

**BECOMING AN INSIDER IN A VIRTUAL
ENVIRONMENT - KEY ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL
REMOTE ONBOARDING**

**Jyväskylä University
School of Business and Economics**

Master's Thesis

2021

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Subject: Management and Leadership
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ABSTRACT

Name Satu Vaara Blöndal	
Title Becoming an insider in a virtual environment – key elements of successful remote onboarding	
Subject Management and Leadership	Type Master Thesis
Date May 2021	Number of pages 88+4
<p>Abstract</p> <p>Employee onboarding is a process enabling the new employee to become a productive member of the company. Previous research indicates that the process is most successful in an office environment. The social distancing and other restrictions set to suppress the Covid19 pandemic have forced companies to change and redesign their business processes to make them executable in a remote working environment, also impacting the onboarding process.</p> <p>This qualitative case study seeks to understand and describe collectively the remote onboarding process participant experiences in a fast-growing case company providing software as service (SaaS) solutions for digital trade in Europe. The study focuses on analyzing the key elements of successful onboarding and the roles of the process participants.</p> <p>Empirical data is collected from the new employees, their mentors, leaders, and cross-team support services using semi-structured interviews. The transcribed interview data is analyzed and organized using thematic analysis with a data matrix format to identify codes and repeating themes. The results are strongly framed by the company growth and the culture of continuous improvement and social, family-like connection. Aligning with existing theories, the identified four key themes of successful onboarding in the case company focus on process, suitable fit, connection, and clarification. Virtual and office-based onboarding key elements are mostly the same; however, the importance and challenges of specific parts differ. The roles of the new hire and a mentor are seen as key roles, supported by the overall team, leader, and cross-company support teams. Results indicate that digitalization, clear processes, and a good fit for hire are seen as important in remote onboarding. Establishing a social connection is seen as challenging. The need for face-to-face interaction to deepen the connection and collaboration is brought up, highlighting an interesting field for further research.</p>	
Keywords Onboarding, virtual onboarding, remote onboarding, remote work, thematic analysis, SaaS	
Place of storage Jyväskylä University Library	

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tekijä Satu Vaara Blöndal	
Työn nimi Sisäpiiriläiseksi virtuaalisessa työympäristössä – Onnistuneen etäperehdytyksen avaintekijät	
Oppiaine Johtaminen	Työn laji Pro gradu -tutkielma
Aika (pvm.) Toukokuu 2021	Sivumäärä 88+4
<p>Tiivistelmä</p> <p>Perehdytys on prosessi, jonka avulla uusi työntekijä kehittyy tuottavaksi tiimin jäseneksi ja joka aikaisempien tutkimuksen mukaan toimii parhaiten toimistoympäristössä. Covid19-pandemian laannuttamiseksi vaadittu sosiaalinen etäisyys ja muut rajoitukset ovat pakottaneet yritykset muuttamaan ja suunnittelemaan liiketoimintaprosessinsa, kuten perehdyttämisen, virtuaalisessa ympäristössä toimiviksi.</p> <p>Tämä laadullinen tapaustutkimus pyrkii ymmärtämään ja kuvaamaan etäperehdytysprosessin osallistujien kokemuksia nopeasti kasvavassa tapausyrityksessä, joka tarjoaa SaaS-ratkaisuja digitaaliseen kaupankäyntiin Euroopassa. Tutkimus keskittyy tutkimaan onnistuneen etäperehdytyksen avaintekijöitä ja prosessirooleja. Tutkimuksen empiirinen data on kerätty teemahaastatteluiden avulla haastatellen uusia työntekijöitä, heidän mentoreitaan, esihenkilöitä sekä yrityksen tukipalvelujen edustajia. Litteroidut haastattelut on analysoitu ja järjestetty käyttäen teemoittelua sekä matriisitaulukointia koodien ja toistuvien teemojen tunnistamiseksi.</p> <p>Tuloksissa näkyy vahvasti yrityksen kasvu ja kulttuuri, joka keskittyy jatkuvaan kehitykseen sekä sosiaaliseen, perheen kaltaiseen yhteyden työntekijöiden välillä. Mukailten teoreettista viitekehystä, neljä onnistuneen etäperehdytyksen teemaa keskittyvät prosessiin, sopivuuteen, yhteyden ja selkeyttämiseen. Uuden työntekijän ja mentorin roolit nähdään avainrooleina, joita auttavat prosessissa koko tiimi, tiimin vetäjä ja yritykset tukitiimit. Tulokset osoittavat, että digitalisaatio, selkeät prosessit sekä uuden työntekijän sopivuus rooliin ja tiimiin ovat tärkeitä etäperehdytyksen onnistumiseksi. Onnistuneen perehdytyksen avaintekijät virtuaalisessa ja toimistoympäristössä ovat samanlaisia, mutta elementtien merkitys ja haasteellisuus nähdään erilaisena. Sosiaalisen yhteyden luomista pidetään vaikeana. Tarve kasvotusten tapahtuvalle vuorovaikutukselle tuodaan esiin yhteyden ja yhteistyön syventämiseksi, nostamalla mielenkiintoisen aiheen jatkotutkimuksille.</p>	
Asiasanat Perehdytys, etäperehdytys, etätyö, teemoittelu, SaaS	
Säilytyspaikka Jyväskylän yliopiston kirjasto	

