

**Increasing employee engagement in new recruits in COVID times: an  
analysis of the onboarding process**

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## **Abstract**

An effective onboarding process is a crucial enabler in the socialization process in an organization. It ensures that the shared values, principles, traditions, and ways of doing things that influence the way organizational members act and distinguish the organization from other organizations are learned in the initial joining period.

The present study provides a comprehensive review of the onboarding processes in the industry and throws light on what changes have taken place in the same during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The researchers have examined the effect of the onboarding process on employee engagement levels. They have gathered views from HR professionals and employees to evaluate whether there is a significant difference between online and offline induction programs.

## **Keywords**

Onboarding, induction, orientation, work culture, organizational culture and employee engagement.

## **Introduction**

Onboarding process helps new recruits move from organizational outsiders to becoming organizational insiders. It helps new employees learn the knowledge, skills, and behaviors they need to succeed in the new work environment and help in organizational socialization in the initial joining period, enabling them to understand the organizational norms and culture better.

Retention and performance of new employees can increase manifold with a strong induction programme in place. Unfortunately, the majority of the firms are unable to utilize the onboarding process to their benefit fully. The reasons for this can range from plain ignorance and lack of resources to skepticism regarding the benefit of investing in the process.

Thus, even during the normal times, firms struggled with the induction process. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, new challenges have come to the fore regarding new employees' onboarding, mainly when the new hires are fresh graduates from remote locations. Irrespective of the gaps in the onboarding process; the new employees are still expected to collaborate for work, meet deadlines, and be loyal to the firm while learning new skills, impress bosses and befriend peers. Effective and efficient onboarding can help new employees better connect with the organization's culture and ease transition when they are finally required to work from brick-and-mortar offices.

The current study's objective is to provide a comprehensive review of the current industry onboarding processes and how they have been tweaked during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also aims to examine if an effective onboarding process increases employee engagement and whether there is a significant difference between online and offline induction programs' effectiveness. Interviews with human resource practitioners and employees onboarded through different modes were conducted for the purpose of the study.

## **Literature Review**

A preliminary literature review showed that past studies focused on improving onboarding processes by employing different activities and aids. Limited work has been done to analyze the

online onboarding tools in use and compare performance outcomes of employees onboarded through standard procedure vis-a-vis online onboarding. However, digitization models have been suggested in the past, but a comprehensive and organized onboarding process that provides not only requisite training and familiarization for the job but also enables an easy post-pandemic transition to physical work environment is missing. The problem of incorporating the norms and unsaid rules of conduct at the workplace have until now not been considered.

### *Employee Engagement*

Over the last few decades, the concept of employee engagement has been increasingly recognised as an important factor that affects employees' productivity and the performance of an organization. According to Hellevig (Hellevig, 2012), engagement is a state where an employee is focused on her tasks and willingly puts in extra efforts to achieve better outcomes in line with the organization's broader values and strategies. Penna's hierarchical model of engagement (*MEANING AT WORK Research Report 2*, n.d.) depicts that employees seek meaning at the workplace and not just hygiene factors like fair pay and ideal working hours. It concludes that as an organization meets the increasingly important factors in the hierarchy, its employees become more engaged and the organization seems more attractive to job seekers. Employees' engagement level affects the quality of work they do, their productivity and attitude, innovation, retention of staff, lower absenteeism, and increased attractiveness of the organization as an employer.

The fact that engagement is an unwritten and unspoken expectation from the employees can be considered a social contract based on the two-way relationship between the employee and the employer. Thus, the onus of increased engagement lies not just on the employees themselves but the organization also needs to actively take steps to ensure a high level of employee engagement. The Institute of Employment Studies, UK (Robinson D., 2004) in their study concluded that feeling value and involved are the key drivers of engagement and the key components of feeling value and involved include focus on training and development, effective cooperation, immediate management, two-way open communication, a harmonious work environment etc.

As is the case with any affective construct, measuring employee engagement can be challenging. An organization may identify key indicators of employee engagement and prepare qualitative and open-ended survey questions around them, which can help collect, measure, and analyze employee opinions. Numerous measurement instruments have been developed to measure employee engagement, which can be adapted for use by the organization.

### *Work Culture/ Organizational culture*

Any organization is essentially a systematic arrangement of people who strive together to attain some specific goals (Yadav S., 2019). And since it is the collective work of people that ultimately decides the organization's productivity, the organizations must create an environment that encourages and promotes positive, collaborative, and helping behaviour in employees. Work culture is ultimately the aggregate manifestation of management's decisions and actions, shared values, beliefs, and behavioural norms exhibited by employees at all levels.

The reflection of organizational culture can be seen in the organization's vision and mission and the manner in which it functions. Work culture acts as a binding factor that holds employees together and enables unity in direction and higher performance levels (Wilkins & Ouchi, 1983).

