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## The new world of onboarding: a comparison of virtual and hybrid onboarding experiences

Hannah Kim

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**THE NEW WORLD OF ONBOARDING: A COMPARISON  
OF VIRTUAL AND HYBRID ONBOARDING  
EXPERIENCES**

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A Research Project

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graziadio Business School  
Pepperdine University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science

In  
Organization Development

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by

Hannah Kim

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This research project, completed by

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

MASTER OF SCIENCE  
IN ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

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## **Abstract**

The world of work has changed significantly due to the global pandemic of 2020. As a result, many organizations have shifted to remote or hybrid work models, requiring new ways of thinking about all aspects of the employee experience. This paper explored the impact of both remote and hybrid work models on the employee onboarding experience, focusing on employee sentiments toward the organization. The study occurred within a consulting organization and involved interviews with twelve new hires, to understand the successes and the challenges of their onboarding experiences. The results indicated that remote onboarding negatively impacted feelings of connection with colleagues and understanding of internal communication methods, and positively impacted new hires' accounts of onboarding structure and planning. Organizations onboarding remotely should proactively address opportunities in the new hire experience to smooth employee entry and socialization.

*Keywords:* Onboarding, Remote, Hybrid, Sentiments, Socialization

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iii
List of Tables .....	vi
1. Chapter 1: Introduction and Purpose .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Case Organization Onboarding Processes .....	3
Study Purpose & Objectives .....	7
Organization of the Study .....	8
2. Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	9
The Importance of Onboarding .....	9
The Changing Landscape of Onboarding .....	11
Recommended Practices .....	14
Applying an Organization Development Lens .....	22
3. Chapter 3: Methodology .....	24
Sample .....	24
Instruments or Measures .....	25
Data Collection & Analysis .....	25
Human Subjects Protections .....	26
4. Chapter 4: Results .....	27
Onboarding Individual Experience .....	27
Connection to Colleagues .....	28
Trust in Leaders .....	31

Individual Identities & Strengths .....	34
Onboarding Planning & Structure .....	36
Internal Communications .....	40
New Hire Sentiments .....	42
Conclusion .....	44
5. Chapter 5: Discussion .....	45
Summary of Findings .....	45
Conclusions .....	48
Recommendations for Organizations .....	51
Recommendations for Organization Development (OD) Practitioners .....	53
Study Limitations .....	54
Suggestions for Future Research .....	55
References .....	57
Appendix A: Interview Questions.....	61

## **List of Tables**

1. Organization ITC Onboarding Project Timeline .....	4
2. Organization ITC Onboarding Toolkit & Deliverables .....	6
3. Participant Positions within Organization ITC .....	25
4. New Hire Positive Experiences in the Onboarding Process .....	28
5. New Hire Expressed Challenges or Opportunities in the Onboarding Process...	28
6. Frequency of Leader-New Hire Meetings & Relationship Descriptor .....	32
7. Response Categories for New Hire Strengths & Reason for Hire .....	36
8. Onboarding Planning & Structure, Reasons for Positive Experience .....	37
9. Onboarding Planning & Structure, Challenges or Opportunities Presented .....	39

## Chapter 1: Introduction and Purpose

### Introduction

The global pandemic of 2020 significantly altered organizational life, from business closures to changes in policy and procedure to employee relations and management (Rogers et al., 2021). In fact, most employees worked remotely at least some of the time during the pandemic (McFeely, 2021). The transition to remote work was precipitated by employee health and safety concerns associated with the coronavirus pandemic and federal, state, and local mandates requiring the temporary closure of non-essential businesses (Rogers et al., 2021). Furthermore, the resurgence of cases due to various coronavirus strains resulted in many organizations extending their work-from-home policies. Various organizations have considered permanent full-time remote workforces or hybrid work models.

The transition to remote work had its share of benefits and challenges and resulted in a need for organizations to maintain agility in their approach to employee relations. According to a January 2021 survey by PricewaterhouseCoopers, 83% of employers and 71% of employees reported that the shift to remote work was successful. Some benefits of remote work for organizations included expanded talent pools and real estate cost savings. Benefits for employees included increased flexibility and work-life balance. However, remote work also raised concerns surrounding engagement, team collaboration, and equality (McFeely, 2021). Organizations that chose remote work were wise to address these areas to maximize employee engagement, productivity, and retention.

Specific areas of employee relations impacted by the pandemic included work processes, training, onboarding, and communication (Albertson, 2021; Goncalves et al.,



2021). The focus of this study was specifically on the impact of remote work on organizational onboarding. *Onboarding* has been defined as the process of bringing an employee into a new job, familiarizing them with the organization at large and the job responsibilities associated with their role. An integral component of this process involves *socialization*, supporting the transition from organizational outsider to insider (Bauer et al., 2007). Bauer (2010) highlighted the four Cs of effective onboarding: compliance involved policies and legal compliance; clarification focused on job expectations; culture indicated familiarity with organizational norms; and connection prioritized building interpersonal relationships. Although many organizations know the importance of these building blocks in effective onboarding, they may struggle to build a program that effectively leverages them. Even before the pandemic, onboarding presented challenges for organizations trying to balance the time and resources needed for effective onboarding with sustaining daily operations and productivity.

The pandemic has challenged onboarding processes to a greater degree by forcing companies to think about virtual processes. They have had to consider the technology they are providing new employees (i.e., equipment and communication channels) and coordinate onboarding efforts amongst multiple parties across the organization (Albertson, 2021). Culture and connection are two specific risk areas in virtual onboarding (Maurer, 2022). Orienting new hires to organizational purpose and values plays a significant role in effective onboarding but is more challenging in a remote environment. Social relationships and building new hire connections are difficult due to a lack of interaction opportunities and an increased reliance on virtual communication methods (Hemphill & Begel, 2011). New employees who feel disconnected from the

organization or their colleagues or are uncertain about their roles and responsibilities may struggle to reach productivity expectations and are likelier to exit the company (Bauer et al., 2007; Bauer, 2010).

How have organizations responded to the new world of onboarding? According to Olear et al. (2021), 38% of organizations worked to improve their virtual onboarding processes in response to the pandemic. While organizational process adaptation likely increased as more organizations moved to remote and hybrid work models, there remain varying levels of organizational adaptation and responsiveness. Given the speed and complexity of organizational change during the pandemic, Goncalves et al. (2021) found that human resources processes were largely under-systematized, including onboarding. “The organizations that have had the most success with virtual onboarding have taken the time to step back and redefine their process” (Maurer, 2022, p. 56). How have these organizations designed (or redesigned) effective onboarding programs to maximize employee retention and engagement?

### **Case Organization Onboarding Processes**

One organization that was carefully evaluating its steps forward in creating a consistent and effective onboarding experience was a global consulting firm, referred to as Organization ITC in this paper.

At the beginning of 2022, Organization ITC initiated efforts to improve its organizational onboarding process in response to its transition to remote work and a recognition of the significant variance in onboarding practices across the organization. Organization ITC requested the Talent Development department lead a project group of colleagues within the organization to develop a framework and resources toolkit for

onboarding in its North American business units. This toolkit needed to include processes for both fully remote and hybrid onboarded new hires since the organization was utilizing both methods for onboarding. The timeline of the initiative occurred as follows:

**Table 1**

***Organization ITC Onboarding Project Timeline***

<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Event/Activity</b>
January 2022	Launch of project team
January – March 2022	Analysis of current processes through survey & interviews
March – June 2022	Vision alignment & onboarding toolkit build
July 2022	Launch of onboarding community & toolkit rollout
July – December 2022	Community meetings & adoption efforts

Background information on the organization and its previous onboarding processes are presented to understand the organizational need for a redesigned and consistent onboarding program. The organization is less than 30 years old and experienced rapid growth during the pandemic due to a widespread shift towards digitalization and repeat business for key clients, including many Fortune 1000 companies. Organization ITC is headquartered in the United States and has acquired multiple firms globally over the past few years; they provide clients with onshore, offshore, and nearshore capabilities. The organization has over 7,000 employees globally. In North America, Organization ITC comprises various business units (BU) that manage their human resources processes with the support of Corporate Human Resources.

Before the pandemic, onboarding was accomplished in person at a local office or remotely, depending on the new colleague's location. Each BU in North America had a unique onboarding program created by the specific office or BU delivering the training. The duration of the onboarding experience was subject to the leadership value placed on this process and the BU's capacity and resources to deliver an effective program. Some

of the programs were strategic and intentional, incorporating both organizational knowledge and the opportunity for socialization. However, some onboarding programs were brief or non-existent and failed to deliver critical information to new employees before exposing them to client-facing work. In addition, the pandemic resulted in an organizational shift to fully remote work, driving further challenges in consistent and impactful onboarding practices.

The company utilized a one-hour corporate-sponsored orientation to briefly expose incoming employees to organizational values, resources, and contacts. The orientation was offered weekly on Mondays, corresponding to a new hire's start date. Following the hour-long orientation, the remainder of onboarding was done within the BU. Organization ITC utilized corporate-led onboarding programs when there was an identified need for more extensive training. These programs supported two specific groups: college graduates entering the workforce for their first full-time position and graduates from a 16-week software engineering program. The specialized onboarding programs focused on building organizational knowledge, setting expectations, facilitating connection, and teaching career and consulting skills. The programs were led by Talent Development but were heavily supported by various departments and facilitators. Once the programs were complete, the new hires received additional training and onboarding within their respective BUs. While these programs provided a balanced and effective approach to onboarding, their audiences were limited. In 2021, roughly 10% of new hires came through corporate-led onboarding initiatives, increasing to over 20% in 2022.

