

A Qualitative Approach: Digital Onboarding Success Factors Based On Employee-Related Outcomes

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an upward trend in remote jobs. Even after the crisis, the number of remote jobs has risen. Employers are not only offering more remote jobs, but employees are keen to continue working remotely. Onboarding is the initial phase in the hiring process, and it has shifted to digital due to the conditions that remote jobs entail. How new hires perceive digital onboarding and communication of critical information relevant to employee-related outcomes such as organizational culture, role clarity, and (job) engagement is yet to be determined. A qualitative study was conducted with 13 participants discussing their digital onboarding experience. The research revealed three perceived success factors of digital onboarding: one-on-one meetings, team interaction and socialization, and games. One-on-one meetings with mentors, in particular, clarify the new role, while one-on-one feedback moments with managers, co-workers, and higher management result in role clarity, engagement, and awareness of the organizational culture, respectively. Large group interaction promotes role clarity and comprehension of organizational culture, whereas small group interaction enables engagement. Quizzes boost engagement, and role-playing aids in clarifying the new role. This study contributes to the current literature by emphasizing the value of small group interactions and one-on-one feedback meetings with co-workers in increasing employee engagement. It also provides practical advice by highlighting the necessity of interaction with senior management in small groups to engage employees and one-on-one feedback meetings with managers to prevent problems with interpretation bias. Limitations and suggestions for future research are also given.

Keywords: digital onboarding, role clarity, organizational culture, engagement, communication, one-on-one meetings, group interaction, games

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	2
Introduction	5
Theoretical Framework	8
Digital Onboarding	9
Organizational Culture	10
Role Clarity	11
Engagement	12
Methods	14
Sampling	15
Interview Guide	15
Data Collection	16
Data Analysis	16
Reliability and Validity	18
Results	18
One-On-One Meetings	19
Mentor Relationship	20

Feedback Moments21

Group Interactions & Socialization25

 Large groups25

 Small Groups30

Games33

 Quizzes33

 Role-Playing35

Discussion & Conclusion37

 Limitations & Future Recommendations42

Reference List43

Appendix A51

Appendix B53

A Qualitative Approach: Digital Onboarding Success Factors Based On Employee-Related Outcomes

Every worker goes through an employee journey, which begins with a hiring process and ends with retirement. During this process, one of the most critical phases is onboarding. It starts after an employee is hired by a company and is when new employees acclimate to its culture. The onboarding process can also be seen as a critical link between the new employee's skills and the attainment of actual productivity (Snell, 2006).

The COVID-19 emergency at the beginning of 2020 shook the world and induced significant changes everywhere. Especially during this time, the onboarding process rapidly shifted to remote/virtual (Carlos & Muralles, 2022). Reportedly, approximately 40% of the EU workforce began working full-time remotely due to the pandemic (Ballario, 2020). Even after this period, the pandemic is expected to lead to a long-term upward trend in remote work (Deloitte, 2021). According to Castrillon (2022), 70% of employees will work remotely in the USA by 2025. Hence, clear expectations and effective communication are essential for a fruitful onboarding process (Serbin & Jensen, 2013).

Several studies have identified practical processes that companies can implement to accomplish new hires' and companies' objectives, which are crucial, especially in periods of crisis (Scott et al., 2021), and may be helpful in the years ahead. However, communication barriers throughout the onboarding process negatively influence new hires (Balali et al., 2018). Therefore, questions arise regarding how employees evaluate the experience of digital onboarding concerning the communication of different core values of the organization and the job itself.

Clear communication about behaviors, organizational procedures, the company's goals, and general beliefs is required between the organization and new hires entering the team to avoid misleading assumptions or disinformation from unreliable sources (A. Knight, 2013). The digital onboarding program usually includes planned activities, more specifically, access to technology and platforms, training videos, briefings on the company's history, culture, and core values, and a virtual introduction to the team to welcome them to the company (Varshney, 2022). Prior academic studies have demonstrated that computer-based orientation methods prevent new employees from socializing (Wesson & Gogus, 2005). However, current practitioners consider that communication tools, among other things, can facilitate the onboarding process by allowing new employees to communicate with their supervisors constantly (Luke, 2021). The source of Wesson and Gogus (2005) can be regarded as old, and there may be a need for more up-to-date insights. Companies like Netflix and Twitter are considered to offer the best digital onboarding experience (Luke, 2021). This indicates that the recent pandemic has forced companies to rethink how they onboard new employees and reevaluate expected employee-related outcomes, this time in a virtual environment (Steward et al., 2021).

Communication can be connected to achieving employee-related outcomes during digital onboarding. Establishing communication rules early and maintaining employee alignment is critical as team members become more transparent regarding the clarity of their roles (Henderson et al., 2016). Moreover, the way the culture of a company is communicated is essential to avoid mistakes for the new hires (A. Knight, 2013). Hence, role clarity and knowledge of an organization's culture are vital, as the onboarding process aims to communicate detailed and comprehensive information regarding the work and the company (Serbin & Jensen, 2013). Apart from role clarity and knowledge of an organization's culture, these remote working

communication tools are also positively related to employees' feeling of connectedness with their teams, primarily when people work from home (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020).

Traditional onboarding practices typically involve one-way communication, but newer technologies, such as online onboarding tools, can improve online onboarding by providing engaging experiences for new employees (Ziden & Joo, 2020). This entails continuing communication training sessions for all staff, recognizing and directly discussing issues (Hargie & Tourish, 2009). For instance, for individuals meeting via video chat, which offers multiple benefits, synchronous media use is a viable substitute for conventional verbal icebreakers (Miller & Mandryk, 2021). It is, therefore, beneficial for employee-related outcomes when effective communication is implemented, especially during times of change (DuFrene & Lehman, 2014), such as the swift switch to remote work during the pandemic of COVID-19.

According to Sava (2020), the number of Americans working from home has increased by 87% since the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared to 2020, there were three times as many remote jobs in 2022 (Yogiama, 2022). Customer service and IT workers, particularly cyber security specialists, are among the vocations that stay entirely remote worldwide (Stahl, 2021). As a result, digital onboarding appears to be primarily applied in organizations that provide this sort of employment. Internal communication managers in companies who provide remote jobs for IT and customer service or plan to do so in the future can benefit from this study by obtaining insight into how workers perceive digital onboarding and improving the digital onboarding process they intend to deploy. The current study aims to explore the experiences of those employees in terms of outcomes such as role clarity, organizational culture, and employees' (work) engagement.

Based on the aforementioned studies, academics, employers, and internal communications managers have focused on how supervisors and managers communicate critical aspects during the onboarding process. This study intends to contribute to a new area within the online internal communication research field by analyzing the communication experiences of new hires in jobs that offer digital onboarding. A qualitative research study will be conducted to explore employees' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the approach of these programs and the tools used. The interviews are intended to collect data and gain insight into employee perceptions of the way essential information is communicated during the digital onboarding process. To achieve the above objectives, the following research question needs to be answered: *"What are the employees' perspectives about digital onboarding, and how do employees evaluate online communication when it comes to outcomes such as culture, role clarity, (work) engagement?"*.

Theoretical Framework

The following section will highlight fundamental concepts expected to contribute to understanding employee's experiences using key communication techniques during *digital onboarding*. For example, general employee perspectives on how messages were transmitted during digital onboarding are likely to dominate the interviews. Working in online environments and being onboarded digitally raises concerns about information exchange to understand the *organizational culture* and define *role clarity* for a position. Moreover, working entirely online may eventually impair new hires' *engagement* because colleagues cannot see each other physically. A full explanation of the principles is provided below.