Building culture in an organization takes time and is an evolving process. The foundational culture of an organization mirrors the vision of the founders, and over time, different additions and subtractions are made to this. During the selection process, employers seek candidates who hold the same values, beliefs, and work behaviour that the organization practices (Adkins, Russell & Werbel, 1994). After the new hires join the organization, these values and beliefs are instilled in them through trainings, mentoring, counselling, interaction with colleagues, participation in organizational activities, and confrontation with organizational issues (Suar & Khuntia, 2010). Thus, organizational culture is imparted to new employees and grows within the organization.

### *Onboarding*

Onboarding, also known as orientation or induction, is a process which helps new recruits move from organizational outsiders to becoming organizational insiders. It helps new employees learn the knowledge, skills, and behaviours they need to succeed in the new work environment and helps in organizational socialization in the initial joining period helping them in gaining a better understanding of the organizational norms and culture.

All employees should understand certain fundamentals of their organization: what it is trying to do, why it is doing that, and how the particular employee contributes to these efforts. Onboarding conveys these messages, providing a framework that shows the new employee where he or she fits into the organization and its aims (Wallace, 2009). The benefits of a well designed and well implemented onboarding program are reduced attrition, reduced stress, shortening of the learning curve, increased productivity and commitment, familiarization with work norms and facilitate bonding between employees.

## **Research Methodology**

### *Research Design*

An exploratory research is conducted to understand the relationship between the onboarding process for new recruits and the level of employee engagement in them and also to recognize the difference in the pre Covid and post Covid onboarding practices.

Both primary and secondary research methods are used. For secondary research, relevant research articles, human resource practices blogs, and journals were consulted. While on the other hand, for primary research interviews were conducted.

### *Population and Sample*

The methodology adopted to collect the primary data collection was through an online questionnaire. It was designed for knowing the experience of our target groups. Questionnaires are structured in a specific order and are designed, keeping in view the objectives of the study.

Two different sets of questionnaires were used. The first set was an open-ended survey questionnaire for Human Resource Managers to provide a comprehensive review of the current industry onboarding processes and how they have been tweaked during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also helps in understanding the challenges faced in both the models and the preferred mode by the managers.

The second set was a questionnaire to be administered to the employees who were recruited before the Covid crisis and were provided physical onboarding and the ones recruited during the Covid crisis and were onboarded virtually through the online mode. A mix of close-ended and open-ended questions were used for the new recruits survey. This would provide an understanding of the employee perception towards induction programs and help in identifying if an effective onboarding process increases employee engagement and whether there is a significant difference between the effectiveness of online and offline induction programme.

Both the questionnaires were peer-reviewed to ensure that the questions framed were easy to understand, and the options for responses were not ambiguous.

Convenience sampling was used for both the HR expert interview and the new recruits interview. The samples were targeted from different industries and locations to ensure a broader range of coverage.

### **Analysis**

To understand the onboarding process, the researchers consulted Human Resource practitioners from fields such as e-commerce, Information technology, automobile, and staffing. The responses gathered provided insightful information about onboarding, its impact as seen in employee engagement, and how firms have been dealing with the new recruits in the pandemic scenario.

#### *Onboarding and employee engagement*

Just as how the first impression of people is important or how an experience with a new thing turns out impacts our future perception of it; onboarding process can be a real game-changer for an organization to portray why it's the best place to work for an employee and accustom him with the organization and help him identify with its goals and vision. In turn, the onboarding activities provide a chance to the employee to showcase his best self to others and thus provide a clean slate for both the employer and employee to draw out their relationship on. An effective onboarding process ensures that not only is a new employee equipped with tools to perform his tasks with ease or is better aware of the organizational structure and processes but also ensures that he is able to adapt to the work culture faster, socialize with people around him and does not feel like an outsider.

Though it is definitely not the only factor that impacts the relationship an employee shares with the firm as the entire journey of an employee in the firm is dependent on various other factors like nature of work, relationship with peers, compensation provided and perceived value of employee to the firm; but it certainly plays a role in deciding what note the employer-employee relationship starts at.

#### *Review of the onboarding practices*

The standard onboarding practices in most firms include document filling, introduction to the firm and departments, review of policies like security, IT, leave and compensation, an overview of the different processes provided by respective departments, planned activities to break the ice between new recruits, meeting with teams, overview of job schedule and providing job tools and aids. Most firms found it difficult to replicate the same activities in online format and made changes to the standard format to adapt to the new format.

The recruitments made by the firms have reduced with some firms having no recruits post March, 2020. Among the firms that hired new people, all of them adopted the online onboarding mode. The firms which earlier followed a standard onboarding model covering introduction to the policies and process of the firm did not find any difficulty in moving to the online model. Other firms which tried to adapt to new online model and tweak it according to the organization's need found a lack of interest in the new employees a big concern and the absence of physical connect robbed the new recruits from showing their soft skills in the onboarding process and hindered connections on personal level between new and old employees, as well as within the new employees.

