes of newcomer adjustment. (Bauer et al. 2007)

2.4 A theoretical model for onboarding

Based on the literature used in this thesis, a model is designed for the principles of an onboarding process, presented in Figure 2. The model is modified from the one presented by Bauer et al. (2007) illustrating newcomer adjustment during organizational socialization. In the heart of the whole process are the three indicators of newcomer adjustment: role clarity, self-efficacy and social acceptance. These indicators predict the outcomes of the onboarding process, including an increase in job performance, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, intentions to remain and employee retention, and a decrease in stress, time to full performance and intentions to quit. The antecedents to newcomer adjustment are newcomer information seeking and organizational socialization tactics. This model incorporates the organization's onboarding activities examined by Klein et al. (2015), as a sort of intermediate antecedent, which I consider to act as a practical connection between newcomer adjustment and its antecedents. The activities provide opportunities for a newcomer to learn about their new surroundings and so, act as a facilitator of newcomer information seeking by reducing uncertainty. On the other hand, the activities are also the medium with which the organization can execute its organizational socialization tactics. My conclusion is that when designing or modifying an onboarding process, the included activities should be examined from the perspective of their effect on newcomer adjustment by monitoring its three indicators: role clarity, self-efficacy and social acceptance. Also, as both newcomer information seeking and organizational socialization tactics have a basis in uncertainty reduction theory (Berger and Calabrese 1975; Saks et al. 2007), any additions or modifications designed to reduce the uncertainty of a newcomer, can be considered beneficial to the onboarding process. Focusing on these elements should produce positive results in the form of onboarding outcomes.

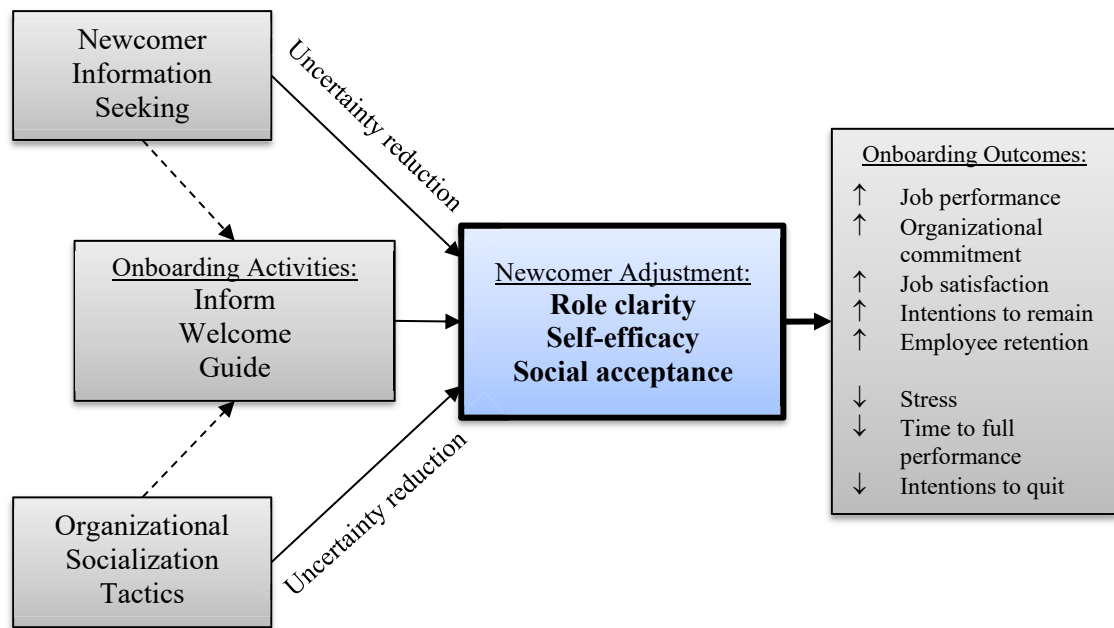


Figure 2: The principles of an onboarding process, based on newcomer adjustment during organizational socialization.

It is also important to note, that what the organization offers as onboarding activities may not directly correspond to what a newcomer experiences when going through the process. In their study Klein et al. (2015) observed that generally, from the organization's perspective it may seem that a newcomer is experiencing more onboarding activities, than they actually are. As the newcomer's experience is ultimately the deciding factor in determining the success of an onboarding process (Harpelund et al. 2019), my conclusion is, that if an onboarding process is to be improved, much emphasis must be put on the employees' experience of the process.

As mentioned before, it appears that for an onboarding program to be as effective as possible, it should be formal in nature, with a clearly documented sequence of steps to go through (Bauer 2010). Klein et al. (2015) state that in most cases onboarding activities are experienced as more helpful when they are offered formally, and their completion is required rather than encouraged. A useful tool to increase the success of an onboarding program is a written onboarding plan, which communicates the necessary tasks and support available to the newcomer (Bauer 2010). Especially when working remotely and going through the onboarding period in a virtual setting, it is crucial for the learning path

to be structured very clearly and for there to be effective solutions for follow-up and monitoring of progress. (Harpelund et al. 2019)

3 EMPIRICAL STUDY

3.1 Research methods

The research approach used in this thesis is qualitative in nature with semi-structured interviews used as the main method of collecting data. Cresswell and Cresswell (2014) define qualitative research as “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem”. In qualitative research, data is usually gathered in the setting of the participant and the researcher has a meaningful role in interpreting the data. This type of research has a less rigid structure and leaves room for flexibility, which makes it possible for the participants to bring up issues, that they experience to be the most meaningful (Azungah 2018).

For this particular study, qualitative research was selected as the approach for several reasons. As the study was conducted within a specific, smaller organizational unit, it would have been difficult to carry out an effective quantitative study. As the sample size would have been quite low for a quantitative study, its integrity would have been compromised, since quantitative approaches use statistical procedures to analyze the data (Cresswell and Cresswell 2014). Interviews with more open-ended questions were seen as the most appropriate method of data collection when studying a problem where the experiences of the participants are of great value. This sort of interview allowed the participants to speak quite freely about their onboarding experiences, thus also making it possible to inductively spot previously unknown improvement possibilities in the onboarding process. Qualitative research was the most effective way to grasp, as accurately as possible, the bigger picture of the onboarding process and specifically how it is implemented in the specific unit being studied, as contextual understanding of the phenomena under investigation is an inherent characteristic of qualitative research (Azungah 2018).

In addition to interviews, data was also gathered by exploring the company’s internal network and various SharePoint sites. These were mainly used to get an accurate picture of the onboarding process in its present state, and to find out what kind of tools and resources are available for onboarding. Additionally, it is important to note that the

researcher himself went through the onboarding process as he joined the company as a thesis worker. This is considered to hold additional value in terms of understanding the bigger picture of how the onboarding process functions and what it entails.

Data analysis in this study was done primarily by utilizing a deductive approach, which means to employ some kind of existing framework or theory to base the analysis on, rather than derive the relevant themes solely from the data itself. (Azungah 2018). This was due to the clear enough areas of interest that were able to be identified from existing theory and what was already known of the potential improvement areas of onboarding in the case company. However, during the analysis the researcher kept an open mind towards the possibility of encountering previously unknown themes from the data as well.

The research design used in this thesis is a case study which Dul and Hak (2007) define as “a study in which (a) one case (single case study) or a small number of cases (comparative case study) in their real-life context are selected, and (b) scores obtained from these cases are analyzed in a qualitative manner”. The case study design was found to be the most appropriate research method, since the study is conducted inside a specific unit in the case company exploring its onboarding process via the experiences of the employees who have gone through it. Here, the studied cases consist of the specific onboarding periods of the participants of the study, whose experiences of the process can give great insight as to what could be improved.

3.2 Research context

The researcher has produced this thesis for the case company as a Thesis Worker during a six-month work contract. The case company in question is a Finnish-based multinational organization working in the field of information and communications technology. The company operates in several different countries employing tens of thousands of people globally.

This study focuses on the onboarding process of a single organizational unit in the location in which the researcher himself was employed. The unit focuses on research and development of specific ICT components and has a headcount of approximately 120

people. While conducting the study, there were tentative plans that the findings of it could possibly be utilized also in other units at some point in time.

The subject for the study was selected in co-operation with the case company, where there had been observed a need for improvement in their onboarding practices. The main area of focus was the onboarding plan and other onboarding material which was experienced as a bit outdated and scattered. The objective of the study was agreed to be, to improve the material and structure of the onboarding plan, but also to inspect the whole onboarding process more holistically in order to detect other potential improvement areas in the process. A survey regarding some of the onboarding and competence development practices was conducted previously in the unit, but the results of that were deemed not sufficient to effectively improve the onboarding process, which contributed to the need of this particular study.

3.2.1 Onboarding process in the present state

The onboarding process in the case company is divided into three phases: prior to arrival, first 90 days, and 90 days to first year. In the first phase contact is made with the newcomer and preparations made to make sure that all the needed practicalities are in order when they arrive. The first 90 days is a crucial phase and also the main focus of this study. It is where learning is a substantial part of the newcomer's working life and they are equipped with relevant information and connections. During this time the objective is for them to settle into their role and learn to navigate their way in the organization. The third phase is the time where the new hire is supposed to operate as a productive team member in the organization.

A standard practice in the case company is that every newcomer has a designated onboarding buddy. This is someone who is working in the same team as the new employee and is able to act as the first point of contact and support during the onboarding period, especially with technical subjects. The buddy has a big responsibility in making sure that the newcomer is also aware of the everyday practicalities that need to be taken care of when joining the organization and unit.

As said, the main focus of this study was the first 90 days of the onboarding, during which there is much to learn of the organization and the specific role of the newcomer. In the examined unit this has involved different trainings and documents in several different systems and locations. This fragmentation, that has the possibility of causing much confusion in newcomers, was the main inspiration for development in this area.

The main resource for the newcomers has been a certain Word document which has acted as an onboarding plan for new employees. This document addresses all kinds of topics that are relevant to a new employee. The onboarding is divided into two sections: general information and unit-specific technical topics. Before these however, is presented information about the organizational structure of the unit. The general information section discusses human relations (HR) topics, other practicalities, and the company's global orientation. There are links to relevant trainings, intranet sites, and learning portals that the newcomer should go through or familiarize themselves with. There is also a link to a country-specific introduction in the form of a PowerPoint presentation. This too covers important practicalities and links to relevant resources, but partly overlaps with the main onboarding plan in terms of areas discussed.

The technical part of the document includes courses, study material and hands-on exercises about the technical topics in the unit that become relevant once the actual practical work begins. There is a lot of material available, but the selection is the same regardless of the specific role of the newcomer. This means that they have to determine together with their buddy or manager, which parts of the plan are relevant to their role and then remember to focus on those elements while going through the onboarding. Follow-up and monitoring of progress have been conducted verbally in meetings with the buddy or manager.

