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**ASSESSING BEST PRACTICES FOR
THE VIRTUAL ONBOARDING OF NEW HIRES IN
THE TECHNOLOGY INDUSTRY**

**A Research Project
Presented to the Faculty of
The Graziadio Business School
Pepperdine University**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
In
Organization Development**

**by
Kaitlyn Pavlina
August 2020**

This research project, completed by

KAITLYN M. R. PAVLINA

under the guidance of the Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the faculty of The George L. Graziadio School of Business and Management in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE
IN ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

Date: August 2020

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the recent virtual onboarding experiences of new hires at companies in the technology industry. The present study sought to answer two research questions: to identify the current practices of technology companies for virtually onboarding new hires and to understand the self-identified needs of recent new hires in this industry around virtual onboarding. The study found that tech companies focus most heavily on formal orientation sessions, one-on-one meetings, and group meetings when virtually onboarding new hires. Additionally, four key themes emerged when exploring what new hires find most important during virtual onboarding. This study details each of these key themes and provides recommendations around how employers can better equip new hires and help them succeed via virtual onboarding.

Keywords: onboarding, socialization, remote work, new hire orientation, virtual, newcomers

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
List of Tables	vi
List of Figures	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Purpose of this Study	3
Research Questions	3
Importance of this Research	3
Organization of the Study	4
Chapter 2: Literature Review	5
Remote Work in Times of Crisis	5
What is Onboarding?	6
Why Does Onboarding Matter?	8
What is Involved in the Onboarding Process?	12
Established Best Practices	22
Utilizing a centralized model.	22
Implementing pre-boarding activities.	23
Creating connections.	24
Common Mistakes and Pitfalls	26
Forgetting to measure.	26
Over indexing on a single facet.....	27
Remote Work as a Concept	28
Advantages of remote work.	29
Challenges involved with remote work.	30
What is Known About Virtual Onboarding	32
The Future of Onboarding and Remote Work	35
Chapter 3: Research Methodology	37
Research Purpose	37
Research Methods	37
Sample.	37
Procedures.....	38
Analytical strategy.	39
Summary	40

Chapter 4: Findings.....	41
Research Question 1.....	41
Length of onboarding period.....	41
Components of the pre-hire onboarding experience.....	42
Components of the new hire onboarding experience.....	43
One-on-one meetings.....	47
Group meetings.....	48
Other key components.....	49
Other considerations for the onboarding experience.....	50
Research Question 2.....	53
Key Theme 1: Logistics matter.....	56
Key Theme 2: Managers are critical.....	59
Key Theme 3: New hires want to connect.....	61
Key Theme 4: Empathy and understanding.....	64
Summary	69
Chapter 5: Discussion.....	70
Implications for Scholarship.....	71
Implications for Practice	75
Implications for employers.....	75
Implications for OD practitioners.....	78
Limitations and Future Directions	79
Final Notes.....	81
References	83
Appendix A: Recruitment Email	89
Appendix B: Informed Consent.....	91
Appendix C: Interview Questions	95
Appendix D: Demographic Indicators.....	97

List of Tables

Table 1. ROI for Comprehensive Onboarding Programs.....	11
Table 2. The Levels of Onboarding and their Domains.....	16
Table 3. Levers to Maximize Onboarding Success.....	17
Table 4. Key Areas for Onboarding Programs to Address.....	17
Table 5. Mapping of Bauer’s and Dai / De Meuse’s Models.....	18
Table 6. Participant Company Profiles.....	38
Table 7. Length of Onboarding Period.....	41
Table 8. Components of the Pre-Hire Onboarding Experience.....	42
Table 9. Components of the New Hire Onboarding Experience.....	44
Table 10. Types and Timing of One-on-One Meetings.....	47
Table 11. Mechanism for One-on-One Scheduling.....	48
Table 12. Types and Timing of Group Meetings.....	48
Table 13. Types & Timing of Other Components of the Onboarding Experience...	49
Table 14. Mechanisms for Connection During Virtual Onboarding Activities.....	51
Table 15. Sources of Feedback Requests.....	52
Table 16. Mechanisms for Requesting and Providing Feedback.....	52
Table 17. Technology Logistics and Detail.....	53
Table 18. Hardware Delivery Details.....	53
Table 19. Overview of Key Themes and Sub-Themes.....	55
Table 20. Theme 1: Key Messages and Recommendations.....	58
Table 21. Theme 2: Key Messages and Recommendations.....	60
Table 22. Theme 3: Key Messages and Recommendations.....	62
Table 23. Types of Social Activities Experienced During the Onboarding Period....	64
Table 24. Theme 4: Key Messages and Recommendations.....	67

List of Figures

Figure 1. Average Length of the Onboarding Process.....	20
Figure 2. Types and Timing of Formal Orientations / Presentations.....	45

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without Erin Bric and Marne Maykowskyj, my BCB's. Thank you for pushing me to complete this milestone, for talking through countless ideas, and for sharing your learnings with me over the last two years.

My sincere thanks go to Dr. Darren Good, for your guidance and reality checks along the way. From a late-night call on a street corner in Lyon to a published thesis. I never could have gotten through it without your flexibility and understanding. You are a gem of a professor. Heartfelt thanks also go to Susan Fleetwood, Dr. Gary Mangiofico, Dr. Miriam Lacey, Dede Henley, and Dr. Julie Chesley for guiding me through some very pivotal moments throughout this program, which in one way or another led to my ability to complete this research. Thank you to Ann Feyerherm for your contribution as my second reader. My sincere thanks also go to the 12 participants who volunteered their time and shared their stories.

I am grateful to all of my family and friends who have been so patient with me throughout this process. Special thanks go to Ivan and Debbie Pavlina, my parents, for always encouraging me to prioritize my education and supporting my choices. To Mary Lou Murphy, for not only being a role model but also a mentor. To my Still Sisters, for keeping me on track and helping me to stay sane during the low times. To Teresa Bow, Amanda Chargin, Emily Cipes, Erin Garcia, Laura Hodges, Lauren Reber, Angela Staleva, for being so understanding that my time has not been my own and encouraging me so much throughout this process. To Arizona for keeping me company during all the late nights of reading and writing. To my friends at Carry Nation's, Cedar Room, and Oak & Rye for putting up with my peculiar study habits. To my colleagues at Netflix, who supported me during the time I took off to complete this program. And to Stefanie Smith, for helping me get through the end of this wild this process, one day at a time.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“If you think happy and engaged employees just happen, you couldn’t be more wrong” (Krasman, 2015, p. 9). The Boston Consulting Group found that onboarding had the second-highest business impact of the 22 HR practices that were presented in their whitepaper on taking HR practices to the next level (Abramo et al., 2013). Yet, according to a 2016 study by the Aberdeen Group, only about 32% of companies reported utilizing a formal onboarding program to integrate their new hires. Another study showed that of those employers who do utilize a formal onboarding process, 14% of employers still only allot one day to the onboarding of their new hires (Laurano, 2013). Laurano (2013) cites that organizations with a formal onboarding process experience have about 50% greater new hire productivity and retention. Research also has found that 25% of workers are participating in an onboarding process at a given time (Rollag, Parise, & Cross, 2005) and workers now are undergoing onboarding more often in their careers (Bauer et al., 2007). So, why are so many companies still paying so little attention to how their new hires are onboarded, given that there is an abundance of evidence that effective onboarding impacts the bottom line, both directly and indirectly? One answer may be that there is simply no one-size-fits-all approach to onboarding. Companies have to take the time to think about what the intention of their onboarding program will be and then find ways to manifest that, all while staying true to the values and norms of their culture. Effectively onboarding new hires requires significant investment of resources, both financially and otherwise.

For those companies that employed a formal onboarding program at the beginning of February 2020, things began to shift drastically as the world sheltered in place in response to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Physical offices were forced to close, but the work did not stop for current employees. Many companies also chose to continue hiring during this time, and therefore had to be ready to onboard their new hires (Anderson, 2020). Organizations had to quickly adapt their onboarding programs to a virtual format, with little guidance or precedent to refer to. Although this transition was reactionary for the most part, the learnings and best practices from this shift can be used to understand how to sustain a virtual onboarding program in the long-term.

Technology companies know technology the best, so it is not surprising that many companies in this industry have made the shift to virtual onboarding effectively during the COVID-19 crisis. These companies already tend to utilize technology to streamline and automate their business practices. They are often on the cutting edge of how technology can change the way people live and work. It seems that some of these companies are also willing to share their learnings about virtual onboarding, as well. For instance, LinkedIn has shared how the company has pivoted their onboarding experience for new hires in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis (Anderson, 2020). Understanding how to effectively onboard new hires virtually will not only help companies thrive during the COVID-19 crisis but will become increasingly relevant as more companies and individuals choose to work remotely on an ongoing basis.

Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this research was to explore the practices used by companies in the technology industry for virtually onboarding new hires, as well as to collect feedback from recent new hires around their recent virtual onboarding experiences.

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer two research questions:

- How are companies in the technology industry virtually onboarding new hires in the U.S.?
- What aspects of the virtual onboarding experience are most important to new hires at companies in the technology industry?

Importance of this Research

While there is a robust body of research on the impacts of the onboarding experience on new employees, there is less available data on what practices companies use to onboard new hires virtually. Additionally, most research is broad in nature, using data that spans across multiple industries. This study extends the body of research by exploring a more specific modality for onboarding within a single industry. As business continues to become more technology-based and global in nature, there will likely be an increase in virtual onboarding experiences. This study aims to help businesses understand how they can better support their new hires during the virtual onboarding experience, by providing data-driven recommendations for virtual onboarding.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 has provided a background for the research and defined its purpose. Chapter 2 will provide a review of the existing literature around onboarding. Chapter 3 outlines the study methodology used to complete this research. Chapter 4 describes the results of the study, by outlining the key themes, supporting data, and recommendations based on these findings. Chapter 5 discusses the implications and limitations of the study, as well as outlines recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Virtual workplaces, or arrangements where employees work remotely from each other and their managers, are not only a reality in the current business landscape, but will become even more common in the future (Cascio, 2000). As the globalization of business has increased, it has become more common for individuals and teams scattered across the world to work directly with one another, using technology to communicate and coordinate their work (Ahuja & Carley, 1999). As the types and quality of the technology products that facilitate this type of work continue to increase, they expand the ability for groups to successfully operate at a distance (Fulk & DeSanctis, 1995). There are several reasons why businesses might opt to support a remote workforce, including reduced real estate expenses, increased productivity, higher profits, improved customer service, access to more global markets, and environmental benefits (Cascio, 2000). However, virtual work is not always appropriate, depending on the organization, job, and individual (Cascio, 2000), so organizations must be thoughtful in their choice to support or require remote work. Given this fact, remote work arrangements vary widely. On the individual level, some choose to work remotely 100% of the time while others split their time between a physical office space and working remotely. Some companies have even eliminated their physical office spaces completely, and successfully operate with a fully remote workforce.

Remote Work in Times of Crisis

In addition to planned remote work arrangements, there are also times where unforeseen events can force employers to take on a remote work approach with their workforce. For instance, in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, a large part of the global

workforce had to quickly pivot into a remote work arrangement based on local regulations. It is estimated that nearly half of the workforce worked remotely at some point during the COVID-19 crisis (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). While working at a distance has many impacts on the way individuals and teams work, another significant impact is how newcomers are brought onboard within their organizations (Elset, 2018; Gruman & Saks, 2018). A potential long-term impact of this situation may be that more companies and individuals will begin to recognize the advantages of remote work, and then choose to stay with their new ways of working together (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). Additionally, economic conditions play a major role in the importance of onboarding (Pike, 2014). Pike (2014) suggests that after an economic recession, much like the one that began in the United States in 2020, job satisfaction rates typically decrease, causing more turnover. As the estimated 12% employees that were laid off during the COVID-19 crisis (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020) and those who voluntarily leave their jobs due to dissatisfaction begin to look for work, organizations will be faced with an influx of new hires who will need to be onboarded. As it remains unclear both when the majority of the workforce will be able to return to the office and what the long-term economic impacts of the crisis may be, understanding how to effectively onboard new hires in a virtual format is especially relevant now and in the future.

What is Onboarding?

In order to understand how working virtually has impacted the onboarding of new hires, it is important to first understand the literature that is available around traditional onboarding. The first key aspect of this literature is understanding the various

perspectives on what onboarding is. A few key definitions of onboarding found in the current literature include:

- “Onboarding is the process of helping new hires adjust to social and performance aspects of their new jobs quickly and smoothly” (Bauer, 2013, p. 1)
- “Onboarding is a process of introducing new hires into the new job, acquainting them with the organization's goals, values, rules, responsibilities, procedures, and socializing the new employee into organizational culture” (Chillakuri, 2020, p. 3)
- Onboarding comprises the “formal and informal practices, programs, and policies enacted or engaged in by an organization or its agents to facilitate newcomer adjustment” (Klein & Polin, 2012, p. 268)

These definitions are clearly not mutually exclusive, nor are any of them all inclusive. In fact, the differences between definitions within the literature mirror the fact that organizations also take vastly different approaches to onboarding in practice. Onboarding can occur both formally and informally within organizations (Bauer, 2007; Elset, 2018, Klein & Polin, 2012). Formal onboarding includes the written set of policies and procedures that help new hires adjust to their new job, both in terms of organizational culture and their actual role. This also includes planned activities that help new hires learn about their job and the company. Informal onboarding refers to any learning that is unplanned or coincidental (Bauer, 2007).

It is also important to note the distinction between onboarding and socialization, since there has been a significant amount of research around both topics. While some authors consider onboarding and socialization to be synonymous, such as Bauer and Erdogan (2011), Klein, Polin, and Sutton (2015) posit that they are actually two separate

concepts. They suggest that onboarding is a means to speed up socialization, which they define as “the learning and adjustment process by which individuals assume an organizational role that fits the needs of both the individual and the organization” (Klein et al. 2015, p. 263). Klein and Weaver (2000) offer a similar definition, describing socialization as the learning of “a variety of information and behaviors” which help organization members become more effective (p. 48). Laurano (2013) points out onboarding and socialization share a mutual goal, but suggests that there are aspects of socialization which are unique to new members of an organization, such as specific types of learning, task management, and forms management, which are necessary for new hires to address in order for them to be successful. Ultimately, these definitions all suggest that the socialization process applies to anyone in the organization, whereas onboarding specifically applies to new hires.

Why Does Onboarding Matter?

Given the investment that is required to deliver an effective onboarding experience, it is natural to wonder whether or not it would be worth it to take the necessary steps to maximize the onboarding experience. The importance of onboarding programs can be difficult to prove without explicit means to measure their success, and return on investment (ROI) is often difficult to prove (Laurano, 2013). However, it is undeniable that onboarding has a positive impact on the long-term success of new hires’ success and retention, based on the abundance of research on this topic (Bauer et al., 2007).