Digital onboarding

In general, onboarding focuses on communicating, setting expectations, and giving clear and comprehensive information about the position and the company (Serbin & Jensen, 2013). Digital onboarding refers to the digitization of the human resources management process of employee orientation programs via computer media technology to assist recruits in adjusting to and integrating into a company (Sani et al., 2022). However, HR concentrates on some of the first tasks that must be completed, such as documentation (Alexander, 2021). The most crucial aspect of digital onboarding is early communication with various parties, including administrators, co-workers, and managers (Alexander, 2021).

When it comes to communication, the sender selects information and encodes it using words, symbols, and images to create a message transmitted across a platform to a receiver who decodes the message and responds to the source (Theaker, 2016). According to PR professionals, when a sender delivers a message to a receiver, noise -which is the idea of communication interference- might occur. This problem may be brought on by faulty equipment (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). As a result, the message could be corrupted or misinterpreted (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Especially in digital onboarding, new hires encounter significant hurdles when they want to acquire the correct information, be proactive, and receive prompt feedback from comprehending the culture and its alignment with the organization (Petrilli et al., 2022).

In cases where the onboarding process is not well developed and implemented, it may be unpleasant, negatively influencing the assimilation process and, inevitably, new hires and organizational outcomes (Scott et al., 2021). Although technology facilitates the change from conventional manual to digital onboarding and enables it to begin as soon as a job offer is accepted (Zinden & Joo, 2020), employees report a lack of social cues. According to Sani et al.

(2022), digital onboarding undermines employees' well-being regarding connections with other employees, rendering the job worthless. Employees in the present study are anticipated to discuss how communication aids the digital onboarding process regarding different aspects, such as role clarity, culture, and (work) engagement, and whether digital onboarding impedes new hires from acclimating to a company.

Organizational culture

Organizational culture refers to the collective mental training that distinguishes the members of one organization from those of another (Hofstede, 1980). Understanding a company's goal and vision is critical for organizational culture, linked to employee satisfaction and turnover (Bauer, 2010). When employees perceive workplace culture concerns during onboarding, organizations are less likely to retain those new hires (Shufutinsky & Cox, 2019). Socialization through communication, particularly during onboarding, is crucial for new hires to comprehend an organization's culture (Scott et al., 2021). As a result, researchers have proposed methods to improve knowledge of organizational culture.

New hires must learn the responsibilities and demands of their professions and understand the organization's unspoken rules and cultural standards (Oranburg & Khan, 2021). When it comes to communication, a company can plan events where individuals can engage and communicate for this purpose (Oranburg & Khan, 2021). Although employees at all levels would slander and exchange information about the company, they would not share it with individuals who do not yet belong to the “company's society” (Kirchner & Stull, 2021). Moreover, since event planning only applies to on-site jobs, it might be challenging to comprehend organizational culture during digital onboarding.

As far as employees working from home are concerned, it is critical to keep the organization's vision in mind by connecting it to the everyday goals of the new hires (Oranburg & Khan, 2021). This may be accomplished by providing new hires with input on the expected behaviors that best match the organization's culture (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). Another method for gaining an awareness of organizational culture is to arrange formal one-on-one meetings with heads of various departments to enlighten new employees about a company's culture (Oranburg & Khan, 2021) and gain insights from diverse persons inside an organization. Participants in the present study are asked to share their experiences and discuss how information about company culture is provided throughout the digital onboarding process.

Role clarity

Role clarity allows for performance management and ensures that each team member contributes to the fullest extent possible by their abilities (Badshah & Bulut, 2022). During the onboarding process, role clarity has been demonstrated to be one of the most reliable markers of job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Adkins, 1995). Especially for new hires, communication influences job performance (Sarker et al., 2011), and this relationship is mediated by role clarity in virtual global teams (Henderson et al., 2016). Communication is critical because interactions with managers regarding job expectations can lead to continuous communication challenges throughout the onboarding process when managers express persistent worries, negatively impacting new hires (Kirchner & Stull, 2021). Several studies have illustrated concerns regarding role clarity in the digital environment (Petrilli et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2021).

During onboarding, new hires can observe their co-workers and managers to better grasp their job (Petrilli et al., 2022). However, there are barely any social interactions in digital

onboarding, so new hires cannot observe how others interact with one another and, consequently, have a clear understanding of their role (Petrilli et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2021). Furthermore, when employees receive feedback from managers, they seek more feedback, improving their role clarity (Whitaker et al., 2007). During digital onboarding, new hires lack feedback due to restricted social interactions, making them apprehensive about their role (Scott et al., 2021). Nonetheless, strategies regarding communication to assist new workers in adapting to a position during digital onboarding have been presented (Scott et al., 2021).

According to Ellis et al. (2014), socialization approaches can generate better role clarity. For instance, each new employee should be allocated to an HR representative who will communicate with them and guide them as they prepare for the new position (Scott et al., 2021). Another way to address role clarity concerns is to develop institutionalized socialization programs during onboarding to assist workers in understanding their roles through various experiences where they are isolated and do not communicate with existing employees (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). In line with the two studies mentioned above, another study has supported that new hires must communicate and socialize with other team members to perform these activities efficiently during digital onboarding (Scott et al., 2021). Therefore, participants of the current study are asked to describe how role clarity was achieved during digital onboarding and how information regarding their role was communicated to them.

Engagement

Employee engagement refers to “the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral energy an employee directs toward positive organizational outcomes” (Shuck & Wollard, 2010, as cited in Shuck et al., 2017, p. 954). On the one hand, when employees feel connected to their colleagues, they are more likely to learn from them, solve problems together, and like their work (Kahn,

1990). On the other hand, when an employee works from home, connections with co-workers tend to be more formal, which prevents real engagement or even thinking of them as potential learning allies (Petrilli et al., 2022). Communication strategies play a fundamental role in overcoming hurdles as they foster employee engagement (Hargie & Tourist, 2009).

It is recommended that internal communication focus on employee communication as it influences employee engagement by changing workplace attitudes and favorably impacting employees' psychological conditions in the workforce (Welch, 2011). When it comes to onboarding, effectively integrating and acclimating new hires increases their likelihood of being committed to the organization and becoming engaged at work (Cesário & Chambel, 2017). In order to increase both employee engagement and the personal ties between employees and senior management, two-way communication is essential (CIPD, 2010). For instance, acknowledging and openly discussing issues, having a communications team plan and share activities, and using an informal network to solicit regular employee feedback, are just a few examples of effective communication practices designed to increase employee engagement (Hargie & Tourist, 2009). Hence, well-organized and carried-out communication programs are vital for employee engagement (Welch, 2011) and can be crucial in orientation training programs, where the risk of disengagement of new hires is high (Bradt & Vonnegut, 2009).

Technological affordances can enhance communication by engaging employees in different places (Waizenegger et al., 2020). During digital onboarding, a gamifying onboarding, such as "Team Bingo", facilitates team building by allowing workers to communicate more efficiently (Heimbürger et al., 2019). Furthermore, tactics for organizational socialization have been demonstrated to strengthen social relationships in the form of social acceptability, which promotes employee engagement during digital onboarding (Scott et al., 2021). It has been

proposed to give appropriate digital communication platforms, such as Slack and Microsoft Teams, and train new hires to communicate with co-workers through them (Scott et al., 2021). In line with that, existing employees must reach out to and engage with new hires through these platforms. One approach is to create online coffee breaks since introverted new hires prefer to talk in smaller groups to form social bonds (Scott et al., 2021). In this study, employees are asked to discuss whether or not communication approaches, such as those proposed by other research, are applied in digital onboarding to address possible hurdles and promote employee engagement.