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1 INTRODUCTION

Employee onboarding, also referred to as organizational socialization in academic research, is the process of ensuring that the newly hired employee settles well to their new organization and understands what kind of results are expected to be achieved to contribute to organizational success (Bauer, 2010; Gruman and Saks, 2011). Onboarding is a part of the Human Resource Talent Management process (Snell, 2006). Well-handled onboarding leads to a successful start of the newly hired employee and benefits the company, whereas poorly handled onboarding often results in underperformance and employee dissatisfaction (Bauer, 2010; Caldwell and Caldwell, 2016; Caldwell and Peters, 2018; Snell, 2006).

In 2020 and 2021, many companies were recommended to execute their operations and processes remotely due to Covid19 pandemic social distancing requirements and government regulations. Companies needed to familiarise themselves with the concept of remote work swiftly to enable their workforce to continue operating in a safe and healthy environment. Remote work, also known as virtual work, telework, and telecommuting, refers to work performed from a non-traditional office location, generally from home, without colleagues at the exact location (Allen, Golden, and Shockley, 2015; Mulki, Bardhi, Lask, and Nanavaty-Dahl, 2009; Nilles, 1997). In some companies, virtual work was already part of the standard operating model. In some, it was a brand-new approach that needed to be set up fast to enable the employees to work from home. On average, across the European countries, 40% of the total workforce was working remotely in 2020 (Eurofound, 2020). Before the pandemic, in 2019, the number was estimated to be 9%, up to 5% working remotely daily (Milasi, S., González-Vázquez, I. and Fernández-Macías, E., 2020), indicating over 30 percentage point increase, quadrupling the number of people working remotely year to year.

This virtual requirement also applies to the new hire onboarding process, which is traditionally handled and recommended to take place in a face-to-face environment to achieve the best possible results (Snell, 2006). Even employees who are planned to work from non-office locations typically visit the office location to join orientation, meet some of the team members, understand the code of conduct and get the essential tools to perform their work remotely, such as

laptops (Nilles, 1997). In 2020 and 2021, due to the pandemic, any face-to-face interaction was not the desired option in many workplaces; hence new employees face the challenge to start in their new roles without physically meeting anyone.

Starting a new job is a very stressful situation where the new employee is expected to absorb plenty of information in a short time to be successful in a new role (Caldwell and Peters, 2018; Wanous and Reicher, 2000). Through onboarding, the new hire turns from outsider to insider, building relationships with the team members and performing their work independently in line with the expectations (Nidefadar and Bauer, 2016). When a new employee does not see or sit nearby their peers or supervisors daily, the traditional company onboarding process might need to be adjusted to ensure success. While this unique situation caused by pandemic was challenging for many companies, especially those who had no previous experience of remote onboarding, it also offered an excellent opportunity for the companies to rethink and redesign existing processes (Sull, Sull, and Bersin, 2020).