Laurano (2013) examined the top objectives that companies have when implementing comprehensive onboarding programs:

- 68% want to get new employees productive more quickly
- 67% want better employee engagement
- 51% want higher rates of employee retention
- 49% want better assimilation of new hires

In addition to these being key drivers for implementing comprehensive onboarding programs, studies show that these, and many other indicators of new hire adjustment and success, are directly impacted by the quality of new hire onboarding (Bauer & Erdogan 2011; Klein, Polin, & Sutton, 2015; Laurano, 2013).

Impacts for newcomers. Starting a new job is inherently stressful, which can impact the new hire's self-confidence and performance (Bauer et al., 2015). At the most fundamental level, onboarding acts as a means for reducing the uncertainty that can cause this stress for new hires joining an organization (Bauer et al., 2015; Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004). These factors, coupled with that fact that entry into the organization is a critical point during employment, indicate that onboarding should be a focus for employers (Good & Cavanagh, 2017). Research has shown that there are many constructive impacts of an effective onboarding experience that directly benefit newcomers, including reduced uncertainty and anxiety, a better understanding of the new environment, development of relationships, and acquisition of knowledge necessary to effectively perform job duties. All of these experiences positively impact the new hire's ability to be a productive member of their organization (Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004; Klein, Polin, & Sutton, 2015). Additionally, there are some intangible benefits that result from onboarding for new hires, which can also end up impacting the organization, such as increased job

satisfaction, positive affect around the direct team and organization and commitment to the organization (Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004).

Impacts for employers. Because the success of the organization reflects the success of the people within it (Talmundo, 2020), it is imperative that organizations support the development of their workers during the onboarding experience. Coff and Kryscynski (2011) point out that the sooner new hires can acquire the knowledge needed to do their job and navigate their organization's culture, the sooner and more effectively they will be able to contribute to the success of their organization. Additionally, the formation of effective working relationships with other organization members is a key factor in new hire success, and is therefore another outcome of onboarding that employers benefit from (Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004). In order to prove the positive impacts and ROI of a formalized onboarding program, the four key drivers mentioned above can be tied to the business metrics outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

ROI for Comprehensive Onboarding Programs

Employer Objective	Example of a Measure	Supporting Evidence
Get new employees productive more quickly	Time to Productivity	<p>Ganzel found that employees in their study who attended their entire onboarding process reached full productivity two months earlier than those who did not (1998).</p> <p>Talmundo found that 62% of employees hired in the last 12 months met first performance milestones on time for those that had formal onboarding programs, as compared to 17% among organizations without formal onboarding.</p> <p>Filipkowski of the HCI found that those with directed onboarding get better talent outcomes and are twice as likely to report faster times to proficiency (2016).</p> <p>Wells reports that it takes a mid-senior manager about 6.2 months to break even in terms of cost to hire versus contribution to the company (2005). Without proper onboarding, this timeline could be significantly extended, resulting in further financial investment or loss.</p>
Better employee engagement	Engagement Scores	<p>TrainingMag found that 54% employers who implemented an onboarding program saw significant gains in employee engagement metrics (2014).</p> <p>Hays found that 51% of employees say they'd go 'above and beyond' if they had a positive onboarding experience, with another 33% 'maybe' doing the same (2016).</p>
Higher rates of employee retention	Retention Rates	<p>Ganzel found that employees in their study who participated in a structured onboarding program were 69% more likely to be retained after 3 years (1998).</p> <p>Hays found that 22% of employees in their study said they'd definitely look for another job if they didn't have a positive onboarding experience, and another 41% said they might look for a new job (2016).</p>
Better assimilation of new hires	Hiring Manager Satisfaction	<p>Talmundo found a 33% year-to-year improvement in hiring manager satisfaction for those that had formal onboarding, as compared to 3% increase among organizations without formal onboarding.</p>

The direct financial investment in hiring new employees is another measure which directly impacts the bottom line for organizations. The various financial impacts of

new hire attrition include cost of hiring, cost of training, cost of learning and development, cost of time with the unfilled role, and impacts on productivity for other workers due to the turnover (Altman, 2020; Jacobs, 2012; Pike, 2014). Typically, newcomers will either align with the culture of their new organization or leave it; and onboarding can speed up the process of determining the level of employee-organization fit (Pike, 2014). The Aberdeen Group (2006) estimates that 90% of employees make their decision to stay or leave a company within their first six months, so that is a key time period for employers to ensure new organization members experience the foundational aspects of their onboarding process. All of the visible and invisible costs of new hire attrition add up to an average of 33% of an employee's annual salary, and up to 213% for senior or executive level positions, as the cost to replace them when they leave an organization (Boushey & Glynn, 2012; Otto, 2017).

What is Involved in the Onboarding Process?

Given the significance of onboarding programs in the success of new hires and their organizations, it is important to understand what the onboarding process is meant to accomplish. According to Bauer et al. (2007), onboarding should build role clarity, task mastery, self-efficacy, and social acceptance in order for newcomers to adjust in a well-rounded manner. Pike (2014) also points out that creating fit is a major intended outcome of onboarding, both on the employee-organization and employee-job levels. This involves helping newcomers align with the culture of the organization and understand their role within the organization, which ultimately can increase performance levels and organizational commitment (Pike, 2014). Another primary function is to meet the

information seeking needs of newcomers, which occurs on three levels (Miller & Jablin, 1991):

- Referent information: what is required in terms of the new hire's role and how they can successfully fulfill their role?
- Appraisal information: feedback about to what level the new hire is succeeding in their role.
- Relational information: what is the nature of the relationships between the new hire and certain other members of the organization?

In their review of multiple studies, Miller and Jablin (1991) found that overall new hires have expressed dissatisfaction around the amount and type of information they received during onboarding (e.g., Comer, 1991; Jablin, 1984; Teboul, 1994). However, it is important to note that information can be acquired by newcomers both actively and passively (Ahuja & Gavin, 2003) and that when new hires are proactive in seeking information, they typically have a more productive onboarding experience than those who take a passive approach (e.g., Bauer, Morrison, & Callister, 1998; Comer, 1991; Good & Cavanagh, 2017; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000). Newcomers who proactively seek out information, both in face-to-face and virtual contexts, tend to specifically choose the sources they engage with and typically rely on those with more tenure and experience in the organization (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003; Settoon & Adkins, 1997). This type of information includes technical, social, and cultural information, which new hires acquire through either explicit requests for information or observation (Comer, 1991). Although Wanberg and Kammeyer-Mueller (2000) suggest that it is not possible for employers to provide every necessary piece of information to newcomers, it

is wise for them to take a balanced approach to facilitating the acquisition of knowledge, while still encouraging proactive behaviors (2000).

A framework that has been developed to help outline the outcomes of onboarding is the Inform, Welcome, Guide model presented by Klein and Heuser (2008). Klein and Heuser (2008) found that there are three primary purposes for onboarding, which help new organization members adjust: to inform, welcome, and guide new hires. The inform category includes communication (one and two-way), resources (information that goes beyond person-to-person communication, such as an intranet or FAQ), and training (planned efforts to impart knowledge upon the new hire, such as orientations or job shadowing) that help newcomers adjust and can come in the form of information, materials, or experience (Klein & Heuser, 2008). The welcome category includes any activities that are aimed at addressing the emotional and social needs of new hires, such as celebrations or social events intended to welcome them into the organization or facilitate the development of relationships with other organization members (Klein & Heuser, 2008; Klein & Polin, 2012). The guide category includes any activities that provide newcomers with direct support for the transition into the organization, such as a buddy or mentor (Gruman & Saks, 2018; Klein & Heuser, 2008). It is also important to note that although these three categories can apply across the entire organization, different positions, functions, or employee types requiring varying levels of focus in each of them (Klein & Heuser, 2008). For instance, while senior-level employees, or those who commonly work with cross-functional partners, may need more time spent around social and relationship-building activities, technical employees whose roles focus on specific tasks may need more focus around acquiring the explicit knowledge necessary to

perform their job (Bauer, 2007; Klein, Polin, & Sutton, 2015). Klein, Polin, and Sutton (2015) found that the Inform category (and more specifically communication and training) was the most commonly experienced category among their study participants, followed by Guide and then Welcome.

Onboarding may look very different from company to company, even when organizations share the goals outlined above. To understand what aspects of onboarding are important and how effective certain tactics are, there have been studies in several areas: stages of the onboarding process, what tactics employers use to socialize new hires, and sensemaking of the new environment by newcomers (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003). To understand some of the existing standards that have been established, we can compare a few key onboarding models (Bauer, 2013; Dai & De Meuse, 2007; Miller & Jablin, 1991).

Bauer (2013) describes the onboarding process as occurring on three different strategic levels, each of which include various domains and accompanying activities. These domains are the building blocks of the onboarding experience, which materialize in various degrees across organizations. It is important to note that in this model, these domains are not necessarily hierarchical, but do tend to represent how strategic, complex, or comprehensive the onboarding program may be as an organization moves from compliance to clarification to culture and finally to connection (Bauer, 2013). The strategic levels of onboarding, their domains, accompanying definitions, and frequencies at which they can be seen in organizations are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

The Levels of Onboarding and their Domains

Domain	Description	Strategic Level	Organizations Working at this Level
Connection	The vital interpersonal relationships and information networks that new employees must establish.	Proactive Onboarding	20%
Culture	A broad category that includes providing employees with a sense of organizational norms— both formal and informal.		
Clarification	Ensuring that employees understand their new jobs and all related expectations. Onboarding is not yet fully systematized across the organization, but has expanded beyond just basic requirements.	High Potential Onboarding	50%
Compliance	Teaching employees basic legal and policy-related rules and regulations. Almost all organizations naturally cover this level as part of a formal onboarding program.	Passive Onboarding	30%

Bauer (2013) goes on to describe the four levers of onboarding which can be used to maximize the success of new hires. These levers and their definitions are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3

Levers to Maximize Onboarding Success

Lever	Definition
Self-Efficacy	Self-confidence of new employees around job performance.
Role Clarity	Understanding of the role and clarity of expectations.
Social Integration	Meeting and working with other organization members; feeling socially comfortable and accepted by peers and superiors.
Knowledge of Culture	Adjusting to the organization's culture through an understanding of its politics, goals, values, unique language, etc.

Another model that outlines the components of an onboarding program is the six Key Areas of Adjustment, outlined by Dai and De Meuse (2007). These areas and their definitions are detailed in Table 4.

Table 4

Key Areas for Onboarding Programs to Address

Key Area	Definition
Performance Proficiency	Learning and mastering the required knowledge, skills and abilities to perform the primary work tasks.
People	Establishing effective relationships with other members of the organization, both within and outside of the employee's primary work team; Building a personal network within the organization
Politics	Gaining knowledge of formal and informal relationships and power structures within the organization, as well as where specific people fit within them.
Language	Developing knowledge of both technical and organizational language, such as slang, jargon, acronyms and ways in which people communicate.
Organizational Vision and Values	Understanding the spoken and unspoken forces that drive the culture and purpose of the organization at every level (seen and unseen).
History	Gaining context about the organization's traditions, customs, myths, rituals and history, to understand how it became the organization it is today; Understanding the backgrounds of various organization members

Although the models presented by Bauer (2013) and Dai and De Meuse (2007) vary in what level of granularity they use to describe the various components of the onboarding experience, they ultimately both conclude that onboarding has several of the same key components. These areas are mapped to each model in Table 5.

Table 5

Mapping of Bauer's and Dai / De Meuse's Models

Bauer's Levers for Maximizing Onboarding Success	Dai / De Meuse's 6 Key Areas of Adjustment
Self-Efficacy	Performance Proficiency
Role Clarity	
Social Integration	People
Culture	Politics
	Language
	Organizational Vision and Values
	History

These levers or areas of adjustment are generalized areas of knowledge that new hires should learn about or experience during their onboarding process. Each of these areas can be manifested in various ways during the onboarding experience (Klein & Polin, 2012). For instance, Social Integration (Bauer, 2013) or People (Dai & De Meuse, 2007) can take the form of one-on-one meetings, group meetings, or various types of

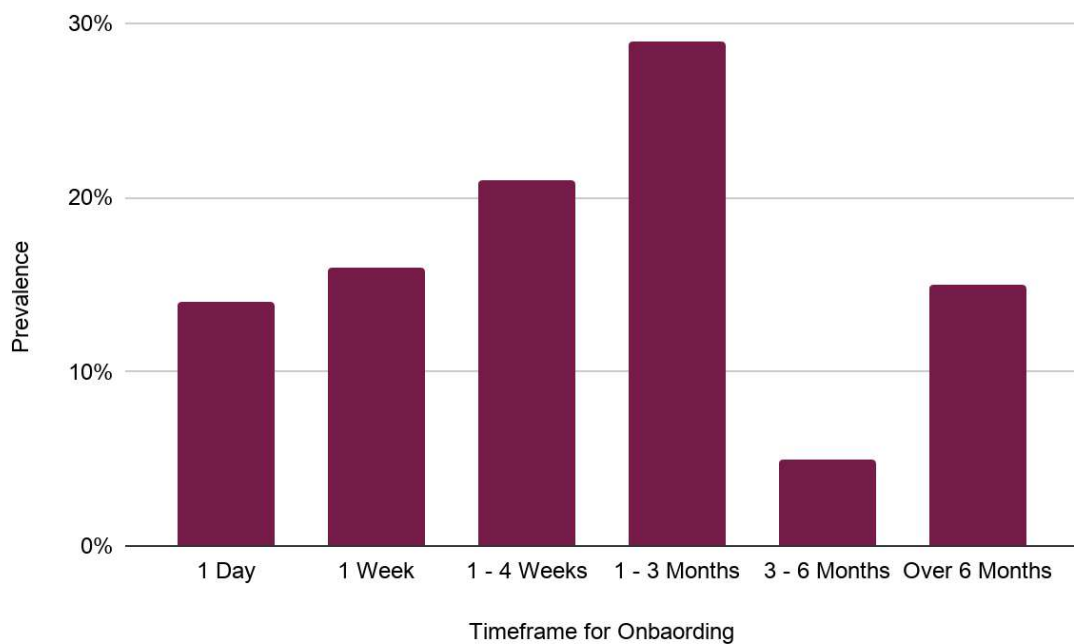
social events (Dai & De Meuse, 2007). The type of experiences that a company will organize for their new hires will then depend on its culture, capabilities, and the needs of that specific new hire (Gruman & Saks, 2018). The models outlined above do not prescriptively define which type of experience that companies should curate for all new hires that enter the organization, rather they merely recommend that employers find some appropriate way to address each of those areas, in a way that is right for their organization. Laurano states that the best way to ensure the success of an onboarding program is not only to balance the factors above, but to connect each part of the experience back to the business (2013).