Here it is necessary to note, that a new solution to solve perceived problems in the existing onboarding process has been under development during this study and the researcher has been involved in developing it on the basis of this research. The solution is a personal onboarding plan in a virtual environment in Jira, which is a common tool that is used for backlog management in the case company, in many cases on a daily basis. The new onboarding plan solution can be customized for each new employee depending on their role, by selecting all the relevant tasks from a general template designed to contain

material for every possible position. In addition to the improvement in role-specificity the plan has more effective tools for monitoring and follow-up and also aims to gather all the necessary trainings, material and other resources in a single place in order to minimize possible confusion in newcomers. The fact that the new onboarding plan has been in development already in the early phases of this study, must be taken into account when analyzing the interview results and also when considering the limitations of this study.

Like said, the case company operates globally, and also hires people from abroad to their Finnish locations. This is the case also in the unit studied in this thesis. This process includes a multitude of activities in addition to the ones in the standard onboarding process, such as providing information about the practicalities of living and working in Finland and arranging temporary accommodation for the new employee, while they don't yet have permanent housing available. This temporary accommodation is financed for one month by the employer.

The case company values continuous learning, and onboarding is just one element of a larger concept of competence development in the organization. In the company there is a practice called Learning Index, which practically provides employees a chance for self-development during working time. There are virtual education portals with a large amount of courses and material available on different topics. Another option is to practice self-defined learning, by reading a book on a relevant topic, for example. Employees can collect Learning Index points by learning or sharing information to others. For all employees, 100 hours of working time per year is budgeted towards learning and sharing information. This process is facilitated by the Learning Index system where there are tools for recording learning activities and monitoring Learning Index points.

During the onboarding period, naturally, employees use a considerably bigger percentage of their working time learning. There are some curriculums of courses that are collected for the purpose of onboarding new employees. There is a curriculum covering organization-wide topics, but also a unit-specific curriculum for a specific part of the organization. However, the materials in these curriculums are again partly overlapping regarding the content.

3.3 Data

The data used in this thesis was collected from different sources. The case company's intranet pages and current onboarding material were used to gather information about the current state of the onboarding process and to assess what kind of resources are available for that purpose. The researcher's own onboarding experiences also gave insight about the nature of the whole process. This particular source of information, however, cannot be relied upon too much on its own, since this one specific onboarding experience does not necessarily represent the whole process realistically. The main method of data collection in the study were semi-structured interviews, which were conducted inside the unit in which the onboarding practices were examined.

3.3.1 Interviewees

For the selection of interview candidates, three different stakeholders were identified, that have a significant role in the onboarding process. These are the new employees going through the onboarding process, the line managers and the onboarding buddies. The experiences of the new employees were deemed to hold the most value for the study, so their proportion of the group of interviewees was designed to be larger than those of the other roles. Ultimately, 10 people were interviewed. The group consisted of 2 line managers, 2 buddies, and 6 new employees.

The potential participants for the interviews of new employees were searched while aiming to fulfill certain criteria. The participants should represent several different teams and roles. They should have gone through the onboarding process in order to have experiences of it, and there should not be more than a year elapsed from the time that they experienced it, for them to still remember their experiences from that time. These time limits had to be modified to be a bit more flexible in the end to reach the initial goal of 6 new employees interviewed. If the participant couldn't remember their experiences of some area, that data had to be disregarded in the analysis phase. This modification must be acknowledged also in the limitations of the study. As a final point, there should be both, Finnish people and people hired from abroad, interviewed in order to identify possible problems in the onboarding practices in both of these cases.

The other roles had a bit more lax criteria for selection. The line managers should be people who have been involved in onboarding new people and have a general picture of the whole process. The same applies to the onboarding buddies, where the main criterion was that they had acted as an onboarding buddy to a new employee. Using these criteria, suitable people from the unit were identified and they were asked if they would like to participate to the interview. The candidates who agreed to participate, made up the final group of interviewees.

3.3.2 Interviews

The interviews were conducted as semi-structured to allow freedom in expression from the participants, but also to maintain consistency in the structure of the interview and topics discussed. The questions were designed to be as open-ended as possible to capture accurately the experiences of the interviewees and to take advantage of the qualitative research method. There were the same set of prepared questions for each participant representing a certain role, and very similar questions between the different roles, just addressed from a different point of view. Even though the questions were prepared beforehand, the participants were told that they could elaborate freely and even divert a bit from the specific topic if they felt it would be relevant for the study. The interview structure was tested in the very first interview, and the participant was made aware that they could make observations and comments concerning the interview itself. The test interview didn't result in significant changes to the interview structure, so it too could be used as viable data in the study.

The atmosphere in the interview was to be as relaxed as possible to make the participants comfortable and for them to be able to give their honest opinions on their onboarding experiences. To this end, preserving the anonymity of the participants was a high priority in analyzing the interviews and publishing their results, which was also made very clear to the participants themselves. To emphasize the participants' comfort and to minimize errors from potentially inaccurate expression, international employees were interviewed in English and Finnish employees were interviewed in Finnish, with their answers being translated afterwards also into English by the researcher.

Due to the remote working conditions prevailing at the time of this study, the interviews were conducted virtually. Microsoft Teams, which is the primary application for virtual meetings in the case company, was used as the mode of communication, with some of its features also utilized. The interviews were recorded for convenience and accuracy, as the researcher could listen back to the interviewees' answers afterwards. Also, the automatic transcription feature was utilized in transcribing the answers. Permission for these actions was requested from the participants beforehand, and no participant was to be recorded involuntarily or without them knowing. Fortunately, all of the participants agreed to be recorded, as it was assured to them that the recordings themselves wouldn't be shared anywhere and existed only to facilitate the researcher's recollection of the conversations. Additionally, the researcher took manual notes of the conversations while conducting the interviews, mainly as a safety measure if the technology would fail unexpectedly.

As mentioned, the prepared questions were very similar between the different roles to gather different viewpoints of the same topics, and to establish whether the different parties have the same kind of picture or experience of the onboarding process. The questions were formulated based on the themes that emerged from the literature and the initial notions of the state of the process.

The interview for line managers started with some background information about the manager's history in the company and the in the unit. After the background information, they were asked about the onboarding process in a general manner before going into more detail about the onboarding plan and their opinions on it, as well as monitoring of progress during the onboarding process. Next, they were asked about how role-specific technical training is conducted, after which the subject of support channels for the employee were discussed. They were tasked to think about the onboarding activities from the perspective of the indicators of newcomer adjustment, and after that, discuss how the pandemic has affected the onboarding process. Finally, they were asked to rate the current onboarding process while pondering on the specific positive and negative aspects of it. As the line manager interviews were conducted before any employees were interviewed, one last question was included, where the manager could voice their opinion on what they would like to know from the employees being interviewed regarding their onboarding.

Concerning specifically the line manager interviews, the analysis had an extra variable that had to be taken into account when making conclusions. Incidentally, just before the interviews took place, all managers in the unit were presented with the preliminary version of the new solution for the customizable onboarding plan in Jira. This seemed to affect the conversations regarding the current state of the onboarding process, as elements of the new solution were described in some of the answers. These sections of the conversations, that clearly referred to the new solution, couldn't be considered as valid data, in terms of representing the current state of the process, as the buddies' and newcomers' corresponding onboarding experiences were from a time when the solution did not exist.

The interview for the onboarding buddies was almost identical to the line manager version, only the point of view was obviously different. The main deviation was the section discussing support channels for the new employee. This section focused on the buddy's role in the onboarding process and also their experiences of the clarity of communication in terms of their own responsibilities in being an onboarding buddy.

As the new employees were the most important source of information in this study, their version of the interview ended up being the most extensive, while still following the same structure as the others. In addition to role and work experience, the background section included questions about whether the employee was hired from abroad and whether they went through their onboarding remotely or on-site. After the background information, they were asked about their onboarding experience on a general level as well as their opinions on their onboarding plan and how their progress was followed. Next, there was a section dedicated to the support channels for the newcomer and their experiences of support received. After that, there were two sections exclusive to the newcomer interviews. First, they were asked about any sort of possible problems or unclarities in their onboarding, and if they knew where to look for information. There were some example areas stated in the questions, but it was made clear to the participants that they should mention any problems in any area they could think of. The second newcomer-exclusive section was about proactivity, where they were asked about their own actions during their onboarding. After this, they were asked about the pandemic situation and how they feel it had affected their adjustment. Before the conclusion part, there was a section dedicated to the three indicators of newcomer adjustment, where the participants

were asked about their experiences of their onboarding regarding each of those three indicators. In each of those three areas, there was a statement included that the newcomers were asked to give their stance on, by selecting an appropriate option on a Likert scale provided. After this, in conclusion, they were asked to rate the overall onboarding process, again on a similar Likert scale method and to consider what specific elements of the onboarding they felt were especially beneficial and what should be improved. The very last, small section was for the questions that the managers had indirectly wanted to ask the newcomers.

For a more detailed view of the questions, the interview forms can be found in the Appendices section of this thesis. In the following section, the data from the interviews will be analyzed in depth.

3.4 Analysis

At the end of the employee interviews, the participants were asked to rate their entire onboarding process, by giving their stance on a statement: “My onboarding process was very successful”. This was done using a Likert scale, where number 5 corresponded to “fully agree” and number 1 to “fully disagree”. Below, in Figure 3, are compiled the ratings of each of the newcomers.