The research focusing on the remote aspect of the onboarding has been limited before the pandemic started in 2020. Past research focuses mainly on overall virtual company structures like the study by Helms and Raiszadeh (2002), rather than specific parts of the HR processes like onboarding. In 2020 and 2021, prompted by the increased focus on remote, virtual work due to the Covid19 pandemic, researchers like Rodeghero, Zimmermann, Houck, and Ford (2021) and McDonnell (2020) have focused on this area covering specific professional groups. Their studies cover the particular employee groups rather than the overall company.

This qualitative case study seeks to understand how the employee onboarding process is performed virtually in a remote setting and collectively describes the experiences and the critical elements essential to the success of onboarding in the specific case company across multiple departments and roles. The interviewed process roles: a new employee, their manager, their mentor like a colleague, buddy, and core onboarding support teams', Human Resource (HR) and training department contribute to the collective view looking at the overall experience from multiple perspectives, describing the experience and the key, important elements of the new hire onboarding from their point of view resulting in rich empirical data.

Empirical research data is obtained through semi-structured virtual interviews. The interview audio is recorded, transcribed, and analyzed carefully to enable in-depth understanding and review of the participants' experiences capturing the key themes. Through captured collective process participant descriptions of virtual onboarding, this study helps to understand the remote onboarding process key elements, the overall onboarding process in the case company, and the roles that the different participants play in the successful onboarding. The general process flow captured as part of the study and the analyzed results and the conclusions can be used to review, adjust and enhance the case company onboarding process as well used, although cannot be

generalized, as one reference case study of further exploration of the virtual, remote onboarding process field. Remote onboarding is an important and current topic in many organizations worldwide due to the pandemic restrictions and social distancing recommendations. The future of work has permanently changed to include remote approach as a standard practice, as highlighted by Rodeghero et al. (2021).

1.1 Purpose of the study and research questions

This empirical case study aims to understand collectively how the virtual onboarding process participants describe the onboarding key elements in a remote environment and reflect these essential elements to the overall virtual onboarding process used in the case company. Together with the overall successful process and component descriptions, the participant roles are described. Describing the key elements and the process collectively enables the study to understand the process and parts required to be successful fully. The role of each of the interviewed process participants is opened, reflecting their journey in the process and the important elements observed. Overall, the analyzed material and findings related draw a clear picture of the process key elements, the overall process, the role of the process participants, and the areas the case company needs to be aware of to develop their remote onboarding process from the collective company perspective. The research questions are:

- *How do the onboarding process participants describe their views of key elements of successful remote onboarding in the case company?*
- *What role do the process participants have in the successful remote onboarding?*

1.2 The structure of the study report

This report consists of six chapters. The first chapter introduces the subject, key terms and scope, the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the overall structure of the report. The second chapter gives an in-depth overview of the existing research related to the key terms, observations, and theories linked to the subject. Current views are summarized into comprehensive figures giving the reader a good overview. The third chapter introduces the case company and the basics of the onboarding process used by the company. The fourth chapter contains the overall research approach description covering the empirical data collection method selection, design and execution, and the data analytics methods. The background of selecting the methods and explanation of the followed research steps are provided with an example of the thematical grouping.

The analyzed results based on empirical data are opened in line with the research questions in the fifth chapter. Results are opened from key themes perspective in collective level and then looked at from process and the role level highlighting the tasks and specifics related to each of the roles linking to the themes identified. The final, sixth chapter reflects the analyzed data to research questions. It compares the results to the existing, previously published research documenting the study's conclusions and the meaning of those findings. Thoughts regarding potential limitations, trustworthiness, and future research topics are shared with the reader in the last sub-chapters of the study. A detailed list of references and appendixes are included at the end of the report.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To form a clear, in-depth understanding of the existing research related to virtual, remote employee onboarding, the key terms, existing studies, and their findings were studied in detail, definitions captured, and key views summarised below. The existing theories summarised at the end of the chapter as figure 4 are used as a base to design the semi-structured interview core to collect the study's empirical research material and reflect the analyzed results to existing theory, capturing the similarities and differences as part of the overall conclusions.

