

Onboarding and Knowledge Sharing: Cases From the Netherlands and Norway

Hanne Haave², Pascale Peters^{1, 2}, Yasmina Khadir-Poggi¹ and Tone Vold²

¹Nyenrode Business University, The Netherlands

²Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Norway

hanne.haave@inn.no

tone.vold@inn.no

Abstract: Whereas some organizations struggled and had to let staff due to the COVID-19 pandemic, others had to expand to keep their business running. In this case, new employees had to be onboarded remotely due to the governmental restrictions regarding physical appearance in the workplace. The newcomers needed interactions to learn about organizational rules and regulations (compliance) and develop personal mastery (Clarification). To adopt and internalize the organizational norms and values (culture) and to become part of the work community (connection) interactions with leaders and co-workers are important. In this paper, we focus on the onboarding process of newcomers during the COVID-19-pandemic and what we can learn from this after the COVID-19 pandemic. By building on Bauer's 6C framework for onboarding (compliance, clarification, culture, connection, confidence and checkback), we analyse the data from two countries: the Netherlands and Norway. Two main themes are elaborated from the study: uncertainty regarding the work to be done and sensemaking of the introductory courses and follow-ups. We discuss possible implications for a post-Covid onboarding processes. Our findings show that the newcomers experience uncertainty with little or no personal contact. At the same time, they claim that the e-learning is supporting their learning process and their introduction to the organization. The perception of information varies and some of the newcomers' experience solitude and the responsibility of actively seeking information is placed with them, whilst others perceive the team designated for their onboarding sufficient to becoming a full member of the organization.

Keywords: Onboarding, Knowledge sharing, Telework, Sensemaking, Uncertainty

1. Introduction

The onboarding of new staff is important to reduce the time they need to be fully operative, as this can reduce costs of unproductive time for the organization (Filstad, 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, most organizations had to send their workforce to a home office and any newcomers had to be onboarded without any opportunities to meet a future colleague. All introductions and trainings were online (with exception of going onsite to collect working equipment such as a laptop for example) (Haave, Kaloudis and Vold, 2023). The rest of the onboarding had to remain digital and online. The opportunities for socializing the organization could have provided through formal and informal practices and programs, were inexistent (Klein and Polin, 2012; Klein, Polin and Leigh Sutton, 2015), perhaps coming at the expense of a successful onboarding process and reducing newcomers intention to stay (Feldman, 1981; Taskin and Bridoux, 2010a, 2010b). An unsuccessful onboarding process may be very costly for organizations. Since the end of the pandemic, in a time called now the "New Normal" (Bergum, Peters and Vold, 2023), most organizations agreed with their employee to continue with the practice of working from home for few days a week.

Due to the absence of homeworkers from the office, opportunities for face-to-face interactions with new colleagues may be reduced. In this paper, we will look at the results from onboarding processes from two countries; The Netherlands and Norway. Our research question is thus:

What are the consequences of less face-to-face interaction during an onboarding process?

Based on the study of the evidence collected from these two countries, it can be said that the times of digital onboarding are more than likely to have an impact on onboarding processes within the "new normal". For example, what may be offered digitally in an onboarding process, and what is important to maintain in a face-to-face interaction in order to secure a successful onboarding?

In the following paragraphs, the first section introduces the theoretical background concerning the two themes of uncertainty and sensemaking. Second, we describe the data collection process and results from the study. The paper closes on a discussion and way forward.

2. Theoretical Foundation

Onboarding is about bringing newcomers to a state where they are able to do the work that they were hired to do using formal and informal practices and programs (Klein and Polin, 2012). It is about bringing an "outsider"

to participate with efficiency in the organization (Feldman, 1976, 1981). Hence, the onboarding process require knowledge sharing where the organization and designated members share their knowledge with the newcomers in order to make them participants in the organization.

Russo, Morandin and Manca (2023) claim that “the objectives of the onboarding process, regardless of its format, revolve around the reduction of initial uncertainty and time for productivity” (Russo, Morandin and Manca, 2023, p. 207). They further state that during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a risk of social isolation leading to a slower learning process, and that trust became an issue (Russo, Morandin and Manca, 2023).