New hires who entered the organization from existing careers experienced vastly different onboarding processes, dependent upon which BU they joined. There was an

expressed need for a framework and resources to guide the individual BUs as they designed and delivered their programs. Thus, the onboarding project team was initiated. The project members were selected based on their vision for, and implementation of, onboarding within their BUs. The priority for the onboarding project group was to extract the processes currently serving the BUs well, benchmark these practices against current research and knowledge about onboarding, and provide recommendations for a universal and consistent onboarding structure. The resulting framework was intended to be utilized across North American BUs, needed to be fully actionable for remote and hybrid onboarding methods, and should support organizational priorities.

The project team’s work extended from March to June 2022, resulting in a comprehensive onboarding toolkit. The project deliverables included:

**Table 2**

*Organization ITC Onboarding Toolkit & Deliverables*

Onboarder's Checklist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create consistent expectations for effective onboarding</li> <li>• Emphasize a team-based approach to onboarding</li> </ul>
Onboarding Guide Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recommend new hires are paired with existing colleagues</li> <li>• Provide the new hire connection &amp; assistance in assimilation</li> </ul>
Guidelines for BU-specific Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outline best practices in adult &amp; experiential learning</li> <li>• Provide examples of BU-specific training materials</li> </ul>
New Hire Introductions Toolkit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create expectations about how to welcome a new hire into a BU</li> <li>• Utilize consistent templates &amp; approach</li> </ul>
Supervisor 1:1's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create framework for consistent conversations with new hires</li> <li>• Focus areas include connection, questions, feedback, and goals</li> </ul>
Improved New Hire FAQ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consolidate new hires questions from onboarding experiences</li> <li>• Organize and place Q&amp;A's on organization intranet for ease</li> </ul>

One of the project team's most significant outcomes was creating an onboarding community, a group of colleagues responsible for onboarding in each BU. The community was established to champion the implementation of the program tools, provide a source of accountability, offer feedback, create revisions to tools, and continuously reimagine and elevate the onboarding program. The onboarding tools were launched in Organization ITC in July 2022, and the onboarding community met five times in 2022 to discuss implementation.

### **Study Purpose & Objectives**

The launch of the onboarding program occurred at a time in the organization when many BUs were pursuing return-to-office initiatives. Organizational leadership communicated that one of the project's desired outcomes was to facilitate in-office delivery of the onboarding experience as frequently as possible. However, given that some BUs are geographically spread across the United States, the organization planned to continue onboarding in remote and hybrid methods. The purpose of this research project was to compare the new hire experience in remote versus hybrid onboarding in a consulting firm. If BUs utilized a similar framework and resources, how did the remote experience differ from that of colleagues whose experience included the opportunity to onboard in an office? The study focused on new hires' sentiments toward their new organization, including feelings of connection, trust in organizational leadership, and abilities to bring their individual strengths to their role.

There is a variety of well-established research on the importance of onboarding and building a comprehensive program. This study documents how Organization ITC applied research surrounding onboarding and socialization in redesigning its onboarding

program. It adds to the body of research by comparing new hire onboarding experiences when the organization's outlined process and tools were utilized in both remote and hybrid onboarding. The similarities and differences in new hires' experiences provide an understanding of how these methods impacted sentiment toward the organization.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter 2 explores the body of knowledge related to effective onboarding and socialization practices. It further explains how onboarding is more challenging in a remote work environment. The chapter provides a framework for implementing organizational onboarding programs. Chapter 3 explores research methods and further establishes parameters for the study. The sample, study design, and data analysis process are detailed. Chapter 4 walks through the study's findings, examining new hire interview data within Organization ITC. The primary themes drawn from the study are evaluated and presented, providing clarity on how the onboarding method impacted the new hires' experiences and sentiments toward the organization. Chapter 5 revisits existing literature and applies new learnings based on the analysis. This final chapter also provides recommendations to the case organization to continue building its onboarding program.

The reality of the current American workforce is an ever-increasing number of employees working either entirely remotely or in a hybrid manner. Many organizations are grappling with the implications of this shift, including how it impacts employee engagement and retention. The study and recommendations may provide value for organizations seeking to establish an effective and consistent onboarding experience, one that drives positive new hire sentiments toward the organization, promotes new hire socialization and productivity, and retains the new hire within the organization.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter highlights the importance of effective onboarding and socialization practices. It acknowledges onboarding challenges in the post-pandemic world, identifying the far-reaching implications of remote work on onboarding practices. The chapter summarizes recommended practices for remote onboarding programs, focusing on three key areas: facilitating connection, building trust, and encouraging individual identities and strengths. Finally, an Organization Development (OD) framework is recommended to proactively align onboarding with organizational strategy.

### **The Importance of Onboarding**

Onboarding typically occurs within the new employee's first 12 months, although the duration varies significantly within organizations and may involve formal and informal processes (Bauer, 2010; Maurer, n.d.). The efficacy of onboarding is critical for both the new employee and the organization. Onboarding occurs during stressful times for new hires, as they enter a new organization and need to learn a vast amount of information (Caldwell & Caldwell, 2016; Wanous & Reichers, 2000). An effective onboarding experience should be focused on clarifying job roles and expectations and facilitating a sense of connection within the organization (Bauer, 2010).

Bauer (2010) identifies levers that promote positive short-term onboarding outcomes for new hires, including self-efficacy, role clarity, social integration, and knowledge of culture. When these outcomes are realized during the onboarding period, new hires report higher levels of job satisfaction and greater levels of organizational commitment. According to research conducted by Saks and Gruman (2011), institutionalized socialization was positively related to an employee's fit perceptions in



both the organization and the job, along with positive emotions and feelings of self-efficacy. Long-term, effective onboarding increases employees' likelihood of staying with the organization and their career effectiveness (Bauer, 2010).

What are the benefits to the organization? Successful onboarding ensures that new employees have the information and resources to become productive, solidifies their role within a team and the organization at large, and integrates them as a stakeholder in the organizational strategy and culture (Dunn & Jasinski, 2009). According to Bauer (2010), effective onboarding improves retention rates of new hires, allows them to become productive more quickly, and even positively impacts customer satisfaction. Aberdeen Group demonstrates how best-in-class onboarding programs create higher revenue per full-time employee (Laurano, 2013). Investing time and thought into onboarding programs directly benefits organizations through various avenues.

Despite the statistics, many organizations view onboarding as an expense rather than an investment and, consequently, they fail to allocate appropriate resources to this effort (Stanley, 2012). This may result in a lack of formal onboarding or unclear processes, resulting in a poor new hire experience. Common errors in onboarding process design involve insufficient duration and information that is overwhelming or irrelevant to the new hire (Bradt & Vonnegut, 2009). Organizations should strive to balance the amount and complexity of information offered, as too much or too little information creates challenges for the new hire (Caldwell & Peters, 2018; Srimannarayana, 2016). In addition, Keisling and Laning (2016) noted that both self-directed programs and those that were overly structured were not helpful to new employees due to their failure to incorporate new employee interactions and socialization opportunities. Ultimately,

neglecting onboarding programs leads to a lack of productivity, disengagement, and a potential exit from the organization (Czopek & Kazusek, 2021).

### **The Changing Landscape of Onboarding**

To complicate matters further, the global pandemic has dramatically changed the onboarding landscape by forcing many organizations to rely on virtual processes.

Organizations and their hires have encountered new challenges associated with onboarding. According to Albertson (2021), transitioning to remote work has made the demanding task of onboarding even more difficult. Expanding on this further, organizations have communicated challenges related to onboarding materials, scheduling support to facilitate onboarding processes, and incorporating socialization and relationship-building opportunities (Albertson, 2021). According to Olear et al. (2021), remote onboarding has increased the need for planning each step of the onboarding process. A thoughtful onboarding program should include opportunities to ask questions and outline where and how new hires can receive support.

Organizations have had to increase their agility and respond quickly to new challenges, such as having appropriate equipment, technological support, and virtual communication tools (Albertson, 2021; Mitchell, 2021; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2021). For example, when Fidelity hired 1,000 interns during the summer of 2020, they had to develop a system to set up and send out laptops to support remote work (Lytle, 2021). In addition to addressing the immediate need, remote organizations have had to adapt their mindset and culture by moving towards more generative learning (Rogers et al., 2021). This implies that organizations engage in new ways of thinking and prioritize “people’s commitment and capacity to learn” (Senge, 1990b, pp. 3-4).

Remote onboarding makes it more difficult for new hires to learn about the organizational culture. According to Bauer (2010), culture is one of the four Cs of effective onboarding. Organizational socialization and belonging are built through shared values, norms, and basic assumptions (Schein & Schein, 2016). Without opportunities for regular office interactions and the ability to observe work processes, it may be more challenging for new hires to understand workplace norms and how to navigate the system (Bortz, 2020; Keisling & Laning, 2016). Keisling and Laning (2016) refer to this vital aspect of onboarding as efficacy and suggest this is an area of high importance for new hires. Examples of this challenge may arise in understanding how others respond to deadlines, meeting attendance norms, and communication expectations. Awareness of organizational culture helps reduce uncertainty for new hires and solidifies their fit within the organization.

Another challenge accentuated by remote onboarding is building connections and relationships, which aligns with Bauer's (2010) four Cs of effective onboarding. It can be challenging for organizations to support the same depth of relationship-building as possible with collocated teams (Hemphill & Begel, 2011). Informal interactions and activities occur much less frequently during remote onboarding and require greater planning and intentionality. Onboarding programs should orient new hires to people within the organization who will support their successful integration, whether this is through influence, knowledge, or capacity (Keisling & Laning, 2016). This is referred to as alliances, another critical component of the onboarding process.