2.1 Employee onboarding

Employee onboarding is a process of introducing a new employee into his or her new job, including introducing the organization's goals, values, rules, policies, processes together while getting employee familiar with the organizational culture (Bauer, 2010; Gruman and Saks, 2011; Caldwell and Peters, 2018). The goal of the onboarding process is getting the new hire to participate and function effectively as a member of an organization and therefore bring value and create wealth for the company (Bauer, 2010; Gruman and Saks, 2011; Caldwell and Peters, 2018). Onboarding is also referred to as organizational socialization, a process through which the new employee, the organizational outsider, becomes an insider (Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2006; Nidefadkar and Bauer, 2016).

Onboarding is seen as part of the overall Talent Management process (Snell, 2006). Bauer (2010) states that based on research and general knowledge, employees get about 90 days to prove themselves in a new role, move from outsider to inside. Ninety days mark is also recorded by Mitchell and Gamlem (2017) as the final checkpoint on how the new hire is settling into the company. From a company perspective, the faster the new employees can execute their roles efficiently, the better. Although onboarding seen as a separate entity in the Talent Management process, it is often overlooked by the companies as key

investments related to Talent Management are made to find the right resources via recruitment and hiring and further in the timeline to focus on measuring the actual performance (Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2006; Snell, 2006).

Well-handled onboarding leads to a successful start of the newly hired employee and therefore also benefits the company, whereas badly handled onboarding often results in underperformance and employee dissatisfaction (Bauer, 2010; Caldwell and Caldwell, 2016; Caldwell and Peters, 2018; Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2006; Snell, 2006). At the beginning of the employment, during onboarding, employees are normally under a high amount of stress as they are in a new environment where there is a lot of new information that needs to be learned (Caldwell and Peters, 2018; Wanous and Reichers, 2000). A well-structured onboarding process considers this and aims to make the orientation and onboarding as stress-free as possible, targeting the new hire to become a productive part of the company as soon as possible, providing a return of the investment made (Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2006). A structured onboarding program is preferred by many new hires, especially the ones that show naturally proactive behavior (Gruman and Saks, 2011).

If the company is successful in onboarding, there are short- and long-term benefits for both the employee and the company, both in remote and office-based onboarding. Employees have better job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and more effective communication with management. A company often sees higher retention and engagement rates, desired work performance and productivity, stronger bonds between colleagues, and increased customer satisfaction in return (Bauer, 2010; Mitchell and Gamlem, 2017; Snell, 2006). Additionally, if the onboarding process is efficiently executed and optimized, sometimes partially automated, the overall onboarding process time is reduced, impacting positively all process participants, employees, managers, colleagues, and HR personnel and bringing financial benefit to the company (Snell, 2006). On the other side, if the onboarding is not handled well, the benefits do not realize and turn negatives. The new employee might not fully understand their role, the business, or feel part of the team, resulting in poor performance and overall income loss as the company's investment in a new employee is not producing the results they wanted to.

The employee onboarding research is traditionally looking at the onboarding process from a rather traditional office setting perspective, although not directly referring to the process to happen onsite but rather than indicating to it with the descriptions and detail provided as frameworks of successful onboarding. For example, Snell (2006) refers to Office Manager in the task flow introduced as part of the research, and Bauer (2010) refers to computer-based onboarding as a special structure as part of the paper. Referring to previous research from 2008 by Aberdeen, Bauer (2010) indicates that the remotely onboarded employees might have less understanding of the work and the company than the new employees who completed their onboarding at the office location. Bauer's view indicates that remote onboarding is an option but not a

preferred structure overall, although it could support the overall flow and efficiency of the process.

Quite often, the new hire onboarding is organizationally focused rather than employee well-being focused. Proces targets ticking the boxes of checklists and mandatory elements rather than ensuring that employee settles well. The goal, efficient performance, is the same for the organization and the employee (Bauer, 2010; Caldwell & Peters, 2017; Snell, 2006). The existing research can be seen as rather practical, offering models and elements that the companies can use as a checklist or reflection to ensure that their onboarding process and elements covered reflect the ideal structure. The structures are presented as a sequence of specific tasks or lists or models of elements, components required to complete the employee onboarding successfully.