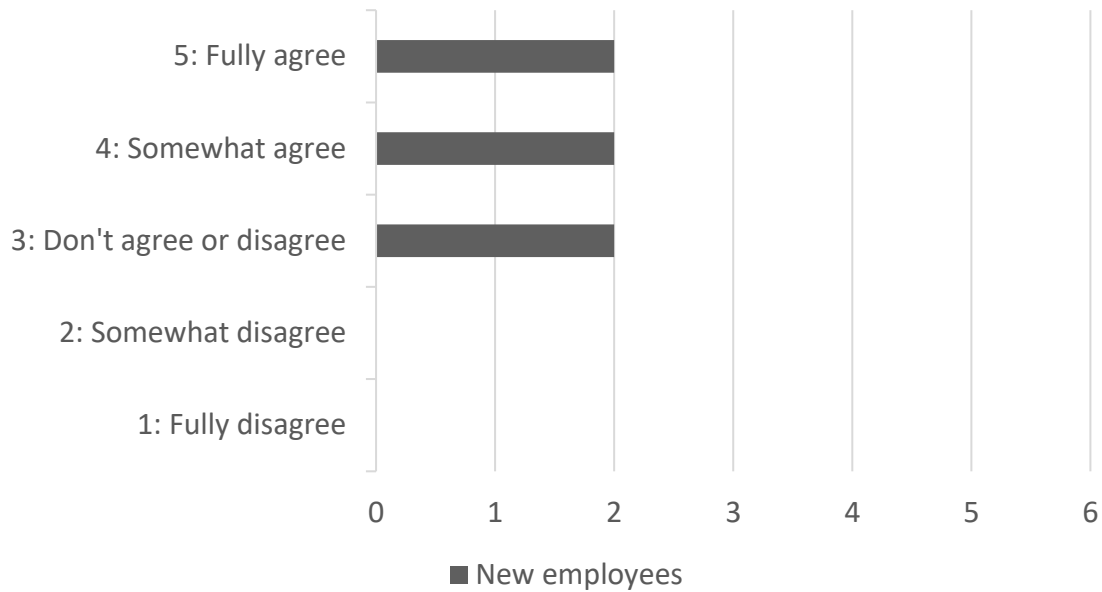


Figure 3: Participant employees' (n=6) stance on the statement: “My onboarding process was very successful”

The average rating here, comes out to 4, somewhat agree, which would imply that, from the surface at least, the onboarding process is quite functional, in a general sense. The ratings ranged from 3 to 5, with two ratings of 3, don't agree or disagree. These ratings indicate that there is some room for improvement in the process. In the following subsections, the interview data is analyzed in more detail. The areas that are not mentioned here, the participants hadn't had any significant problems with, and so, are not considered areas to be improved upon.

3.4.1 Practicalities

Generally, the participants had not experienced any major issues related to equipment during their onboarding. One employee however, had had significant problems with their equipment.

A lot of information should have been passed in onboarding, but it was not. Even things like infrastructure was not ready, like laptops, mouse, keyboard, headphones were not available on onboarding time. So, it was little like disappointing. - - Yeah, I was asked to join with my personal laptop kind of thing... So, and after a year also this situation is

same because one of my friend again joined and laptop is still not available to him.

– Employee 1

In some cases, there seemed to be some unclarities also with the necessary tools and setting up the work environment, as well as getting access to certain software.

So, tools... names of the tools are not very much communicated right in advance. Then you raise a query and then they will address that query saying you need to access this particular tool. So that kind of the issues are there. – Employee 1

Now I do remember that setting up the working environment was very difficult for me, like the tools and yeah... And I was asking my buddy, but she couldn't help because it's not her area, because I am in a different [unit], and she's in different, so she does not have really hardware level knowledge. - Employee 2

Regarding the use of software, uh, it took some delay to like add my name to that module. So, for example, like what I expected, if I am hired, this would give me access or permissions to use the software instantly so I can begin the work. But if it takes like 10 days, 15 days, so I think this is not good practice. – Employee 4

Also, one of the buddies brought up similar issues, regarding the clarity with the necessary tools and access rights for new employees.

When we for example, get a new employee, they need lots of different accesses or sort of tools and usernames for them and so on, so those should be clearly then organized and sorted, so that there is like a straightforward list. – Buddy 2

One issue, specific to employees coming from abroad, was brought up by two separate participants. This was related to the information supplied in the very beginning of the process, regarding their salary and how taxes are calculated in Finland. They felt that they hadn't received sufficient information on the subject beforehand.

Ah, the only thing which I faced issues is this salary part because the taxation here is very different than what is there in our country. There was one agency hired for this, but they did not give much idea on this. So at least after joining here in [case company] there

should have been a proper onboarding process for salaries, taxes and how the reimbursement works, where to update the accounts. - - It is very complex and at least, uh, employees are not aware of that and due to that, we are ending up paying more taxes here because they are not educating prior to our joining like how you should calculate your tax. – Employee 1

So, the taxation here is bit different. Yes, so uh at least, uh, the HR or somebody in the team should actually guide us like how much we need to mention. - - This is like, at the end of the year, so we are actually paying more tax because of that, because we did not know that. – Employee 6

Another, quite large subject, specific to international employees also emerged from the same participants, regarding the practicalities of relocating to Finland. They expressed their discontent in some of the arrangements made by the case company in support of the relocation.

So, onboarding-wise like few agencies were hired to bring us from our native company to Finland and few of these agencies are like meaningless. What they are doing is still not understood to me. So that those can be removed. Few agencies are good, they are helping a lot to get settled here and get proper things here. But few of the agencies, I don't know why they are there and what purpose they are serving. – Employee 1

Actually, I found that like, they could have provided... Uh, like help to move my stuff from [country of origin] to Finland. So, they did not provide anything as such. - - They could have done that. I heard that there were many other [units] or many other teams actually, which actually support for this, but in our [unit], there was no support for this moving our stuff. – Employee 6

Related to the relocation, there appears to be a lot of different official actions that need to be taken by different parties, and these actions sometimes take a long time, which makes the whole relocation process more complicated. One employee mentioned a lack of financial support during a time, where they hadn't gotten a bank account yet.

It takes around one and a half month to get bank account. And by that time, [case company] is just keeping all employees on their own, they don't provide any financial support in this time frame. They just say once you are here, once you have your account, then only we'll credit your salary. – Employee 1

Also, in some cases, the one-month period of temporary accommodation has not been long enough, as there are some time-consuming mandatory steps in Finland, that need to be taken before the newcomer can rent their own apartment. These actions can take such a long time that the one-month temporary accommodation runs out before the new employee has had a chance to rent their own apartment. This came up in the interviews with the same two participants who had experienced also other inconveniences with their relocation to Finland.

Now, if you see the process, if you don't have your police ID card, you don't get anything in Finland, is what the general rule is, because they will verify you are a valid citizen of the city or Finland. No one will give you any rental apartment, and no one will give you any like bank card or anything. - - They should have something at least to streamline this process. Either you get police ID card better or at least a bank card in advance. – Employee 1

So, since I did not have this bank card, so I got it a bit late, so I could not rent a house. So, there was some difficulty. - - Because [case company] actually provides only one month accommodation, so within that one month, I need to get my bank card and even my... uh, this relocation bonus and everything. And once I get the bank card, then only I can go to the police station and then get this police ID. So, once I get the police ID, then I can apply for this online authentication. Yeah, so that it is a long process that needs to be understood by [case company] management. – Employee 6

Employee 6 also brought up an issue where they had had problems with some agencies in Finland that do not operate in English at all, so there was a clear language barrier. It was contemplated that, even if these issues are not strictly work-related, someone from the case company, like an onboarding buddy, could provide help in these situations, where you cannot operate without speaking Finnish.

3.4.2 Structure and follow-up (onboarding plan)

The managers voiced their positive opinions about the current onboarding plan, the Word document, mentioning that it is definitely better than no onboarding plan at all. However, in the conversations there emerged also clear areas for improvement regarding the general structure and content of the plan. There seems to be a need to make the plan more specific to the unit and the role of the newcomer, which can be seen, for example, from these comments from Manager 2:

I've tried to always follow the process, which is defined for us, but there is room for improvement, as the [development unit's] process is quite general and it would be good for every [unit] to have their own, which is the direction that it's been taken now. - - As it [onboarding plan] now is that kind of Word [document], and it's recommended that it's used from the one specific place, there aren't a lot of editing possibilities, so that's maybe the downside with that plan, but it's definitely better than no plan at all. - Manager 2

Even though the other parties interviewed, had generally positive impressions of the onboarding plan and its material, the same topic of role-specificity came up also in the interviews with buddies and new employees. Buddy 2, for example, commented on the plan from the perspective of a non-technical role, which is rarer in the case company:

Maybe it should be possible to manage the process better according to the role [of the newcomer]. Most of our employees come into a technical role, but for example, here in the autumn we had that, if an employee comes into the building in that sort of non-technical role, then we should be able to very clearly see, what trainings are not necessarily relevant. – Buddy 2

5 of the 6 employees interviewed, clearly acknowledged the general nature of the onboarding plan and expressed that it would be beneficial if the plan was more specific to a particular role, like seen in these comments:

They provide you all the information. And then according to your role, you can pick those materials to refer and then you can groom yourself accordingly. But material was quite general and then you need to pick based on your role and responsibilities. – Employee 1

It [role] is considered [in the onboarding plan], but maybe it could be improved because, my role is like a bridge between two [units]. And the onboarding was mainly on the team I am employed, or I'm assigned. - - But it would be nice also to have on the onboarding plan, more involvement from the other [unit]. – Employee 2

Well, if I think about it afterwards like this, then maybe it could have been good to go through more specifically as to what is expected in this role. That what are the most important things and tools. – Employee 3

Regarding the use of the onboarding plan, specifically in the case of employee 2, the situation had been so that, there hadn't been a meeting where they would have gone through the plan with a buddy or a manager beforehand. This resulted in the employee having to go through the Word document themselves in its entirety.

According to the interviews, another clear area of improvement with the onboarding plan seems to be the possibilities for follow-up and monitoring progress. The progress has been followed mainly in conversations with the line manager and buddy, in meetings that are scheduled at different intervals, depending on the employee. From the managers' perspective these issues were brought up especially by Manager 2.

I think it's functional even now, the plan, but it's then just a document that the employee is left with, and it's then in their hands how they report progress - - In the conversation [1to1 meetings] it often stays on a general level, and you have to then start to pry, what they have done. - - If there was a clear structure, as to what courses are included and people would go through and report it via a tool, that how many of them have been completed, it would significantly ease the manager's monitoring. – Manager 2

Buddies and employees also generally felt that the onboarding plan is a good tool, and the Word document has a clear structure. However, similar areas for improvement, related to following progress, emerged when the conversations proceeded further, and the current methods of follow-up were discussed.

Well, for me at least, the monitoring comes along with the other work, that when we have conversations, we discuss things and go through things and questions, that the newcomer thinks of. There the monitoring comes at the same time. – Buddy 2

As I remember, it [progress-following] was maybe more informal. So, if it seemed like things were getting done, then it wasn't necessary to have any particularly controlled or systematic monitoring. – Employee 5

Yeah, progress was actually followed by my line manager. - - Uh, it was not like a regular meeting. It was kind of like, I mean, if there is some issue, then I would bring it up to him. – Employee 6

Regarding the progress-following, employee 2 had some challenging circumstances as their line manager changed during the onboarding period, and there was a period where they couldn't have follow-up meetings as the previous manager had left before the new one started in that position. Employee 2 stated however, that they then had conversations with the new line manager once they had started in the position.

3.4.3 Support

From the interviews, it becomes clear that the onboarding buddy is a valuable part of the whole onboarding process. According to the managers, the selection of the buddy is done quite informally and assessed case by case.