While some organizations have invested significant time and resources to create a robust and consistent remote onboarding process, others have neglected this step. Early in

the pandemic, organizations developed temporary workarounds for issues, which functioned more like band-aids and failed to consider the potential duration of remote work requirements and the future of work. Some organizations shifted their onboarding processes to assign ownership of onboarding to the new hire, expecting that they would bring themselves up to speed (Bortz, 2020). This approach failed to recognize the importance of connection and culture in onboarding and failed to treat onboarding as part of an ongoing strategy (Albertson, 2021).

Another challenge associated with remote onboarding is prolonged time on video chats, sometimes called Zoom fatigue (Bailenson, 2021). Bailenson (2021) highlights the primary causes for this phenomenon: violating social norms by engaging in eye gaze at a close distance for a prolonged period, cognitive load associated with sending and receiving extra non-verbal cues, self-focused and negative attention resulting from looking at oneself on the screen, and reduced mobility due to the restricted field of view on computer cameras. This final challenge highlights the importance of creating balance in an onboarding program. Setting up too many calls and video interactions, including those designed for social purposes, may increase exhaustion (Evans, 2021).

Gaining familiarity with both the benefits and challenges of onboarding and the impact of remote work provides a framework for recommendations that can be utilized to design a best-in-class or proactive onboarding program. How an organization's onboarding program is structured has significant implications for new hires' sentiment toward the organization. Previous research suggests that computer-based onboarding negatively impacted new hire socialization and, subsequently, organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Wesson & Gogus, 2005). However, as organizations

have increased awareness regarding the impact of remote onboarding, they have focused more on socialization as an intended outcome of onboarding. Socialization efforts can be accomplished virtually and more organizations are finding creative ways to build this into their daily work to support employee engagement. The subsequent sections explore three critical aspects of new hire onboarding, which impact employee sentiments towards the organization: facilitating connection, building trust, and encouraging new employees to bring their individual identities and strengths to the organization. The recommendations apply to in-person and remote methods, although the focus is on how these practices can support a more effective remote onboarding experience.

### **Recommended Practices**

**Facilitating Connection.** In remote onboarding programs, organizations must intentionally create connection opportunities during the new hires' first few weeks (Olear et al., 2021). The organization should introduce the new hire to the organization and their direct team early on and in a meaningful way (Czopek & Kazusek, 2021). For example, they might introduce the new hire, a few interesting facts about them, and some of the strengths they bring to the team. This early introduction creates a welcoming environment, encourages colleagues to reach out, and helps reinforce the new hire's value (Bauer, 2010). Another recommendation is to build a two-week plan with daily agendas; the agenda should include work-based sessions and opportunities to socialize with colleagues (Olear et al., 2021).

Bauer et al. (2007) found that social tactics significantly impacted newcomer adjustment and socialization outcomes. Thus, onboarding programs should prioritize new hire meetings with colleagues across the organization, which would facilitate the

development of information networks to support the new hire (Bauer, 2010). These meetings hold a variety of purposes, including connecting new hires to those in the organization who have a significant amount of influence and allowing them to build relationships with colleagues they will be working directly with (Keisling & Laning, 2016). Individual meetings enable new hires to pace their learning and maximize their opportunities to build alliances. Group meetings were also cited as essential to the onboarding process to help new hires learn about colleagues and organizational priorities. Overall, meetings during the onboarding period are beneficial in understanding how to get things done within the organization and who can support the new hires in creating successful outcomes.

Several studies suggest assigning a peer coach or mentor to a new hire; that is, someone within the organization who facilitates organizational learning and socialization outside of leadership (Czopek & Kazusek, 2021; Evans, 2021; Ragins et al., 2000). According to Ragins et al. (2000), both the type and the quality of mentoring impacts the new hire's outcomes of socialization and learning. A peer coach or mentor answers questions throughout the onboarding process, helps facilitate an understanding of role relationships, and supports a greater understanding of culture and expectations (Bhakta & Medina, 2021). They should plan to meet with a new hire weekly and be available for the new hire's questions and concerns as they arise (Lytle, 2021). One of the primary reasons for a coach or mentor is to provide social support for the new employee through introductions to other key stakeholders within the organization.

Organizations with a well-established onboarding program may consider scheduling onboarding in small groups of new hires in a cohort approach (Lytle, 2021;

Olear et al., 2021). This arrangement benefits both the organization and the new hires. First, it allows for maximizing the time that is invested in orientation by allowing the facilitators to share the knowledge with multiple new hires simultaneously. Second, it promotes effective learning since new hires get to benefit from others' questions and insights. Finally, this arrangement can build a sense of connection within the cohort and allow the group to share their experiences and questions. Lytle (2021) provides an example of an organization that onboards new employees in groups of 10-15, and a representative from their HR department provides a cultural orientation for the group.

According to Derven (2008), onboarding should be a shared responsibility between HR, the manager, a peer coach/mentor, and a process owner, with each stakeholder playing a clearly defined and complementary role to the other parties. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) outlines recommended onboarding roles for various stakeholders, advocating that organizations make these expectations explicit ("Understanding Employee Onboarding," n.d.). Establishing a stakeholder-based approach to onboarding naturally supports greater connection for new hires, as they can interact with multiple organization representatives throughout the process. Furthermore, it can reinforce organizational objectives and consistency in the new hire experience, as new hires will better understand how things work in the organization and how their role is interconnected.

**Building Trust.** Building trust during onboarding is an area that deserves further consideration, especially in a remote environment. Mayer et al. (1995) defined trust as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the

expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party” (p. 712).

In remote teams, trust can be more difficult to establish for multiple reasons. First, a large amount of work is accomplished outside of what other colleagues may see. Second, nonverbal cues are essential to trust-building but may be difficult to assess during virtual encounters. Finally, newcomers may experience a feeling of invisibility, especially if their leader and team are not proactive about reaching out and facilitating organizational and role-based learning (Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Hemphill & Begel, 2011). Invisibility makes it challenging for the team to understand the newcomer’s strengths and opportunities and appropriately guide their work.

Furthermore, the remote environment results in less impromptu learning (Hemphill & Begel, 2011). Essential aspects of the job may remain hidden, leading to poor productivity and feelings of incompetence. The new hire may not understand the importance of their work to the organization and the team and may not have a thorough understanding of how they will be evaluated. Finally, there are fewer opportunities for collaboration with colleagues, which helps build trust, create a shared sense of purpose, and support an understanding of how work is accomplished within the organization.

When trust in both organizations and leaders has decreased, organizations should intentionally build this during onboarding (Caldwell & Peters, 2018). Organizations should be conscious of upholding a psychological contract with the new employee, which is typically unwritten but reflects the obligations of both parties in the relationship. The employment relationship can be described as an interpersonal relationship where mutual trust and consideration are essential to long-term success. Caldwell and Peters (2018)



argue that caring for this relationship and upholding ethical standards during onboarding is critical for retention, employee satisfaction, and productivity.

According to Caldwell and Caldwell (2016), 10 critical errors undermine the psychological contract during onboarding, centering around failure to appropriately plan for the onboarding process. These errors highlight the importance of understanding the new employee's needs, with awareness of transitional stress. In addition, organizations should carefully consider the amount and timing of onboarding information presented. Organizational missteps such as miscommunication of information, failure to follow up on commitments, and not offering a realistic job preview breach the psychological contract and may irreparably impact the experience and the new hire's decision to stay.

Honoring and prioritizing the psychological contract with new employees supports their onboarding experience in three ways. First, it demonstrates a commitment to an employee's success. Second, it paints the organization as caring and people-centered. Finally, it shows competence in delivering an effective onboarding experience (Beer, 2009). A personalized approach to the newcomer's onboarding experience considers their needs first and foremost (Caldwell & Peters, 2018). The opportunity to establish trust occurs as early as the interview and pre-boarding process, and consistent and respectful communication affirms that the organization is preparing for a smooth and thoughtful onboarding process and values the new employee.

In the first few days of onboarding, details carry significant weight to the new hire. For example, creating and providing a timeline for onboarding activities with clear stages and outcomes can increase newcomer onboarding efficacy (Bauer et al., 2007). Olear et al. (2021) suggest a plan outlining the new hire's 30, 60, and 90 days.

Furthermore, leaders should communicate expectations with new hires early and often (Albertson, 2021; Caldwell & Peters, 2018; Czopek & Kazusek, 2021; Keisling & Laning, 2016;). New hires desire this information and incorporating it into the onboarding experience decreases uncertainty and maximizes the opportunity for early success in both their role and the organization.

Another way to build trust during onboarding includes assigning projects that allow new hires to contribute as early as possible (Keisling & Laning, 2016). Scheduling adequate opportunities for new employees to connect with their leader and other key stakeholders throughout the organization improves visibility for the new hire and reinforces organizational learning. Socialization occurs as new hires engage in positive interactions and establish trusting relationships with colleagues, leaders, and the organization. Bauer (2010) further supports the importance of this process by linking social adjustment within the organization to outcomes such as organizational commitment, which can be viewed as the new hire upholding their end of the psychological contract. Providing the opportunity for the new hire to ask questions during one-on-one meetings allows them to explore what is important to them and receive candid answers to their questions. Keisling and Laning (2016) suggest that transparency around sensitive organization issues and listening to the new hire's perspective are critical opportunities during onboarding. Finally, the organization can ask for the new hire's feedback on their onboarding experience, further reinforcing their commitment to listening and providing an exceptional onboarding experience.