Employee onboarding tactics have been categorized in multiple different ways. Bauer (2010) divides the existing onboarding practices in companies into formal and informal structures. In a formal structure, the company has a written set of onboarding policies and processes. In an informal structure, there is no documented process. In an informal case, the employee understands the new role without a specific onboarding program. From an overall scope and coverage perspective, Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2006) record in their organizational socialization literature review also other bipolar onboarding tactics. Collective-individual divides onboarding based on whether the new hires are socialized in groups or individually. Sequential-random splits onboarding based on whether the new employees are explained their onboarding as sequenced steps or not. Fixed-variable splits onboarding based on the timetable and serial-disjunctive based on the availability of the previous role holder as a role model. Investiture-divestiture divides onboarding into two groups based on the colleague-provided social support. In general, Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2006) document that many new hires prefer formal and well-structured onboarding as it helps them coordinate the process and therefore reduce the stress.

2.1.1 Employee onboarding process and roles

In the scientific research, the components of onboarding are described as an overall model like Bauer (2010), a list of elements that the onboarding structure should contain like Caldwell and Peters (2018), or as task-based process flow like Snell (2006) targeting a good, successful completion of the onboarding. The task-based process flow is introduced first to understand the sequence of the typical onboarding activities and the roles involved.

Snell (2006) draws the onboarding process timeline to a comprehensive swim lane model specifying the tasks, task owners, and sequence of the activities (figure 1). In the model, activities start from the moment the employee accepts the job offer and end once the employee completes feedback on the new hire process and is moved to business-as-usual performance management. The model focuses on the efficient execution of the process, especially the admin steps, rather than the personal aspect of bringing the new hire to be part of the company

through successful onboarding. Mitchell and Gamlem (2017) join Snell’s view seeing that accepting the job offer is the first step. Snell’s model focuses largely on the compliance element out of the 4Cs recorded by Bauer (2010). In a remote environment, most of the steps are still relevant; however, preparing an office and the role of the Office Manager becomes obsolete.

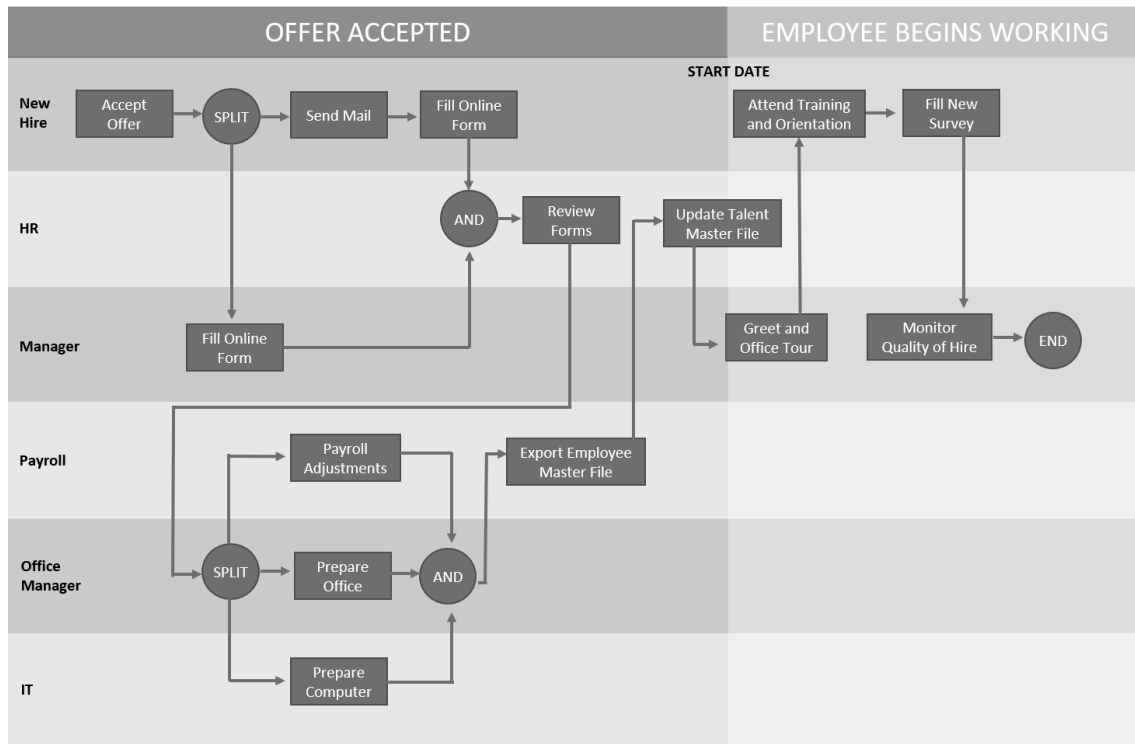


FIGURE 1 Onboarding Process Timeline by Role (Snell, 2006)