Well, I've always looked at in which role the new employee is coming, and who there are in that kind of role, or who they will be working with on a day-to-day basis. - - So, the technical competence area would be the same as the newcomer's. - - And I've always asked about voluntariness, but people have gladly been taking the role. – Manager 1

We try to also think, who would be the right person for support for the person in the new role. And we understand that people are busy, so you can't always put the same person there, so at times we try to kind of assign different people as buddies, but the kind of people who could then support the newcomer's training and onboarding as far as possible. - - There's not really any standard model, it's considered case by case. – Manager 2

The managers and buddies interviewed seemed to have the same sort of general idea of the role of an onboarding buddy. The main part is to be the first point of contact to the newcomer, and also take part in the technical training.

Roughly speaking, they are kind of the first contact channel. When you're wondering where the health center is, then the buddy is a good contact to ask. And the buddy guides in the sort of practical work, practical matters. And the buddy also guides to the technical project where you're going. The kind of close person who you can contact when you feel that you have even a silly question... - Manager 1

It's really important, the buddy's role, in that there's a lot of things in the orientation that people probably wouldn't dare to ask from the line manager, but it's easier to ask from the buddy. And in a way it's a working concept [onboarding buddy system] and we should absolutely hold on to it... – Manager 2

I organized all the time that kind of follow-up meetings and tried to make myself somehow as friendly and familiar as possible, so that these new people dare to ask things and ask a meeting... - Buddy 1

By my understanding, the aim is to select the buddy so that they would have then an opportunity to guide the newcomer also in the practical work or technical work as far as possible. – Buddy 2

The employees had generally very positive experiences regarding their buddies and the support they had received during their onboarding, both from the buddy and the line manager, like seen from these comments from a few of the employees:

Yeah, it was well connected like he [buddy] like at least once in a week or twice in a week he will come, and he will ask like "how is things going?" And we are always welcome to approach them. As in when we need, but if we don't ping them, at least they come back to us and ask like is "everything going good?" Or if I need any help. So that way it was well connected. – Employee 1

She [buddy] was available all the time. I was like pinging her in Teams and asking, but I would say that she did her best. But she had also... she does not have also all the answers to my questions, but I think that is normal. – Employee 2

Yeah, actually he [line manager] supported me throughout. I mean, it was good, so at least he supported, when I actually brought up the issues. – Employee 6

In the case of employee 3 however, it was revealed that their onboarding experience had some unexpected factors, considering the standard procedures in the company. They were hired in the middle of a busy project as a Local Project Owner (LPO), after the previous person had left the position, so there was no real handover period. Additionally, they were not assigned an onboarding buddy when they started in the position, so they had to find out many things by themselves. They attributed their relatively successful adjustment to the new responsibilities largely to their extensive work experience and the contacts they had had beforehand. They speculated that a more inexperienced person in similar circumstances might have experienced the situation as more distressing than they did. Employee 3 did express however, that their line manager offered great support and they also had significant help from their colleagues. Also other participants mentioned that they received support from their team members in addition to their buddy and line manager.

One potential area of improvement emerged in the interviews with the buddies, regarding their responsibilities in the onboarding process. The interviewed buddies had somewhat similar experiences with each other, related to the communication of an onboarding buddy's responsibilities. Mainly the whole process of being a buddy appeared to have been quite successful and, as mentioned, the buddies seemed to have the same perception about the general role of the buddy as the managers did. However, the actual, specific responsibilities related to the buddy's role seemed to be a bit unclear to the buddies.

Well, I think I read some very short document, very general. But I haven't gotten anything particularly... I don't think that it's... at least anything very clear. - - I would like to see that what kind of things this kind of buddy has to remember. Checklists about what kind of things has to be taught. – Buddy 1

At least I haven't gotten any kind of actual training for the buddy's role specifically. - - Well, no I don't feel [like buddy's responsibilities have been communicated clearly enough], because if there are some special responsibilities, then I'm not aware of them.
– Buddy 2

The buddies also felt that they hadn't gotten any significant support for their role, but also that they didn't really need any, and suspected that they would have gotten the support should they have requested it.

3.4.4 Remote working

The interviewed people felt strongly that the remote working situation caused by the pandemic has had a clear negative impact to the onboarding of new employees. The managers or buddies couldn't think of any specific things that would have been officially changed or added in the onboarding process, due to the pandemic situation. A major area of impact seems to be communication, which can be seen from these comments, for instance:

A person may even come from abroad and the only contact to their team in the first few months is when their line manager gives them a laptop with a mask on. And you have never met your colleagues, who you're supposed to be working daily... - - And most don't even turn their camera on in the virtual setting, so it's quite a challenge... - Manager 1

It is surely harder when people can't sort of ask quickly from the person next to them. - - And another thing is that people don't run into each other in the hallways like before. It would be that you run into someone, you exchange a few words and there it was easy to kind of raise off the topic, that by the way I've had problems with this. That kind of thing doesn't happen, so there's not that kind of coffee table conversation now... - Manager 2

It [pandemic] definitely has an impact, but we have managed, nonetheless. It just requires active calling from every party. – Buddy 2

Also, from the employee interviews, the takeaway was that COVID-19 was a major obstacle in their onboarding. All of the interviewed people had gone through their

onboarding process mainly remotely. A few employees speculated, that practicalities and learning could have gone over smoother had they experienced their onboarding on-site.

Yeah, this actually affected because if this is not there, if COVID-19 is not there, I could have went to office for onboarding. There is well managed onboarding process, then the infrastructure is also ready, like your laptop and everything is also ready, but that all get affected due to this COVID and somehow that link was broken. – Employee 1

I had to stay home and learn things. If it was at the office, at office-site, it would have been quick to understand many, many things. At home, like, I study, I learn, but not everything goes in my mind. – Employee 4

Also, the negative effects of remote working to social integration were brought up by Employee 5, for example:

Well, ultimately regarding the actual work, not much, I don't think. But, regarding the team and teamwork, well surely it [COVID-19] has had an effect [to the onboarding process], all in all. There isn't really a chance to develop that kind of real personal chemistry with others. – Employee 5

Although remote working seems to be a challenge to the socialization process, employee 3 also acknowledged some positive aspects of it. They brought up that it is easier to focus when working remotely, and that they haven't had problems with virtual meetings. Also, several participants brought up that they understand that it was absolutely necessary to work remotely, and they didn't want to blame the case company for these difficulties.

3.4.5 Role-clarity

Based on the interviews, there didn't seem to be any kind of standardized onboarding activity which would have addressed role-clarity specifically. It seemed to be integrated more into the common practices that take place when a new employee joins the unit, which can be interpreted from these comments by the managers:

Everything in it [onboarding process] makes a foundation for that the person understands where they have come into, and what is expected of them begins to form. - - ... what is

expected of them in the role they have been chosen for, goes through normal goal setting and then we go to our PI plan, so plan thoroughly the next months, what to do then. In the beginning there's only the onboarding, but more and more there is also project work.

– Manager 1

The manager usually looks at, and discusses with the LPO or team leader, who looks at the area from a technical standpoint, so we try to find a role for the person [newcomer], when they come into the building, so that the role would be ready already on the first day.

- - In some cases, you necessarily can't say right away what the role is, and it remains a bit unclear, they are just told what they should start to do and what subjects to start to study. It's kind of case-by-case that how accurately you can communicate the role.

– Manager 2

As mentioned, the indicators of newcomer adjustment had their own sections in the interview structure, with a rating to be given on a Likert scale by the 6 interviewed employees. They were asked to give their stance on this statement: “After my onboarding, I knew exactly what my tasks are and what is expected of me to succeed in my role.” The rating was given on a scale of 1 to 5, where number 5 corresponded to “fully agree” and number 1 to “fully disagree”. Below, in Figure 4, are compiled the ratings of each of the newcomers.

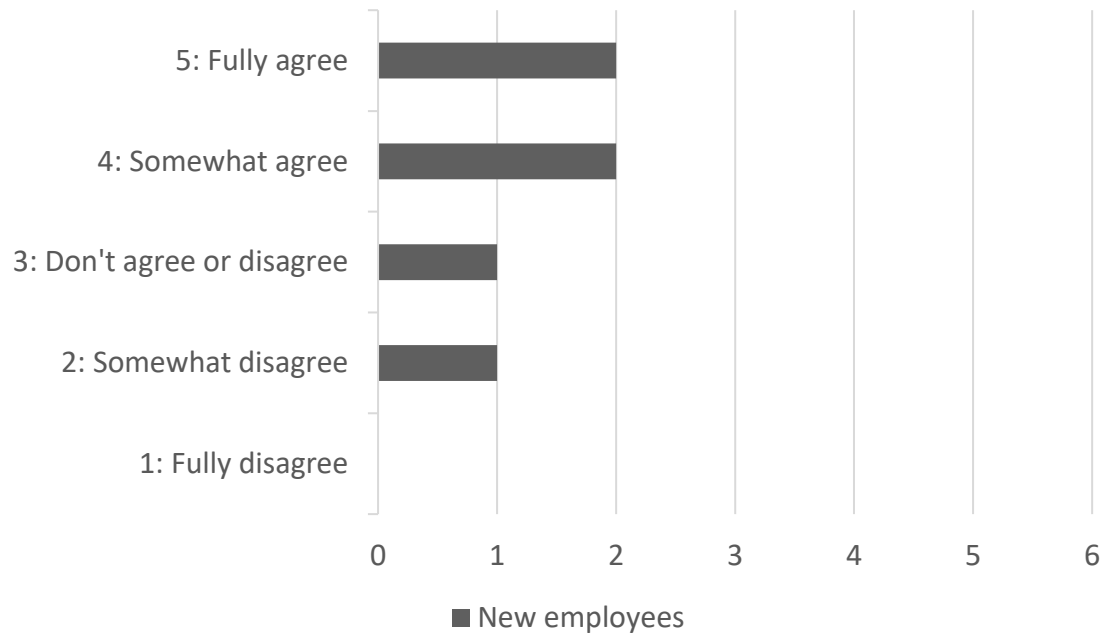


Figure 4: Participant employees' (n=6) stance on the statement: “After my onboarding, I knew exactly what my tasks are and what is expected of me to succeed in my role”

The average rating for role clarity, within these interviewed employees is 3,83, with the ratings ranging from 2 to 5. The most notable part here may be the fact, that there are ratings as low as 2 and 3. There were mentioned some uncommon circumstances, regarding the onboarding period and role of some participants, in the interviews, but this definitely seems to be a potential area for improvement, as can be interpreted from these employee comments, for instance:

Yes, [I understood my role and its expectations] to some extent, I couldn't say like perfectly. - - Yeah, the role is not clear enough, but it is getting clearer, slowly. Not even now... Even now I'm not 100% sure exactly what I'm expected to do, even if I am now working. – Employee 2

I didn't know everything, as to what, or how I should do, specifically because I didn't have any model or time. Because it was an ongoing project in crisis, so no one has time to explain, when there's a fire. – Employee 3