Though the online format allowed savings on time and cost with room for flexibility; it was observed that the onboarding activities increasingly became unidirectional and thus fell short of the required outcomes. We observed a clear preference for the physical onboarding format as it allowed for better communication flow, formation of personal bonds and kept new employees invested in the process. The physical onboarding process was also superior as it led to better communication of the organizational culture to new recruits and was more efficient in controlling turn around rate in employees. The engagement of new employees was perceived to be higher in those onboarded in physical environment in comparison to the ones onboarded virtually. Firms are still finding it difficult to adapt to the online mode and thus have been trying to improve its effectiveness.

#### *Employee perception and experience*

A survey was conducted with employees, and they were categorized according to their date of joining the organizations, the method of onboarding adopted, and whether they had previous work experience or not.

The employees who have joined after March 2020; have all been onboarded virtually, while prior to that, all employees were onboarded offline. The duration of the onboarding program in both online and offline mode varied from a single day to thirty days.

In the case of employees who have joined after March 2020 and are currently in their first job; the online onboarding sessions did not meet expectations as many were dissatisfied with the process. The survey revealed that they were not able to fully understand the culture of the organization and found it extremely difficult to socialize with people in the online format. Though most employees were satisfied with the assistance provided by their reporting managers or mentors and the required job aids were made available to them; the satisfaction with the overall onboarding remained below average due to the difficulty in understanding the job requirements and the performance expectations. The onboarding is even more important for fresh graduates as they have no full-time work experience and may feel overwhelmed with the new responsibilities and expectations set on them. An effective onboarding would give them a chance to showcase who they are, what they bring to the table and allows them to freely express themselves. As one of the respondents quoted, 'the online mode is not just fraught with connectivity issues on both ends, which leads to frustration, but the employees are also unable to understand the organization's vibe.

Employees who had switched jobs during the pandemic and were onboarded in virtual mode in their current jobs were better able to adapt to the online onboarding but still found it challenging to connect with peers in online mode and believed that the current format did not give them

enough opportunities to showcase their skills and gain the visibility they strive for. Since they have experienced online and offline onboarding in the past; their high preference for offline mode is extremely relevant.

For physically onboarded employees, the satisfaction with the onboarding process was much higher, and they had a better understanding of the organizational culture, their roles and responsibilities and were able to connect better with peers.

An interesting observation in both online and offline onboarded employees was that as the number of days spent on onboarding activities increased, employees' satisfaction levels increased as well.

### **Recommendations and Conclusions**

A good onboarding reinforces the concept of clan as given by Wilkins & Ouchi (1983). The new employee's effective socialization ensures that he sees his own goals being in congruence with the broader organizational goals and vice versa; in effect, they believe that there will be equity in the employee employer relationship in the long term.

A good onboarding experience helps both parties immensely. For the new employees, it ensures that they are well settled in their new workplace and are able to establish bonds with their colleagues and the organization. For the employers, the onboarding process helps reduce the time to productivity of employees, increase retention, increase employee satisfaction, and help employees better grasp the unsaid rules of the workplace by gaining a hands on experience of workplace interaction with their peers before they start their jobs. Therefore, a successful onboarding can ensure that the employee and employer relationship becomes more personal, and both can showcase their strengths and establish a symbiotic relationship.

In the present scenario where onboarding has moved to the online mode, constant interaction with the new joiners has become even more important. Practices like townhalls conducted in online mode have become popular and the attendance to such events have increased as it gives employees a glimpse into the happenings at the organization level and provides them a chance to interact with the management directly since the power distance has been disrupted to a certain extent by the virtual working environment.

The majority of the human resource professionals believed that an online onboarding program does fall short of the expectations on both ends, and they would like to move to the physical model of onboarding post-pandemic. A sustainable onboarding process in the future would be a mix of both online and offline medium.

#### *A way forward*

- Gamification of different processes has been found to increase the levels of employee engagement (Shah et al, 2020). Gamified and interactive onboarding modules, social networking within the organization via online platform with profile of each employee and credit system for onboarding activities can increase effectiveness of the online onboarding process by encouraging employees to make more effort in their learning and stimulate interaction (Armstrong & Landers, 2018).
- Customized mobile application can be developed as Procter and Gamble Company called P&G Connect, which provides resources to explore the system and serves as a learning

and engagement platform. These handy tools address the difficulty of accessing information in a virtual working environment. (“Shift to virtual onboarding,” 2020).