**Encouraging Individual Identities & Strengths.** Most onboarding programs prioritize sharing organizational information with the new hire and seek to create a sense

of belonging. As evidenced by the definition of socialization by Bauer et al. (2007), one goal of onboarding is to support a transition from outsider to insider. Sharing organizational knowledge with new employees helps indoctrinate them into its culture and values (Cable et al., 2013). While there is evidence to support the value of the socialization process, other research suggests that there may be benefits to emphasizing new hire individual identity by affirming the new employee's strengths and contribution to the organization. Cable et al. (2013) demonstrates that encouraging new employees to bring their authentic selves to work builds more effective employee/employer relationships.

Cable et al. (2013) outline four principles that can be used to shift onboarding to encourage individual strengths and identities: break out of a traditional approach, help new hires identify their authentic strengths, facilitate introductions to colleagues in the organization, and ask newcomers to consider how their authentic strengths can be applied to their role. New hire strengths can be incorporated throughout the onboarding process. Several examples of this include leaders reinforcing their reasons for hiring the individual during the onboarding process, sharing the new hire's strengths when introducing them to the rest of the team, and placing them on high visibility and high priority projects according to their strengths (Keisling & Laning, 2016).

Czopek and Kazusek (2021) suggest that investing time in getting to know a new hire allows for individualizing the employer-employee relationship. Organizations should seek to empower and appreciate employees throughout the onboarding process. The assignment of tasks and projects during onboarding should be tailored to a specific individual based on their experience level and strengths. Furthermore, the organization

should seek to provide and promote learning opportunities to increase new hire skills in areas of interest, focusing on developing the whole employee (Bortz, 2020; Rogers et al., 2021). Finally, continuous coaching by the leader creates a strong focus on ongoing new hire development. It empowers the new hire to use their strengths to achieve successful and impactful outcomes within the organization (Czopek & Kazusek, 2021).

While tactics prioritizing organizational knowledge are beneficial for helping the new employee feel a sense of connection to the organization and better understand their role, Ashforth and Saks (1996) reported that this approach lessened role innovation. Learning about new employees and seeking to understand and utilize their strengths can help advance organizational outcomes and employees' personal goals (Keisling & Laning, 2016). While socialization remains essential to onboarding, organizations should consider balancing this with understanding and encouraging the new hire's strengths. This is critical for organizations whose strategies and cultures prioritize innovation.

Identifying and encouraging individual strengths, building trust, and creating connection opportunities are all recommended practices in effective onboarding but may be more challenging in remote onboarding. Synthesizing all the available information on onboarding while maintaining a keen eye toward the implications of remote work provides insights into how organizations can build onboarding programs that acknowledge the current state of the workforce and align with organizational strategy. These recommendations do not give a recipe for effective onboarding but rather key ingredients that organizations should consider while tailoring the onboarding process to align with the organizational culture and strategy.

## **Applying an Organization Development Lens**

Due to the significance of the shift to remote work, organizations must evaluate responses and processes with an organization-wide lens. One approach that may support this process is utilizing an OD lens. According to Cummings and Worley (2015), OD is “a system-wide application and transfer of behavioral science knowledge to the planned development, improvement, and reinforcement of the strategies, structures, and processes that lead to organization effectiveness” (p. 2). What are the specific aspects of organization development that aid in better understanding the organizational implications of remote work – specifically remote onboarding?

First, OD advocates for system-wide change (Cummings & Worley, 2015), which is required due to the ongoing nature of the pandemic and the variety of ways it has impacted organizational life (Rogers et al., 2021). When evaluating and redesigning their onboarding processes, organizations should attempt to create a long-term solution that supports organizational strategy (Dunn & Jasinski, 2009). In addition, it is recommended to create a remote onboarding process involving various stakeholders to maximize integration and allow the new employee to develop appropriate alliances (Dunn & Jasinski, 2009; Keisling & Laning, 2016). This also supports organizational congruence and reinforcement of the mission and values.

Second, organization development promotes using behavioral science knowledge and practice (Cummings & Worley, 2015). This approach encourages organizations to consider the behaviors and needs of new employees, group dynamics that can support or hinder a sense of belonging, and work design, all of which are essential components of the onboarding process. OD provides insight into the challenges of organizational

socialization, especially within the context of a remote environment. Church et al. (2018) propose that “OD is about the system as a social entity” (p. 271). Culture is essential to this social entity and is particularly challenging to replicate in a remote environment.

OD's third and fourth components relate to the change process and organizational mindset that supports effective evolution. Specifically, the third component of OD requires adaptive methods for planning and implementing change (Cummings & Worley, 2015). This acknowledges the need to diagnose challenges before creating solutions. It requires flexibility and agility, emphasizing consistent evaluation and re-evaluation, even after implementing solutions. The final component involves the design, implementation, and subsequent reinforcement of change (Cummings & Worley, 2015). An example of this component would involve an organization answering the question: “How can we utilize what we’re learning about work and the future reality to build an onboarding program that will anticipate and meet these needs?”

The new world of onboarding forces organizations to consider how to create onboarding processes that are meaningful and engaging for new hires. While there is much to be gleaned from early studies and knowledge about onboarding, organizational practices are changing now faster than ever. In addition, organizations are learning more about employee priorities in a post-pandemic world. In many cases, such as creating opportunities for connection and building trust, onboarding priorities remain steady. In other instances, such as identifying and celebrating new hire strengths, organizations are challenged to escape their existing mindsets and view onboarding differently. There is an opportunity for all organizations to re-evaluate their people processes and ensure they align the new hire experience with organizational objectives and future state.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The purpose of this research project was to compare the new hire experience in remote versus hybrid onboarding in a consulting firm. This study outlines one organization's process of defining onboarding priorities in a post-pandemic context and evaluating whether they delivered on those priorities according to the new hires' perspectives. This study had four key phases: design and implement the data collection process, analyze the data, determine themes; and provide recommendations on how the organization should proceed. Perceptions of the onboarding program and associated new employee sentiments were assessed through interviews with new hires onboarded to the organization between July – November 2022. The study intended to provide the case organization with an analysis of its onboarding process and recommendations.

#### **Sample**

The data collection was completed within Organization ITC. The study looked specifically at new hires hired to Organization ITC in any of its North American BUs from July – November 2022 following the launch of the unified onboarding program. The sample consisted of 12 new hires, representing both remote and hybrid onboarding methods. Study participants were identified through purposive sampling, utilizing an employee list provided by Organization ITC Human Resources. Study participants were contacted via email to determine their interest in participation.

Seven participants were onboarded in a fully remote method, and five were onboarded in a hybrid manner. Onboarding in a hybrid manner involved spending at least one full day of the new hire's onboarding experience engaging with colleagues in a physical office. Ten participants were hired to Local Business Units (LBUs), and two

were onboarded to National Business Units (geographically dispersed teams). Ten respondents were male, and two were female. Participants held various roles within the organization; however, it is important to note that no participants were hired into entry-level or early career roles (Table 3). In addition, new hires who participated in one of the extended corporate-led onboarding programs were not included as participants.

**Table 3**

***Participant Positions within Organization ITC***

<b>Position</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>
Project Manager	3
Sr. Project Manager	2
Account Developer	2
Sr. Business Consultant	1
Sr. Technical Consultant	1
Lead Technical Consultant	1
Solutions Architect	1
Director	1

**Instruments or Measures**

Interviews were conducted to provide a deeper analysis of the new hire's onboarding experience from the new hire's perspective. The interviews were anticipated to last approximately 30 minutes. The interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

**Data Collection & Analysis**

The new hire interviews were recorded and transcribed. The remote interviews were consolidated for comparison, as were the hybrid interviews. Analyses of interviews were done via coding, utilizing the three methods outlined by Maxwell (2013): organizational categories, substantive categories, and theoretical categories. Organizational categories were selected before the interviews, based on well-established research on onboarding. These categories included connection, trust, and strengths.



Substantive categories were assessed as data was collected, both through the transcription process and through re-reading individual interviews to understand a specific story or experience; this kind of categorization relied on understanding the depth of an individual's story and what was important or meaningful for them (Maxwell, 2013). Finally, theoretical categories were determined by looking for interview content related to prior theory and emerging data from the interviews. An example of this was a statement like building connections during remote onboarding needs to be an intentional process. Based on existing onboarding research, themes were assessed from the data and recommended practices were evaluated.

### **Human Subjects Protections**

Confidentiality and informed participation of participants were of primary concern. Participants were contacted via email, given a brief description of the study, and informed that the study had been approved by organization leadership. Participants were told that their participation was voluntary and were requested to sign a consent form before the interview. At the start of the study interviews, participants received a brief description of the study and were informed about what to expect within the 30-minute interview. They were asked for their permission to record the interview, informed of how the recording would be used, and given the opportunity to ask questions. While reporting the data, confidentiality was protected by ensuring quotes did not contain identifying participant data and instead were described by the general group from which the interviewee was a part (e.g., remote onboarded new hire).

## **Chapter 4: Results**

The purpose of this research project was to compare the new hire experience in remote versus hybrid onboarding in a consulting firm. To accomplish this, 12 new hires from Organization ITC were selected to participate in a 30-minute interview about their onboarding experience. This study aimed to evaluate whether the onboarding method impacted the new hires' sentiments towards the organization, so remote hire interviews were coded separately from hybrid hire interviews to understand differences and similarities. A total of seven new hires were onboarded remotely, while five new hires participated in hybrid onboarding.