The timing of the onboarding process and its components is also a consideration for organizations. One of the most common mistakes employers make while onboarding new hires is not continuing the process long enough (Bauer, 2013; Krasman, 2015; Laurano, 2013). Krasman (2015) sums it up well by stating that “onboarding isn’t a one time event; it’s a process that persists through all the early stages of an employee’s journey. Even more, it’s an investment in workers that helps them become more productive and more satisfied members of [their] organization” (p. 10). Although it is clear that effective onboarding cannot occur in a single day, there is still no definitive answer around exactly how long it should last. The Aberdeen Group (2006) states that onboarding new hires for less than a month is likely to impact retention rates negatively, citing that companies with onboarding programs that last less than a month are 9% less likely to keep their new hires for over a year, as compared to those with longer onboarding processes. Laurano (2013) found that the timeframe which companies use to onboard their new hires varies widely, and that a period of one to three months is the

most common timeframe that companies use to complete onboarding experience (Figure 1). In this amount of time, employees can get set up from a tactical perspective, understand the company's culture, receive adequate training for their role, and begin to understand if the company is indeed a good fit for them (Laurano, 2013). The Aberdeen Group (2016) also cautions employers to spread onboarding activities out appropriately over the allotted period of time, in order to ensure maximum benefit can be derived from each experience.

Figure 1

Average Length of the Onboarding Process



In 2016, the Aberdeen group surveyed employers again and found that only 37% of companies used an onboarding period longer than one month to integrate new hires, and that about 15% of them still only provide one day for onboarding activities.

Within the context of the entire onboarding experience, there has also been some research on when specific components occur during the process. Klein, Polin, and Sutton

(2015) report that activities within the Guide category usually occur a few days prior to the newcomer's start date; those within the Inform category (especially those within the communication sub-category) occur on the first day; and activities in the Welcome category tend to occur later within the first week of employment. They also found that activities in the Resources and Training sub-categories of the Inform category tended to begin in the second week of employment (Klein et al., 2015). Although many organizations use onboarding as a means to reduce the ramp up time for newcomers (e.g., Bauer, 2013; Coff & Kryscynski, 2011), Klein et al. (2015) found that the timing of onboarding practices is more complex than offering everything as early as possible in the onboarding experience. The only tactic that was found to be rated as more helpful based on the proximity to hire, was being shown how to navigate the company intranet or knowledge base. All other tactics seemed to vary based on the individual, types of activities offered and number of activities within the onboarding experience (Klein et al., 2015). The individualization versus institutionalization of activities also have an effect on when they should be present within the onboarding experience:

The use of more institutionalized socialization tactics (those characterized by collective experiences and formal socialization processes) were more advantageous for proximal outcomes, including role clarity, self-efficacy, and social integration. In contrast, organizations using more individualized socialization approaches (those characterized by less structured, "sink or swim" approaches where the newcomer is left to figure out the organization's culture, norms, and one's job) tend to result in lower levels of clarity, efficacy, and social integration. (Ellis et al., 2015, p. 209)

Established Best Practices

There have already been extensive studies that prove how the new hire onboarding experience can impact employees and their companies in the long-term, but there has also been a great deal of investigation into what components and practices can be used to make an onboarding program successful. A few examples are highlighted below and throughout this study.

Utilizing a centralized model. In the past, the Human Resources function has been primarily responsible for managing the onboarding of new hires, but companies are rapidly moving away from that model (Laurano, 2013). Onboarding new hires in a comprehensive and effective manner now requires coordinated efforts between various departments as well as thoughtful planning and communication (Bauer, 2013; Laurano 2013). When it comes to working virtually, not only does the onboarding program itself have to adapt, but the communication and collaboration measures between the teams that are coordinating to plan these efforts must also adapt (Cascio, 2000; Flanagin & Waldeck, 2014). Bauer (2013) suggests that although the various support functions and stakeholders involved in the onboarding process work separately to some degree, the key to success is ensuring that they work seamlessly together. And although a high level of collaboration is required to fully onboard new hires, Laurano (2013) states that there should still be a centralized owner with full visibility and decision-making powers. While some companies use Human Resources, Recruiting, or a separate Onboarding function, companies are more commonly moving toward centralizing their onboarding programs within the Learning & Development function (Laurano, 2013). In addition to assigning clear ownership and a high level of stakeholder collaboration, this model can also help

increase visibility into the onboarding process across the organization (Laurano, 2013). As more companies are turning to managers and other individual business leaders to manage the onboarding within their function, it is imperative that these individuals understand what the onboarding journey looks like from start to finish, and where they have responsibility to plan and execute onboarding plans for their new hires (Laurano, 2013). This allows for a fine balance of consistency across the company, including creating consistency across geographies, while still allowing for some customization and flexibility based on factors such as function, role, and local culture (Laurano, 2013).

Implementing pre-boarding activities. Another best practice for onboarding is using pre-boarding or pre-hire onboarding activities to get new hires ready for their first day (Gruman & Saks, 2018). Krasman (2015) outlines the importance of setting expectations for the new hire's first day and sending information over to them ahead of time in order to get them adequately prepared. Best in class organizations go a step further and provide opportunities for education and forms management prior to the first day of work (Laurano, 2013). Aberdeen (2016) found that companies who use pre-boarding retain 81% of their first-year hires. Given that 73% of new hires want a thorough review of company policies within their first week of work, employers can send this information prior to the start date to allow more time for absorption (Aberdeen, 2016). In addition to some basic education, the abundance of platforms that are available to help manage parts of the onboarding process means that repetitive and manual tasks can be automated with relative ease (Cascio, 2000). Best practice is for new hires to have their paperwork filled out prior to their start date, including filling out tax and payroll forms, work authorizations, reading and signing company policies, and filling out

personal information (Laurano, 2013). The automation and early action on these types of activities can drive compliance for organizations who are currently relying on more manual processes (Bauer, 2013). More importantly, this allows the first day to be focused around welcoming the new hire into the organization and the rest of the first week to focus on education and socialization. Consciously showing new hires that the company cares about them through actions like pre-boarding creates a “perceptual take-away” for new hires (Lee, 2006, p. 10), which can positively impact their perception of the company in the long-term. Lahey (2014) provides guidance for companies that are considering incorporating pre-boarding into their onboarding programs:

Businesses [who are] looking to demonstrate the importance they place on new employees and their engagement should extend the traditional onboarding process by beginning it even before new hires start...The amount of time needed before employees start is company- and industry-specific, but doesn't necessarily have to be weeks in advance. Instead it should be just enough time to allow new hires to feel comfortable and ready to learn and then participate. Pre-boarding shouldn't be a complicated process either. The activities and applicable materials chosen for the process should be available online, either in a portal or sent by email, so that the new employees can absorb the information even before their first day.

(pp. 3- 4)

When pre-boarding is delivered in a thoughtful and effective way, it can help streamline the onboarding experience and ease the sense of overwhelm on the first day.

Creating connections. A final best practice to consider is proactively mapping out and building the new hire's network (Krasman, 2015). Connection is called out as a key

aspect of onboarding throughout the various models above. Not only does building connections help new hires feel like they are welcome and foster a sense of belonging, but it can also help the new hire informally learn and absorb more information about the company through interactions that take place within the personal network (Comer, 1991). Bauer (2013) cites acceptance by peers to be a key indicator of new hire adjustment and reported that 60% of managers who fail cite “failure to establish effective working relationships” as a primary cause (p. 5). According to Dai and De Meuse (2007), companies can enable this process by structuring it into the onboarding program. Examples of how employers can help their new hires connect with other members of the organization suggested by Dai and De Meuse (2007) include:

- Managers can identify who their new hire needs to interact with in order to be successful in their role and then facilitate introductions
- Utilize buddy programs to pair new hires with a peer or mentor that can help guide them through the onboarding process
- Leverage affinity or employee resource groups to help new hires find others within the organization that have the same interests or backgrounds
- Organize social events on the company, team or new hire cohort level to create opportunity for more relaxed, personal connections

Helping new hires establish connections not only will help them feel better about their place in the organization on an emotional level, but can have direct business impacts by establishing positive, effective working relationships with key partners early on.

The use of a buddy or mentor system is another way to help newcomers simultaneously expand their social network and gain the knowledge and support they

need (Allen, McManus, & Russell, 1999). Newcomers who participate in mentoring of some kind have been found to report significantly increased levels of socialization, both in terms of relationships and cultural integration (Allen et al., 1999; Chao, Walz, & Gardener, 1992; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993). Some of the social benefits that result from a buddy or mentor relationship include skills that can help newcomers more effectively navigate their relationships within the organization, including “conflict resolution, leadership, and interpersonal communication skills” (Allen et al., 1999, p. 464). Additionally, those who participate in buddy or mentor relationship relationships reported a decrease in work-related stress (Allen et al., 1999).

Common Mistakes and Pitfalls

In addition to telling employers what should be done to build and maintain a successful onboarding program, several studies have also compiled research on the common mistakes or pitfalls employers encounter when onboarding their new hires.

Forgetting to measure. Krasman (2015) states that like any other business outcome or critical process, companies should be regularly measuring onboarding effectiveness and reevaluating their offerings based on those findings. As mentioned above, there are several key indicators of an onboarding program’s success. Ways to measure these and other measures of success should be baked into the onboarding program early on in its implementation. A few key metrics that can help companies understand how effective their onboarding include:

- Employee Retention: the percentage of new hires that stay within the organization over a certain time period

- Time to Productivity: the percentage of new employees that meet stated performance goals or milestone by a certain time
- Hiring Manager Satisfaction: the year over year change in hiring manager satisfaction with the employees that have come into the firm (Laurano, 2013).

In addition to quantitative data around the new hires themselves, Baek and Bramwell (2016) emphasize that employers should actively seek feedback directly from new hires about their experience during the onboarding process. In fact, they found that this direct feedback, through the use of surveys, interviews, and/or focus groups is the most common way onboarding effectiveness is measured by companies. It is imperative that organizations seek feedback throughout the onboarding process and respond to it in a timely manner. Not only will this let new hires know that their opinions are valued, but it will also allow organizations to capitalize on the fresh perspectives and information that new hires bring to their new companies (Korte, 2007; Lee, 2006).

Over indexing on a single facet. One of the major mistakes companies with more established onboarding programs make is over indexing on the strategic aspects of the experience (Laurano, 2013). On the flip side, companies that focus solely on the tactical portions of the process lose out on the benefits of an expanded program that ties back to the business directly. Laurano (2013) states that:

By improving efficiencies, organization should not abandon efforts to engage employees but instead should view socialization activities as a way to drive productivity and empower new hires with the tools they need to succeed...Many organizations have either stuck with traditional orientation programs that fail to assimilate new hires or embraced innovative programs that offer little impact on

the bottom line. Although the ultimate goal is to improve the new hire experience, many of these programs fail to connect the dots between onboarding and business objectives. (p. 6)

When an organization swings too far in either direction, other aspects of onboarding can be diminished, which can ultimately impact a new hire's view of the entire experience. Additionally, Bauer (2013) further emphasizes this message in the Four C model of the levels of onboarding. Onboarding programs should be intentional and have meaning, connecting all aspects of the experience to one another and back to the business.

Remote Work as a Concept

Technology is changing the way people and organizations work (Cascio, 2000; Coover & Thompson, 2013). It can enable teams to communicate more quickly and dynamically, usually at a lower cost to the organization (Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004). The growing rate at which people are choosing to work remotely has been supported by the advance in technology that supports this type of communication and collaboration (Cascio, 2000). In Owl Labs' 2018 State of Remote Work Report, which surveyed over 3,000 workers across 23 countries and six continents, 85% of US-based participants reported that their companies allowed or required remote work to some degree. For those companies who did not previously allow remote work, the COVID-19 crisis has forced many of them to change this stance, resulting in new insights about what happens when a large portion of the population works remotely. Even after the crisis, IBM (2020) estimates that 54% of people would prefer to continue working remotely. Another study identified a similar sentiment, where 54% of those surveyed said they would quit their job for another if it offered more flexible work arrangements (Hickman & Robison,

2020). Because of its increased prevalence, various studies have investigated the impact of virtual work on individuals and teams (e.g., Ahuja & Galvin, 2003; Cascio, 2000; Coover & Thompson, 2013; Scott & Timmerman, 1999).

Advantages of remote work. One of the most significant positive outcomes of remote work is the increased productivity of employees. A study around working from home showed that remote work can increase total-factor productivity by 20 to 30%, between the increased performance and lower overhead costs associated with this Arrangement (Bloom, Liang, Roberts, & Ying, 2015). It is important to note that the study also discussed that increased productivity is the result of an intentional and thoughtful remote work set up, where employees have access to the right tools and technology to do their job, as well as a level of trust within their team in order to effectively work remotely. Scott and Timmerman (1999) found that individuals who work a moderate of time remotely tend to identify with their teams and organizations more closely than those who do not work remotely or work remotely 100% of the time. Gallup had similar findings, noting that a fine balance of face-time and remote work results in the optimal boost to employee engagement (Hickman & Robison, 2020). The study found that employees who spend 60 - 80% of their time working offsite have better levels of engagement at work, which can translate to lower levels of absenteeism, fewer quality defects, and higher profitability (Hickman & Robison, 2020). The speed at which teams can communicate, make decisions, and collaborate is also typically increased (Cascio, 2000). For employees, remote work may provide more work-life balance, more dynamic team membership, and the ability to work on cross-functional and cross-geography projects (Cascio, 2000). For employers, a virtual workplace can also

result in lowered real estate costs, increased productivity, higher profits, access to more markets across the globe, and even improved environmental sustainability (Cascio, 2000). Across these studies, it is clear that working remotely can benefit both employees and their employers.

Challenges involved with remote work. Ahuja and Galvin (2003) point out that although virtual teams have similar needs to traditional, on-site teams, working remotely also comes with unique challenges. For instance, because there may be a reduction in the number of people workers directly communicate with, this can lead to a decrease in collaboration or limited perspective, especially for newcomers (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003). Additionally, for employers the advantages may be outweighed by factors like setup costs for home offices, maintenance and support costs for technology, loss of cost efficiencies in the workplace, feelings of isolation, and decreased trust (Cascio, 2000). The transition to remote work also requires individuals and managers to change the way they work, moving from a time and activity-based mindset to a project and results-based mindset (Cascio, 2000). Virtual teams also require better leadership skills for existing managers, including formal and informal communication, a solution and results oriented management style, agility and flexibility, performance management, and the ability to delegate effectively (Cascio, 2000). Another challenge for virtual teams is the lack of physical interaction, decreasing the amount of verbal and non-verbal cues during communication, as well as the synergy that comes with real-time communication (Cascio, 2000).