Not in the beginning [understood the role and its expectations]. Uh, I was unaware about this thing, but after a couple of months, when I was given responsibility partly, then I begin to understand. What... What is the workflow and what my organization wanted me to do. – Employee 4

3.4.6 Self-efficacy

From the interviews with the managers and buddies, it can be interpreted that the technical training for a specific role is generally done in close connection with the buddy and the rest of the team. The buddy especially has a big responsibility in making sure, that the newcomer starts to grasp their work tasks, which became clear from these comments from the managers, for example:

So, here a person [newcomer] joins a specific team, and from that team an official buddy is assigned for them. The responsibility [of technical training] falls largely on the buddy and the team - -. Line manager obviously monitors it but has a smaller role in that phase. The team leader, that is the LPO [local product owner], and the buddy have the decisive role when we move into the actual project work. – Manager 1

They [buddy] help in accessing all the environments and make sure that the basic things are working, and if needed, another person can give technical guidance if it [role] is in an area where the buddy doesn't have expertise. – Manager 2

Manager 2 also mentioned the emphasis put on communication in the case of technical training:

There's the attitude that dialogue has to be kept open. - - So there would be as low threshold as possible to have conversations and talk about your challenges, that if you don't know something, it's not a problem. You can always learn, but if you don't want to even try, then that's a problem. – Manager 2

Again, the interviewed employees gave their stance on a statement, in this case, related to self-efficacy. The statement was: “After my onboarding, I was confident that I had the required skills and abilities so that I could perform the tasks required of me.” The rating was given on a scale of 1 to 5, where number 5 corresponded to “fully agree” and number

1 to “fully disagree”. Below, in Figure 5, are compiled the ratings of each of the newcomers.

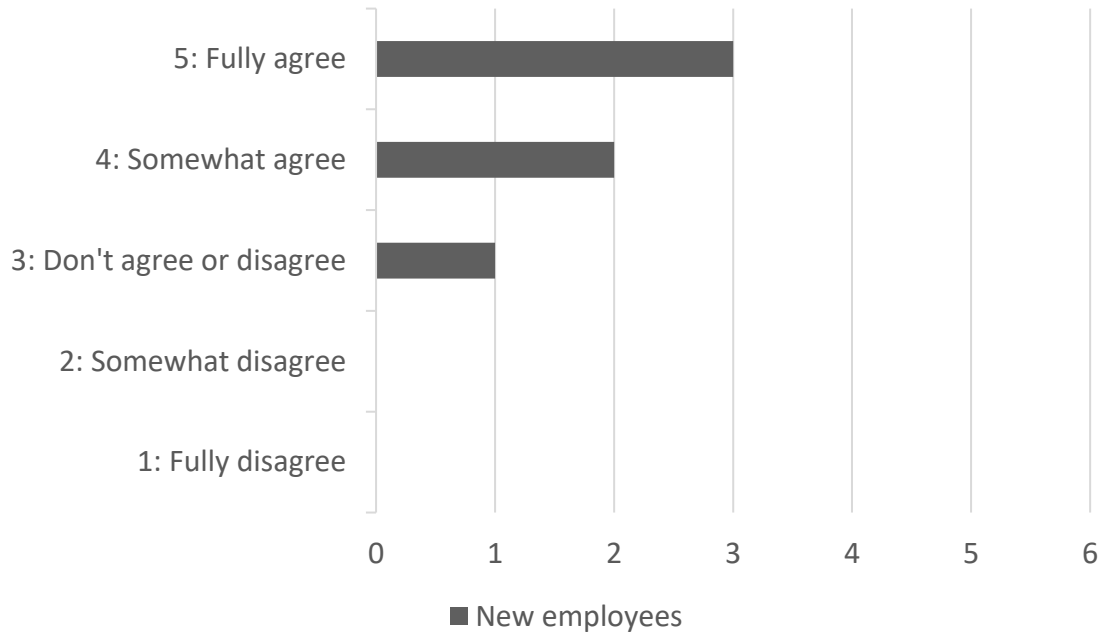


Figure 5: Participant employees' (n=6) stance on the statement: “After my onboarding, I was confident that I had the required skills and abilities so that I could perform the tasks required of me”

Here, the average rating, in the case of self-efficacy is 4,33, with the ratings ranging from 3 to 5. In most cases the technical training seemed to have been successful and the employee was confident in their ability to perform the tasks assigned to them after their onboarding. There were some instances however, where the confidence in their own abilities wasn't very high. This seemed to correlate partly with role-clarity, as when the responsibilities are not clear, it naturally also affects the confidence in fulfilling those responsibilities. The effect of role clarity in self-efficacy can be seen from these comments by Employee 2 and Employee 4:

I could perform well, I'm not a bit sure about the hardware part yet, because I don't know exactly. But I know the tools and I may need to refresh myself and... But I don't know exactly what kind of tasks, or to the details of the tasks, like what I'm going to do. So, in that sense I cannot say like I'm fully confident. - - I would prefer it to be much better, like high, high confidence, but that is because I don't know the task exactly. – Employee 2

Okay, so not in the beginning. I was not fully confident [to perform well in my role] and I was waiting for responsibility, like what is the responsibility they give to me, and how am I going to perform that. – Employee 4

3.4.7 Social acceptance

Much like role clarity, social integration, appears to be addressed in a more informal way, with common practices, that are carried out a bit differently, depending on the situation, like seen from these comments by the managers and buddies:

... He [line manager] announces and introduces the new member to the team - -. And nowadays in the [unit] info sessions we introduce the newcomers. – Manager 1

Usually, I try to meet the person face to face on the first day, and possibly with some other people we have gone to lunch... - -. Then, usually during the same that when the person has joined the team, we've had a team meeting where they can introduce themselves and others have given short introductions as well. - - And also we've had some unofficial coffee breaks, and tried to ask something about the new person to get them kind of active and feel like they are part of the team. – Manager 2

... And certainly, even before they [newcomer] have started, we tell that this person is coming to this role, but not really more than that beforehand. But then, when they start, the aim is to very soon introduce them to the squad and the whole team – Buddy 2

The employees were, again, asked to give their stance on a statement with a Likert scale, regarding social acceptance this time. This statement was: “After my onboarding, I felt that I was a part of the team and accepted by my peers and superiors.” The rating was given on the same scale of 1 to 5, where number 5 corresponded to “fully agree” and number 1 to “fully disagree”. Below, in Figure 6, are compiled the ratings of each of the newcomers.

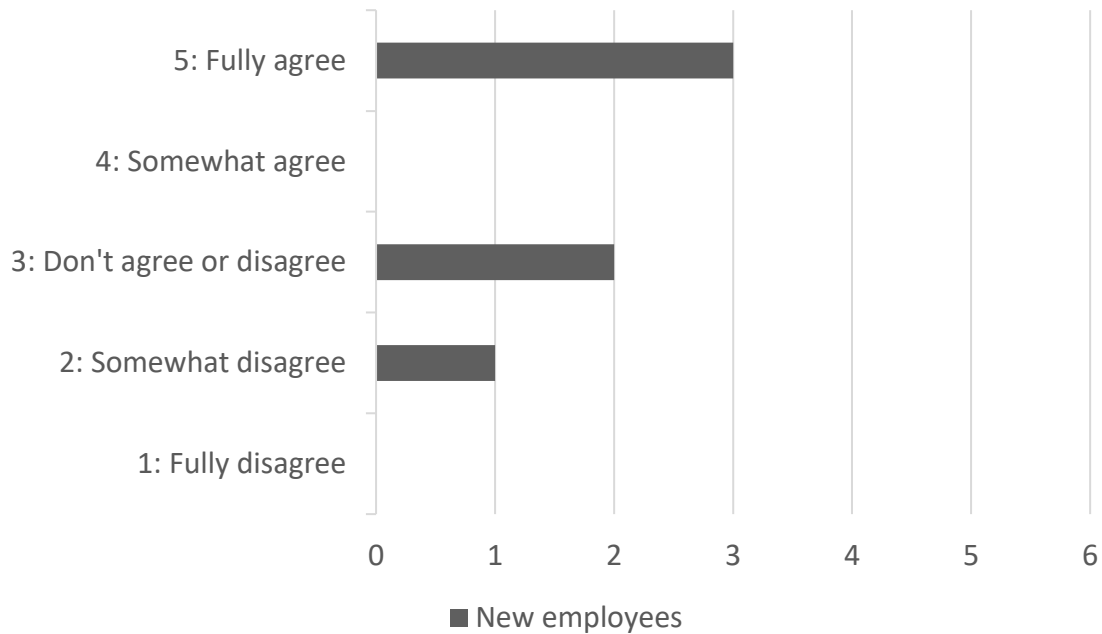


Figure 6: Participant employees' (n=6) stance on the statement: “After my onboarding, I felt that I was a part of the team and accepted by my peers and superiors”

Here, the average rating comes out to 3,83, with the ratings ranging from 2 to 5, much like in the case for role clarity. Generally, the newcomers felt accepted by their peers and superiors, but here again, it has to be acknowledged that there are individual ratings as low as 2 and 3. Here in the case of social integration, the pandemic had a clear effect and some participants mentioned it specifically as a factor that hindered their integration to the team.

There's again this COVID-19. - - I was integrated only to the extent that was necessary, but no more. I did always feel accepted, there wasn't any problem there. You just can't integrate to people very well solely via Teams. – Employee 5

So, social integration had been a problem because I could not meet many of my colleagues. The situation is like that so... Yeah, I cannot blame [case company] nor my colleagues nor myself. – Employee 6

One employee also said to have experienced some team members less welcoming but didn't go into any details.

Few people were like welcoming, uh, as a new team member and fewer reluctant, is what my feeling is. So, I don't want to go either side so number 3, don't agree or disagree. - - if we see a larger picture, yes, I was socially integrated. But yeah, few people were having some reluctance, I don't know why. – Employee 1

Some employees also mentioned more informal virtual coffee breaks as a specific element, that had helped their social integration during the remote working situation.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Improvement areas

The average rating among the 6 employees for the whole onboarding process on the used Likert scale was 4, with the individual ratings ranging from 3 to 5, which implies a relatively successful onboarding process, where there still is room to improve, due to the two scores of 3. However, it must be acknowledged that the overall rating of the experienced onboarding process doesn't necessarily reflect the true state of the process, since that rating didn't seem to always follow logically from the answers in the more detailed sections, and the ratings themselves are very subjective in nature. The ratings do however help to grasp a more accurate picture of specific participants' experiences in a specific area of onboarding.