The interview transcripts were coded and analyzed to develop themes. Three themes were prioritized according to the literature, and three themes emerged during the analysis. These six themes were a connection to colleagues, trust in leaders, individual identities and strengths, onboarding structure and planning, internal communications, and sentiments and feelings.

### **Onboarding Individual Experience**

To understand what experiences shaped onboarding for each new hire, positive experiences and challenges were highlighted in each interview. Table 4 and Table 5 demonstrate the number of interviews where the given positive experience category or challenge/opportunity category was reported.

**Table 4*****New Hire Positive Experiences in the Onboarding Process***

Positive Experience Category	Number of Interviews Reported	
	Remote Hires (7 Interviews)	Hybrid Hires (5 Interviews)
Connection to colleagues	2	5
Leader relationship	6	5
Identity & strengths	2	3
Planning & structure	7	4
Work arrangement	2	4
Organizational/BU pride	4	2
Understanding org structure & interactions	0	1

**Table 5*****New Hire Expressed Challenges or Opportunities in the Onboarding Process***

Challenge/Opportunity Category	Number of Interviews Reported	
	Remote Hires (7 Interviews)	Hybrid Hires (5 Interviews)
Connection to colleagues	6	0
Leader relationship	1	0
Identity & strengths	2	0
Planning & structure	3	4
Hiring process	1	0

**Connection to Colleagues**

The strongest theme from the interviews was the positive impact of hybrid onboarding on new hires' connection with colleagues. All five hybrid hires reported that one of the positive factors associated with their onboarding experience was friendly and supportive colleagues. In contrast, only two of seven remote onboarded new hires reported this. In addition, the specific terms support, supported, and supportive were used by four hybrid onboarded new hires to describe their experience or sentiment toward the organization.

What actions supported this sentiment? The new hires onboarded in a hybrid manner reported that their colleagues were willing to answer questions and that this was part of the organizational culture. One hybrid onboarded new hire shared:

I really enjoy the culture. I really enjoy, you know, all of my interactions with people; I feel like everybody's been super friendly, helpful... you know, you never feel like you're like a burden. It's like everybody's always willing to, you know, help and be there to support you, so I mean, I think that's like a really big deal.

Furthermore, hybrid new hires reported that their colleagues actively reached out to engage them, as demonstrated by this statement:

Yeah, one of the most impressive things I've found is people from all different sectors of the business reaching out to me. I've got a list of people I'm supposed to reach out to, to find out what they do and how they do it, you know, as part of my onboarding, but then people call me and say, 'I want to meet you, I want to tell you about what I do.'

In addition, attributes of in-person work, such as that experienced by the hybrid new hires, helped create connection opportunities. One of these attributes was the ability to have in-office interactions, which helped facilitate small talk and conversations about topics that were not work-related. This quote by a hybrid new hire demonstrated the connection of their local office:

Every time I go to the office, it just feels like every time there's someone that walks by, they just want to introduce themselves and tell me what they're doing, and get to know me. So it's definitely a welcoming environment [...] the days when I go in there, it like looks like a party every time. Like everybody knows everybody, they just stop to talk about their kids, the weekend stuff – like you can tell that it's a pretty tight group, you know?

Hybrid hires also had the opportunity to participate in in-person events, such as in-office Town Halls, charity events, and shared meals. One hybrid new hire reported that this caused them to feel like they had been a part of the organization for a year already.

In comparison, only two remote new hires reported that one of the positive factors associated with their onboarding experience was friendly and supportive colleagues. The two hires that reported this during the interviews were hired into LBUs, which are geographical offices. One of the remote new hires lived near the office but had only visited once for a meeting, while the other was in another state and had not yet visited the local office. However, these remote new hires did talk about being welcomed and supported by their colleagues, like hybrid new hires. This was likely attributed to the BU culture, which was successfully extended to their remote onboarded new hires.

Six remote new hires acknowledged the challenges of the remote onboarding method regarding the lack of connection. One remote new hire described the challenge of finding a colleague to answer questions. They describe that they would have just walked down the hall in an office, but remotely experienced a bottleneck of assessing whom to contact and waiting for a response. One method that would have addressed remote hire questions and provided additional context on how the organization functions was to have an onboarding buddy. Interestingly, this was only mentioned in one interview by a remote new hire who had not been assigned a buddy but suggested that it would have positively impacted his experience. They stated:

I would like a work buddy. [To provide] Tips and tricks [...] sort of like some know-how, and some like hallway chat about somebody else's real perspective of what my branch looks like and what, how things are actually running with the company, just to get a little bit of grapevine. That's all critical to me.

One remote new hire shared the challenge of creating connections in a remote environment, comparing it to their previous in-person role:

But, you know, in terms of making connection, I still don't think we know what that means as a people working remotely, and um, you get really invested. I mean,

where I used to work, we were all a family and tight, and we all knew each other. And this isn't like that, you know, and I think that's okay.

Another remote new hire addressed that it could be challenging to talk to new people and create opportunities for outside-of-work interactions; this is much more natural when standing next to someone in the office. They further described the benefit of outside-of-work interactions, stating that it gave people a “humanizing” quality instead of just being a colleague.

Five remote new hires mentioned wanting an in-person component to their onboarding experience. One remote new hire shared how in-person onboarding reinforces that they are unique and not easily replaceable:

You know, what needs to happen is like you personally go to an office, and there'll be an onboarding process and [...] you meet people and then you connect with people – there's a human touch, and you start getting a feeling that you are important, you are unique.

### **Trust in Leaders**

Trust was a critical component in a positive leader and new hire relationship. The onboarding interviews focused on understanding new hires' sentiments toward their leader and found that positive sentiments appeared to be a function of the quantity and quality of interactions. In total, 11 of the 12 new hires reported their interactions with leaders as a positive factor in their onboarding experience. While the interview questions did not specifically ask about trust, many new hires' descriptions of their relationship with their leaders involved sharing leader actions that built a sense of trust.

In both remote and hybrid scenarios, multiple new hires mentioned the ability to reach out to their leaders and have their leaders reach out to check in on them. Regarding the frequency of individual meetings, most leaders met with their direct reports at least

weekly during their first 30 days. Three new hires reported that they met with their leader weekly. Six reported the frequency as multiple times per week, including three who stated that they interacted with their leader “every day” during the onboarding period. Two new hires reported that their individual meetings occurred bi-monthly or less, and one new hire did not provide a specific frequency but stated that their leader frequently checked in with them, regardless of the leader’s workload. Table 6 showcases a summary of the frequency of leader-new hire meetings.

**Table 6**

*Frequency of Leader-New Hire Meetings & Relationship Descriptors*

<b>Remote Hires</b>	
<b>Frequency of 1:1's</b>	<b>Relationship Descriptors</b>
Once since hire (+ emails)	In sync; mutual belief; transactional relationship
Bi-monthly	Available; neutral
3 times/week for 1 <sup>st</sup> week; reduced	Guidance; support; trust to complete tasks
3-4 times/week initially; reduced	Available; knowledge of hire as an individual
Every day, multiple times	Available; professional; friendly; comfortable
Every day or every other day	Great; understanding about workload
Did not provide specific frequency	Caring; checking in; trust to complete tasks
<b>Hybrid Hires</b>	
<b>Frequency of 1:1's</b>	<b>Relationship Descriptors</b>
Unsure; currently weekly	Caring; support; reason that he intends to stay
Weekly	Trust to complete tasks; checking in; respect
Weekly	Great; checking in; development-focused
4-5 times/week	Available; values hire skill & experience
Every day or every other day	Coaching; autonomy & purpose; expectations

When looking further at the experiences of the two hires who reported less frequent meetings (bi-monthly or less), it was plausible that the reduced frequency of meetings impacted their relationships with their leader. In addition, both hires were onboarded remotely. One remote new hire described their relationship with their leader:

I don't know, there's nothing that would stand out, and at the same time, there is nothing that would bother me, so I'm more in neutral space right now. And

thinking about the reason for that is that because it's just two months since I've been here in this space, and it's just been not like even a month since I have joined a client project, so I don't really have a lot of situations, you know, where I could say that OK, this situation, this happened, and this is how things were.

In the second instance, the remote new hire reported having met with their leader just once since their start date. Although this colleague stated that their leader believed in their capabilities, the relationship description was largely transactional.

The frequency of individual meetings was not solely an indicator of the amount of trust that the new hire experienced toward their leader. Various interactions were reported to build trust: a personal and deep sense of caring by the leader as perceived by the new hires, coaching and guidance provided by the leader, and the leader trusting the new hire to do their job while being available for support as needed. One hybrid new hire highlighted their personal relationship with their leader:

Even when I met him when I worked at the other place, like he, you know, there's a lot of people who say they care? [My leader] actually, as you get to know him, he really means it. You know what I mean? He really does care for like, I know he cares about me and my well-being, if I'm happy, so like he checks in on me quite a bit, you know what I mean? He's a good manager.

A hybrid new hire focused on how their leader supported them to complete their work: “[My leader] does not micromanage at all; he really wants me to run, you know, my area like my own business, and um, and then he's always available for help and support.”

Two specific accounts of leader and new hire interactions demonstrated the new hires' abilities to be vulnerable with their leaders. In these accounts, the new hires communicated that their work was either “over their head” or that the workload was too much. Both instances were shared by remote new hires, and their leaders' responses significantly impacted how the new hires viewed their relationships with their manager



and their willingness to try something new or navigate a challenging situation. One remote new hire recounted this experience:

There was kind of a time when we were making this transition when I was taking over for [a Project Manager], and I was just getting you know, bombarded with some workload essentially. And I raised the question to him, and I said, 'Hey, I don't really know if I'm going to be able to handle this much for a sustained period of time, right? If it's like for a short amount of time, fine.' He didn't take the approach of, 'Well, that's the job.' It was more of, he came from a place of understanding. I was like, 'Oh, OK, well then, you just earned several respect points from me for that.'