- A focus on personal identity socialization approach wherein employees are encouraged to give expression to their unique perspective and strengths makes onboarding more personalized and results in increased adoption and engagement. This ensures that new employees become more connected with their work and colleagues and ultimately makes them more likely to stay (Cable et al., 2013).
- The onboarding process should be more than just lectures, process understanding, and form filling. An opportunity for communication and active participation should be provided to the employees to enhance the experience. Administrative work should be delegated to new hires in advance in online mode so that the time to productivity in the new hires is reduced (Brin, 2018).
- Connection with new recruits should be well established before they formally come aboard. Communication via emails regarding their date of joining, onboarding and training schedule, the organizational news and events should be established to make the transition smoother.
- Townhalls and virtual meets with upper management and introduction meetings with the team should be periodically conducted. The human resource teams should also have feedback meets with employees regularly to continually improve the process.
- Most organizations have a buddy program wherein a team member of the new employee is assigned as the first point of contact for addressing general queries and act as a guide. This can be replicated in online mode with ease.
- Point of contacts should be assigned to address queries to reduce anxiety and breaks in the work of the new employees.

### **Limitations and future scope**

The convenience sampling method may result in a skewed sample that is not sufficiently representative of the entire population. Consequently, in the survey undertaken, all sample employees were in the age bracket of 20-40 years, who are more adept at dealing with online tools in comparison to older employees. On account of the paucity of time, the response rate of the survey was low. The samples picked up also do not have a good representation of government employees, and therefore, a comparative analysis of government organizations vis-à-vis private organizations could not be done. The researchers could not perform the comparative study of employees onboarded through different strategies in the same organization. That could further provide insights into the effectiveness of the same onboarding model in different modes. Future researchers may be able to overcome these shortcomings by exploring further.

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**Appendix I**

***Questionnaire for HR practitioners***

1. Gender -
  - Male
  - Female
  - Other
  
2. Industry that you are currently working in
  - E-commerce
  - Banking
  - IT
  - Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. Years of experience in HR sector \_\_\_\_\_
4. Were there any recruits by your company during COVID 19 period?
  - Yes
  - No
5. Has your company conducted any online induction programs?
  - Yes
  - No
  
6. Is there a difference between the current induction program format and the format followed before COVID-19?
  - Yes
  - No
7. Describe the standard induction program. \_\_\_\_\_

If answer is yes to 6<sup>th</sup> question, please answer the following questions. If no, please submit the form. Thank you for your response.

8. What is the difference between the current format and the previous one?  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. What are the challenges that you have faced in the current format? \_\_\_\_\_
10. What are the positives you have seen in the current format? \_\_\_\_\_
11. Which format do you prefer?
  - Current one
  - Previous one
  
12. Please tick the boxes as per your choice

	<b>CURRENT FORMAT (during COVID-19)</b>	<b>OLD FORMAT (before COVID-19)</b>
Better and easier		

communication flow in?		
Better perceived new recruits retention is seen in?		
Better perceived new recruits' happiness is seen in?		
Which format is able to make the new recruits more comfortable?		
Better personal relations are formed in which format?		
Which format is better in making the new recruits understand the culture of the organization?		

13. Any suggestions to make the current format better (If any)? \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix II

### *Questionnaire for new recruits*

1. Gender –
  - Male
  - Female
  - Other
  
2. Age
  - 20-30
  - 30-40
  - 50-60
  - >60
  
3. Please specify your organization type
  - Government
  - Private
  
4. Industry that you are currently working in?
  - IT
  - Banking
  - E-commerce
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. No. of jobs done before the current one?
  - None
  - 1
  - 2
  - 3
  - >3
  
6. Recruitment date (dd/mm/yy)\_\_\_\_\_
  
7. Induction program was done in which mode?
  - Online
  - Offline
  
8. How long did the induction program last in terms of days? \_\_\_\_\_
9. Which mode are you currently working in?
  - Online
  - Offline

10. Please rate the following factors in terms of satisfaction in your company's induction program. (1 being extremely dissatisfied and 5 being very satisfied)

	1	2	3	4	5
Has the induction helped you in understanding the culture of your organization?					
Has the induction programme helped you in getting familiarized with the tools that will be required in the job?					
Has your induction helped you understand your job, responsibilities, and performance standards					
Has the induction helped you in socializing with your colleagues					
How satisfied were you with the on-boarding experience?					
How satisfied were you with the welcome you received from your department?					
How satisfied were you with the knowledge and skill of your assigned mentor or co-worker?					
How satisfied were you with the assistance provided by your manager to complete your training?					

11. What problems did you face? \_\_\_\_\_

12. Suggestions for improvement (if any)? \_\_\_\_\_

If the current job is your first job then please submit the form. Thank you for your responses. **If not, then please answer the next 2 questions.**

13. If you have been recruited before COVID 19 in offline format and now you are recruited in online format, then which mode do you prefer?

- online
- offline
- Reason for your choice \_\_\_\_\_

14. Suggestions for improvement in the current format (if any) \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your responses.

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