Method

It was decided to conduct qualitative research since it is most suited to provide extensive insight into people's experiences, actions, and attitudes (Rowley, 2012). In particular, it is an advantageous research method when a researcher needs detailed information on a person's standpoint and behaviors or when they wish to dig deeper into a new subject (Boyce et al., 2006). Since, as stated in the introduction, digital onboarding will become more common as the number of remote positions increases, a qualitative study was conducted to explore new employees' experiences with digital onboarding. Participants engaged in an open dialogue with the interviewer, revealing their opinions and feelings regarding digital onboarding. The semi-structured interviews allowed for predefined main questions and scripts, but the interviewer could also improvise probing questions and explore developing meanings and areas of interest (Arksey & Knight, 1999). To address the research question of this study, the interviewer determined the sequence of probing questions based on the respondents' responses (Dearnley, 2005).

Sampling

Participants for this study were chosen via purposive sampling. This approach was chosen because it was essential for the sampling strategy to include individuals who met particular requirements (Treadwell, 2020). Hence, participants had to have had experience with digital onboarding, either during or after the pandemic's lockdown. The present study's participants were under 30 years old (Y and Z generation) and worked in corporations with highly structured communication departments (onboarding, internal communications, crisis communication, et cetera). Furthermore, age was not a factor in selecting participants because people of various ages might start a new job and undergo digital onboarding.

All participants belonged to the interviewer's social group. They were approached via email or social media, particularly Facebook. For this study, 15 people who met the eligibility criteria were contacted, and all agreed to participate in an interview. However, two people backed out of the interview at the last minute. Participants were male and female between the ages of 23 and 29, had experienced digital onboarding during the COVID-19 pandemic and worked in either customer service or IT. Appendix A lists the sample's key features.

Interview guide

The interview guide (Appendix B) was created before the interviews and divided into four sections. The first subject sought to ascertain the participants' overall thoughts on digital onboarding. The second, third, and fourth sections focused on employees' perspectives and evaluation of online communication of critical corporate values connected to employee-related outcomes, such as knowledge of organizational culture, role clarity, and engagement, respectively. Participants were asked questions such as: “Which were the moments of (online) interaction with your team members, and how were these interactions helpful in understanding

the new role?” and “How was all this information communicated with you (top-down, informative)?”. The interview guide's second, third, and fourth sections were designed to elicit information on how employees perceived each employee-related outcome following digital onboarding.

Data collection

Zoom was utilized for all interviews. Participants were sent an email with a link to the Zoom meeting. One advantage of doing interviews through Zoom is that people feel more at ease discussing issues at home (Oliffe et al., 2021). As a result, it was assumed that interviewees would not hesitate to share their thoughts and feelings regarding their digital onboarding experience when conducting an interview online from home. All interviews were conducted in English between November 21 and December 02. They were permitted to choose the day and hour of their interview.

Before the interview, the interviewees received an introduction to the study and an informed consent form that they were asked to sign and submit via email. Tilburg University requirements required that the data be retained for 10 years. Participants were reminded at the beginning of the interview that they would be recorded but that any shared data would remain anonymous and could not be traced back to them. They were then asked to consent verbally to the interview being recorded. All the interviews lasted roughly an hour.

Data analysis

Due to the exploratory purpose of the study to understand workers' digital onboarding experiences, Grounded Theory was chosen for the data analysis. This method is better suited when a researcher seeks to develop knowledge claims about how interviewees interpret reality (Suddaby, 2006). The purpose of grounded theory is to construct a theory based on data that has

been acquired and analyzed (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). The initial transcripts are constantly explored, compared, and questioned in the development of grounded theory to generate analytic categories appropriate to the study (Arksey & Knight, 1999).

The voice recordings from the 12 interviews were anonymized and transcribed using Microsoft Word 365. The anonymized data were uploaded and coded using Atlas.it, where memos were created based on the interviewer's notes. The participants' perspectives on digital onboarding were initially labeled using open coding. A total of 310 codes were generated, and since numerous participants regularly alluded to the same subjects, many codes were reused. After open coding, focused coding was utilized to group the corresponding labels and create categories. For example, employees usually identified the need for large group interaction as one of the potential success aspects during digital onboarding. The indicators that were assigned to this factor were: (1) 'large groups help everyone ensure they are on the same page regarding culture', (2) 'large groups increase role clarity', (3) 'not all colleagues open to interacting in large groups for engagement', and (4) 'large group interaction for the role would be beneficial'. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of all the categories and indicators.

The final part of this process was theoretical coding (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Recognizing that the categories reported in the literature may have little to do with the data (Arksey & Knight, 1999), the final coding scheme categories were assigned to a larger concept. The concept-indicator model (CIM) was then developed based on continuous comparison of indicators, i.e., frequent recognition of similarities and differences in texts (LaRossa, 2005), and three categories were formed. Everything the employees mentioned seemed to fall under the potential success factors of digital onboarding. More specifically, one-on-one meetings with

mentors, one-on-one feedback meetings, large and small group interaction and socialization, and games such as quizzes and role-playing.

Reliability and Validity

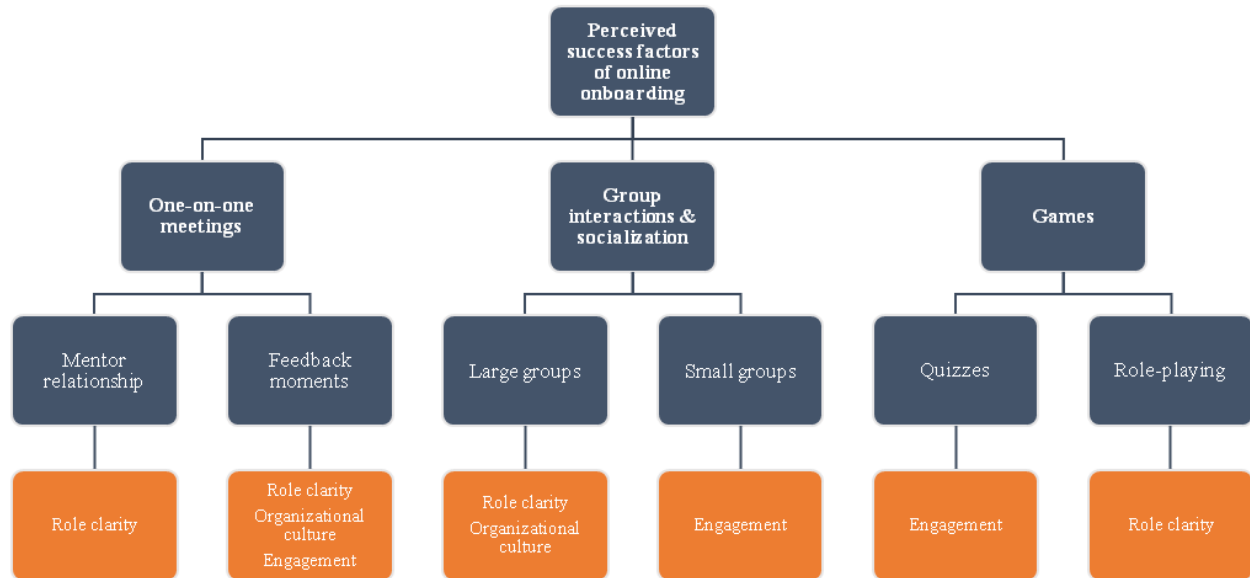
The researcher took several measures to enhance the study's reliability and validity. Regarding reliability, the interview guide was followed throughout the interviews. Moreover, writing analytical memos during the interviews facilitated interaction with the data by reconsidering, doubting, and specifying what was happening in the data (Charman, 2012). In terms of validity, the researcher ensured that the methods used were thoroughly described, and the thesis supervisor conducted peer debriefing.