Although this study focused on building trust within the leader and new hire relationship, it is essential to note that there were accounts of building trust outside of this relationship. For example, 11 new hires mentioned that something that stood out about the onboarding experience was organizational preparedness. One remote new hire commented on how the organization followed through on timelines they had outlined, including when the new hire would have access to third-party systems. Other comments highlighted "authenticity" as something that stood out to them regarding the organizational culture and colleagues' genuine kindness and willingness to support others.

### **Individual Identities & Strengths**

Two questions in the interview sought to uncover organization practices of supporting new hire individual identities and strengths:

- Did you have an opportunity to discuss your personal and professional goals within your first 30 days (Ruiz, 2021)?
- Why were you hired into the organization, and what strengths do you bring?

There was insufficient data about whether the onboarding method impacted the new hires' ability to bring their authentic selves and apply their strengths to their work.

There were inconsistent responses to the question, “Did you have an opportunity to discuss your personal and professional goals within your first 30 days” (Ruiz, 2021)? Eight participants suggested that a discussion of goals was incorporated into their first 30 days, three of which were hybrid hires and five of which were remote hires. Despite the number of affirmative responses, several new hires indicated the conversation was “informal” or that goals were only “lightly touched on.” Four participants stated that they did not have a goals discussion within their first 30 days. Two new hires commented that these discussions occurred more during recruiting and interviewing, but once the new hire started, they understood their role within the organization. Several stated that they anticipated further goal-oriented conversations in the future. One remote new hire had a particularly compelling description of their goal discussions, outlining their leader's steps to prepare them for a promotion opportunity. Five new hires praised the opportunities for continued learning and development within the organization; four comments came from remote hires, while one came from a hybrid hire.

When asked about their strengths and reason for being hired into the organization, new hires’ responses focused on three main areas: their background and the value of their past experiences (11), people-oriented strengths (7), and technical skills (5). Three remote new hires named communication as a strength when citing people-oriented strengths, whereas only one hybrid new hire highlighted this (Table 7).

Table 7

*Response Categories for New Hire Strengths & Reason for Hire*

Response Category	Number of Times Cited as Strength	
	Remote Hires	Hybrid Hires
Background & experience	6	5
Technical skills	4	3
People-oriented strengths: communication	3	1
People-oriented strengths: leadership	1	2
People-oriented strengths: other	3	1

Another account of a leader and new hire interaction indicated a model of building on individual identity and strengths. This hybrid new hire was brought in to support building a client base in a specific industry sector. They shared their excitement and unique qualifications in supporting this organizational goal. As they described their relationship with their leader:

[...] he was like, ‘Man, I could really lean on you for some certain areas in leading the sales team because you have that experience.’ Um, so you know, that’s been nice, he’s, ‘[...] what do you think here?’ We’ll be in a meeting; we’ll all be sitting, and he’s like, ‘[...] how would you position this?’ or ‘What’s a way that our team can do this?’ So it’s just been really collaborative and nice.

Including this participant, three hybrid new hires talked about the autonomy they experienced in their roles, and three remote onboarded new hires shared this sentiment.

### **Onboarding Planning & Structure**

Onboarding planning and structure were a strong theme during the interviews, indicating that this significantly impacted the new hire experience. Eleven new hires commented on the positive outcomes of the organization’s preparedness for them. This was in response to several questions:

- What stood out to you about your onboarding experience?

- How well did your first 30 days in the organization meet your expectations?
- What two words best describe your current sentiment towards the organization, and why?

Four new hires specifically mentioned the laptop being sent before their start date, two of whom were remotely onboarded and two of whom were hybrid onboarded. A seemingly small action on the organization's part significantly impacted these new hires' experiences, all of which occurred pre-hire. Six remote onboarded new hires mentioned that they appreciated having a checklist that walked them through onboarding tasks within their first 30 days, so this was a strong theme across that group. Both remote and hybrid new hires mentioned a wealth of resources available to help them learn about the company, understand how to perform specific actions such as timecard completion, and better understand their role and responsibilities. Overall, positive comments regarding onboarding structure and planning were more frequent in the remote hire interviews (Table 8).

**Table 8**

***Onboarding Planning & Structure, Reasons for Positive Experience***

Contribution to Positive Onboarding Experience	Number of Times Reported	
	Remote Hires (7 Interviews)	Hybrid Hires (5 Interviews)
Laptop arrival prior to start	2	2
Checklist of onboarding tasks	6	2
Wealth of resources	4	2
Self-directed onboarding	4	1
Multiple stakeholders involved	3	2
Organized	3	2
Teams (channels & chat)	2	1
HR orientation & support	3	2

The significance of onboarding planning and structure is based on new hire sentiments and feelings associated with this intentionality. One hybrid new hire said, “And then when I got my laptop before I was even really hired, you know, I was like, ‘Wow, they’re on the ball!’ And then I get my list, and then, you know, things just started coming together relatively quickly, so I could just move fast.” The timely arrival of the laptop and the list of tasks helped the new hire recognize that the organization was anticipating their start.

The availability of materials and resources created a sense of self-reliance and ownership during onboarding. This was reported as a positive quality by four remote new hires and one hybrid new hire. One remote new hire said:

The thing that stood out to me was the amount of materials and stuff out there that you could use to make it through that. I didn’t have to ping my new boss every 15 minutes and say, ‘Hey, do I need to do this, or do I need to do that? And what do I do in my spare time?’ You know, [Organization] Academy and all these different you know kind of tools at your disposal, which is something that you don’t get in onboarding processes across – what I feel like I’ve seen across different companies.

Another remote new hire commented on how the onboarding process felt like it was intended to support remote work. Finally, using an onboarding checklist allowed new hires quickly staffed on projects to work through the onboarding tasks as their project work allowed.

However, there was also critical feedback around the onboarding structure (Table 9). Two hybrid new hires mentioned that there could have been more structure around the order of tasks and outlining when specific tasks would be available for completion, such as those that required access to a site or system. One hybrid onboarded new hire stated:

I just didn’t know if there was like a certain order to work through everything, and you know, there’s some things you have to wait on and not wait on. If there was

like a timeline kind of thing that was printed out that kind of gave some guidance on how you proceed through it and in the right order, based on role; I thought that would be kind of cool.

**Table 9**

***Onboarding Planning & Structure, Challenges or Opportunities Presented***

Challenges/Opportunities in Onboarding Experience	Number of Times Reported	
	Remote Hires (7 Interviews)	Hybrid Hires (5 Interviews)
Order & availability of tasks	0	2
Balancing tasks with project work	2	1
Format of training (i.e. videos)	0	1
Delayed project start	1	0

Another significant outcome of onboarding planning and structure related to how soon a new hire was staffed on a project. Immediate staffing created some challenges in the onboarding process. Six new hires reported being staffed on a project before hire or within the first few days of their start; four were remote new hires and two were hybrid new hires. When analyzing their interviews, it seemed plausible that this contributed to some challenges associated with time constraints and organizational understanding. For example, two of these hires (one from each onboarding method) mentioned that they found it challenging to complete compliance training videos while staffed on a full-time project. Other new hires did not report negative feelings towards immediate staffing; in fact, several new hires said they liked this approach.

However, the interviews suggested that immediate staffing may impact a new hire's understanding of the organization. One hybrid new hire said, "I don't even know what the [organizational] values are, and if you ask me how I demonstrate that every day in my work, I couldn't tell you." When asked how their roles fit into the organizational strategy, two new hires who were immediately placed on projects responded that they

were still learning about that (one from each group). Another area of impact seemed to be understanding how various BUs interact and communicate. This arose as feedback from two new hires, both were remotely onboarded and were immediately staffed on projects.

Finally, delayed staffing was experienced by one remote new hire, who waited over a month for their first project. They reported that this created frustration and a feeling of wasted time, as she left an organization with a robust learning and development program. Project staffing, whether it was immediate or overly delayed, had an impact on both the new hire's experience and their resulting sentiment toward the organization.

### **Internal Communications**

Multiple new hires communicated that there was an opportunity for the organization to support a better understanding of internal communications. This theme arose through interview analysis and highlighted a significant difference in remote versus hybrid onboarding. While immediate staffing on a project potentially played a role in creating this issue, it should also be noted that the three hires who mentioned this feedback were remotely onboarded, so the onboarding method is likely to have played a role in this feedback. Two of the new hires gave specific feedback that a better understanding of this should be built into the onboarding process. The third new hire communicated that it would be beneficial for the company to ensure opportunities for collaboration and engagement across BUs.

In remote onboarding, colleagues have less opportunity to engage with other employees who are not actively working on a project with them. One hybrid onboarded new hire highlighted the importance of working in person with other colleagues, stating, “I work from home, but I also go into the office because I just need to learn more, I need

to make sure I'm focused and engaged with other employees. That's the best way for, I think, to really understand how things work.”

In addition, occasionally, BUs engaged in road shows, where they visited other BUs. One hybrid new hire captured the value of this experience:

No, so like, we just had the [technology-focused] team, [...], and you know, it was a time of them presenting their business, getting to know them, getting to know specifically what they do, and then time afterwards with a happy hour where we kind of just got to get to know them. And that you know, I can't stress how important that is because we do so much at [the organization].

In-person work allowed these hires to better understand the organization and their role.