The first potential improvement area is related to the practicalities of the onboarding process. Some new employees seem to have problems with the needed equipment, which complicates the start of the onboarding. It is possible that these have been single incidents caused by the sudden, unforeseen emergence of remote working, and have since been corrected. However, it is an issue worth of further investigation, as having the employee's workspace ready for them has been observed to be very beneficial in their socialization. (Klein et al. 2015; Harpelund et al. 2019) Also, some participants reported unclarities experienced, regarding necessary tools and accesses for a new employee in the organizational unit.

A more significant area seems to be the practicalities related to the relocation of new employees hired from abroad. Two separate participants expressed their opinion of insufficient information provided to them about what is included in their salary and taxes, which do work differently in their country of origin. As seen from Figure 2, both antecedents for newcomer adjustment, namely newcomer information seeking and organizational socialization tactics, have a basis in uncertainty reduction (Berger and Calabrese 1975; Saks et al. 2007). Here, regarding the information supplied to international newcomers, there seems to be an opportunity to reduce their uncertainty during their relocation process and thus, improve their onboarding experience. Additionally, the one-month temporary accommodation provided by the case company

may not be long enough, as in Finland it can take a long time to get a verified ID card and a bank account, which are generally needed when renting an apartment.

A clear area for improvement is the current onboarding plan, namely its general nature and lack of possibilities for monitoring progress. These deficiencies are something that are necessary to address, which is supported by the literature as well, including the papers by Bauer (2010), and Davila and Pina-Ramirez (2018). The onboarding plan was generally experienced as a useful tool, but its contents didn't seem to match the specific role of any newcomer, which makes navigating the plan more complicated, as the new employee has to get guidance on what parts they should focus on, or as in the case of one employee, try to figure it out by themselves. The progress has been monitored quite informally in meetings with the line manager and buddy. This leaves a lot of responsibility to the newcomer to be proactive and request support if they feel like they are not making progress in some area. Also, in these follow-up meetings, substantial amount of time has been spent to catch up on the newcomers onboarding progress, when that time could be used more effectively. A function which allows the manager, buddy or the newcomer themselves to easily follow their progress would be a beneficial addition in the onboarding plan, as is also supported by Harpelund et al. (2019), who state, that real-time visualization of progress can increase a newcomer's motivation.

The next area for improvement concerns the indicators of newcomer adjustment addressed in the onboarding process. The empirical study suggests that there may be some problems in the role-clarity of new employees. This is an important area to focus on, due to the significance of role-clarity in the adjustment of a newcomer (Bauer et al. 2007) and thus, the success of an onboarding process as a whole. The participants had not experienced significant difficulties in self-efficacy, but it is possible that making improvements in the role clarity of new employees may also positively affect their self-efficacy. Clear evidence for this interaction could not be found from the used literature, so this could be an interesting area for further research. Social acceptance was another indicator that should be considered as an area for improvement. Naturally, the remote working conditions had affected the newcomers' social integration. The pandemic situation is in a better state now, than it was when the participants were going through their onboarding, but remote working continues to be extremely relevant. Therefore, it would be wise to develop ways to improve social integration also in a remote setting.

The last area of improvement emerged inductively from the interviews with the two buddies. An onboarding buddy is experienced as a truly important element of the whole onboarding process, and the interviewed employees had generally very good experiences of their buddies. The literature also recognizes the importance of having a buddy. In their study, Klein et al. (2015) determine that assigning an onboarding buddy to guide the newcomer, is very beneficial to their socialization. The buddies interviewed in this study however, seemed to experience some unclarities about the specific responsibilities connected to the buddy's role. Given the importance of the buddy in the integration of a new employee, this issue is definitely necessary to address.

As an even more concerning finding, regarding the buddy system, one employee hadn't been assigned an onboarding buddy at all. In that particular case the onboarding process was manageable even without a buddy, but the participant themselves attributed a lot of the success to their extensive work experience from previous positions, which may not be true for every new employee. As the assignment of an onboarding buddy is a standard process in the case company, a situation should not occur, where a newcomer has to navigate their new surroundings without the support of an onboarding buddy.

4.2 Development proposals

Below, are presented the improvement suggestions made to the case company on the basis of this study. Due to the relatively large scope of the research and the restrictions in resources and time, in some cases the improvement suggestion is to investigate the discussed matter further. Additionally, as there were only 6 new employees interviewed, it is possible that some issues mentioned are just outliers of data, that make the discussed problem appear more significant than it actually is. However, in a few areas, more concrete actions can be suggested to make improvements in the onboarding process. It then falls on the case company to decide, if and how it is feasible to implement these actions.

4.2.1 Practicalities

As presented in the previous section, there were several potential areas for improvement, regarding the practicalities of joining the case company. Based on the conducted study, the researcher suggests four actions for improvement.

First, it should be investigated if equipment not being ready for newcomers, is a common problem or just a one-time occurrence. The unit needs to make sure that equipment is ready already on the first day, and needed accesses are in place. If not already done, responsibility should be assigned for these actions to ensure their completion with every new employee.

Next, the process of recruiting international employees should be reviewed. If it becomes clear, that there is an insufficient information supply regarding relevant practicalities, such as salary and taxes in Finland, a session with HR should be incorporated into the process, where these matters are discussed and thus, newcomer's uncertainty reduced. The significance of uncertainty reduction in new employees can be seen from the conclusion of the theory in section 2.4, specifically in Figure 2, where it is illustrated how uncertainty reduction is the basis of the two main antecedents of newcomer adjustment.

The third action is to investigate further if the duration of temporary accommodation is a common problem. If so, it should be checked if the essential bureaucratic steps (getting an official ID card and a bank account) can be accelerated or if it is possible to modify the duration of the temporary accommodation offered.

The last action here is to incorporate a section in the new onboarding plan, where all the necessary tools and accesses are communicated in a clear format for the new employee. This should reduce uncertainty in newcomers, as they could easily see which tools are relevant specifically for their role and how to get access to them.

4.2.2 New onboarding plan

A major development contribution of this thesis to the onboarding process of the case company is the development and implementation of the new onboarding plan solution in Jira. The basis of the solution is a template containing every possible onboarding task that

should be assigned to a new employee, regardless of their specific role. This template is updated regularly, on the basis of the feedback given by the new employees that use the Jira solution as their onboarding plan. As a new employee joins the organization, based on their intended role, all appropriate tasks from the template are selected and compiled in a personal onboarding plan for them. This plan is introduced to them in an onboarding kick-off meeting with the Competence Development Manager. During the meeting, it is explained to the newcomer, what the plan contains and how to use it. If possible, in this meeting are also present the onboarding buddy and the newcomer's manager.

The new solution offers several improvements compared to the previous version. The new plan is more role-specific with tasks already filtered to suit the newcomer's specific role. This reduces the uncertainty that would result from having to determine, which parts of the plan are relevant to them while going through it.

Another clear improvement is the possibility of monitoring progress. The new solution includes a function, with which the new employee can easily change the status of an onboarding task between the options: "To do", "In Progress" and "Done" according to their current situation. This facilitates the monitoring of progress, as the manager, buddy and the newcomer themselves can quickly see how much of the onboarding is completed, and if there are needs for additional support in some area. Considering the case of employee 2, where their line manager changed during the onboarding period, the new solution should help to minimize negative impacts of such events in the future, as the new manager can clearly see the employee's progress from the tool, without having to have extensive conversations about the situation of every new employee.

As mentioned, the new onboarding plan has been in development and in use already while conducting this study. The feedback from the new employees that have used the new solution in their onboarding, has been very positive. The clarity of the plan has been explicitly mentioned as a good characteristic. It is thus suggested that the unit continues to use the new onboarding plan with new employees joining the organization, as well as continue to develop it further based on feedback from users. Another recommended action is that the development of the onboarding packages for different roles is continued, in order to improve the onboarding plan's role specificity even further.

To reap the benefits of the new onboarding plan and to standardize the process further, it is suggested that using this new solution, a personal onboarding plan is created for every new employee joining the unit, regardless of their position. This practice promotes appropriate information supply and training for everyone, thus reducing unnecessary uncertainty experienced during entry. It also makes the onboarding process more consistent and formal in nature, with clear tasks to complete. These features are generally understood to indicate that an organization is functioning well, in terms of their onboarding (Bauer 2010; Klein et al. 2015).

The last suggested action regarding the onboarding plan is to create a user guide for the solution. This guide helps to standardize the usage of the solution, as is recommended by Bauer (2010), and enables the implementation of the solution in other organizational units.

4.2.3 Addressing the indicators of newcomer adjustment

As it is presented in Figure 2, when aiming to improve an onboarding process, the indicators of newcomer adjustment are the main focus area, that an organization should divert their attention to, in order to achieve positive outcomes of onboarding. As mentioned, regarding the indicators of newcomer adjustment in this particular study, role clarity and social integration were the areas with the most need for improvement. Therefore, the suggested actions are focused on addressing those two areas. From the interview results, it can also be hypothesized, that improvements in role clarity may translate also into better self-efficacy.

The first suggestion for improvement in the area of newcomer adjustment is to standardize an action to make the responsibilities and success requirements of the newcomer's role as clear as possible even before they join the organization, so that they can be communicated effectively to the new employee, once they arrive. It is likely, that not every role can be broken down to clear tasks and success criteria but focusing on this subject as a standardized step in newcomer entry, should ultimately have a positive effect in the role clarity of new employees.

The second action suggested, is to incorporate a task addressing role-clarity in the onboarding plan of every new employee. In practical terms, this task can be to hold a discussion with the line manager and buddy, with the sole subject of the newcomer's role in the organization. In addition to the responsibilities and success requirements, also the function of the role in a larger scale should be discussed, to clarify how the contribution of the employee translates to the end product or the functioning of the organization as a whole.

The next actions are dedicated to social acceptance. The first suggestion here is to again, incorporate a task in the onboarding plan, this time to address social integration. This task is an introductory meeting with the team of the new employee, where the newcomer can introduce themselves and also, start to get to know their colleagues. This sort of practice has been in use already at least in some teams in the unit but making it a required task in the onboarding process, should ensure its completion in the case of every new employee.

The last two suggestions are related to the remote working conditions that have been a major obstacle in the social integration of new employees. As it is not possible to require people to have their cameras on in virtual meetings, it is suggested that a strong recommendation is communicated to the entire unit, that people would have their cameras on at least in the beginning of a newcomer's onboarding period when having meetings with them. This could help newcomers to make personal connections more easily, as the people could see each other when interacting instead of having to stare at a still picture or just the initials of their colleagues. This suggestion is also in line with the recommendations made in the study by Rodeghero et al. (2021), concerning the onboarding of software developers in a remote setting.

A specific practice with positive influence on social integration, that emerged from the interviews was arranging virtual coffee breaks, that is to say, more informal meetings during the day, where people can socialize much like during the coffee breaks on-site. It is thus suggested that regular virtual coffee breaks and other opportunities for informal socializing are promoted and recommended for every team in the unit.