Socializing is about acquiring “asset of appropriate role behaviours”, develop “work skills and abilities”, and adjusting “to the work group’s norms an values” (Feldman, 1981, p. 309). Feldman (1981) proposes a three-phase process; “anticipatory socialization” – the learning before the newcomer joins the organization, “encounter” – engages with the organization and get a clearer picture of values, skills, and attitudes, and “change and acquisition” – where the newcomers learn to master their work and adjust to their roles and adjust to the norms and values (Feldman, 1981). In this last phase, it is important to master the tasks and, through this, gain self-confidence and “attain consistently positive performance levels” (Feldman, 1981, p. 310). The outcome is “general satisfaction,” “internal work motivation,” and “job involvement” (Feldman, 1981, p. 311). This is also tied to performance evaluation. With positive evaluations, it is possible to enhance the performance and the opposite: negative evaluations may lead to loss of self-confidence. Also, newcomers contact other staff members to interpret experiences and to learn the different codes of conduct. General satisfaction encompasses role definition, handling role conflicts within the work groups and obtaining work life balance. Internal work motivation is connected to experiencing personal growth and a sense of meaningful work (Feldman, 1981). The social interaction (working in teams) support task mastery and thus job involvement (Feldman, 1981). Although onboarding is about newcomers, organizational socialization may embrace other members of the organization too (Haaland, 2019). Van Maanen and Schein (1979) claim that the newcomers will try to reduce their uncertainty and Berger’s uncertainty reduction theory (1986) suggests that newcomers will use different channels and both peers and superiors to reduce uncertainty. Within this theory, sensemaking and seeking information are two important dimensions. Sensemaking is a key in newcomers’ adjustment as it is about how they construct meaning from their work day (Weick, 1995; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2015). Klein and Heuser (2008) developed the Inform Welcome Guide (IWG) framework based on academics’ and practitioners’ reviews. Inform is about providing the newcomer with all necessary information needed prior to the entrance in the organization. This includes communication, resources, and training prior to entering the organization. Upon entering, the welcome includes meeting other members of the organization and here the social capital may be developed (Klein and Polin, 2012). In the “Guide”-part, one may be assigned a “buddy” or a mentor. Klein, Polin, and Sutton (2015) also touch upon self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2017), mentioning the dispute about triggering intrinsic motivation when newcomers maximize the outcome of the training programs. Below, an overview of the IWG- framework is presented (Figure 1).

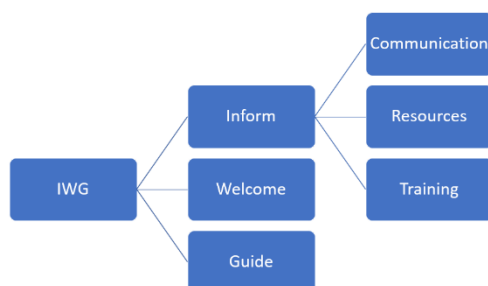


Figure 1: The IWG Framework

According to Bauer and Green (1998), managers also have an impact on newcomers’ information seeking. If managers supported and clarified behaviours, the information seeking would be of less importance to the newcomer. Bauer (Preppio, 2022) developed a checklist for onboarding consisting of 6 C’; Compliance, Clarity, Culture, Connection, Confidence and Checkback, see table 1 below:

Table 1: Bauer's 6 C's

Compliance	Clarity	Culture	Connection	Confidence	Checkback
How the organization adapt for the newcomer to understand organizational knowledge regarding rules and routines	How the organization facilitate for the newcomer getting a clear idea about expectations and understanding of the job tasks	How the organization contribute towards the newcomer adapting to the organizational culture	How the organization facilitate for building the necessary connections and network in the organization	How the organization contribute towards the newcomers' personal mastery	How the organization keep track of the onboarding and feedback on the different facilitations – how they are adapted and how they work

In the 6 C model, there is a focus not only on understanding the job and environment but also on securing the “confidence” of the newcomer and making sure that the different initiatives in the onboarding process really work or whether they need to be adjusted (Preppio, 2022). In our case studies we have mainly utilized the first four of these C's.

3. Method of Inquiry

In this paper, we present the results from two different research studies: the “Millennials study” performed in the Netherlands and the “Onboarding under the pandemic-study” from Norway. Both studies aim to reveal how the participants experienced the onboarding process during the COVID-19 pandemic and had a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews. In the Dutch study, 14 informants were interviewed, all working in different organisations and recruited among the researchers’ network (Table 2). The interviews were carried out both physically and online. In the Norwegian Onboarding-study, a total of six persons, all working in the same organisation were interviewed about their experiences with onboarding under the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were carried out digitally in November 2021.

Table 2: Overview of respondents

	Study from The Netherlands	Study from Norway
Informants	Interviewees nr. 1-14	Informants 1-6
Selection criteria	Ages 25-41 From different organisations Both employees and managers	Ages 25-41 Newly hired during 2021 In one organisation. Employees

The themes for the studies in both countries were to investigate how the newcomers perceived being onboarded without being able to meet physically at work, and about how they experienced support in their onboarding process from their “buddy”/supervisor/manager. Our particular foci have been on experiencing uncertainty and sensemaking.