Rock and Smith (2020) state that virtual work can result in several challenges and biased behaviors when not managed effectively. At a distance it is much easier to

unintentionally exclude people or give in to distance bias, which can result in decreased collaboration. Additionally, because the hallway run-in's do not happen, there is less opportunity for quick updates and personal connection. Expedience bias can result in the unconscious decision to schedule meetings from the moment we start working; and when remote work happens at home, this can end up being the moment someone wakes up. Productivity research shows that people tend to focus and generate ideas best during the morning. Starting meetings early generally diminishes the amount of time that individuals can work at their mental peak. Productivity and work quality can decline when meetings are scheduled back to back without adequate breaks to mentally recharge. With remote work, people may tend to work longer, but their results are not always better. People automatically tend to jump into business first during virtual meetings, missing the key aspect of human connection. This loss of face time can be detrimental since research shows that healthy personal relationships in the workplace are a building block for trust, partnership, and innovation (Cascio, 2000). The distractions that come with working remotely, such as adjusting cameras, dealing with audio challenges, and paying attention to what we look like on video can hinder the natural flow of conversations. Because non-verbal cues are largely lost during remote work, people have to communicate more explicitly and often (Rock & Smith, 2020).

Remote work may not be suitable for all jobs, managers, or organizations. (Cascio, 2000). Choudhury (2018) also mentions that there is a concern that some people do not want to work remotely and states that the characteristic which drives whether or not one wants to work remotely is also correlated with productivity. In addition to the consideration of individual preference, employers must also be aware of how remote

work can impact teams that need a high level of collaboration in order to effectively meet their goals (Chodhury & Larson, 2018). In environments where brainstorming and heavy project-based interactions are required, remote could actually increase costs. and notes There has been a call for research to be done on how remote work impacts people in collaborative settings (Choudhury & Larson, 2018). Although initial studies do show the positive effects of remote work on productivity, more research is needed to understand where this type of arrangement can lead to success and what the long-term impacts of a virtual workforce are (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). Despite this, remote work is currently a reality for more workers than ever, and according to Cascio (2000) “all indications are that it will become even more prevalent in the future” (p. 81).

What is Known About Virtual Onboarding

Because workers now rely on technology to do their jobs, employers must consider how onboarding is impacted by this trend and how they can use technology to positively change their onboarding procedures (Flanigan & Waldeck, 2004). Because of the advancement of technology, there is great opportunity around how employers can leverage it to support their new hires during the onboarding (Good & Cavanagh, 2017; Gruman & Saks, 2018). In fact, technology has been used in onboarding for some time now, typically as part of a hybrid model (Cascio, 2000). This has allowed various studies to assess how a virtual format can impact the onboarding experience for newcomers (e.g., Ahuja & Galvin, 2013; Elset, 2018; Flanagan & Waldeck, 2004; Gruman & Saks, 2018).

Technology has the ability to bring clarity, efficiency, and ease to the onboarding process, as well as enabling companies to deliver a more timely and consistent experience to members across all parts of their organization (Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004).

Technology can also allow onboarding to be more easily customized to the individual and can enable newcomers to expand their role in the onboarding process (Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004). Studies have also found some dysfunctional consequences around virtual onboarding, particularly related to social and normative learning (Ahuja & Galvin, 2013; Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004).

Although there are significant positive consequences of virtual onboarding, research has shown that it can also limit newcomers' ability to develop normative and social understandings of their organization (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003). Because normative and social information is harder to describe explicitly, newcomers often observe the actions and behaviors of others to gain this type of information (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003; Korte, 2007; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992). Remote work makes this more difficult because there is less opportunity for newcomers to watch others interact (Comer, 1991). A study by Ahuja and Galvin (2003) found that newcomers were reluctant to use email to inquire about norms but were still inclined to observe the interactions between other organization members over email (2003). Since new hires are already found to be dissatisfied with the amount of information about organizational norms (Comer, 1991), it is possible that virtual onboarding could further exacerbate this concern. Korte (2007) suggests that impaired knowledge of organizational norms can impact the ability of newcomers to form effective relationships, thus impacting their performance.

Additionally, virtual onboarding can limit newcomers' social interactions with other organization members and reduce the opportunity for proactive social behaviors. (Gruman & Saks, 2018). For instance, in one study newcomers who were virtually onboarded scored lower in socially oriented areas of their adjustment, based on self and

supervisor reported data (Gruman & Saks, 2018). Because of this, newcomers who are onboarded virtually may need to take a proactive approach to their onboarding, by asking more questions and intentionally creating opportunities for observation (Comer, 1991). Lowered social capital can result in weaker work identity and lengthened adjustment periods in other areas of socialization (Gruman & Saks, 2018).

Aside from potential impact of relationship development, decreased social interaction can also impact the new hire's self-concept (Pike, 2014). Ahuja and Galvin (2013) note that onboarding is not an individual process, but rather is a group process that involves multiple members of the organization and team. Newcomers continually seek information and feedback from other organization members to help them adapt to the new environment and understand whether or not they are meeting expectations (Pike, 2014). Without ongoing observation and incidental opportunities for the exchange of this type of information, new hires and other organization members must make a conscious effort to deliver feedback on a regular basis (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003; Bauer et al., 1998; Cascio, 2000; Gruman & Saks, 2018).

A major consideration for virtual onboarding is the degree of virtuality that is introduced throughout the onboarding process (Gruman & Saks, 2018). Gruman and Saks (2018) recommend a hybrid approach to onboarding, where in-person and virtual activities are used to provide specific content or experiences to newcomers. Structures for opportunities for developing a social network are imperative in virtual onboarding, such as leveraging a buddy or mentor program to or adapting traditional social interactions to a virtual format (Gruman & Saks, 2018). Additionally, employers should be thoughtful in which virtual onboarding activities are institutionalized versus individualized, to ensure

newcomers get maximum exposure to the information they need for success (Gruman & Saks, 2018; Klein et al., 2015). Ahuja and Galvin (2003) also highlight the importance of a centralized contact or liaison who can direct them to other specific organization members, since their social network is likely to be smaller than in a traditional onboarding experience. In virtual onboarding, employers must also be even more explicit and detailed in their communication and training of new hires (Gruman & Saks, 2018). Organizations should carefully consider how to leverage technology in the onboarding process, to ensure it is actually helpful to new hires and aligns with organizational use patterns of other technology (Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004). Because virtual onboarding is still a new area for research, there are still questions about how and when technology can be most effectively used to integrate newcomers into their organizations (Gruman & Saks, 2018).

The Future of Onboarding and Remote Work

The COVID-19 crisis has illustrated how the concept of remote work and onboarding are inextricably linked (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020; Pike, 2014). Studies around both onboarding and the positive impacts of remote work tell us that not only can employers successfully adapt their onboarding programs to a virtual format with the right amount of care and intentionality, but also inspire hope that these organizations can leverage virtual work capability and practices to improve their onboarding experience beyond the status quo (Gruman & Saks, 2018). Technology companies are at the forefront of this movement, as many of them already employ mechanisms for working virtually. The present study will bridge the gap between onboarding and remote work practices. It will explore what companies are doing to onboard their new hires virtually

and how they are doing it. Additionally, it will also explore what some new hires who are being onboarded actually find important and valuable during the onboarding experience. It is imperative for organizations to stay agile and understand how to transition their key people programs (including onboarding) to a virtual format in order to retain their competitive advantage. Doing so will help keep their workforce more engaged and productive, in both planned remote work settings and during times of crisis.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research was to explore the practices used by companies in the technology industry for virtually onboarding new hires, as well as to collect feedback from recent new hires around their onboarding experience. The present study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How are U.S. companies in the technology industry virtually onboarding new hires?
2. What aspects of the virtual onboarding experience are most important to new hires at U.S. companies in the technology industry?

While a fair amount of research has been conducted on new hire onboarding in general, there has been little research about what works best when onboarding new hires virtually and even less about this demographic specifically.

Research Methods

Sample. I reached out to 20 potential participants solicited from my network, of which 17 agreed to participate. Of these 17 potential participants, 13 actually scheduled their interview and 12 completed their individual interview. All of the participants were hired and virtually onboarded at technology companies after February 2020. All of the companies and corresponding study participants are headquartered in the US, with 83% of them headquartered in the San Francisco Bay Area (the area also colloquially known as Silicon Valley) and the other 17% of them headquartered in the greater Seattle, WA area. These companies are profiled in more detail in Table 6.

Table 6

Participant Company Profiles

Company	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
HQ Location	Bay Area, CA	Bay Area, CA	Bay Area, CA	Greater Seattle Area	Bay Area, CA	Bay Area, CA	Bay Area, CA	Bay Area, CA	Bay Area, CA	Greater Seattle Area
Founded	2017	2012	2014	1994	2002	1984	1997	2009	1976	2012
# of Employees	25	1,800	230	936,000	16,000	76,000	8,600	1,700	137,000	500
# Study Participants	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	1

Procedures. I solicited participants from a variety of companies, based solely on the hire date of the participant and the industry of their company. These individuals were identified as recent hires of companies in the technology industry, who were either already known to me, recommended by others, or found via public search on LinkedIn. Initial contact with participants was made via LinkedIn direct message or email. The request for participation (Appendix A) detailed the purpose of the research, demographic criteria for participants, information around requirements for participation, and the informed consent document for the study (Appendix B).

All 12 interviews were conducted virtually, using a unique, password-protected Zoom room that was only accessible to me and the participant. Prior to the interview, participants were instructed to find a quiet, private space to use for the duration of the interview in order to allow for the sharing of private detail in a confidential manner (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Participants completed the informed consent document and were told verbally at the beginning of the interview that recordings would be transcribed, then deleted, and that all notes and transcriptions would be stored in a secure location.

Each interview began with a review of the research purpose and information around the risks involved with participation in the study. Prior to commencing the interview, I verbally asked the participants to confirm that they would still like to participate and to confirm that they were in a quiet, private space.

I used a semi-structured interview to collect all data (Appendix C), as well as various demographic indicators (Appendix D). The primary interview questions were reviewed by my faculty advisor, and then probing questions were added to obtain more detail and personal perspective from the participants (Creswell, 2014). I took notes on my laptop and also audio-recorded the interviews, such that they could give more attention to the participant and be able to participate in meaningful dialogue during the interview (Creswell, 2014). Upon the conclusion of each interview, I thanked the participant for their time and ensured them that they would receive a copy of the executive summary of the research project.

Analytical strategy. The data analysis for this research was primarily conducted via thematic analysis, by coding the interview notes, chunking similar types of information or sentiments, and then identifying meaningful themes within the data set (Creswell, 2014). I began by grouping the answers to each interview question and then identifying the frequency of each sentiment within the data. Additionally, I read all the answers to a single question and looked for other patterns and themes in the data. To confirm the themes that I identified, I then also read each interview as a whole and looked for patterns and themes within a single participant's interview. I recorded these themes and the approximate frequency at which they occurred across all interviews. Once these granular themes were identified, I used the affinity sorting method to group similar

sentiments and look for broader themes (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). Corresponding direct quotes were selected to support each significant theme, with all personal data being omitted in order to preserve participant confidentiality. Themes that were not as widely represented in the data were still recorded for use as further considerations in the research project.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology used to conduct this study. It briefly reviewed the research purpose, then detailed the study methods, including the sampling of participants, procedures, and data analysis strategy. Chapter 4 will focus on the results of this research, including the data that was gathered and the overall findings of the study.

Chapter 4: Findings

Research Question 1

The first research question asked how companies in the technology industry are currently virtually onboarding new hires. This question can be answered by the following data points: length of onboarding period, components of the pre-hire onboarding experience, components of the new hire onboarding experience, and various other considerations for onboarding.

Length of onboarding period. Table 7 shows the length of the participants' onboarding experiences. The total time for onboarding varied widely between the companies represented in this research.

Table 7

Length of Onboarding Period

Length of Onboarding Period	N	%
1 day	2	17%
2 weeks	2	17%
3 weeks	2	17%
4 weeks	1	8%
5 weeks	1	8%
6 weeks	2	17%
8 weeks	1	8%
1 year	1	8%
Total	12	100%

The minimum amount of time for new hire onboarding was reported as one day and the maximum time for new hire onboarding was one year. The median length of the onboarding period was 3.5 weeks, with 59% of participants reporting that their onboarding lasted one month or less. It is important to note that new hires self-reported this data, so there is a degree of subjectivity around what constitutes the onboarding period. There are both formal and informal aspects of the onboarding period which may have been considered by new hires when providing this estimate. Most participants indicated that their answer was representative of the length of time in which more formal or company-sponsored onboarding took place. For instance, one participant noted that, “[their] training is over now, but [they] still feel like [they are] learning to some degree, and probably will be for a while.” New hires seem to think about onboarding as a period of time during which focused activities occur, which are intended to get them up to speed within the company and their role in order to support their transition to working independently.

Components of the pre-hire onboarding experience. Table 8 shows the various components of the pre-hire onboarding experience reported by the study participants. The pre-hire period is defined as the period between when the new hires signs their offer letter and their actual start date.

Table 8

Components of the Pre-Hire Onboarding Experience

Pre-Hire Onboarding Activity Type	N	%
Communication with HR	9	75%
Completion of New Hire Documents	8	67%
Communication with Manager	7	58%

Communication with Direct Teammates	3	25%
COVID-19 Specific Communications	2	17%
Relocation Specific Communications	2	17%
Enrollment in Health Benefits	1	8%

The most common pre-hire onboarding activity was contact with the company’s HR department (75%). The reasons for these communications reported by the participants were: providing first day or orientation details to the new hire (8), collection of personal information for IT purposes (i.e., preferred name, address for mailing laptop) (3), and general welcome email (2). The second most common pre-hire onboarding activity was filling out new hire documents, where 67% of new hires were instructed to complete their onboarding documents online prior to their first day. Examples of these documents reported by the participants included: work authorization (I-9), tax forms (W-4), personal information / emergency contacts, and signing non-disclosure agreement(s) or other company policy documents. The third most common pre-hire onboarding activity was direct communication with the new hire’s manager (58%). The primary reasons for this communication reported by the participants were: general welcome email / personal introduction (7), sharing first day logistics (4), and request for IT hardware requirements (2).

Components of the new hire onboarding experience. Table 9 shows the various components of the virtual onboarding experience reported by the study participants and when they occurred. The onboarding experience is defined as the period in which onboarding activities occur, beginning on the new hire’s first day of work.