Results

The current study provides insights into how employees evaluate communication through digital onboarding, during or after the COVID-19 crisis, regarding employee-related outcomes such as organizational culture, role clarity, and (work) engagement. All participants contributed information about their perspectives on digital onboarding and the elements that lead to a successful digital onboarding experience for new hires. The analysis produced one CIM that illustrates the study's findings. In particular, it revealed three perceived factors associated with a successful digital onboarding experience. Namely, one-on-one meetings, group interactions and socialization, and games are the three success components of digital onboarding (Figure 1), each of which consists of two relevant indicators.

Figure 1

CIM of Perceived Success Factors of Digital Onboarding



One-On-One Meetings

During the interviews, participants frequently highlighted how various aspects positively influenced their experiences with digital onboarding. One-on-one meetings were regarded as one of the elements of success. According to the information supplied by participants, the most relevant indicators of this dimension were mentor relationships and feedback moments. The first indicator addresses why their role became clearer in one-on-one meetings with mentors. The second describes how one-on-one meetings for feedback with managers, co-workers, or higher management facilitated the knowledge of their role and the organization's culture and increased their engagement. More specifically, the difference between the meetings with mentors, managers, co-workers, and higher management was that the first addressed the clarity of the role in general rather than feedback on particular assignments during digital onboarding as the meetings with the manager. Meetings with mentors did not concern feedback, but they conveyed

general information, whereas meetings with co-workers focused on specific activities and tasks. The meetings with higher management were scheduled and concerned feedback on the understanding of the organizational culture on a personal level. Several participants stated that one-on-one meetings helped them overcome challenges with receiving feedback during digital onboarding, such as interpretation bias. At the same time, there are still some nonverbal communication obstacles.

Mentor Relationship

According to the participants, one-on-one meetings with someone who works in the same department and does the same job as them enabled them to ask questions about the role. Those meetings did not concern sharing feedback. New hires were allocated to a mentor, and communicated with them more consistently according to the schedule and structure of digital onboarding in terms of receiving information about their role, in general. In particular, participants in the digital onboarding process needed to be aware of the high expectations of their new role. For example, this purpose was achieved by assigning participants to mentors by the HR manager to help them understand their new role: “...*the HR manager placed ex-trainees with new trainees into a Microsoft Team call, and they could meet digitally.*” (P5). Those meetings with mentors helped them comprehend what they would do in their jobs based on real-life experiences. Additionally, during those one-on-one meetings, they felt at ease to express questions that they would not have raised in earlier meetings with co-workers:

P5: “...*that made it very clear for me what was expected because... I had some worries about some things and so I didn't really know how high the expectations were... I could hear the actual*

real-life experiences of all that I just heard, and that made it very clear to me... the expectations that they have. I definitely did feel like I could share my genuine worries... ”.

Not only did participants feel at ease asking questions, but they were also able to understand better the tasks they would have to do in the future. Mentors provided participants with an overview of their role and actively assisted them by advising and supporting them, acting as role models and allies to execute the job effectively:

P6: “...*that was already in the position and could explain in detail the day-to-day tasks of their own. Not only the day-to-day task but which is a better way to chronically put them in order.*”

Feedback Moments

With managers: Most interviewees indicated they could ask questions and obtain feedback from their managers during the digital onboarding process facilitating the understanding of their new role in specific assignments. Those feedback moments were beneficial since managers helped and motivated participants to perform well in any task relevant to their role. “*She made a few structural moments in the week that I could ask some new questions that I have released some comments...*” (P9). Moreover, another participant indicated that those feedback moments were beneficial since managers also helped them overcome any obstacle related to their role:

P3: *“Well, they are very good, like managers that don't do one-on-one are not good managers because it helps a lot. It's the time... to discuss things with your manager. If you're having trouble or something with a task they can guide you... they can give you feedback whenever you are doing something and then they can tell you to do this, do that, or get better at this. It's a very important space with your supervisor...”*

Furthermore, some participants mentioned they had the opportunity for written feedback (via chat), while others could attend one-on-one meetings with the manager to get feedback on their new role. Several interviewees indicated having difficulty interpreting the feedback managers shared with them. More specifically, they noted that written feedback in chat was sometimes ambiguous, and they needed to understand how managers intended to express themselves. As they advocated, this could lead to misinterpretation of the managers' tones in chat, ranging from the formality level to the emotional tone. Hence, they began to experience interpretation bias in computer-mediated communication (CMC), which implies that they did not understand the text accurately. One interviewee explicitly mentioned:

P3: *“...written communication and sometimes in chat can be misunderstood or you don't know the tone of the person. So then you can feel a bit bad or you don't know exactly how this person is telling you this. But if you receive feedback in person, well in a personal video call then it's better...”*

Managers discovered that having one-on-one live meetings with employees to communicate feedback was one approach to prevent difficulties with interpretation bias when

understanding the new role. One participant noted that individual meetings for sharing feedback regarding their performance on specific tasks during digital onboarding related to their role were more efficient and helpful than written feedback. Regular individual meetings with the manager for feedback focused on directly conveying information about the interviewee's role: *“I had 30 minutes of one-on-one every day with my manager... about feedback on how I undertook or worked on projects... it was very very helpful.”* (P1). Another interviewee also stated that one-on-one feedback sessions during digital onboarding were efficient. The rationale for this was that one-on-one meetings allowed for concise and clear communication, which was beneficial for learning new skills: *“I believe that because when let's say someone has difficulty learning a new skill during the onboarding, it can be easier for them to learn that new skill with direct communication and not via messages...”* (P2).

With co-workers: One-on-one meetings to share feedback with co-workers helped new hires feel engaged with the organization. Those meetings differed from those with mentors because they were about feedback and were informal, impromptu, and spontaneous. Moreover, while feedback moments with managers focused on new hires' performance, feedback moments with co-workers made new hires believe that their co-workers were interested in checking up on them even though the meetings had a job-related context. Although meetings with mentors, managers, and co-workers focus on assisting participants with their new role, their purpose and the outcomes they achieved differed. For example, when participants had informal one-on-one meetings with co-workers to communicate and discuss how they functioned in different tasks, they felt more connected with the co-workers. Receiving feedback from co-workers in one-on-one meetings encouraged interviewees to conclude that their co-workers treated them

with compassion and acceptance, causing them to think that their efforts mattered and, as a result, become engaged with the organization:

P1: "...colleagues asked me to jump in for certain projects and discuss with them one-on-one and also hearing that they see what I do. So whether I perform well or not, that makes you feel heard and seen, and that makes you then engaged in the organization ..."

With higher management: Interviewees reported that being placed in a one-on-one meeting with senior management to receive feedback was also a way to enhance the digital onboarding experience in terms of understanding the organizational culture. In particular, employees not only felt more comfortable expressing questions in such one-on-one meetings, but they also had more space to communicate with the other person. Although such one-on-one feedback meetings were held digitally, they provided a personal understanding of the culture by communicating knowledge live in a private environment shared by higher-level management:

P5: "...I was put into a break-out room with the Managing Director... so someone in very high management... this was about knowing the culture of the company... maybe because it was more personal..."

In conclusion, one-on-one feedback sessions with either manager, co-workers, or higher management facilitated the digital onboarding experience in terms of new hires clarifying their roles, becoming engaged, and understanding the organizational culture, respectively. However, interviewees' perspectives resonate well with each other upon one main challenge. As one

interviewee indicated, nonverbal communication was something digital onboarding lacked. Social communication, particularly turn-taking, was challenging to develop online due to a lack of nonverbal cues:

P9: *“It's not that you want to touch the other person, but like in terms of taking turns, taking turns in speaking, it can be quite hard because you cannot really see if someone wants to talk, and also like body language is just like you know... it's not that much.”*

Group Interactions & Socialization

According to interviewees' responses, the second perceived success factor of digital onboarding was group interactions and socialization. Interviewees addressed two sorts of group interactions on various occasions during the interviews. Large and small groups are the two indicators of the group interactions and socialization factor. On the one hand, large group interactions, within the department and cross-departments, influenced interviewees' experiences of digital onboarding in terms of clarifying their roles and comprehending the organizational culture, respectively. On the other hand, small group interactions influenced how they engaged with other employees and the organization.