The data analysis started by reading through the transcribed texts and coding the interviews by highlighting sentences with relevance to issues and themes that are central to the research question. In the process, both empirical and theoretical categories were developed. Furthermore, we discussed our findings up against the theoretical perspectives presented above.

4. Findings

As previously stated, we focussed on “uncertainty and sensemaking,” as these were amongst the most common features in the data material in both countries. In the study from The Netherlands one of the respondents claim that “The clarity about the roles was not sufficient, due to little guidance. The best seems to be having a regular one-to-one meeting with the manager.” (Interviewee 1Ne) In the Norwegian study two respondents claimed : “Most of the newcomers experienced that they “felt thrown into the work” with little support and had to take action themselves to work it out.” (Interviewee 1No) and “The supervisor that were appointed to me was new to the organization and was not able to answer some of my questions. Hence, I contacted our manager instead” (Interviewee 2No).

Here, we see an example of unclear roles, what Bauer would call “Clarity/Clarification” (Bauer, 2010; Preppio, 2022). In the Dutch study, the informant turned to the manager. This may be an example of confusion that needs to be sorted out and where the newcomer/respondent turned to another than the designated mentor/buddy just like described in Feldman (1981) and Bauer and Green (1998). The Norwegian informants also displays uncertainty but has a slightly different approach as the informant shows independence regarding figuring things out by him/herself. It is possible that this is a display of the self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2017). The informants also have to make sense of whatever is possible to work out (Weick, 1995). In the case where the closest supervisor/“buddy” lacks the necessary information, the next level (up) is approached in order to obtain the needed input.

Study from The Netherlands	Study from Norway
Many reports on partly passive information, partly interactive via e-learning videos “You receive an email with the pieces that are relevant to read.” (Interviewee 1)	Information via e-learning videos about the organization. Since all were in the same organization, most report a positive learning experience about the organizations.

The above mentioned forms of information can be seen as a part of the “Welcome” in the “IWG” framework (Klein and Heuser, 2008). Again, it is about making sense of the information given, mostly to get an insight into the structure and culture of the organization. Learning about the organization via e-learning initiatives seems in both countries to work well.

Study from The Netherlands	Study from Norway
Though they often are being introduced to relevant contacts by having an appointment, but then the newcomer finds themselves responsible for follow up. This can be difficult when not knowing many colleagues. ...“sometimes I didn’t really have a clue who to contact...” (Interviewee 2)	Statement 1: One of the informants was followed up by colleagues with the same profession. (Interviewee 3) Statement 2: “I did not want to trouble the same person all the time, so I found others to ask my questions.” (Interviewee 2)

This “connection” (Bauer, 2010) shows a difference in the organizations’ approaches to follow up on their newcomers. The Dutch study shows what potentially may be a very unsecure position for the newcomers as they are responsible for making contacts in the organisation. In the Norwegian study, this seems be resolved in as shown in Statement 1, as there was a team that followed up the newcomer. In Statement 2, there again was uncertainty and a wish not to “tire out” one designated person and that the uncertainty reduction theory applies (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979; Berger, 1986).

5. Conclusion

In the data from the two studies there seems to be minor differences in approaches to handling uncertainty and sensemaking. The findings show that the digital information about the organization may contribute positively towards being a part of the “Compliance” (in the 6 C’s) or “Welcome” in the IWG framework. “Clarity” regarding job understanding and expectancies require more than a video course, it requires either a “buddy”, a manager, or the newcomer must be encouraged to find the information themselves. Obtaining the “Clarity” through asking the presented network, may also aid both building the “Culture” as well as support the “Connections” – the networking. Regarding “Inform”, some of the communication would benefit from being personal, but may also be conducted via technology.

Our investigations show that introductory courses and some of the basic training can be offered digitally. Depending on the nature of the job, some job training that for example provide a deeper understanding should be conducted in a face-to-face setting for clarity and sensemaking regarding job content and enabling the newcomer to perform.

Stabilizing uncertainty and supporting sensemaking will for newcomers in most organizations contribute to the onboarding process being successful such that it will bring the newcomers to a level of being compliant with their work situation and thus be contributing in the organization rather than being a cost.

5.1 Further Research

This paper look into the evidence collected from two countries. The data requires more studying to see if there are other differences/similarities that may contribute towards reducing insecurity and enhancing sensemaking for newcomers to become full members of their new organization. For example, will differences in age groups in the material impact on insecurity/sensemaking issues? And are there any differences in how organizations facilitate their onboarding programmes.

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