Table 9

Components of the New Hire Onboarding Experience

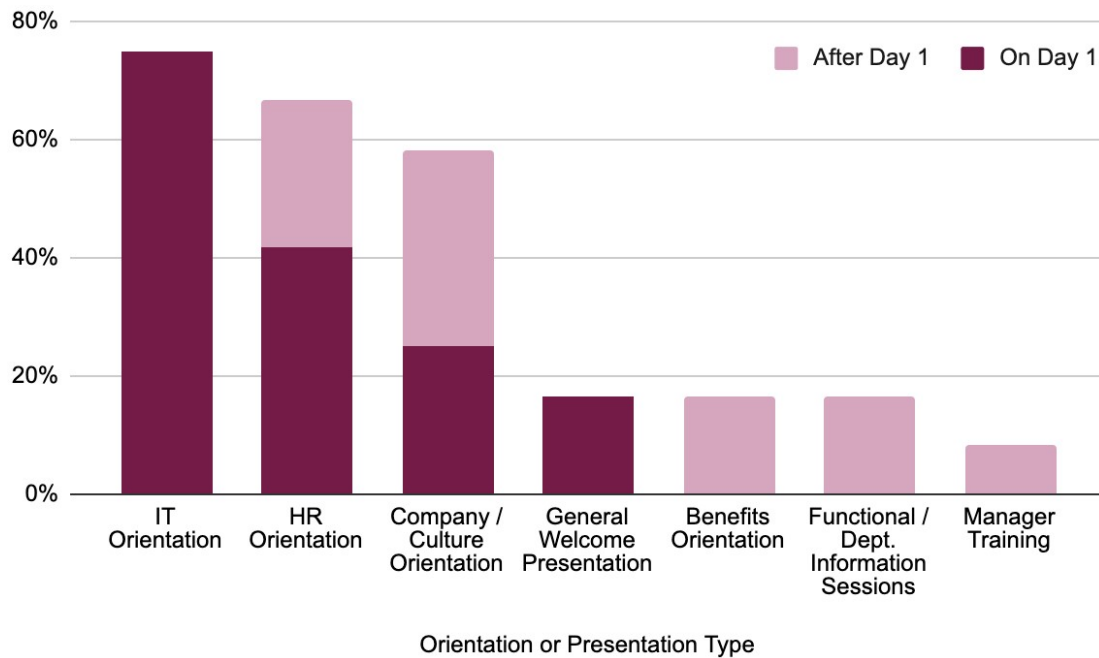
Category	Type	On Day 1		After Day 1	
		N	%	N	%
Formal Orientation or Presentation	IT Orientation	9	75%	0	0%
	HR Orientation	5	42%	3	25%
	Company / Culture Orientation	3	25%	4	33%
	General Welcome Presentation	2	17%	0	0%
	Benefits Orientation	0	0%	2	17%
	Functional / Dept. Information Sessions	0	0%	2	17%
	Manager Training	0	0%	1	8%
1:1 Meetings	Manager	9	75%	10	83%
	Teammates	2	17%	9	75%
	Cross-Functional Partners	0	0%	7	58%
Group Meetings	Team Meeting with Direct Team	2	17%	7	58%
	Team Meeting with Partner Team	0	0%	3	25%
	Meeting with Top-Level Leadership	1	8%	1	8%
	All-Hands / Company Wide Meeting	0	0%	7	58%
Other	Discussion of Goals / Expectations for Role	3	25%	3	25%
	Ad-Hoc Topical Online Learning	4	33%	8	67%
	Formal, Ongoing Training Program	5	42%	n/a	n/a
	Participation in a Buddy Program	6	50%	n/a	n/a

Formal orientations or presentations. The most common activity which the participants engaged in on their first day of work was formal orientations or

presentations. All 12 participants reported participating in at least formal orientation or presentation, with nine participants reporting that they participated in three or more separate activities within this category. The frequency and timing in which participants reported attending these formal orientations or presentations are detailed in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Types and Timing of Formal Orientations / Presentations



The most common formal orientation provided by companies to the participants in this study was an IT orientation. Nine of 12 participants reported that they attended an IT orientation, and 100% of those participants reported that the IT orientation took place on their first day. During these orientations, topics covered included: hardware setup, downloading software, setting passwords, and receiving instructions on how to use various technologies or tools provided by the company. Most participants who attended

an IT orientation found it helpful, however three of nine reported that the orientations were too short or did not include enough detail to completely get them set up.

The second most common formal orientation provided by companies to the participants in this study was an HR orientation. Eight of 12 participants reported that they attended this type of orientation, of which five reported attending it on their first day and three reported attending it after their first day. During these orientations, topics covered included the review of HR and other company policies, payroll information, regular company processes, and information about how to navigate working the company.

The third most common formal orientation provided by companies to the participants in this study was a company and culture orientation. Seven of 12 participants reported that they attended this type of orientation, of which three reported attending it on their first day and four reported attending it after their first day. During these orientations, the most common topics covered were a review of the company's history, mission, vision, values, culture, and ways of working. All seven of the participants who reported attending this type of session also reported that it was helpful to some degree, but two of these participants thought they could have been improved if the employer had provided more context around the session. Five of seven participants who reported attending this type of session reported that this activity made them feel more excited about working for their company and three of seven participants who reported attending this type of session reported that this activity made them feel like they were part of something 'big' or 'important.'

One-on-one meetings. Table 10 shows the frequency and timing in which participants reported attending one-on-one meetings with other employees at their companies. 11 of 12 participants reported participating in at least one activity within this category.

Table 10

Types and Timing of One-on-One Meetings

1:1 Meeting Type	On Day 1		After Day 1	
	N	%	N	%
Manager	9	75%	10	83%
Teammates	2	17%	9	75%
Cross-Functional Partners	0	0%	7	58%

Nine of 11 participants who reported participating in a one-on-one meeting during their onboarding experience reported having a one-on-one meeting with their manager on their first day. Four of 11 of the participants who reported participating in a one-on-one meeting during their onboarding experience reported having more than one meeting with their manager during their first week. All of the 11 participants who reported meeting their manager at some point during their onboarding mentioned that they met with their manager on a regular cadence. In general, the participants reported that the frequency of meeting with their manager gradually decreased over time. For instance, five of 12 total participants in this study reported that they have or plan to meet with their manager on a weekly basis after the onboarding period.

In addition to the type of one-on-one meetings they had during their onboarding, participants also reported on how these meetings were set up (Table 11). Five of the participants who reported about the one-on-one scheduling process had at least some help

from their managers in setting these meetings up, all of which found that to be helpful. In some cases, these one-on-one meetings had been set up by their manager and were already on the participant’s calendar on their first day. In other cases, the participants said that their manager made an introduction between the participant and the other meeting attendee, and then let them schedule it on their own. Other managers took a hybrid approach, where they scheduled the first week or two and then provided a list of future one-on-ones for the participant to schedule on their own.

Table 11

Mechanism for One-on-One Scheduling

Mechanism for 1:1 Scheduling	Percentage	Count
1:1's set up by manager	25%	2
1:1's set up by employee	37.5%	3
Hybrid	37.5%	3

Group meetings. Table 12 shows the frequency and timing of the various types of group meetings which participants attended during their onboarding experience. 10 of 12 participants reported participating in at least one activity within this category.

Table 12

Types and Timing of Group Meetings

Type of Group Meeting	On Day 1		After Day 1	
	N	%	N	%
Team Meeting with Direct Team	2	17%	7	58%
Team Meeting with Partner Team	0	0%	3	25%
Meeting with Top-Level Leadership	1	8%	1	8%
Company-Wide Meeting	0	0%	7	58%

The two most common types of activities in this category that participants reported attending were team meetings and all-hands meetings. The most impactful group meeting for participants appeared to be their company-wide meetings. All of the participants who reported attending a company-wide meeting (also referred to as an all-hands or townhall meeting) during their onboarding experience found them to be helpful and informative. For instance, one participant called the experience inspirational and said that “it was very smooth considering how many people were presenting virtually. They really exuded great energy in the meeting, too. They celebrated the employees and what the various teams were doing during such a hard time. It made me feel really grateful and excited to work here.” Another participant reported that attending a company-wide meeting helped them “understand what was going on in the company and how I would contribute in [this] role.” The focus of these meetings seemed to vary fairly drastically amongst the participants, yet all of the participants who attended reported positive sentiments around this general type of meeting.

Other key components. Table 13 shows the other frequent components of the new hire onboarding experience reported by the study participants.

Table 13

Types and Timing of Other Components of the Onboarding Experience

Type of Activity or Experience	On Day 1		After Day 1	
	N	%	N	%
Discussion of Goals / Expectations for Role	3	25%	3	25%
Topical Online Learning	4	33%	8	67%
Formal, Ongoing Training Program	0	0%	5	42%
Participation in a Buddy Program	6	50%	n/a	n/a

Eight of 12 total participants reported that they were able to participate in online training focused on specific topics during their onboarding experience, four of which reported that they began this activity on their first day. The topics covered by these training modules include things such as job-relevant training (7), industry-specific information (5), and general skills development (e.g., writing, using specific software, data analysis skills) (4). Five of eight participants who had this type of training offered reported that they were assigned at least one mandatory training and had the option to choose additional ad-hoc training modules based on their interests and needs. The other three participants who had this type of training offered reported that all of the online trainings they took were optional.

Six of 12 participants reported that they participated in a buddy program throughout their onboarding. The length and purpose of this program varied between companies, but five of six of the participants who did have an assigned buddy during their onboarding experience found it to be very helpful. Three of those six participants who were assigned a buddy did note that they were not sure if every new hire got a consistent buddy experience and were not sure of the expectations that were set (if any) for their buddy. Only six of 12 participants reported that they explicitly discussed the expectations or goals around either the onboarding period or even their role with their manager.

Other considerations for the onboarding experience. In addition to the actual content of the onboarding program, the interview data also provided information around what companies are doing to onboard their new hires. The data collected includes

mechanisms for connection, requesting feedback from new hires, and technology delivery and logistics.

Mechanisms for connection. In addition to the actual onboarding activities, 11 of 12 participants reported that their employer used at least one mechanism to establish connection between employees during these activities. The specific types of mechanisms for connection are outlined in Table 14.

Table 14

Mechanisms for Connection During Virtual Onboarding Activities

Mechanism for Connection	%	N
Ice Breaker	83%	10
Group Activity	25%	3
Virtual Games	17%	2

10 of 12 participants reported that ice breakers were incorporated into the onboarding activities to some degree. Examples of these ice breakers include sharing fun facts, a ‘show and tell’ type activity and Two Truths and a Lie. Three of 12 participants reported that group activities were incorporated into the onboarding activities to some degree. Examples of these activities include small group competitions and breakout discussion groups. Two of 12 participants reported that games were incorporated into the onboarding activities to some degree. The participants reported that these games took place virtually using the Kahoot and Jackbox platforms.

Requesting feedback from new hires. During the onboarding experience, 10 of 12 participants were asked for feedback about their experience at least once. Table 15 details who sought feedback from the participants and Table 16 outlines what mechanisms the participants used to deliver feedback to their employer. The most

common mechanism for providing feedback was through an online survey, of which six of 10 participants who reported being asked for feedback used to give feedback to their employer. Only one of 10 participants who reported being asked for feedback reported that the team who had requested the feedback had implemented their suggestions since the feedback was shared.

Table 15

Sources of Feedback Requests

Who Requested Feedback	N	%
Manager	4	33%
Training / Presentation Leaders	4	33%
HR or Onboarding Department	2	17%
Recruiting	2	17%
None	2	17%
Onboarding Buddy	1	8%
IT	1	8%

Table 16

Mechanisms for Requesting and Providing Feedback

How Was Feedback Requested	N	%
Online Survey	6	50%
Verbally	4	33%
Email or Online Forum	3	25%

Technology delivery and logistics. A topic of concern when virtually onboarding new hires is the delivery and logistics of technology, namely company-provided laptops. Whereas during on-site onboarding the new hire can simply pick up their laptop from IT on their first day, employers who are onboarding virtually have had to figure out how to get laptops to their new hires and ensure they are prepared correctly. Table 17 details

some of the logistics and preparation the participants reported around obtaining their computers and other technology, while Table 18 outlines how participants actually received their computers and other hardware. Most employers opted to mail the hardware to the study participants, while one chose to hand deliver the hardware to the participant's local address. Two participants reported that they picked up their laptop in person, one of which started three days prior to COVID-19 Shelter in Place Orders being instituted in their location. The other participant who physically picked up their laptop did so during the COVID-19 Shelter in Place Order that was in place in their location, but their business was classified as Essential and therefore was still physically open.

Table 17

Technology Logistics and Detail

Technology Detail	N	%
Asked for Equipment Preferences	3	25%
Included Instructions with Laptop	3	25%
Asked for Preferred Name or Email	3	25%
Included Peripherals with Laptop	2	17%

Table 18

Hardware Delivery Details

Delivery of Technology	N	%
Delivery via Mail	8	67%
Picked up On-Site	3	25%
Contactless Drop-Off	1	8%

Research Question 2

The second question asked about which aspects of the virtual onboarding experience are most important to new hires at companies in the technology industry. Specifically, the interviews asked participants to explore the most helpful or valuable parts of their onboarding experience, the least helpful or valuable parts of their onboarding experience, and what was missing from their onboarding experience all together in order to answer this research question.

After collecting and analyzing the data from the 12 interviews, four consistent and significant themes emerged. Although each participant had a completely unique experience, even from other participants who were virtually onboarded at the same company, there were various shared experiences that illustrated thematic similarities between the needs and desires of the participants. Table 19 outlines the four key themes identified through this research, along with any apparent sub-themes and quotes that illustrate the key messages.

Table 19

Overview of Key Themes and Sub-Themes

Key Theme	Sub-Themes	Key Messages
Logistics matter, all the way through the new hire onboarding experience.	IT preparedness and access; Ongoing support and resources; Smooth and streamlined experience	<p>“Without access to the systems it's like I'm in my role, but walking with a blindfold.”</p> <p>“It was dialed. They left no stone unturned. It shows me that they care: not only do they want me to be successful like any company does, but they actually care.”</p>
The manager can make or break the new hire onboarding experience.	Consistency of the onboarding experience; Personalization; Onboarding as a team sport	<p>“Not everyone is as helpful, I had to learn who would give me the information and context I needed. Everything just seemed to take longer for me.”</p> <p>“The whole company gets excited about new jointer training, you can tell. Maybe it's the ‘kool aid factor’ but what they’re doing feels genuine and inspired me to work harder. I wanted to do more and just jump in head first - to me that is invaluable, they set a really good tone.”</p>
New hires want to connect with others, both on the individual and community levels.	More effort is required in virtual settings; Impact on performance and engagement; Intentionality and being proactive	<p>“Overall I feel more connected with people on my team and on other teams. I know more about what others do now, so if I need help or information, I feel like I can reach out. Feeling connected definitely gives me permission to ask for help from others. I feel like I belong.”</p> <p>“I wish I could have met others in person and see them face to face. I like to know where people are from technically, functionally, geographically, what their last company was. It's so interesting to meet people with totally different backgrounds.”</p>
New Hires want their employers to be empathetic toward them, in	Setting expectations and creating context; Intentionality and cohesion of the experience;	<p>“People don't realize what you are going through. They just skim over it and don't talk about it. It was demoralizing. It's just too much</p>

both actions and words.	Understanding of the emotional experience during onboarding	information sometimes...I just kept wondering 'Am I stupid?'" "This company has an intense culture, and starting remotely made me worry about ramping up fast enough and my performance...but there was consistent messaging [that] really helped me be more relaxed. I probably would have been more anxious starting in person because of the culture, but this made it less stressful."
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Key Theme 1: Logistics matter. The first key theme that emerged from the data was that logistics matter, all the way through the new hire onboarding experience. Compared to some of the other more intangible parts of onboarding, such as content and building connections, the data showed that the logistics which support all other aspects of the onboarding experience matter equally to new hires. This is not surprising since this aspect of the experience ultimately underlies the others, especially when new hires are being onboarded virtually. For example, when new hires cannot readily gain access to their company's IT systems, their learning and ability to do work stalls. The three key areas of logistics that new hires pay attention to are IT preparedness and access, ongoing support and resources, and a smooth and streamlined experience.