When a new employee starts their organizational socialization, the journey of becoming a company insider instead of the outsider, many roles impact the success of the process. The key person in the process is the new employee. From the existing company personnel side, direct management, their colleagues, and HR and payroll department representatives generally play significant roles in the process. Many of these roles are captured in Snell’s (2006) task-based onboarding process timeline recorded in figure 1 together with Office Manager, Payroll, and IT Manager. These roles might or might not be visible as sometimes the communication is handled via management lines and sometimes directly with the support teams. In Snell’s flow chart, there is no direct linkage between these departments and the new hire. In the remote onboarding setup, IT plays a critical role in ensuring that the new employee can connect to other people working in the organization and access relevant business material. The role of an Office Manager is likely to be an obsolete role in the process. In addition to Snell’s (2006) flow, Bauer (2010) brings up the role of colleagues and mentors as an important element of successful onboarding. Mitchell and Gamlem (2017) also recommend that a buddy, a colleague assigned to especially welcome and support the new hire, is identified and assigned for each new hire.

Bauer (2010) states that *new employees* should expect help from HR personnel and team during their onboarding. Still, they are also expected to facilitate their onboarding by actively building relationships, such as engaging with their colleagues, joining their colleagues for lunch, and other breaks highlighting the need to meet and socialize with the colleagues face-to-face at the office. Gruman and Saks (2011) document that the new hire is expected to be proactive and actively shape their onboarding experience by seeking information concerning the role and work environment. This helps them reduce the stress that is normally experienced during the start of the employment (Caldwell and Peters, 2018; Gruman and Saks, 2011; Wanous and Reichers, 2000). Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2006) highlight the impact of the individual differences, for example, personality, values, information seeking, and proactive behavior models, on the overall onboarding, indicating more success when the values of the new hire and the organization match and when the new hire shows proactive approaches.

The new hire's first-line *manager, a supervisor*, is expected to facilitate the overall onboarding process together with HR and other parts of the organization and ensure that the new hire settles into the role well. Mitchell and Gamlem (2017) highlight the importance of being available and ensuring that all the necessary access, preparations, announcements, and information are done and shared before a new employee starts. A manager should make time for the new hire, for example, by organizing a lunch with them to cover any new hires' questions. In line with Bauer (2010), they look at the onboarding from the office setting, face to face meeting perspective when referring to lunches and chats. Mitchell and Gamlem (2017) also provide concrete examples of the actions manager can take to make the new hire feel welcome. For example, they can decorate the new hire's office or desk, assign a training buddy from the team, and organize a welcome coffee inviting all the team members to ensure that the office is welcoming from the interior and colleague sides. Nifadkar and Bauer (2016) identified that a supervisor could also repair any information gaps or conflicts between the new employee and colleagues and therefore enable a smooth onboarding process.

For new employees, building relationships with their *colleagues* is an important step in socially integrating into the company and becoming an insider instead of an outsider (Bauer, 2010). Mitchell and Gamlem (2017) state that new hires generally feel more comfortable asking questions from their peers rather than managers. This indicates that the connection between the new hire and colleague is seen as important. Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2006) raise the actions taken by the colleagues as an important element in the onboarding. Nifadkar and Bauer (2016) concluded in their study that a conflict between co-workers and the new hire six months after joining the organization negatively impacts onboarding success. However, the actual onboarding phase has normally been completed by then. In the same research, they also recommend that companies involve new hire's colleagues in the newcomer adjustment initiatives based on their findings. Experienced colleagues can also act as *a mentor or a buddy* for the new employee, supporting the overall onboarding process as

per recommendation documented by Caldwell and Peters (2018) and Mitchell and Gamlem (2017). A buddy can ensure that the new hire has a trusted person to ask questions and get support in the areas where they might be hesitant to ask to advise from their managers.