Large Groups

Within the department: Interviewees recognized the value of large group interactions from the same department by often saying how it aids in understanding the new role. Throughout the digital onboarding process, they had scheduled meetings, via Microsoft Teams, with other employees from the same department, during which everyone exchanged information about their roles. This interaction and exchange of knowledge from people who did the same function

highlighted their role and helped them distinguish it from the roles of other employees. One interviewee stated that interactions in large groups within the same department aided in understanding how the roles operate in daily life because communication about the roles was clear:

P13: *“...I got a sense of being in a team and being in a group of people that we would get feedback and we would help each other and also it felt like it was materialized the job that I would do. So it was like it was real.”*

Interaction facilitated a clear overview of their role and those of others. By listening to those who held the same employment position, new hires began learning what they would be doing in this job: *“...I see that there are other people on the team that also have the same role as me. So then, as they started to like giving updates about their tasks, I knew... I will do the same...”* P3. Moreover, actively listening to the responsibilities of other employees in the same department helped participants understand the differences between their duties and those of others. Therefore, those group interactions increased accountability at an individual and a collective level within the department, and employees clearly understood the department dynamics in terms of clarifying their roles: *“Interaction was helpful because I could see my role and the others' roles so I was not confused about what my role is. It was pretty clear what my role is and what someone else's role is. I could see what I can expect from them and vice versa.”* P11.

These large interaction groups occurred regularly, and interviewees could attend future group meetings to obtain further information and validate the information from other sources inside the company. This process of acquiring further information on the roles during large group

interaction meetings was ongoing throughout digital onboarding. Those interactions served as a point at which new hires might request further information on topics that were either unclear in a prior session or problematic throughout the digital onboarding process. The sessions eventually included a Q&A section to answer any questions from meeting to meeting:

“...I could write down some questions and comments that I had from other conversations or conversations with them and then I could return to these comments like ‘ok, last week you said this and this, but I also heard this. So what does this mean? Or can you tell me a bit more about it? So then you would have some structural time to get some answers.’”

Cross-departments: Interviewees indicated that interaction and socialization in large groups across different departments facilitated understanding the organizational culture. One interviewee, in particular, stated that one could better interpret organizational culture by socializing in large groups with employees and observing how they behave. In contrast, interacting with a limited number of individuals, a new hire could adopt those employees’ perspectives, which were not necessarily reflective of the organizational culture per se but were primarily connected to their own opinion:

P13: *“...previous workers... had a very different view of the company than it actually was. So if I stick to what they said I think that my behavior would be completely different from what was actually the case... you need to see what everyone else is doing and how they are behaving in order for you to adapt as well.”*

Interviewees could comprehend the organizational culture when interacting in large groups with higher management from different departments. To accomplish this, some organizations scheduled large group meetings in Microsoft Teams in which top management from each department described how each department functioned following the organization's culture. During those meetings, new hires could acquire knowledge and verbally interact with each other by discussing and asking people to elaborate more on things that were not clear:

P8: *“...we have ‘downtown’ meetings, it’s a meeting for the company, where all the colleagues from all departments are there. The company told us what they need from us, what is the vision of the company, what we had built, and what we can improve for the patients, in general...the leader shared with us the vision of the company... during this meeting, you can speak and ask questions.”*

Another interviewee stated that interaction and socialization in such groups aided the understanding of the organizational culture as a whole. In particular, he argued that those large group interactions and socialization enabled communication regarding a set of activities and values they all share in their departments to define the company's general culture across different departments: *“It’s always important how the employees take the information and communicate about it so that they all together can find and can accept and define what is the right thing to do, what is accepted... for the company.”* P6.

Participants in such large group meetings could utilize the chat to ask questions and interact with other participants. They could ask questions via chat rather than only during the

meeting interaction. They could express genuine concerns and acquire the information they did not fully grasp:

P11: *“It definitely helps. In that way you share your ideas and thoughts with your colleagues and you get to talk and understand the company’s culture. It helps you to augment your knowledge because by talking I might hear something that I didn’t pay attention to or I didn’t really catch during the presentations. The interaction and socialization helps you to share and receive information regarding the company.”*

Although interviewees largely agreed on the importance of large group interactions and socialization in understanding the organizational culture, one stumbling block remained. Since the interaction between current employees and new hires took place online in large group meetings, the former hesitated to divulge the unspoken rules during those interactions, which might aid in learning how to behave and succeed in social environments. Therefore, large group meetings discouraged current employees from sharing the unspoken rules and new hires from delving deeper and gaining knowledge of the organization’s culture:

P9: *“...when people think about an onboarding program they only think about the formal socialization of a new employee in the organization, whereas also the informal socialization is really important. So who’s going to take you through the unwritten rules? If you know what I mean...”*

Small Groups

While organizations held large online group events for employees to start engaging with one another, interviewees noted that when they joined small groups, they felt more comfortable discussing and engaging with each other. In those online events, employees could join break-out rooms to form small groups where it was easier for current employees and new hires to interact online by approaching each other and taking center stage to talk about themselves:

P12: *“...then... if you need to tell that to hundreds of people, I don't feel that comfortable, especially not in the beginning... in the break-out room, some people were asking me like ‘hey, what did you do?’, ‘What are you going to do here?’, I just answered that thing with confidence due to the break-out rooms. If they didn't have that and I needed to say it to the whole people, I wouldn't feel comfortable.”*

Not only did interviewees report feeling more comfortable engaging in smaller groups within their department, but they also identified certain advantages in engagement when two-way communication happens in smaller groups. They believed it was easier in smaller groups to build social relationships even with managers because communication was clearer and more precise in small break-out rooms: *“...communication is more direct and more personal.”* P2. Moreover, small group interactions resembled real-life interactions, and their context extended beyond the professional environment, allowing for stronger social bonds: *“...by being able to create either groups or break-out rooms and engage with your colleagues you felt that you built more human relationships and not only about the job.”* P11.

Small group interactions enabled employees to meet and discuss with colleagues at different hierarchical levels, which could be experienced as an engaging situation. This can be observed in the example where a manager introduced the participant to a new colleague and established an engaging conversation, all online. This interviewee stated unequivocally that digital communication via digital platforms during digital onboarding created engaging situations in the workplace when it occurred in small groups:

P12: *“I know an employee with whom I worked very closely with and then she introduced me to another guy who also works but more from a higher level and she introduced me to him and he was like ‘oh, interesting, you do that work, I’m doing this on the other side’ and I was like ‘oh interesting’. Then the conversation starts rolling and it was actually fun because she goes out of the conversation because I was actually talking with him more. So she introduced me to someone and I was online...now I’m thinking about it... in an online world it can also work.”*

Another type of small group interaction and socialization was the department's online coffee breaks, which engaged interviewees. These meetings were held via Microsoft Teams and were casual and amicable rather than serious or professional. There, new hires and current workers could mingle and begin engaging with one another. Current employees initiated most meetings: *“...they would send me a message... whether I would have some time to drink a digital cup of coffee.”* P9. Introverted new hires had the chance to spend their social time during small group breaks and enjoyed them since they did not feel apprehensive: *“ In the coffee breaks, I also had more time to present my personality, professional and personal, so I could become more engaged with them.”* P11. Moreover, online coffee breaks allowed interviewees to have some

time to relax, be detached from the company, and engage in more general conversations: *“It helped us become engaged with each other, and it was our time to talk, discuss, and relax... it was our opportunity to break the ice among us and relax and talk about something other than work.”* P6.