11 of 12 participants encountered some issue with IT during their onboarding process. This ranged from hardware issues (4) to lack of education or resources (3); but systems access was reported as the biggest issue in this area (8). Those with systems access universally noted that this impacted the speed of their learning and/or ability to do their job.

New hires also indicated that there was a need for centralized resources for their ongoing support. Six of 12 participants reported that they were provided with some sort of centralized onboarding document that served as a resource during their onboarding.

One participant detailed the contents of this document: “The centralized onboarding doc they gave me was great. It was a google doc with links to what I needed to read, wikis, setup instructions, cross-functional, resources, and list of people to meet and who they are. I use that doc to this day as a reference, it’s so helpful!” Three of the participants who did not receive a centralized resource mentioned that something more centralized and easier to navigate than what they received would have been helpful. These participants shared the sentiment that they had many systems to navigate and were not always sure where to look for information or what they should even be searching for.

The final area of logistics that new hires seemed to prioritize was the feeling of a smooth and streamlined experience. New hires noticed when their orientation leaders were late versus on-time and enthusiastic versus uninspired. They reported that when the experience was not exciting, they lost interest in the content and seemed to project the negative sentiment onto the company itself. While nine of 12 participants mentioned that they thought their employers “did the best they could given the situation,” they still mentioned that a disjointed onboarding experience has a negative impact on their engagement. Table 20 outlines these key sub-themes, provides key messages to support the theme, and includes recommendations based on the data collected from the interviews.

Table 20

Theme 1: Key Messages and Recommendations

Sub-Theme	Key Messages	Recommendations
<p>IT preparedness and access</p>	<p>“When the tech setup is well oiled, I can get up and running right away and I can be productive and valuable on day one. When that happens, I feel confident and like I am of value.”</p> <p>“My laptop was late and the temporary one I had worked well enough, but I felt like I couldn’t get fully set up. I was going to have to download everything and save my links again once I got my regular computer. It felt like a waste of time.”</p>	<p>Ask new hires if they have a preference for a laptop ahead of time, if various models or types are available. Ensure the correct model is ordered and configured prior to their start date.</p> <p>Proactively grant systems access based on role, prior to the new hire’s start date. Consider automatically mirroring access of someone in a similar role.</p> <p>Pre-download relevant software prior to the start date and ensure adequate documentation is available. Make sure instructions are suitable to all levels of proficiency.</p>
<p>Ongoing support and resources</p>	<p>“It felt organized. There were a lot of resources. As a company we are very documentation and discussion based, it was easy to find things I was looking for.”</p> <p>“Understanding the technology was the hardest part as an engineer. It was the least documented part, but most widely used. That took me the longest to understand. Without whiteboards, it took a bunch of Zoom meetings and a lot more effort.”</p>	<p>Provide a centralized resource for each new hire, that is relevant to their role. Immediately provide links to key documents and systems. Ensure any intranet or documentation is not only complete, but easy to navigate for someone with little knowledge of its content.</p> <p>Proactively provide support and check in with new hires. Ensure access to support teams, such as IT and HR, available and easy to take advantage of.</p>
<p>Smooth and streamlined experience</p>	<p>“I can chock some of it up to COVID-19, but there were major communication lapses and it just seemed really disorganized. I was not well equipped or given good information. It all lacked a connection. It gave me a weird, unfavorable perspective of this company. I just kept wondering ‘What happened?’”</p> <p>“The orientation was pretty lackluster. There was an unenthusiastic person leading the session, you’ve heard of ‘Death by Powerpoint’ right? It was like she got there</p>	<p>Centralize content and minimize the number of systems new hires are exposed to, when appropriate. Ensure each system has a specific purpose and communicate that to new hires.</p> <p>Implement clear communication channels between recruiting, human resources and hiring managers. Ensure each stakeholder knows when and what to communicate to the new hire. When possible, assign one point of contact or clearly designate a primary point of contact for the new hire during onboarding.</p>

	<p>3 minutes late, did her job and just signed off. I felt like she wanted to get it over with. It definitely didn't get me excited. Hopefully in the office it would have been more energetic or interactive?"</p> <p>"The experience impacted my engagement, at least initially, if not in the long-term. There's already grief when you leave a job and start a new one, this just gave me a bigger sense of remorse, insecurity and imposter syndrome."</p>	<p>Ensure presenters are prepared, punctual and enthusiastic when facilitating orientations or interacting with new hires.</p> <p>Be mindful when setting the schedules for new hires. Consider starting their day a little later or ending it a little earlier. Make sure there are adequate breaks and meal time scheduled throughout the day.</p>
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Key Theme 2: Managers are critical. The second key theme which emerged from the data is that new hires believe that the manager can “make or break” the new hire onboarding experience. Seven of 12 participants reported that they believe the manager can determine not only what a new hire’s onboarding experience might look like, but also impact how successful they will be able to be at their new company, based on that onboarding experience. Surprisingly, five of these seven participants mentioned this in a positive way, stating that it was their manager who was primarily responsible for their positive onboarding experience and ability to adequately ramp up. Only two participants reported that their manager had a negative impact on their onboarding, but for both of these participants the impact of that experience significantly impacted their ability to ramp up and has resulted in a fairly negative sentiment around their employer. Three of seven participants whose comments aligned with this theme expected their employer to set some sort of baseline for what an onboarding experience should look like, and then give the hiring manager support in tailoring the experience to the needs of their specific team or new hire. Table 21 outlines additional key sub-themes, provides key messages to support the themes, and includes recommendations based on the data collected from the interviews.

Table 21

Theme 2: Key Messages and Recommendations

Sub-Theme	Key Messages	Recommendations
<p>Consistency of the onboarding experience</p>	<p>“I feel like onboarding really varies based on your manager. Like how much effort are they going to put into it?”</p> <p>“Your manager has a lot of power to make it or break it, in terms of your onboarding experience. They also have the power to fire you, even if they don’t give you what you need to succeed.”</p> <p>“My manager picked up the slack and advocated for me so much. It felt like she was up until 2am every night helping us.”</p>	<p>Be mindful of the pace and expectations set during the onboarding experience. Be aware of what might take them longer than their tenured peers.</p> <p>Provide formal manager training around how to craft an excellent onboarding experience. Provide supporting documents, resources and templates. Recognize managers that consistently do a good job, to reinforce the behavior and expectations.</p> <p>Ensure some degree of consistency throughout the company, through centralized onboarding sessions for specific content (i.e., HR, culture, company history, etc).</p>
<p>Personalization</p>	<p>“My manager and the connection with him made a huge difference. We had immediate rapport and he was flexible. He tailored the work to me and had a high level of trust.”</p> <p>“My manager reached out a few weeks before I started to ask what I needed to get setup, so I was ready to go on my first day. It made me happier and really appreciative of my employer. I feel like they really care about my comfort and my onboarding experience, like I’m not just another cog in the wheel.”</p>	<p>Managers should set aside time to get to know their new hires on a personal level. Using assessments can also help managers and new hires understand each other's strengths and work styles.</p> <p>Managers should check in with new hires regularly throughout their onboarding, at least once a week to start.</p> <p>Based on feedback from new hires, managers should adjust the pace of the onboarding and/or learning experience.</p>
<p>Onboarding as a team sport</p>	<p>“My onboarding buddy and I met every week for my first month. She took the initiative to set up the recurring meeting, so I could ask questions and it wasn’t just ‘Come to me when you need to.’ She made</p>	<p>Set expectations with the new hire’s team around the culture of support. Ensure the new hire has access to help and knows who to contact with questions.</p> <p>Assign an onboarding “buddy” for each new hire. Set clear expectations with the buddy around their</p>

	<p>it structured and initiated contact. I liked the experience.”</p> <p>“My teammates have probably been the best resource in my onboarding. It's bizarre how amazing they are. They keep sending me links and telling me where to find things. They were so willing to just hop on a [video call] and show me how to do things. It was a collective effort to get me up to speed.”</p>	<p>role, what the relationship should look like and how long the relationship will last. Have the buddy proactively set up time to check in with their new hire. Communicate to the new hire the intention of the buddy program and provide information on how to best leverage this resource.</p>
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Key Theme 3: New hires want to connect. The third key theme which emerged from the data is that new hires want to connect with others, both on the individual and community levels. All participants expressed the desire to connect with people in the workplace and acknowledged the complexity and challenges that virtual onboarding bring in this area. There was an equal frequency of references to connecting with individuals within their direct teams versus outside of their teams. Additionally, six of 12 participants made reference to connecting with groups of people or communities within their companies. For instance, two participants reference cohort-based gatherings for new hires specifically, and three participants made reference to affinity or employee resource groups. The participants universally acknowledged that it takes more effort to establish and build relationships in a virtual setting, but that they were willing “to put in the work and feel awkward sometimes, because it is well worth it in the end.” The participants that did participate in a social activity that was sponsored or facilitated by the employer all reported a positive sentiment around attending the events and how they facilitated building connections with other employees. Ultimately all of the participants reported that building rapport and connections does impact their job to some degree. The most common outcomes of building connections were reported as being more comfortable asking for help (5), feeling like a part of a team (5), and feeling good about going to work

at their company (3). Table 22 outlines additional key sub-themes, provides key messages to support the themes, and includes recommendations based on the data collected from the interviews.

Table 22

Theme 3: Key Messages and Recommendations

Sub-Theme	Key Messages	Recommendations
<p>More effort is required in virtual settings</p>	<p>“It was already frustrating to get stuck, and then it made it worse to have so much back and forth before getting unstuck. I did have some buddies that I could quickly jump on a video call with too, they were so helpful.”</p> <p>“My team has a bi-weekly social hour and that was a forum for them to welcome me. It was awesome. I honestly was very close to not attending because I felt insecure. I’m glad I pushed myself because they were very nice. I feel more connected to them.”</p> <p>“Virtually it was harder to connect with people. Using [my company’s instant messaging tool] takes a more concerted effort and is less effective.”</p>	<p>Encourage employees to use video when conducting meetings, to mimic face to face conversations.</p> <p>Facilitate and incentivize employees to attend virtual social gatherings on a regular basis. Examples include virtual happy hours, coffee chats and team building activities.</p> <p>Intentionally create space for the sharing of personal information and humor. Examples include ice breakers or fun facts, even within established teams. Considering reserving a few minutes at the beginning or end of team meeting for personal conversation.</p> <p>Proactively provide context around projects and decisions. Be mindful of areas where new hires may not know they are missing key details.</p>
<p>Impact on performance</p>	<p>“I couldn’t shadow seasoned employees who know what</p>	<p>Include new hires in upcoming team summits or virtual offsites.</p>

<p>and engagement</p>	<p>they're doing, to see what they're doing and how they work. That was missing. It took me longer to figure out how to do the job, even though there's documentation."</p> <p>"I think [having rapport] has somewhat of an impact on my job, it makes it easier to email them and ask for help. It puts a face to the name and gives some personal context. I wish they knew me more. I seek more personal connections because I like to have friends at work. I enjoy coming to work more when I can feel less shy and come [be around] friendly people."</p>	<p>Consider moving the start date in order to include them if applicable.</p> <p>Provide forums to team members to develop mutual understanding, and create space for the new hire to be comfortable sharing. Establish the expectation of open communication around availability and constraints.</p> <p>Communicate how and from whom the new hire should seek training, if sessions are not already scheduled. Provide advice around best practices in the role or company norms.</p>
<p>Intentionality and being proactive</p>	<p>"The 1:1s helped me build excitement in terms of seeing what people have done in the past in this role and what I can do in it."</p> <p>"It would have had an enormous impact to be able to talk about current events with people, but they didn't create space for that. One of the harder parts of working from home as an extrovert is not having the 'water cooler' time."</p> <p>"My manager gave me a rundown of the people I'd be working with and how I'd engage with them, and gave me a reference deck. I'm doing the same with my direct reports now. The new hire can initiate and then follow up, everyone understands that is part of the process and makes time for it."</p>	<p>Managers should provide a list of key partners that the new hire should meet and build relationships with. Provide an overview of the person, their team, how they will work with the new hire and key questions that should be asked in the introductory meeting. They should also help the new hire prioritize their meetings.</p> <p>Managers should consider scheduling the first week or two of 1:1 meetings on the new hire's calendar, especially with those partners that have busy schedules. Avoid booking back to back meetings all day, and block time for breaks where appropriate.</p> <p>Onboard multiple new hires together, to establish a cohort-like experience. Build in time for new hires to reconnect with one another.</p>

In addition to providing ways to connect new hires specifically during the onboarding experience, 10 of 12 participants reported that their company also hosted regular social events to connect their employees. Some of these events were specifically designed for the new hire cohort, whereas others were open to members of specific teams or the whole company. Table 23 outlines some examples of social activities that can be conducted virtually.