There were several specific recommendations in the remote new hires feedback; they mentioned wanting to understand the organizational structure better, they wanted to receive more guidance on how BUs should interact along with points of contact, and wanted to learn more about email cadence and expectations. A remote new hire shared:

I did give some feedback [...] it was a suggestion from me to perhaps as part of the onboarding process, set up meetings with various business units, so as a new hire, you can have exposure to those and kind of connect the dots and have a broader perspective as to how these business units kind of tie into one another in [the organization].

This quote highlighted the importance of internal communications in helping new hires understand how Organization ITC operates and how to leverage connections.

Another benefit of understanding internal communications was the ease with which new hires could roll onto and off projects and lessening the confusion associated with this process. In addition, knowing whom to reach out to and the norms around communication could reduce productivity bottlenecks. When sending emails, new hires could anticipate when they might receive a response and when to follow up, thus decreasing new hire uncertainty.



There were also some positive comments regarding internal communications, specifically on the ease of contacting internal corporate departments, such as HR, with any questions. This feedback was mentioned by three remote new hires and two hybrid new hires. Reaching out to the correct individuals and receiving timely responses was essential in the new hire onboarding process, especially for remote hires.

### **New Hire Sentiments**

A primary outcome of this study was to understand how the onboarding method contributed to new hires' positive sentiments and feelings toward the organization. Regardless of the onboarding method, there were a variety of positive sentiments associated with the organization and onboarding experience.

The sentiments expressed by hybrid new hires mainly centered around the people. Connections with colleagues and leaders largely shaped their onboarding experiences. One hybrid new hire captured this with the statement:

This has been probably one of the better onboarding experiences that I've ever had [...] Yeah, we have low turn-over [in our business unit], we have amazing people, this has just been a great experience; this office is awesome; [my leader] is awesome.

This connection created a tie to the organization and provided a reason for the new hires to communicate their intent to stay. For example, when asked what sentiments best expressed how he felt about Organization ITC, a hybrid new hire responded:

Happy, or content if you will. I don't know, last contract I had, I wasn't really happy with it. And then, yeah, this is probably like... it's been a while since I'm happy somewhere, like I'm not you know, usually you're kinda always in conversations with recruitment. It's like I'm not right now. It's just, I don't know, I like working with [my leader], [the organization]'s been good so far.

Furthermore, fulfilled expectations of an organization and the onboarding process created excitement in working for the organization and supporting its business. One hybrid hire mentioned:

I just see all the things that I left in coming into [the organization], they're just my expectation of what a company should be. So I'm excited to go to work for them, I'm excited to get out there and sell, you know? And it's because of the onboarding... it's because of the culture, you know?

The sentiments expressed by remote new hires centered heavily around onboarding, the work of the organization, and the organizational culture. When speaking about their overall onboarding experience, one remote new hire called their onboarding experience “pleasant” and shared how this could ease nerves associated with a job change, especially when a new hire has been with a previous employer for a significant length of time.

Another remote new hire commented:

It's just kinda like everyone seems very real, which is kind of rare in a large corporation, right? That doesn't really happen. People are afraid to speak their minds. I haven't seen anyone that's afraid to speak up, you know? So that's nice. I don't know what word I would assign to that. Authentic, maybe.

Several remote new hires expressed their opinion of their colleagues' experience level. Some talked about “smart” people, while others mentioned “professionalism.” One remote hire communicated the value they experienced in working with such experienced professionals, in that each person carried their weight and contributed to the project at hand; as a Project Manager, this meant their role was much more effective. Finally, another remote hire talked about their pride in Organization ITC:

Um, probably like ‘Go [Organization]!’ on a big #1 hand foam. I want [the organization] to rule the world and then because I want to ride their coattails. I hope to work here for, you know, I hope to be one of those people who are like, ‘Yeah, I've been here for 17 years!’ or whatever. Because you know, they seem solid; they seem like they're interested in being the best around. And I'm interested in being on that team.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature review and analysis of new hires' interviews resulted in six themes. Three of these themes were impacted by the onboarding method. Connection with colleagues and understanding internal communications emerged as a strength of hybrid onboarding compared to remote onboarding. Given the challenges in remote onboarding, Organization ITC would benefit from finding ways to bridge these gaps and creating greater intentionality in these areas. Onboarding structure and planning were stronger themes in the remote group. Organizational preparedness was a substantial positive factor, while immediate project staffing posed various challenges.

The other three themes overall were not impacted by the onboarding method. Trust within the leader and new hire relationship was related to the quantity and quality of interactions. Building an onboarding experience on new hire identities and strengths emerged as an opportunity for increased consistency and focus within Organization ITC, given the importance of innovation. Finally, new hires spoke overwhelmingly positive about their onboarding experience and Organization ITC, indicating that the organization already has an onboarding program yielding positive outcomes in both remote and hybrid methods.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The purpose of this research project was to compare the new hire experience in remote versus hybrid onboarding in a consulting firm. The study focused on the new hire experience, including their sentiments and feelings towards the organization. Based on the literature review, three key areas were evaluated: feelings of connection, expressed views of trust in their leader, and the new hires' abilities to bring their identity and individual strengths to their work. Did the onboarding method impact new hire feelings and sentiments; if so, in what way? This chapter includes a summary of findings, conclusions, recommendations for organizations and OD practitioners, study limitations, and recommendations for further study.

### **Summary of Findings**

When evaluating the themes of connection, trust, and individual strengths, the only one significantly impacted by the onboarding method was new hire feelings of connection. In the study, it was clear how much connection was valued as part of the onboarding experience. It shaped many of the positive responses from the hybrid new hires and was identified as an area of opportunity by most remote new hires. The need for connection as part of the new hire experience is well-supported by literature (Bauer, 2010; Kiesling & Laning, 2016; Olear et al., 2021). Organizations should prioritize building this into their onboarding programs, which can be accomplished through various means, such as supporting in-person onboarding, utilizing a cohort approach to onboarding, pairing new hires with onboarding buddies, and setting up meet-and-greet opportunities across the business. These solutions help reduce new hires' uncertainty and

support the expressed desire for remote onboarded new hires to better understand internal communications.

Trust in leaders was a function of both the quantity and quality of interactions. Positive outcomes were associated with leaders holding one-on-one meetings at least weekly during the first 30 days. Because the onboarding method significantly impacted feelings of connection, leaders of remote onboarded new hires would be wise to schedule check-in conversations more frequently than weekly. When intentional and well-executed, these check-in conversations can effectively reduce uncertainty, provide an opportunity to learn about new hires' identities and strengths, and build trust. Leaders' specific characteristics helped build trust, including a personal and deep sense of caring, coaching and guidance, an appropriate balance between trust and support, and understanding when new hires expressed concern about their ability to handle specific workloads or responsibilities. Finally, it is important to highlight the relationship between building trust with new hires, onboarding preparedness, and following through on new hire commitments (Caldwell & Peters, 2018).

Understanding and building on individual strengths did not emerge as a consistent focus of the onboarding process in Organization ITC and was identified as an area of opportunity. Prioritizing this approach would involve shifting existing perspectives on onboarding, and organizational leadership should set the tone and expectation of this as an intentional onboarding focus. When considering how to build this into an onboarding program, leaders should follow the three A's:

- Affirm positive qualities and strengths observed in the new hire, including why they were brought into the organization.

- Ask new hires about their areas of interest and goals.
- Apply this knowledge in selecting projects and tasks to assign to the new hire.

Onboarding planning and structure were more frequently cited as positively impacting the experience of remote new hires, compared to hybrid hires. While the study is inconclusive as to the reason for this difference, it is plausible that remote new hires were more reliant on a structure and checklist for directing their onboarding experience in the absence of regular interactions in an office setting. The difference could also be attributed to the strength of the remote onboarding program in delivering operational or technical onboarding information. Furthermore, an area of opportunity for the organization related to the timing of staffing on a project. Immediate staffing impacted the new hires' abilities to complete onboarding tasks and, more significantly, their understanding of the organizational values, structure, and communication processes.

Another factor in understanding internal communications was the onboarding method, as this challenge was reported only by remote new hires. Three new hires said that a better understanding of (and opportunity to participate in) cross-BU interactions was an opportunity for the organization. New hires understanding whom to reach out to for questions and when this is appropriate reduces uncertainty and helps new hires increase productivity and their sense of connection within the organization. While organizational charts may help deliver this information, efficacy would increase by introducing this as a topic of ongoing conversations, such as between a new hire and their leader, or a new hire and an onboarding buddy.

It is important to consider the benefits and challenges of both remote and hybrid onboarding. From this study, the benefits of hybrid onboarding included an increased sense of connection and a greater understanding of organizational processes and communication pathways. The most significant challenge expressed by hybrid hires was the planning and structure of onboarding. In contrast, this emerged as the greatest strength of remote onboarding. The most significant challenges associated with remote onboarding were the lack of connection and poor understanding of internal communications. Organizations should consider how to accentuate the benefits of each onboarding method and minimize the challenges.

### **Conclusions**

Based on the summary of findings, five key conclusions were drawn.

1. An organization-wide approach is critical to successful integration. The first step in creating an effective onboarding program is to determine intended outcomes, which should be based on organizational goals (Dunn & Jasinski, 2009). These outcomes might build on the four C's identified by Bauer (2010). However, the key to success is to have these outcomes supported by senior leadership and communicated broadly throughout the organization. Although a specific onboarding program and toolkit were created within the case organization, it became apparent that there remained significant differences in onboarding processes across BUs and that some tools were not being leveraged, such as an onboarding buddy program.