However, while those coffee breaks could be helpful for participants to become engaged with other colleagues, one interviewee mentioned that new hires were occasionally barred from those coffee breaks. More specifically, in digital onboarding, current workers could have already formed certain small groups that new hires could not access. This exclusivity could jeopardize engagement since new hires needed to feel included: *“...the coffee drinks I know that happened, but that was more with employees who have known each other for a long time. Like I didn't know anyone that long, and I didn't do that, the coffee breaks.”* P12.

Interviewees identified a unique reason why it was easier for them to become engaged with people in different departments in small groups. They indicated that they were supposed to introduce themselves to hundreds of people during online events and felt uncomfortable. Although digital tools facilitate meetings for hundreds of people, one can more easily introduce themselves in smaller groups to start engaging with other people. This is because also, in real life, companies form small groups so people can introduce themselves and communicate with each other:

P12: *“In the beginning, you're like with hundred people in one Webex and... for example, new employees want to introduce themselves to other people, it can be a bit overwhelming because in real life, you are never with that many people... Webex facilitates an environment where*

everybody can join. So I think, maybe, in that sense, it's a little uncomfortable for some people to introduce themselves to hundreds of people. Also, people from other floors... ”

Games

The games interviewees were invited to play were the third perceived factor of a successful digital onboarding program. This factor is made up of two indicators that reflect what games were played throughout the digital onboarding process and how they assisted in transmitting information about employee-related outcomes. The first indicator is the quizzes that interviewees played which helped to engage new hires and understand the organizational culture. The second indicator is role-playing. Interviewees were shown the role expectation matrix and invited to participate in role-playing games based on the knowledge they gleaned from it. Role-playing allowed new hires to understand their role.

Quizzes

The purpose of the quizzes was twofold. On the one hand, there were randomly planned quizzes as an interaction moment via chat and written messages that helped current employees and new hires become engaged after individually answering the quiz. On the other hand, those quizzes took place in break-out rooms where new hires could interact live and collaborate to answer the quiz and learn about the organizational culture.

Regarding the first type of quiz, an interviewee explained how the games functioned and how they aided employees in being more engaged. Employees were informed of a forthcoming quiz, and engagement occurred via written responses via chat immediately after they individually submitted their answers. Therefore, engagement was characterized as developing an informal entertaining conversation in chat about everyone's answers:

P5: *“...they send out like ‘now a question is coming up’ or ‘another quiz question is coming up’ and everybody interacts and sometimes it's really funny. So there are managers and... directors like in this chat but everybody just in a fun way engages with each other, like laughing...”*

Furthermore, interviewees indicated they could answer questions about topics unrelated to the organization but more relevant to current events in everyone's everyday lives. By doing so, the organization hoped to help current employees unwind at times of high stress while also engaging and getting to know the new hires. Hence, those games generated a win-win situation for both employees that already work in the company and new hires. The former might take a break from their workload, while the latter could engage with them in a less formal context:

P5: *“...for example now it's like Black Friday... which is the busiest period of the year and during this time everybody at work I think can be very stressed out... maybe due to that the interaction can maybe be negatively affected... now with the World Cup they send fun games and questions... quizzes...”*

The second quiz type allowed new employees to interact, communicate, and collaborate in live meetings to learn about the company's culture. Initially, interviewees were given a live online presentation in Microsoft Teams before being divided into sub-groups in break-out rooms to answer questions on organizational culture collectively: *“...questions like ‘what do you think about the company?’, ‘what is the mission?’...”* P10. The new hires were required to type their collective response to the question in a shared document, which the person in charge of digital onboarding would evaluate at the meeting through Microsoft Teams, where all the teams would

reconvene. One participant stated: “...we wrote some bullet points with the others... then after that, they told us, based on what we answered, what was correct and what was not so relevant.”

Role-Playing

Interviewees reported receiving a role expectation matrix before role-playing, which they filled out while collectively discussing their role's responsibilities with the manager via Microsoft Teams: “We had a role matrix... those activities were in a collective manner. There each team member wrote everyone's roles, explained the roles, and brainstormed the team expectations from one role to another...” P11.

After explaining the role, the interviewees stated that they began role-playing in a platform without specifying the platform's name or how exactly communication occurred. They were still in an online group meeting during the role-playing via Microsoft Teams, where they observed, via screen sharing, the person participating in the role-playing simulation and communicated at the end with one another to improve their attribution: “It was with an audience... we all discussed after the role-playing how it went and what could be improved. So there was interaction even with the audience after the end.” P6. The discussion with the manager and other new hires helped them listen to each other's comments and enhanced their understanding of their new role.

Role-playing allowed familiarization with real-world circumstances and the application of theoretical information entailed by the role matrix: “...we had some case studies and then we had some role-playing. So there were the tools used for us to understand better how to perform the tasks... after the second week... we were mostly role-playing.” P6. Another participant explained that role-playing in real-life cases assisted in comprehending the tools required to be learned in such a position, facilitating the learning of the role itself: “...we have exactly the tools

that we use on our job...we had...hypothetical customers or hypothetical cards number or whatever. So we had to do exactly the job...” P7. One interviewee explicitly mentioned how the role-playing helped to understand their role:

P11: *“We had role-playing after we worked in the role matrix. The role-playing was like a simulation. There was a potential client in a hypothetical scenario relevant to our job and we had to use all the tools that we would have to use in our actual job... so basically, during the role-playing we communicated with a potential customer and we had to perform certain actions. This helped to understand our role in practice.”*

Furthermore, interviewees stated that their performance was evaluated during the role-playing. When someone did not perform well, they would address any problems that developed during the role-playing with the manager in the group meeting: *“The manager...evaluated my answers to the problem. If he saw that I was handling a situation well in role-playing...he congratulated me. Some people that didn’t do good, he tried to make them think better and find a solution.”* P11.

Although several interviewees stated that when a new hire begins working in the function, they better grasp their role, participants' perspectives on role-playing resonate well with each other upon one thing. They agreed on the importance of role-playing in learning their role and how they needed to perform it. As indicated earlier in the results section of the present study, this derives from interviews reporting that they could speak with the manager and other new hires: *“...the role playing helped me a lot to understand my role. However, I think that again it is difficult to get it 100% from the onboarding per se.”* P11.

Discussion & Conclusions

This study investigated employees' perceptions of digital onboarding and their opinion of online communication regarding employee-related outcomes, including organizational culture, role clarity, and engagement. The need for this stems from the peculiarity of the situation since there are suggestions that more and more people will be working remotely in the future (Stahl, 2021). In addition, earlier studies proposed recommendations based on gaps in the literature (Ziden & Joo, 2020) rather than on employees' evaluations of the techniques utilized in digital onboarding. The main conclusion of the present study is that one-on-one meetings, team interactions, and games were interaction situations that mostly contributed to the perceived success of the digital onboarding experience in terms of understanding the organizational culture, clarifying the role, and becoming engaged.

Regarding understanding the organizational culture, the current study supports that one-on-one meetings with high management are essential. The present study is in line with Oranburg and Khan's (2021) study, which stated that one-on-one meetings with higher management are necessary during the initial weeks of digital onboarding to comprehend the organization's culture. Interviewees in the present study supported that attending a one-on-one meeting with higher management enabled them to better understand the organization's culture on a more personal level.