Table 23

Types of Social Activities Experienced During the Onboarding Period

Social Event Category	Social Event Type	N	%
Team-Specific Event	Summit / Virtual Offsite	2	17%
	Happy Hour	4	33%
	Lunch	2	17%
	Themed Activity (i.e. paint nite, wine tasting)	2	17%
Company Wide Event	Happy Hour	2	17%
	1:1 Coffee Chats	1	8%
Other	New Hire Social	2	17%
	Virtual "Get to Know You" Tool / Portal	1	8%
No Social Event	Not Applicable	2	17%

Key Theme 4: Empathy and understanding. The fourth key theme which emerged from the data is that new hires want their employers to be empathetic toward them, in both actions and words. Eight of 12 participants reported that onboarding as a new hire is a stressful experience to some degree. Krasman (2015) points out that new hires have several hurdles to overcome and critical decisions to make when starting with a new company. During this time of heightened anxiety, it is natural for new hires to have a lot of questions and concerns around the transition to a new employer. The data

revealed that the participants responded positively when their employers showed empathy or understanding around their situation as a new hire. In contrast to the other themes above those related to the onboarding process itself, the theme that emerged here was focused around a shared emotional experience by the participants. Although this theme may be less tangible than some of the others mentioned above, based on the frequency of comments that aligned with this theme, it is just as important as the others. The general sentiment was that the participants were excited to start their new jobs but needed the support of their employer to stay excited and engaged. For example, when the employers did not show excitement or communicate proactively throughout their onboarding experience, the participants reported that they became less excited and less engaged.

In the absence of being on-site to observe and experience the culture of their new companies, participants in the study had to rely on their virtual interactions to understand what it is like and how to work at their new companies. Several key opportunities that are missing from the onboarding experience when it takes place virtually: impromptu introductions around the office, hallway conversations, workplace tours, lunch in shared kitchens, being able to just turn around and ask their colleague a quick question, etc. Even in the virtual setting, new hires want their employers to actively communicate and show them that they are welcome, valued, and cared for. Employers may need to find ways to intentionally increase the number of ways and the frequency in which they display empathy, since there is less opportunity for in-person interactions where this typically takes place (i.e., through non-verbal cues, proactive sharing of personal advice).

The three areas which new hires wanted to see empathy displayed were setting expectations and providing context, intentionality and cohesion of the onboarding

experience, and communicating or displaying an understanding of the emotional experience that new hires have during onboarding. In terms of setting expectations, the participants wanted to more context around their onboarding experience and they wanted it earlier. For instance, three of 12 participants did not receive information around first-day logistics until one or two days before their start date. The participants stressed that knowing where to be, when to be there, why they needed to be there, and why the event, meeting or training was important (even virtually) would provide them with a sense of cohesion and minimize stress. Because many of the non-verbal cues that are present in person are missing during the virtual onboarding experience, the participants reported that they need their employer to be very explicit when communicating around expectations, policies, and processes. Additionally, the participants who reported that their employer proactively and sporadically reached out to ask if they needed help found this to be helpful and comforting.

Additionally, without the ability to observe others around them interacting and working, virtual onboarding requires employers to proactively teach new hires the ways in which employees of the company work. Six of 12 participants mentioned the desire to fit in or feel like they are part of a team during their interviews. This tells us that it is essential that employers actively find ways to integrate new hires that are onboarding virtually into their workforce. Although 10 participants reported that they were asked for feedback around their onboarding experiences, none of them reported that their employers asked about the feelings that were evoked during the onboarding experience, and what employers could do to better support the personal or emotional needs of their new hires. Table 24 outlines additional key sub-themes, provides key messages to support

the themes, and includes recommendations based on the data collected from the interviews.

Table 24

Theme 4: Key Messages and Recommendations

Sub-Theme	Key Messages	Recommendations
<p>Setting expectations and creating context</p>	<p>“They said ‘Hey, we’re going to keep you in the loop’ and then I heard nothing else. I didn’t want to come across as pushy, but I just needed to know where and when to be on my first day.”</p> <p>“I felt like it was hard being external. No one explained the systems or the lingo. It felt like some things should be a given, but as a new hire, nothing is a given.”</p> <p>“I honestly felt a sense of fear. Did I get what I needed to get done, done? There was just too much information in too many systems, all in a very short amount of time. Even my manager disclosed to me that the timeline is impossible.”</p> <p>“My manager told me that they didn’t expect me to know what I’m doing for at least 6 months, I will be in every meeting with you and will help you the whole way.”</p>	<p>Let new hires know what they will be required to do during their pre-hire and new hire onboarding experiences. Communicate when and how key tasks will be completed, as well as who will be communicating with them or will be able to help them.</p> <p>Provide the context around what new hires are being asked to do or attend. Help them understand how specific tasks or events are part of their broader onboarding experience or journey.</p> <p>Managers should proactively help their new hires prioritize training activities and work responsibilities.</p> <p>Managers should provide both positive and constructive feedback during the onboarding experience. They should regularly check in to ensure their new hires feel supported.</p>
<p>Intentionality and cohesion of the experience</p>	<p>“It just seemed like a mess, I never knew what my next steps were or where to go to find them. My manager didn’t even seem to know.”</p>	<p>Leaders should communicate with employees often about the state of affairs and direction of the company. When possible, leaders should meet with new hires and communicate their value and</p>

	<p>“Virtually it was fine. I did start to lose focus after so many hours of being in front of a screen though. At that point I just wasn’t absorbing.”</p> <p>“I know that some stuff doesn’t seem to matter right now, but it will soon. I want to know what’s up and what I will need to do when that time comes. The onus was on me to go seek it out versus it being presented to me. It was not ideal.”</p>	<p>contribution to the overall mission of the company.</p> <p>In addition to department-specific onboarding sessions (i.e. IT, HR, etc), consider adding a culture onboarding to proactively communicate about company values, vision and culture.</p> <p>Include new hires in as many meetings and learning opportunities as possible, without overwhelming them. Communicate the context and their role prior to each meeting.</p>
<p>Understanding of the emotional experience during onboarding</p>	<p>“My onboarding made me feel optimistic about working here in the long term. I had multiple job offers and was second guessing myself, but this made me feel more confident in my decision.”</p> <p>“The experience was exhausting. I told them how much work I had and about the amount of training I had been assigned, but they just said ‘It’s okay, we know you’ll get it done.’ It was weird, like they tried to put a positive spin on the fact that they knowingly overwhelmed me. Everything takes longer as a new hire since I’m still learning the systems and the business, so I ended up working four weekends in a row right after I started. I wondered if this was what my life was going to be like and really started to regret my decision [to join the company]. They kind of lived up to the hype, and not in a good way.”</p> <p>“It was nice to start a little later in the morning. I got to get my head straight, do a [workout] and see my family. Then we ended relatively early and I got to hang out with my family and tell them about how excited I was.”</p>	<p>Managers and teammates should proactively check in with new hires to see how they are doing and feeling, on a regular basis. Consider assigning team members to check in or have a virtual coffee chat with the new hire each day during their first week.</p> <p>Proactively communicate around current events that can have impacts on the company’s workforce (i.e. COVID-19). Communicate the company’s stance and what they are doing for employees during times of crisis.</p> <p>Be flexible around the needs of new hires, especially when onboarding them virtually. Encourage new hires to attend all onboarding activities, but follow up and provide guidance if they do need to miss a meeting.</p> <p>Managers should communicate to new hires explicitly and often how excited they are to have them as a valued member of their team, and why they are important to the team and company’s success.</p>

Summary

This chapter outlined the key findings of the research and answered the two primary research questions. It described how the participants were virtually onboarded and discussed the four key themes that emerged around what the participants think is important during the onboarding process. This chapter also discussed some recommendations for how technology companies can better meet the needs of their new hires, based on the four key themes and supporting statements made by participants. Chapter 5 will discuss the conclusions that can be drawn from this research and implications of the study. Additionally, Chapter 5 will outline the limitations of this study and provide recommendations for future research around this topic.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study explored the practices used by companies in the technology industry for virtually onboarding new hires, as well as collected feedback from recent new hires around their recent virtual onboarding experiences. This study addressed two research questions:

- How are companies in the technology industry virtually onboarding new hires?
- What aspects of the virtual onboarding experience are most important to new hires at companies in the technology industry?

Overview of Results

The study found that the minimum amount of time for new hire onboarding was reported as one day and the maximum time for new hire onboarding was one year, with the median length of the onboarding period being 3.5 weeks. All of the participants engaged in some sort of pre-hire activity, with the most common examples being communication with the company's HR department, filling out new hire documents, and communication with their direct manager. The study also found that technology companies focus most heavily on formal orientation sessions, one-on-one meetings, and group meetings once their new hires have officially started working. The most common type of orientation sessions were those focused around IT, HR, and company culture. The

one-on-one meetings typically included the direct manager, direct teammates, and cross-functional partners. Other significant aspects of the onboarding process included online learning and participation in a buddy or mentor program.

The study also identified four key themes around what new hires find most important during virtual onboarding: logistics matter, all the way through the new hire onboarding experience; the manager can make or break the new hire onboarding experience; new hires want to connect with others, both on the individual and community levels; and new hires want their employers to be empathetic toward them, in both actions and words. The study also outlined some recommendations made by the participants, around how employers can improve in these four key areas. Although the results are not definitive, they do offer some unique insights into onboarding within the technology industry and a firsthand account of what new hires in that industry want.

Implications for Scholarship

The literature outlined in Chapter 2 provides support for many of the findings of this study, suggesting that the needs of new hires in virtual versus face-to-face onboarding are the same. It seems that instead of creating a different experience for new hires who are onboarding virtually, employers should be finding ways to more effectively adapt the onboarding process to deliver a similar experience that would be had in person. For instance, the first key theme that logistics matter to new hires throughout the onboarding process was not only reflected in the interviews, but also by the literature. Bauer (2013) states that the foundation for successful and seamless new hire onboarding is the coordination and integration between several functions, such as Human Resources, Information Technology, and Workplace Services. Furthermore, Laurano (2013) details

how the tactical aspects of onboarding should not be completely outweighed by the social aspects of the program:

Over [the] years, socialization has been considered the top priority for organizations looking to improve existing onboarding initiatives. Yet by embracing socialization, many organizations have neglected the tactical side of onboarding...The tactical components are critical to improving productivity and organizational performance and should be enhanced - not replaced by - engagement strategies. (p. 9)

These statements align with the frequency of which logistics were mentioned as a significant factor in the participants' satisfaction with their onboarding experiences. In a virtual setting, this means employers should focus on readiness in terms of technology and any home office set up that they may provide to their new hires, whereas in person the focus might be on having a physical workspace set up. Ultimately both the literature and this research conclude that ineffective logistics throughout the new hire experience can result in a severely diminished onboarding experience.

The second key theme that is addressed in the literature review and further supported by the research and the importance of the hiring manager in the onboarding process. Participants reported that they believe managers have a vast amount of control over their onboarding experience, and ultimately their success in the workplace. Many of the participants stated that not all new hires experience consistent onboarding practices within their companies, and they attribute at least part of this disparity to the new hires' managers. Laurano (2013) notes that many organizations are centralizing their onboarding programs and then assigning key ownership roles to "mentors, peers and

individual business leaders” (p. 12). The findings from this research suggests that there is indeed power in giving managers responsibility for their new hires’ onboarding experiences, but that organizations must also give them guidance and ensure accountability in order to ensure a consistent and excellent onboarding experience organization-wide. Laurano (2013) highlights visibility as a key factor in allowing managers to be more involved and successful in crafting onboarding experiences for their new hires:

Providing visibility and accountability to key stakeholders is necessary to ensure that onboarding is both consistent through the organization and customized to meet the different expectations and attitudes [within the organization]. Hiring managers in particular are often left in the dark when it comes to new hires.

(p. 18)

As suggested by a few of the participants, it is most effective when there is a foundation built by a centralized onboarding program balanced with customization by the hiring manager, based on the function and role of their new hires.

The third key theme from the present study that is supported by the literature is the idea of building connections between new hires and other members of their organizations. Bauer (2013) highlights social integration as one of the four primary levers for a successful onboarding. Bauer (2013) highlighted that 60% of the managers who failed to onboard successfully cited failure to establish effective working relationships as a primary reason. Stein and Christiansen (2010) state that even a small gesture such as a warm welcome can make new hires feel more important and welcomed within their

organization. The present study reflected the same emphasis on relationships, both within the team and across the organization.

The fourth key theme in this research focused on empathy and understanding from employers around the new hire experience. Various sub-themes emerged from the interviews, but ultimately they were all tied together by the overarching idea that new hires want their employers to show more empathy about the onboarding experience, through both words and actions. Some of the literature outlined parts of these sub-themes (i.e., setting expectations, contextualizing the experience) independently, but few of them mentioned the emotional aspects of being a new hire and going through the onboarding process. The Aberdeen Group (2016) cites that employers should avoid overwhelming new employees and instead thoughtfully ramp up the onboarding experience to show that they care about the wellbeing and success of their new hires. However, this literature does not provide actionable ways for employers to show care toward new hires. The present research expands upon the current literature providing recommendations around how employers can show empathy and understanding during the new hire experience.

The final major point of discussion that emerged from this research is the similarity between recommendations for traditional on-site onboarding versus virtual onboarding. Throughout the literature review, the recommendations for how to build, implement, and maintain a successful and engaging onboarding program were largely in reference to traditional on-site onboarding. Much of the feedback provided by the participants mirrors and supports the information outlined in the existing literature around onboarding. This demonstrates that employers should be treating onboarding virtually with just as much care and intentionality as if these new hires were being onboarded on-

site. Employers will need to find ways to mimic or adapt the on-site onboarding and deliver similar results to their new hires virtually. For instance, Krasman (2015) states that a consistent onboarding experience across the company is a component of a successful onboarding program. This may materialize on-site in the form of centralized formal orientations, where employees of all departments are invited and therefore receive the same amount and type of information about the company. In virtual onboarding, this can be mimicked through video calls that have the same group of new hires invited. Another example provided by Krasman (2015) is around making preliminary introductions between the new hire and their teammates and key partners. On-site this might manifest as a manager physically walking their new hire around the office for introductions. To adapt to the virtual setting, this could entail the manager introducing the new hire to their partners via email, setting up one-on-one meetings with key stakeholders, and inviting their new hires to team meetings and then doing an ice breaker or introductions in that meeting. While the first example shows that adapting on-site onboarding to a virtual format can be relatively simple in some aspects, the last example illustrates how virtual onboarding can include an increased time requirement and level of complexity. No matter what burden adapting onboarding to a virtual format might place on managers and their companies, the literature and the present research both reinforce just how important the onboarding experience is in order to maintain a productive and engaged workforce.

Implications for Practice

Implications for employers. The present research serves as a call to action around the practice of virtual onboarding in several ways. First, employers need to

refocus on the tactical aspects of their virtual onboarding programs. Not only did the participants' logistical experiences during onboarding directly influence their opinions of the employers, but they also impacted their ability to be successful in the other key areas of the onboarding process and in their primary roles. Thinking through the lens of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, employers should dial in the basic needs of the employees who are being virtually onboarded (i.e., working computer, access to systems, clean and available workstation) before tackling more complex, strategic areas of onboarding (Jerome, 2013). This also aligns with Laurano's (2013) recommendation for each stage of onboarding program maturity: all three stages mention logistics to some degree, but depending on the current state of an organization's onboarding program, the way in which logistics need to be addressed is more nuanced. For instance, in laggard organizations (or those who are newly launching a more formal onboarding program) the first step to effective logistics is to coordinate across departments and break down silos. In average performing organizations (as related to onboarding), there should be a focus on implementing technology and automation where things still may be less efficient or become ambiguous in the virtual setting. And in best in class onboarding organizations, they often need to find a finer balance between tactical and strategic aspects of onboarding new hires. The present research offers that no matter the maturity of a company's virtual onboarding program, logistics always matter to new hires; and some of the existing research offers suggestions around how organizations can become more tactically sound in their onboarding processes (Laurano, 2013).