Furthermore, there is a need to define the onboarding period and create clear expectations around how this impacts project staffing. While this

recommendation is specific to consulting organizations, organizations in other industries may interpret this as defining a balance between time to learn about the organization and socialize with employees and engaging the new hire in their specific work and responsibilities. Another critical component is to ensure the correct parties are involved in and supportive of the process (Derven, 2008).

2. The onboarding method presents unique strengths and challenges that should be considered in onboarding design. Organizations that onboard remotely should ask themselves, “How can we maximize the benefits of remote onboarding and address the identified challenges?” This study found that two critical areas impacted by remote onboarding include the opportunity to form connections and understand internal organization communications. According to Bauer (2010), one recommended practice is to focus on supporting the development of information networks. In addition, an onboarding peer mentor or buddy can help answer new hire questions and help them understand how things work within the organization (Czopek & Kazusek, 2021; Evans, 2021; & Ragins et al., 2000).

Leaders should cover internal communications with new hires, including norms and expectations. This is also a byproduct of frequent interactions with colleagues. In addition, onboarding programs should prioritize work-based and casual connection opportunities. The organization might decide that the best way to facilitate this is to require new hires to spend some of their onboarding experience in a physical office, even if this requires travel. An alternate means of increasing connection involves cohort onboarding (Lytle, 2021; Olear et al., 2021).



3. An individualized onboarding plan is a way to provide a unique experience with targeted outcomes. This could be set up as a 30-60-90-day plan (Olear et al., 2021). This plan might include a list of individuals within the organization who are critical to the new hire's success and encourage the new hire to set up meetings with them (Keisling & Laning, 2016). Finally, this individualized plan will provide details on engaging the new hires in tasks or projects, considering their experience and strengths (Czopek & Kazusek, 2021). Prioritizing cross-collaboration projects can support organizational learning and connection (Olear et al., 2021).
4. Relationships with leaders, especially the trust built through interactions, are critical to a new hire's experience. This study found that weekly one-on-one leader conversations provided positive benefits to the new hire, which is supported by Bortz (2020). These conversations should focus on what is top of mind for the new hire, their questions, and what support they need for the week ahead. In addition, these conversations should be used as an opportunity for the leader to get to know the employee personally and professionally, focusing on their signature strengths (Cable et al., 2013; Czopek & Kazusek, 2021). Finally, several study participants outlined the values of clear expectations from their leader but also valued leader trust in their capabilities, which aligns with prior research (Albertson, 2021; Czopek & Kazusek, 2021; Keisling & Laning, 2016).
5. Finally, new hire sentiments must be considered and captured throughout the onboarding experience. This can be accomplished through one-on-one leader conversations, as the leader builds trust with the new hire. In addition, surveys

allow organizations to hear from a larger sample size of new hires and provide confidentiality, so new hires feel safe to share constructive feedback. Many surveys focus on the tactical aspects of onboarding, such as the tools and resources available; this study recommends that surveys also seek to measure new hire sentiments, which are critical to understanding new hires' satisfaction, performance, and retention. Several studies recommend asking for feedback on the onboarding experience (Albertson, 2021; Olear et al., 2021). The final step of this process is to seek ways to implement the feedback gathered, continuously improving the onboarding process and resulting new hire experience.

### **Recommendations for Organizations**

This study provides recommendations for the case organization. Given the limited sample size in the study, these recommendations are suggestive and should be evaluated within the context of a specific organization when applied more broadly. This process involves defining the organization's approach to onboarding, communicating and training leaders on this process, and measuring organization participation and new hire feedback.

1. Define the organization's approach to onboarding, ensuring alignment with organizational goals. Name stakeholders and define critical roles and responsibilities, including the hand-off between stakeholders. Reaching leadership alignment on onboarding outcomes allows the organization to make decisions around essential investments to support effective onboarding. Suppose the organization is committed to connecting and creating information networks during onboarding (Bauer, 2010). In that case, it may consider a

financial investment to support one or more days of onboarding in a physical office location.

Another critical decision for the organization is the duration of time committed to onboarding before a new hire is staffed on a project. This involves defining the onboarding process and committing to the value of this process in supporting the four Cs of onboarding (Bauer, 2010). While utilization may be delayed by a day or two, establishing connections and helping new hires feel invested in the culture creates numerous positive outcomes. Regardless of which onboarding method or methods the organization chooses, it should intentionally create a process that addresses critical areas of concern associated with a particular onboarding method. For example, suppose the organization intends to continue onboarding new hires in both hybrid and fully remote methods. In that case, they should consider incorporating specific content on internal communications for remote hires.

2. Train leaders to achieve the organization's onboarding outcomes. This includes the onboarding approach and specific expectations of leaders. Consider rolling out an onboarding plan template that outlines the new hire's 30-60-90-day goals and is customizable for everyone; training would allow them to communicate this change and provide details on setting up an individual onboarding plan. Other training topics might include building trust with new hires and identifying and building on new hires' unique strengths. Specifically for Organization ITC, this is an area of opportunity. Due to the nature of the organization's work, emphasizing new hire individuality and

strengths can increase levels of innovation and create a desire to maximize new hire contributions to the organization.

3. Measure organization participation and new hire feedback. This supports accountability and provides a greater understanding of the impact of specific changes. This can be done through several means, including capturing and storing new hire individualized development plans and surveying new hires at 30, 60, and 90 days. Gathering feedback allows the organization to understand the efficacy of its process and new hire sentiments. Maximizing onboarding effectiveness is an iterative process, so measuring and collecting data supports this effort.

### **Recommendations for Organization Development (OD) Practitioners**

OD practitioners may also benefit from the conclusions of this study.

1. Find a balance by considering the needs of multiple stakeholders. Many of the decisions related to onboarding processes consider seemingly contrasting priorities, such as the need to staff new hires immediately to projects versus the need to ensure new hires have a firm understanding of the organization, available resources and connections, and communication processes, Decisions should be made by gaining clarity on organizational strategy, listening and being aware of differing perspectives, and then either seeking alignment or a creative solution.
2. Consider the strengths and challenges of both methods of onboarding. From this study, there are benefits and challenges to both remote and hybrid onboarding. Determine how to capitalize on the strengths and alleviate or

minimize the challenges. For example, organizations might recommend an onboarding process that requires two days to be spent in a physical office to build connection, with the rest of the onboarding process occurring remotely, directed by a checklist, and supported by virtual meetings with both their leader and an onboarding buddy.

3. Ensure that organizational processes are set up to support onboarding priorities. Two examples of this might be automating parts of the process or hiring an onboarding coordinator to manage the overall process and continue to drive innovation and excellence in onboarding. This step may require the organization to back its stated priorities through financial commitment.
4. Support leaders in shifting their mindset to better align with the future state of work. An example of this involves transitioning from an onboarding focus on assimilation to a focus on drawing out and leaning on individual identities and strengths. While this can help new hires feel more connected to their work and increase their role effectiveness, it also supports diversity and inclusion.

### **Study Limitations**

1. Small sample size. Only 12 new hires participated in interviews. Participants who agreed to the interview may be largely satisfied with the organization's onboarding process.
2. Differing BU practices. Although the organization had rolled out a consistent onboarding program, it was clear that not all BUs followed these recommendations during their onboarding. This made the comparison of hybrid versus remote onboarding more challenging.

3. Lack of quantitative questions. The study relied on the new hire's description of their overall experience and associated sentiments.
4. Industry-specific challenges. Some onboarding challenges presented are unique to Organization ITC's industry, so concepts may not directly apply to other organizations.
5. Individual bias. Existing beliefs and experiences with work arrangements are likely to have impacted the understanding of study results.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Opportunities for future research include the involvement of a larger sample of participants, providing additional validity for study results. While implementing the study within a specific organization is beneficial for making recommendations to that organization, future research could look at the new hire experience and resulting sentiments across various industries. Within the study, connection emerged as the most significant theme impacted by the onboarding method, and future research could evaluate ways to mitigate this difference. Although a few research studies highlight identity and strengths during the onboarding program, many organizations continue to prioritize assimilation. This is an exciting area for future research, considering how this helps drive innovation, job performance, and new hire commitment to the organization.

This study was captured during a unique period, following the emergence of the global pandemic and a time of complex and frequent change in the world. In what many consider a post-pandemic world, it is necessary to understand the implications of both the changes that occurred and the future of work. These have significant implications for organizational processes, impacting all aspects of the employee experience. This study

sought to understand the new world of onboarding and the resulting new hires' sentiments. It found that the onboarding method impacted feelings of connection, onboarding planning and structure, and new hires' understanding of organization communications. Both hybrid and remote onboarding brought unique strengths and challenges. Organizations who carefully consider and design their onboarding programs with this in mind will likely better engage and support their new hires, leading to numerous benefits for the organization.

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**Appendix A: Interview Questions**

Questionnaire: New Hire Interviews

1. What stands out to you about your onboarding experience?
2. How well were you able to get to know your colleagues on both a personal and professional level during your first 30 days (Ruiz, 2021)?
3. How many times did you interact with your supervisor in your first 30 days?  
What stands out to you about your relationship with your supervisor?
4. Did you have an opportunity to discuss your personal and professional goals within your first 30 days (Ruiz, 2021)?
5. How well did your first 30 days in the organization meet your expectations?
6. Did you onboard in an organization office, remotely, or a combination of both? If it was a combination of both, how many days were spent in the office approximately?
7. What is your role in the organization? What is your understanding of how your role supports the organizational strategy?
8. Why were you hired into the organization, and what strengths do you bring?
9. What two words best describe your current sentiment toward the organization?  
Why?