Furthermore, new hires attend high-level management committee meetings to learn about the organization's culture (Oranburg & Khan, 2021). Participants in the current study stated that attending such meetings with high-level managers from various departments helped them understand the culture. The current study's unique finding is that those meetings are beneficial in large groups since employees can interact and socialize with co-workers while developing a

broad perspective of the culture. This finding is in line with another study that has demonstrated that new hires must socialize through communication to integrate into an organization's culture (Scott et al., 2021). In particular, the present study's interviewees emphasized the necessity of large group interaction and socialization to comprehend the appropriate organizational behaviors. More specifically, it was challenging to comprehend the corporate culture in small group interactions because they may adopt a prejudiced perspective of a colleague.

According to Oranburg and Khan (2021), understanding an organization's culture requires understanding its unspoken norms. In the current study, employees acknowledged that they needed to learn the unspoken rules even though the digital onboarding was well-organized. During digital onboarding, this was their only challenge in understanding the organizational culture since the tacit standards they had to follow to behave according to the organization's culture should have been verbally articulated. Employees evaluated that this is something that digital onboarding lacks.

Interviewees indicated various strategies to improve the communication of their role during digital onboarding regarding role clarity. One-on-one meetings and being assigned to a mentor during digital onboarding are both essential success factors (Pavlina & Kaitlyn, 2020). The current study suggests that having one-on-one meetings with a mentor helps new hires comprehend their role. In particular, employees mentioned that one-on-one meetings with a mentor helped them understand how their role works in practice and how high the expectations were for them.

Participants in the current study acknowledged the value of obtaining feedback from their managers. They did, however, indicate that when the feedback was written in CMC, they encountered interpretation bias. In concordance with this finding, a prior study has found that

CMC causes ambiguity, leading to the misinterpretation of digital messages' (Kingsbury & Coplan, 2016). Employees in the present study indicated that the factor that solved the problem of interpretation bias was having one-on-one feedback meetings with managers in digital onboarding to receive feedback on their roles and performance. This finding concurs with another study that has found that real-time manager feedback during digital onboarding aids in defining a role's expectations (Petrilli et al., 2022).

Participants in the present study mentioned two additional variables that positively enhanced the digital onboarding process regarding role clarity: large group interactions and role-playing. Prior research has supported that socializing new hires can lead to a better knowledge of their role (Ellis et al., 2014). The above finding is in line with the present study. More precisely, the present study suggests that while interacting and socializing in large groups, employees understand their responsibilities by listening to colleagues with the same job and differentiate their roles from others by listening to employees from other departments. Moreover, employees indicated that role-playing games were a successful aspect of digital onboarding since they could comprehend their roles based on simulations of hypothetical scenarios. This conclusion is consistent with previous research, which has found that employees recognize the value of simulation role-playing in educational programs (Börner et al., 2012), even though the two studies' target groups are different.

As far as employee engagement during digital onboarding is concerned, employees identified three critical elements. Employees indicated that informal feedback meetings with co-workers made them feel engaged. This conclusion is consistent with a previous study, which has demonstrated that establishing an informal network to request regular employee feedback is a communication approach for keeping employees engaged (Hargie & Tourist, 2009). The

unique finding of the present study is that employees claimed that this occurred when such feedback moments took place in one-on-one sessions.

Furthermore, a prior study has illustrated that two-way communication is critical for increasing employee engagement and facilitating personal relationships between employees and senior management (CIPD, 2010). According to the present study, this happened in small group interactions with senior management since their communication was clear and concise. Interviewees also felt they could better express themselves in small groups. According to a previous study, introverted new hires prefer small groups, such as online coffee breaks, to engage with employees and develop social relationships among them (Scott et al., 2021). The current study's findings align with this prior research, as employees stated that it was easier for introverts to communicate in smaller groups, such as online coffee breaks. Moreover, a unique conclusion of this study is that small groups are better for employees to engage. Engagement in small groups reminds individuals of real life because, as they indicated, people rarely engage in large groups with hundreds of people in real life, which can be the case in an online setting where digital tools facilitate that.

A further thing to consider is that games also engage employees. According to one study, gamifying onboarding promotes team building since employees interact more effectively (Heimbürger et al., 2019). The current study reveals that games during digital onboarding do increase engagement. While the previous study proposed the example of Team Bingo, the current study suggests that group quizzes increase employee engagement during digital onboarding.

In conclusion, the study's findings provide new perspectives on internal communication and what is known about information and communication technology within organizations regarding digital onboarding. In contrast to earlier studies, this study focuses on employee

perspectives and redefines the digital onboarding dynamics by expanding existing knowledge. In terms of employee engagement, this study discovered that when new hires join small groups, information communication technology can provide a feeling of reality. This form of engagement enables new hires to recall real-life experiences, which can improve the digital onboarding experience.

Moreover, while informal employee feedback meetings have been advocated as success factors for onboarding, this study emphasizes the necessity of one-on-one informal feedback meetings with co-workers. Employees who attend such meetings consider they are treated with respect and acceptance and become engaged. This finding adds to the existing literature by providing a new perspective on achieving employee engagement online via information and communication technology platforms.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the onboarding process more difficult as more jobs become remote and onboarding takes place online. Participants in the present study provided insight into their perspectives on the success factors of digital onboarding, which can be helpful for future practices. Based on the findings of this study, there is practical advice for practitioners and organizations and factors that can be implemented in the digital onboarding process. It is suggested that employees interact with senior management because that way, they become engaged. This outcome can be achieved when interactions occur in small groups because communication in small groups is clear and concise. Employees develop more personal ties with senior management, and as a result, engagement levels rise.

Furthermore, another piece of practical advice is for managers to set up one-on-one feedback meetings. When managers provide feedback on work-related tasks, it is recommended to be done in one-on-one meetings since employees face interpretation bias in CMC when they

receive written feedback. Information and communication technology platforms enable one-on-one meetings and act as communication mediator platforms to address communication challenges. In general, the present study demonstrates that those success factors of digital onboarding can be incorporated into business and communication practices.

Limitations & Future Recommendations

The first limitation of the study is connected to the study's sample. Participants in the present study worked in either IT or customer service. During the interviews, the interviewer discovered that sometimes the interviewees' opinions in those jobs differed since their ideals varied. For example, whereas customer service participants valued engagement, IT participants did not. Moreover, some participants worked for multinational corporations, while others worked for national companies. The sample could be more specific to achieve more definite results that can enable observations of differences when compared with samples of other studies and transferability if results can be transferred to other groups of people and other contexts. Therefore, a future study can attempt to define more specific selection criteria for interviewees.

Another limitation of the current study is that the data did not specify how the role-playing occurred. It was unclear which technology was used for role-playing and how communication with other new hires was accomplished while performing the role-playing game. It would be interesting to study why and how group communication in role-playing aids knowledge of the new role. A future study might look into this by asking more probing questions to participants in order to gain additional insights into role-playing.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Sample Characteristics

Participant	Type of job	Digital Onboarding Experience	Sex	Age
P1	Customer Service	During Covid-19	Female	24
P2	Customer Service	During Covid-19	Female	26
P3	Customer Service	During Covid-19	Female	26
P4	IT	During Covid-19	Male	25
P5	Customer Service	During Covid-19	Female	23
P6	Customer Service	During Covid-19	Male	28
P7	Customer Service	During Covid-19	Female	29
P8	IT	During Covid-19	Male	28

P9	Customer Service	During Covid-19	Female	24
P10	Customer Service	During Covid-19	Female	25
P11	Customer Service	During Covid-19	Female	27
P12	IT	During Covid-19	Male	26
P13	Customer Service	During Covid-19	Female	25

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Research Question: What are the employees' perspectives about digital onboarding and how do employees evaluate online communication when it comes to outcomes such as role clarity, (work) engagement, and culture ?

Introduction

(Introduce myself in case I do not know the participant)

In this study, I hope to increase our knowledge of how crucial information like role clarity, organizational culture, and engagement are communicated during digital onboarding.