Second, employers should consider using a centralized model for onboarding which includes a high level of communication and participation for managers. Using a

centralized model can allow employers to retain a certain amount of control over the virtual onboarding process, while allowing individual business leaders to customize the experience for their functions (Bauer, 2013). Additionally, centralization can help organizations continue to think globally, while acting locally to meet the differing needs of their unique employee populations. Research shows that onboarding is becoming increasingly tied to the learning and development function, and moving away from being centralized in recruiting or acting as a standalone onboarding function (Laurano, 2013). Organizations should consider their own cultures in determining which team ownership of this program should sit with, and then allow the owner an appropriate degree of oversight and authority to drive improvements to the virtual onboarding experience. Additionally, allowing managers to participate in the improvement of the virtual onboarding program will not only allow them to be more committed to and well versed in the process once they start onboarding new hires under the new program, but will also allow the centralized function to leverage their unique perspective and feedback as ongoing stakeholders in the process (Bauer, 2013; Ellis, 2017; Laurano, 2013).

Third, employers should seek meaningful and relevant feedback from their employees on the virtual onboarding experience at their companies. Baek and Bramwell (2016) found that “employee feedback was by far the most predominant method of measurement of onboarding effectiveness” (p. 2), but they do not mention the focus or types of questions that companies typically ask. In this research, more than 80% of participants reported being asked for feedback. However, the focus of feedback requests seemed to be split between content (i.e., ‘was the content relevant? digestible?’ etc.) and broad questions about the entire experience (i.e., ‘let me know if you have any

feedback’). It may be helpful to ask questions relevant to each of the four key themes in this research, as a way to dig into what strengths or gaps their onboarding experiences have in relationship to what new hires weigh as most important in an onboarding experience. Because virtual onboarding is relatively new, it is even more important for employers to understand the experience from the new hire perspective and then use that feedback to adapt.

Implications for OD practitioners. Because this study supports so much of the existing research, we must also wonder why new hires (including the participants of this study) still report sub-par onboarding experiences in technology companies. Bauer (2013) clearly lays out some best practices for onboarding, including many of the key activities that were included in the onboarding experiences of the participants (i.e., use of formal orientations, implementing the basics such as new hire paperwork and basic company education prior to the first day on the job). Snell (2006) even lays out a clear four step process to designing, implementing, and managing an onboarding program. Based on this research, it seems that the more behavioral aspects of onboarding are the ones that employers are not adequately focusing on in the virtual setting, such as consistently setting expectations, use of a written onboarding plan, making onboarding participatory, and actively engaging various cross-functional stakeholders in the planning and implementation of new hire onboarding. This is a key area of opportunity for organization development practitioners to step in to help employers take their virtual onboarding programs to the next level. In addition to helping align the various stakeholders across the organization and participating in planned change management, organization development practitioners are uniquely qualified to help organizations

understand the psychological and emotional processes that new hires might be experiencing and help them determine how to tailor their onboarding programs to these experiences. For example, Cascio (2000) states that the lack of trust that may be present in the virtual setting can hinder the development of positive working relationships (2000). In this situation, OD practitioners can step in to help new employees build trust within their teams, through virtual team building or coaching. Cascio (2000) also highlights the necessary qualities which will enable managers to be successful in a remote work setting, including being solution-oriented, results-oriented, flexible, and having open lines of communication. In this situation, an OD practitioner could help develop managers that are being virtually onboarded and those who will be onboarding new hires virtually, to ensure they have the tools needed to be successful leaders. As these situations include some of the key themes that the participants highlighted as a significant factor in the onboarding experience, employers would be wise to leverage the perspective and knowledge of the organization development practitioner.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study does align with much of the literature outlined in Chapter 2, there are several limitations to the research. The first major limitation is the sample of participants represented in the research. The small sample size of this study limited the demographics of the participants. For instance, all of those interviewed were salaried employees and were all based on the West Coast. Bauer (2013) cites that “almost all research studies to date have examined the onboarding of salaried workers (executives and knowledge workers) rather than hourly workers” (p. 15), and the present study is no exception. Further research could involve interviewing workers of different

classifications, and expanding the number of organizations involved to understand if organization size or maturity plays a part in the success of onboarding. Because the participants were solicited from my personal network, there is also a skew toward those in roles within human resources and engineering functions. In a further study, it would be important to ensure all functions are adequately represented in the data. It is also important to note that all of the participants in this study were still relatively new to their organizations. A way to see how perceptions change over time or validate the findings would be to do a longitudinal study over the course of the first year of employment for the participants. Additionally, this study only addressed companies in the technology industry. It is possible that the results could be different if future research investigated companies in other industries. Further studies could examine how new hires are being onboarded virtually, in a less restricted context.

Another limitation of this study is that no definition of onboarding was given to participants in order to frame their understanding of what the onboarding experience contains. Because of this, it is possible that some participants left out data that they felt was irrelevant based on their own understanding of what onboarding means. The use of a survey or closed-ended questions would help the research gain consistency among the participants, especially in relation to the first research question. A future study could employ a survey to get more data around the research questions, and use specific definitions for onboarding and its components. Additionally, this study was fairly broad in the discussion of the onboarding experience as a whole. Future research could explore a specific aspect of the onboarding experience, in order to yield more specific feedback and recommendations for improvements.

To expand the research around onboarding, future studies should explore specific tactics used by companies to onboard new employees and gain an understanding of how effective they may or may not be. Much of the research around onboarding covers broad strategies and topics, but does not dig deeper to understand what, when, and how tactics within these topics are most effective (Klein & Polin, 2012). Although this study did ask the participants to self-report what tactics they found to be effective during their onboarding, increased validity of the findings could be found by asking employers to also rate the success of specific onboarding tactics. Additionally, most of the empirical research around onboarding has focused on traditional on-site onboarding (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003), so it would be wise for research to continue focusing on the virtual onboarding experience.

A final recommendation for further research is to focus on the emotional aspects of virtually onboarding new hires. This topic is worthy of further exploration because most of the research around onboarding does not address the unique challenge of a lack of face-to-face interactions during virtual onboarding. Along with the fact that virtual onboarding is becoming more commonplace as businesses become more global in nature, employers would directly benefit from the information and recommendations that might come from this research.

Final Notes

There is no doubt that onboarding will continue to be an important aspect of the employee lifecycle in organizations of all types. As onboarding can lead to the success or failure of new employees, it is imperative that companies continue to assess the needs of their new hires and continually improve their onboarding programs. It is also important to

note that this research took place during a pivotal time and context in history, during the COVID-19 crisis. Restrictions during this time has forced employers around the world to pivot quickly and onboard their employees virtually, with little notice and time to prepare. Due to this experience many employers have also begun to reevaluate their business practices, including onboarding. Several participants in this study alone reported that their employers are considering moving to a more remotely based workforce and closing several of their offices. Because of these factors and the ongoing nature of the COVID-19 crisis, more new hires will continue to be onboarded virtually each day. This may continue to be a trend as employers identify the value, cost savings and efficiencies that virtual onboarding can bring to the new hire experience. A positive outcome of this research is the insight that the general outlook of employees around virtual onboarding seems to be one of hope, not despondence. This should inspire organizations to thoroughly reassess their onboarding programs and effectively adapt them to a virtual format, knowing that doing so will undoubtedly increase their capability to thrive in an increasingly uncertain world.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear [Name],

My name is Kaitlyn and I am a candidate for the Masters of Organization Development in the Graziadio School of Business and Management at Pepperdine University.

I am conducting a research study assessing the virtual new hire onboarding practices of technology companies, and you are invited to participate in the study. If you agree, you are invited to participate in-depth interview regarding your onboarding experience at your current company. The interview is anticipated to take no more than forty-five minutes and it will be voice-recorded.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may pause or terminate the interview at any time for any reason. Your identity as a participant will remain confidential during and after the study. During data collection, studying, and writing, your data will be protected by the following steps:

1. The interview recordings will be transferred from the recorder to a laptop.
2. PGP encryption will be applied.
 - a. A strong key for the encryption will be used which will be stored at a different location than the research data.
 - b. The password used will also be strong in strength and stored at a third location.
3. The PGP encrypted data will be transferred to my student account on Google drive which is 2FA protected. A backup is maintained on my personal google drive which is also 2FA protected.
4. The data will be deleted from the recorder and the laptop.

All names and identifying characteristics learned during the personal interviews will be changed if used in the written report to protect your confidentiality.

If you have questions or would like to participate, please contact me at kate.pavlina@gmail.com or +1 (408) 621-5667.

Thank you for your participation,

Kaitlyn Pavlina

Pepperdine University

Graziadio School of Business and Management

Student, Masters of Science in Organizational Development

Appendix B: Informed Consent

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY
Graziadio School of Business and Management

**INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH
ACTIVITIES**

**Assessing Best Practices for the Virtual Onboarding
of New Hires in the Tech Industry**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by **Kaitlyn Pavlina (Principal investigator and Dr. Darren Good, PhD (faculty advisor))** at Pepperdine University, because you are **an employee at a technology company who was hired in or after March 2020 and virtually onboarded**. Your participation is voluntary. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything that you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. Please take as much time as you need to read the consent form. You may also decide to discuss participation with your family or friends. You will also be given a copy of this form for your records.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The onboarding experience is considered a significant factor in a new employee's level of engagement and ability to perform in the workplace. To support this, employers may include various types of information and experiences during the onboarding period in an attempt to help new employees build relationships, ramp up quickly and feel connected to their new organization.

The purpose of this study is to explore the onboarding experiences of recent new hires, their perceptions about what was most valuable/helpful and their perceptions about what was missing from their onboarding experiences. As a part of this research I am seeking to answer the following questions:

- What information and/or experiences were included in the employees' new employee onboarding?
- How were these perceived by the employee?
- To what degree were these valuable or helpful to the employees?
- What other information or experiences would the employees have liked to have had as a part of their new employee onboarding?

STUDY PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in one-on-one forty-five minute interview with the Principal Investigator. The Principal Investigator may request a follow up session of 30 minutes in case any clarifications are required.

Data Collection:

- a. In-depth interviewing of employees of technology companies based in Silicon Valley, who were hired in the last 6 months. The questions will be around their onboarding experience at their current company.
- b. The interviews will be voice-recorded.

Data Analysis:

- a. The recordings will be transcribed.
- b. The transcribed notes will be analyzed and coded based on emerging themes and patterns.
- c. Handwritten interview notes will be analyzed and coded based on emerging themes and patterns.

Data Security:

- a. Principal Investigator will collect the data anonymously.
- b. Principal Investigator will code data on a master list, which will be kept on the Principal Investigator's password-protected Google Drive, which is 2FA protected.
- c. Principal Investigator will transfer the interview recordings from the recorder to the same Google Drive and the data file will be deleted from the laptop.
- d. Handwritten notes will not contain identifying information and will be stored in a locked filing cabinet.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no anticipated risks. While answering the questions please refrain from using any names of people and organizations.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

There is no direct benefit to the participants. The anticipated benefit is for participants to learn from the findings of the study, about the onboarding practices used by technology companies based in Silicon Valley and how they are perceived by new employees.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The records collected for this study will be *anonymous* as far as permitted by law. However, if required to do so by law, it may be necessary to disclose information collected about you. Examples of the types of issues that would require me to break confidentiality are if disclosed any instances of child abuse and elder abuse. Pepperdine's University's Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) may also access the data collected. The HSPP occasionally reviews and monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research subjects.

There will be no identifiable information obtained in connection with this study. Your name, address or other identifiable information will not be collected. The data will be

encrypted and stored on the principal investigator's google drive. The data will be stored for a maximum of three years.

SUSPECTED NEGLECT OR ABUSE OF CHILDREN

Under California law, the researcher(s) who may also be a mandated reporter will not maintain as confidential, information about known or reasonably suspected incidents of abuse or neglect of a child, dependent adult or elder, including, but not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse or neglect. If any researcher has or is given such information, he or she is required to report this abuse to the proper authorities.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

ALTERNATIVES TO FULL PARTICIPATION

The alternative to participation in the study is not participating or only completing the items for which you feel comfortable.

INVESTIGATOR'S CONTACT INFORMATION

You understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries you may have concerning the research herein described. You understand that you may contact following if you have any other questions or concerns about this research:

1. Principal Investigator:
 - a. Name: Kaitlyn Pavlina
 - b. Email : kate.pavlina@pepperdine.edu
 - c. Mobile: +1 (408) 621-5667
2. Faculty Advisor:
 - . Name: Dr. Darren Good
 - a. Email: darren.good@pepperdine.edu

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant or research in general please contact Dr. Judy Ho , Chairperson of the Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board at Pepperdine University 6100 Center Drive Suite 500, Los Angeles, CA 90045, 310-568-5753 or gpsirb@pepperdine.edu

Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. Please describe the timeline of your onboarding process? *For instance, did it start before you were hired or on your first day? When did it end?*
2. Please describe your onboarding process to me, from beginning to end? *For instance, what type content was presented and how was it presented to you?*
3. Aside from informational sessions, did your onboarding process involve any other events or experiences? *Examples include new hire socials or team building events. What about company events?*
4. Overall, how do you feel about your onboarding process?
5. What were the 3 most helpful or valuable parts of your onboarding?
6. What were the 3 least helpful or valuable parts of your onboarding?
7. Was anything missing from your onboarding? If so, what was missing? *(If clarification is needed, this question can be rephrased as “What would you add to your onboarding experience if you had a magic wand?” or “How could your onboarding experience been better?”)*
8. Did any snafu’s or mishaps occur during your onboarding experience? If so, please describe them?
9. Were you asked to provide feedback about your onboarding experience? If so, please describe how the request was made and how you provided the feedback, if you did.
10. What impact do you think your onboarding has had on you since you joined your company? *For instance, do you think it impacted your performance, engagement or excitement around your job or company? If so, how.*
11. Is there anything else you’d like to share or anything we didn’t discuss that you’d like to talk about?

Appendix D: Demographic Indicators

1. How long have you been at your company?
2. How many employees does your company have?
3. What is your job level?
4. What is your role or job title?
5. Where is your company headquartered?
6. Where will you primarily perform your work after COVID-19?