4.2.4 Onboarding buddy

Having a dedicated onboarding buddy was experienced as an extremely important support mechanism during onboarding, and its positive effects are acknowledged also in the literature. (Bauer 2010; Klein et al. 2015; Davila and Pina-Ramirez 2018; Harpelund et al. 2019) Thus, a suggested action is that it is made absolutely certain that an onboarding buddy is assigned for each newcomer, regardless of their position in the company, which was not the case with employee 3, for example.

From the buddy interviews it can be inferred that the communication of responsibilities and support for a buddy is one area that should be improved. Given the importance of a buddy in the adjustment of a newcomer, this is an issue that must be acknowledged. The improvement suggestion for this issue is ultimately quite simple, as from the company's intranet, the researcher found extensive material on being an onboarding buddy, that the participants didn't seem to be aware of. It is thus recommended, that as a standardized action, this material is simply made available to an onboarding buddy once they are assigned. In addition to this, it may be wise to keep monitoring the situation, to determine if the buddies need even more support for their role.

4.2.5 Suggested process for the entry of a new employee

In addition to and based on the individual improvement suggestions made, a standardized process for the entry of a new employee is suggested. This process is illustrated in Figure 7. The process is designed with the idea that the actions included are essential in the entry of a new employee, regardless of the newcomer's role or whether they are hired from Finland or from abroad. Someone from the organizational unit should be assigned as responsible for each of these actions to ensure their completion. As new employees join the company in different positions, the people responsible for these actions can be considered case by case. However, standard suggestions for the responsible people are made, and are visible in Figure 7.

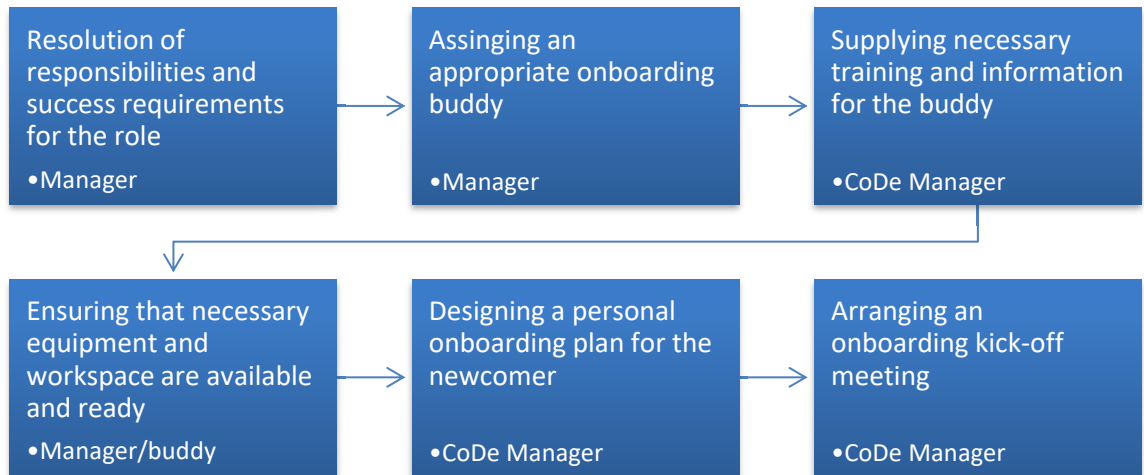


Figure 7: Suggested process for the entry of a new employee

5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Key results

The objective of this thesis was to research how the new employee onboarding process of a case company could be improved on the basis of existing theory on the topic. The practical contribution of this study was to produce clear improvement suggestions for the case company, along with a new solution for an onboarding plan for newcomers. It is then for the case company to determine if and how these recommendations are implemented in their onboarding process.

The objectives of this study are boiled down to four research questions. The first question was answered with the literature review, questions 2 and 3 were answered with the empirical study, and the fourth question was answered by synthesizing the previous sections together to develop concrete recommendations for the case company. The answers to the research questions are concluded below.

RQ1: What is the theoretical basis for an effective onboarding process?

As mentioned, the first research question was addressed in the literature review of this thesis. The goal here was to derive a theoretical basis from the current literature to use as a foundation for identifying the improvement areas in the onboarding process and for making informed recommendations for the case company to implement.

A theoretical model for onboarding was constructed for this purpose, and it is illustrated in Figure 2. The most significant element that emerged from the literature, was newcomer adjustment and its three indicators: role clarity, self-efficacy, and social acceptance, which directly affect the outcomes of onboarding, including job performance, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction, for instance. The two factors contributing to newcomer adjustment are newcomer information seeking and organizational socialization tactics. As a practical connection between these two factors and newcomer adjustment, are the actual onboarding activities of the organization, as the activities provide opportunities for the newcomers to practice information seeking behavior, and they also act as a medium with which the organization carries out its

organizational socialization tactics. The take-away from this model is that, when designing or modifying an onboarding process, the included activities should be considered from the perspective of the three indicators of newcomer adjustment, to ensure that each one of them is addressed in the process. Additionally, as both of the antecedents of newcomer adjustment have a basis in uncertainty reduction theory, every action that eliminates unnecessary uncertainty in newcomers, can be considered an improvement in the overall process.

Other relevant findings included, that the onboarding process should be formal in nature, with clearly communicated tasks to proceed through. Also, when designing this process, the primary focus should be, how the newcomers themselves experience it while going through their onboarding.

A useful tool for a successful onboarding process is a well-executed onboarding plan, designed for each role individually. Especially in remote working conditions, a clear plan, possibly in the form of a digital onboarding portal, is a necessity for a new employee. Also, the appointment of a designated onboarding buddy is recognized in the literature as a beneficial measure to provide support for a newcomer.

RQ2: How is onboarding executed currently in the case company?

The second research question was addressed by examining the information available in the case company's internal network and analyzing the data from the interviews conducted in this study. The current onboarding process in the case company is divided into three phases: prior to arrival, first 90 days, and 90 days to first year. The first 90 days was the main focus of this study.

The main resource in the examined unit's onboarding process has been a certain Word document that has served the role of an onboarding plan for new employees. The scope of this document, however, is the onboarding practices of a larger organizational unit, so the content in the plan has not been specific to any role in particular. The standard practice has been, that the manager goes through the plan with the newcomer to determine which parts of the plan are relevant and what should be disregarded.

There are tremendous amounts of material and different courses for newcomers in the case company, and even other documents comparable to the used onboarding plan, with some overlapping information. However, the material is quite scattered, which can confuse a new employee, as they may not be sure exactly where to find what information.

A popular practice in the onboarding process, which has been valued by the newcomers and managers alike, has been the use of an onboarding buddy. The standard practice has been that for every new employee, a buddy is assigned, who can then provide support for the newcomer and participate in supplying the technical training needed in the target role.

RQ3: What are the areas in the onboarding process, where there are needs for improvement?

On the basis of the interviews, several potential areas for improvement were identified in the onboarding process. Regarding the practicalities, there were some unclarities experienced regarding the necessary tools and accesses, as well as an instance where equipment wasn't ready for the newcomer during their entry. Specific to employees hired from abroad, there may be deficiencies in the information supplied to them about the standard regulations of working in Finland, relating to taxes, for instance. Also, the temporary accommodation provided by the case company may be insufficient in some cases.

A clear area for improvement is the onboarding plan. Although the plan has been experienced as a useful tool by the managers and employees, there is room for improvement, regarding its clarity, role-specificity, and possibilities for following progress.

Of the three indicators of newcomer adjustment, problems were identified mainly with role clarity and social acceptance. The participants generally had felt accepted by their peers, but the prevailing remote working conditions had, quite expectedly, affected their social integration.

The final area for improvement, which emerged inductively from the interview data, is to do with the assignment of an onboarding buddy. From the buddy interviews it could be

inferred that there may be some issues in communicating the responsibilities and specific tasks connected to the role of an onboarding buddy, to the buddy themselves. Additionally, as a more alarming finding, one of the interviewed employees had not been assigned a buddy at all.

RQ4: What actions could the case company take to improve its onboarding process?

Based on the identified areas for improvement, several recommendations could be made to the case company, in order for them to improve their onboarding practices. Regarding the practicalities and issues specific to international employees, four actions are recommended:

1. Investigate if equipment not being ready for newcomers, is a common problem. Make sure that equipment is ready on the first day, and needed accesses are in place. Assign responsibility for these actions.
2. Incorporate a section in the new onboarding plan, where all the necessary tools and accesses are communicated in a clear format.
3. Review the process of recruiting international employees. If it becomes clear, that there is an insufficient information supply regarding practicalities, such as salary and taxes in Finland, incorporate into the process a session with HR, where these issues are discussed.
4. Investigate further if the duration of temporary accommodation is a common problem. If so, find out if the essential bureaucratic steps (getting a verified ID card and a bank account) can be accelerated or consider modifying the duration of temporary accommodation.

A major concrete contribution of this study was the development and implementation of a new onboarding plan solution in Jira, which was in development already in the very early phases of the study. The solution makes improvements in the onboarding plan's clarity, role-specificity, and progress monitoring capabilities. Informal feedback gathered from newcomers and buddies that have utilized the new solution, has been very positive. Four actions are recommended, regarding the onboarding plan:

1. Continue to use the new onboarding plan with new employees joining the organization, and continue to develop it further, based on feedback from users.
2. Continue to develop onboarding packages for different roles.
3. Create a personal onboarding plan for every new employee joining the unit, regardless of their position.
4. Create a user guide for the solution to standardize its usage and to enable the implementation of the solution in other organizational units.

Addressing the indicators of newcomer adjustment was a significant element in making improvements in the onboarding process. Regarding specifically role clarity, two recommendations are made:

1. Standardize an action to make the responsibilities and success requirements of the newcomer's role as clear as possible even before they join the organization.
2. Incorporate an official task addressing role clarity in the onboarding plan. This can be a discussion with the manager and buddy, designated solely to the role of the newcomer.

Concerning social acceptance, three actions are recommended:

1. Incorporate an official task addressing social integration in the onboarding plan of the newcomer. This task can be an introductory meeting with the team.
2. Recommend everyone working remotely to have cameras on at least at the beginning of the newcomer's onboarding.
3. Promote virtual coffee breaks, where the newcomer can socialize with their team.

As an onboarding buddy is clearly a valuable asset in the adjustment of a new employee, the practice of assigning this role should be in order. Two actions are recommended, regarding the role of an onboarding buddy:

1. It must be made absolutely certain that, as a systematic step in the process, an onboarding buddy is assigned for each newcomer, regardless of their position in the unit.