I will ask you about your experience with digital onboarding, how information was communicated during this process, and your thoughts on how it was shared: both the positive experience and any difficulties that may have arisen. There are no correct or wrong responses, and you can discuss your job experiences. I'm curious about your point of view. You will always stay anonymous: Your answers cannot be traced back to you, and your name will not appear in the reports. I would like to include your job position in the report unless you prefer me not to.

I want to record the interview so I can analyze the material afterward. I will delete the recording once I have transcribed the interview. Do you mind if I record this interview? [If the person says no, I begin recording.]

Do you have any comments or questions regarding the interview? Let's get started!

Background check

Questions:

- Can you tell me a bit more about yourself? What is your name, origin, and job?
- Can you tell me a bit more about your professional background? In which type of company do you work for (type, size, location) and what is your job position?

Topic 1. Digital Onboarding

Clarification: Now I want to ask you some questions about how the company organized the D.O. and what tools were used during D.O.

Goal (1): Description of digital onboarding	1. Could you describe your experience with digital onboarding? - When was it? - In which type of company (sector) did you start to work? - For what kind of position? <i>(consider if the participant had more than one experience with digital onboarding)</i> 2. Could you describe how the onboarding program was designed? EXAMPLE: Was the program divided into weeks communicating different information? 3. Who were you in contact with during the process (your manager, HR manager, future colleagues)? 4. What was the role of your future manager in the D.O. process?
Goal (2): Description of communication during digital onboarding	1. Which communication tools/platforms were used during the D.O.? 2. What was the purpose of each tool (top-down (organizational or manager) communication, team interaction, etc.)? 3. What is your opinion of these communication tools?
Goal (3): Perceptions and evaluations of D.O. experience	1. In your opinion, what are the positives aspects of D.O.? 2. And what were the negative or disappointing aspects of the D.O. process? 3. How could the D.O. process be improved?

Topic 2: Culture

Topic Introduction: Thank you for sharing some general information on how digital onboarding was designed and implemented. Now I would like to talk again about communication but regarding your understanding of the organizational culture.

Goal (1): General perspectives of organizational culture.	1. With your current knowledge and experience, how would you describe the organization's culture? 2. Which are its values, and mission? 3. Which are the aspects that make this organization different from others? 4. How much of this information did you receive during the D.O.?
Goal (2): Understand how communication can help to better understand the organizational culture.	1. How did you learn about the organization's mission, vision, and objectives? 2. How did you learn about the organization's values? 3. How was all this information communicated with you (top-down, informative)? 4. How did you learn about the preferred/suitable behaviors within the company (<i>in case they don't understand the question, ask, for example, whether they had one-on-one meetings, events where they talked with other employees</i>)? 5. How did you interact with other employees (e.g. online events)? 6. How does team interaction and socialization with other employees facilitate or put barriers in the comprehension of the company's culture during your experience of D.O. ?
Goal (3): Evaluation of online communication regarding organizational culture	1. In general how would you evaluate the online communication of the culture? Why so? 2. Which moments/activities of the D.O. processed helped you better understand the organization's culture? Why? 3. How do you think that the company could have achieved better online communication of the culture?

Topic 3: Role clarity

Topic introduction: Thank you for your answers so far. Our discussion was constructive for me to understand how the company communicated with you the organizational culture. When applying for a position, candidates have an idea of what the job will be like. But your new role tends to become clearer after you actually start in the function. So now we will talk about role clarity and how information regarding your role was communicated.

Goal (1): General perspectives of role clarity.	1. During the D.O. process, which kind of information did you receive about your role? How was this information communicated (via which tools?, by which interlocutor (HR employee, manager))? 2. Are there occasions that you experienced insufficient communication because of the tools used? 3. After the D.O., was it clear what your job was? 4. When did your role become clear to you? 5. What helped you understand your role/ what is expected of you in such a job?
Goal (2): Description of the role communication plays in role clarity	1. When you had questions about your new role, how did you get further information? 2. Did you have opportunities for feedback and questions with your manager about your role? 3. How helpful was the management feedback for your comprehension of the new role? 4. Were there planned activities (alone or in groups) that made you better grasp your role? Could you describe these activities? Example: - Role expectation matrix - R&Rs Venn Diagram - R&R Card Sort - Raci/Daci/Delegation Poker Murphy, A. (2021, April 5). <i>4 roles & responsibilities workshops to bring clarity to your team</i>. Medium. Retrieved November 17, 2022, from https://antmurphy.medium.com/4-roles-responsibilities-workshops-to-bring-clarity-to-your-team-e1012218f703 5. Which were the moments of (online) interaction with your team members and how were these interactions helpful in understanding the new role?

Goal (3): Evaluation of online communication regarding role clarity	1. What are the challenges that you have faced about the clarity of your role in terms of communication during D.O.? 2. In general, how would you evaluate the online communication of your role?
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Topic 3: Engagement

Topic Introduction: Thank you for your answers so far. You helped me understand how clear your role was during D.O.

Employee engagement concerns the whole work experience (tasks, interaction with the team, and the organization). More specifically, performing effectively, taking ownership, developing trust-based, collaborative relationships with colleagues, improving procedures, enhancing their abilities, sharing and receiving feedback, and being proactive in resolving challenges are shared traits of engaged workers. I would like to talk with you about the interaction and relationships with other employees and the organization and how digital communication during D.O. played a role in becoming engaged in the company.

Goal (1): General perspectives regarding engagement in digital onboarding	1. During the D.O., did you have opportunities to interact with your colleagues? Could you describe these moments? 2. Which tools were used to allow these interactions? 3. How did those tools make communication possible? 4. Were there also informal/non-planned interactions with colleagues? Could you describe those? 5. How open were the colleagues to interact during the D.O. process? 6. How did the communication tools used during D.O. help you feel comfortable exchanging ideas and opinions at work? 7. How did your managers use those communication tools to build trust and discuss any work-related issues (e.g., online sessions, online activities, etc.)?
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Goal (2): Understand whether online communication facilitates engagement or not. Moreover, understand how engagement is achieved through online communication.	<i>INFORMAL WAYS</i> 1. When did you start feeling part of the organization, and engaged with it? 2. How did the use of any communication functionalities such as Slack or Microsoft Teams (or other platforms) make you connect with other employees? 3. Did you have team breaks, online lunch breaks, or online coffee breaks with your colleagues or any other activity during D.O.? How did they help you become engaged with the organization? 4. Why not? How do you think these informal interactions (would) have changed your D.O. experience? <i>FORMAL WAYS</i> 5. How did the use of any communication functionalities help you feel comfortable sharing feedback with and receiving from your manager? 6. How did they make you feel during D.O. that your opinion values (e.g. how did they recognize the value of your opinion online) ? 7. How did they communicate to you during D.O. that the work that you will do contributes to the greater's organization purpose? - How did they make you feel a sense of purpose in the organization? 8. During D.O. was your performance measured? 9. Why not? How do you think that this measurement (would) have made you become engaged with the organization?
Goal (3): Evaluation of engagement during digital onboarding	1. How do you evaluate communication through the tools you talked about? 2. How do you think that D.O. helped or not to become engaged with the organization? 3. How would you evaluate the general experience of digital onboarding in terms of engagement?

Thank you for your time. It is very important that you contributed to this study. Are there any other topics that we failed to discuss that are relevant for understanding how you experienced digital onboarding? If you think so please take the stage and mention anything you feel that has to be added in this interview.

We have reached the end of this interview. It was really interesting talking with you because you helped me understand how you experienced digital onboarding.

If you want I can send you the paper when it is done so you will be able to see the results of this study. Now I am going to stop the recording. Thank you very much. Have a nice day!