2. As a standardized action, make training material available to an onboarding buddy once they are assigned.

Finally, based on, and adding to the individual recommendations, a suggestion is made for a standardized process for the entry of a new employee. It is designed with the idea that every one of the included actions must be completed in the entry of a new employee, regardless of the newcomer's role or whether they are hired from Finland or from abroad. Responsibility should be assigned for each of the actions to ensure their completion. The process is illustrated in Figure 7.

5.2 Limitations

The conducted study produced clear results in the form of improvement suggestions for the case company to enhance its onboarding process. There are however some limitations that should be considered when examining the validity of the results. An obvious limitation is to do with the nature of a master's thesis and its resources. Even though the researcher tried to be as impartial as possible and employ scientific rigor in conducting the study, the fact that the research is done by only one person may have some impact on the results. In addition to interpreting the literature, especially in the case of a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews, the researcher has a major role in interpreting the data in the empirical section, which should be acknowledged when examining the study.

Another factor that might have an impact to the results is connected to the new onboarding plan solution. As mentioned earlier, a major result of this study in the form of a more concrete improvement in the onboarding process, was a new solution for a virtual onboarding plan in Jira. The development of this solution was started already in the very early stages of the research and continued throughout the time of conducting the study. This could be seen, for instance, in the interviews with the managers, where some features of the new solution were described when discussing the current state of the onboarding process. There is a possibility that the existence of the solution would create an unconscious bias in the researcher to arrive in a certain conclusion to support the use of the new onboarding plan, for which resources had already been spent. However, the researcher strived to remain impartial, and this potential bias was considered when doing the literature research and when designing and carrying out the empirical study. Also, the

sections of the interviews describing the new solution as the current state of onboarding in the case company, were disregarded as invalid data.

For the interviews, the initial criteria for the new employee participants included that more than a year shouldn't have been passed from the time that they had gone through their onboarding process, for them to still remember their experiences from that time. To reach the goal of six new employees interviewed, this criterion had to be relaxed a bit with one participant, who had experienced their onboarding approximately 1,5 years ago. This too, was considered in the analysis of the data, and the comments in which the participant expressed uncertainty in the recollection of the events, were not included in the results.

The final limitation has to do with the quantitative elements of the study, namely the Likert scale ratings that the participants were asked to give about their onboarding process. When examining these ratings, it must be kept in mind that six participants is quite a low sample size for statistical analysis, and conclusions should not be made solely based on these ratings. Additionally, the Likert scale is somewhat subjective in nature, as one person can interpret a given option slightly differently than another participant. In this study, the emphasis was on the actual comments made by the interviewees, and the quantitative elements were only used as a supportive tool to the qualitative analysis, as the ratings could give some insight about the general state of the process, in relation to a specific indicator of newcomer adjustment.

As the study was conducted within a specific organizational unit in the case company, which operates in a specific field, the results of this study cannot be generalized well to be utilized in other domains. However, the research does provide value to the case company, and its results can be used as reference in studies conducted in similar circumstances.

5.3 Future research

This study addresses using a model for onboarding, derived from literature, as a basis for improving the onboarding process of a specific organizational unit in a case company operating in the field of information and communications technology. There are a few

areas of interest related to this research, that weren't explored in this study, but could merit further research on the topic.

The data from the interviews suggests that there could be a connection between role clarity and self-efficacy, as the participants who expressed problems in self-efficacy, mentioned uncertainty in their role as a factor contributing to their lack of confidence. This does make intuitive sense, as it is more difficult to feel confident doing one's tasks if the tasks themselves are unclear. This would be an interesting topic to study further, to determine if, and to what extent, role clarity affects self-efficacy in new employees, and if self-efficacy could thus be improved by making improvements in role clarity.

This study touched on the subject of onboarding outcomes, mostly as a means of justifying the efforts for improving an onboarding process in the first place. However, with the resources available, the outcomes related to this specific improvement process could not be explored comprehensively. It would be an interesting topic for additional study to examine how the outcomes of onboarding are affected in this kind of setting, when the onboarding process is modified based on the theoretical model used in this study.

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Manager

- Background
 - How long have you been working at the case company?
 - How long have you been in a managerial role in this organizational unit?
- General onboarding process
 - Is there a standard onboarding process in use?
 - How much time has been allocated to it?
- Onboarding plan
 - Is there an onboarding plan in use?
 - Could you give a general description of it?
 - How is the specific role of the new employee considered in the plan?
 - In what capacity is the new employee involved in designing their onboarding plan?
 - What is your opinion on the current onboarding plan?
 - *Is the onboarding plan clear?*
 - *Are the items in the onboarding plan relevant to the new employee?*
 - *Are the items in the onboarding plan up to date?*
 - How is the progress of the new employee followed during the onboarding process?
- Role-specific onboarding
 - How is the functional/technical training for a specific role conducted?
- Support for the new employee
 - What is the role of the line manager in the onboarding process?
 - How is a buddy/mentor designated for the new employee?
 - what is the role of the buddy in the onboarding process?
 - Are there other primary support channels for the new employee?
- Role clarity, self-efficacy, social integration
 - What kind of actions are there in the onboarding process designed to ensure that the new employee:
 - fully understands their role and what is expected of them?
 - feels confident in their ability to perform well in their role?
 - becomes socially integrated in their team and feels accepted by their peers and superiors?
- Covid-19
 - How has the pandemic affected the onboarding process?
 - What kind of changes have been made to the process to tackle these challenges?
- Conclusion
 - How would you rate the overall onboarding process?

- Which elements are good?
- What should be improved?
- What would you like to ask the new employees, regarding their onboarding process?

Onboarding Buddy

- Background
 - How long have you been working at the case company?
 - How much experience do you have of being a buddy?
- Onboarding plan
 - Is there an onboarding plan in use?
 - Could you give a general description of it?
 - How is the specific role of the new employee considered in the plan?
 - In what capacity is the new employee involved in designing their onboarding plan?
 - What is your opinion on the current onboarding plan?
 - *Is the onboarding plan clear?*
 - *Are the items in the onboarding plan relevant to the new employee?*
 - *Are the items in the onboarding plan up to date?*
 - How is the progress of the new employee monitored during the onboarding process?
 - How are you involved in the monitoring?
- Role-specific onboarding
 - How is the functional/technical training for a specific role conducted?
- Support for the new employee
 - What is the role of the buddy in the onboarding process?
 - How is the buddy orientated to their role?
 - Do you feel that the buddy's responsibilities are communicated clearly?
 - Do you feel that you have received enough support as a buddy?
- Role clarity, self-efficacy, social integration
 - What kind of actions are there in the onboarding process designed to ensure that the new employee:
 - fully understands their role and what is expected of them?
 - feels confident in their ability to perform well in their role?
 - becomes socially integrated in their team and feels accepted by their peers and superiors?
- Covid-19
 - How has the pandemic affected the onboarding process?
 - What kind of changes have been made to the process to tackle these challenges?
- Conclusion

- **How would you rate the overall onboarding process from the perspective of the new employee?**
 - **Which elements are good?**
 - **What should be improved?**
- **How would you rate the overall onboarding process from the perspective of the buddy?**
 - **Which elements are good?**
 - **What should be improved?**

New Employee

- Background
 - **What is your position at the case company?**
 - **When did you start in this position?**
 - **How much work experience do you have from elsewhere?**
 - **Did you move from abroad for this position?**
 - **Did you go through the onboarding process on-site or remotely?**
- General onboarding process
 - **What are your general opinions on your onboarding process?**
 - **How much time was allocated to it?**
 - **Was it enough?**
- Onboarding plan
 - **Did you have an onboarding plan?**
 - **How was your specific role considered in the onboarding plan?**
 - **In what capacity were you involved in designing your onboarding plan?**
 - **What was your opinion on the onboarding plan?**
 - *Was the onboarding plan clear?*
 - *Were the items in the onboarding plan relevant to you and your role?*
 - *Were the items in the onboarding plan up to date?*
 - **How was your progress followed during your onboarding process?**
- Support for the new employee
 - **Did you have a designated buddy/mentor?**
 - **How did they support you during the onboarding process?**
 - **How did the line-manager support you during the onboarding process?**
 - **Were there other primary support channels that you used?**
 - **Do you feel that you received enough support during your onboarding?**
- Possible problems
 - **What sort of problems or unclarities did you encounter in your onboarding process?**
 - *Practicalities*

- Equipment
 - Access, permissions
 - Physical facilities
 - *General onboarding*
 - Rules, values, culture
 - Communication channels
 - Safety, well-being
 - Security
 - HR issues
 - Salary
 - Working hours
 - Vacations
 - Healthcare
 - *Role-specific onboarding*
 - Practices, communication channels
 - Functional/technical training for your role
 - **Did you know where to look for information when needed?**
- Proactivity
 - **Were you proactive in your onboarding?**
 - **What actions did you take to facilitate your integration?**
 - **Do you think that you could have done something differently?**
- Covid-19
 - **How did the pandemic affect the onboarding process?**
 - **Do you feel that the challenges created by the pandemic were considered carefully enough in your onboarding process?**
 - **What kind of special actions did you notice?**
- Role clarity, self-efficacy, social integration
 - **After your onboarding:**
 - **Did you fully understand your role and what is expected of you in this role?**
 - **What would be your stance on the following statement on a scale of 1 to 5?**
 - **I knew exactly what my tasks are and what is expected of me to succeed in my role.**
 - 5: Fully agree
 - 4: Somewhat agree
 - 3: Don't agree or disagree
 - 2: Somewhat disagree
 - 1: Fully disagree
 - **Did you feel confident in your ability to perform well in your role?**
 - **What would be your stance on the following statement on a scale of 1 to 5?**
 - **I was confident that I had the required skills and abilities so that I could perform the tasks required of me.**
 - 5: Fully agree

- 4: Somewhat agree
 - 3: Don't agree or disagree
 - 2: Somewhat disagree
 - 1: Fully disagree
 - **Did you become socially integrated in your team/squad and did you feel accepted by your peers and superiors?**
 - **What would be your stance on the following statement on a scale of 1 to 5?**
 - **I felt that I was a part of the team and accepted by my peers and superiors.**
 - 5: Fully agree
 - 4: Somewhat agree
 - 3: Don't agree or disagree
 - 2: Somewhat disagree
 - 1: Fully disagree
- Conclusion
 - **Could rate the overall onboarding process?**
 - **What would be your stance on the following statement on a scale of 1 to 5?**
 - **My onboarding process was very successful.**
 - 5: Fully agree
 - 4: Somewhat agree
 - 3: Don't agree or disagree
 - 2: Somewhat disagree
 - 1: Fully disagree
 - **What was good in the process?**
 - **What should be improved?**
- Questions from managers
 - **What was the most difficult part of the onboarding process?**
 - **What was the most time-consuming part of the onboarding process?**
 - **Did some part of the process feel unnecessary to you?**