The *HR function* is expected to facilitate and support new hire onboarding (Bauer, 2010). Caldwell and Caldwell (2016) highlight the importance of structuring the HR department within the organization as a strategic function to treat employees with dignity and commitment to their success, therefore driving the overall company success. As key actions to avoid onboarding process pitfalls, they record communicating, honoring commitments, supporting new employees to reduce stress, avoiding overloading new hires with information, structuring a clear orientation handbook, scheduling efficiently and timely, providing clear job preview expectations, supporting relationship building, and providing accurate information. The HR department works in close contact with other cross-team support functions like IT, security, and training who, from their part, support the success of the onboarding (Caldwell and Caldwell, 2016).

In addition to the specific roles introduced, Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2006) also record the overall organization as a key player in defining the overall approach of onboarding in the company. It can be seen that as the owner of the process HR function manages the onboarding structure. Still, at the same time, the decisions are often partially impacted or at minimum accepted by the organization's top management.

2.1.2 Elements of successful onboarding

This research aims to understand the successful remote onboarding key components in the case company collectively. The definition of successful onboarding is seen as an ongoing problem for both researchers and HR professionals as the success of the process is seen differently across new hires, organizations, and cultures (Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2006). Possible success indicators recorded by Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2006) highlight the actual measurements of onboarding success: role performance, extra-role performance, social cohesion, internal stability, and external representation. While their paper aims to fill the existing research gap to bring concrete, measurable elements of successful onboarding to the table, measuring these elements in the organizations remains unclear as companies use a different set of measurements. Role performance could be measured based on a more formal performance rating if such exists or getting direct feedback from colleagues or managers. Social cohesion could be measured as a team spirit rating if measured or as a general statement. Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2006) underline the importance of looking at success onboarding from multiple perspectives. In this research, new hires and other process participant descriptions and explained satisfaction with the onboarding process are seen as the indicator of whether the specific onboarding was successful or not.

Bauer (2010) has simplified the ideal onboarding program scope to four sections, four Cs: Compliance, Clarification, Culture, and Connection) These 4 Cs have been referred to in more recent studies like Caldwell and Peters (2018) as the basic division of the required coverage of the onboarding process. The compliance element covers basic company legal and policy rules and regulations that should be carefully reviewed and communicated to the new employee. Clarification is highlighted as a key block of the onboarding process by Caldwell and Peters (2018) and seen as an element is that is often poorly handled. The step aims to ensure that employees understand their actual job and related expectations that Bauer (2010) refers to as the area that suffers the most in online onboarding. The third block, culture, covers information company norms and behaviors; however, this is often overlooked as these are assumed to be easy to understand and absorb during daily work. The fourth block, connection, relates to establishing key interpersonal relationships and explaining information networks essential for an employee to perform well, which could be seen as challenging in a remote environment.

Bauer's (2010) research-based model of onboarding (figure 2) shows a successful onboarding model as a combination of four researched-based levers desired for each employee to achieve and mechanisms like processes and tools required from the company and HR perspective to support the employee during the onboarding process. The four levers of successful onboarding are captured as self-efficacy, role clarity, social integration, and knowledge of culture. These levers are very much focused on the Clarification, Connection, and Culture out of the 4Cs (Bauer, 2010), contradictory to Snell's task-based timeline process (figure 1) that mainly focused on Compliance. Bauer's (2010) overall research-based model (figure 2) also records "Selection" as an element that is not directly part of onboarding, yet relevant. During the selection and recruiting process, the new hire gets information about the company and future role. Simultaneously, the company gets information about the new hire to prepare the onboarding structure to better respond to employee needs. Bauer (2010) especially warns the companies not to see the recruiting process as a separate entity from onboarding but rather consider it a pre-phase where the new employee and the company can prepare for a successful selection and onboarding experience. Also, Snell (2006) and Mitchell and Gamlem (2017) see onboarding starting earlier than the actual first day of employment. They start the process from the acceptance of the offer rather than the selection of the employee like Bauer (2010).

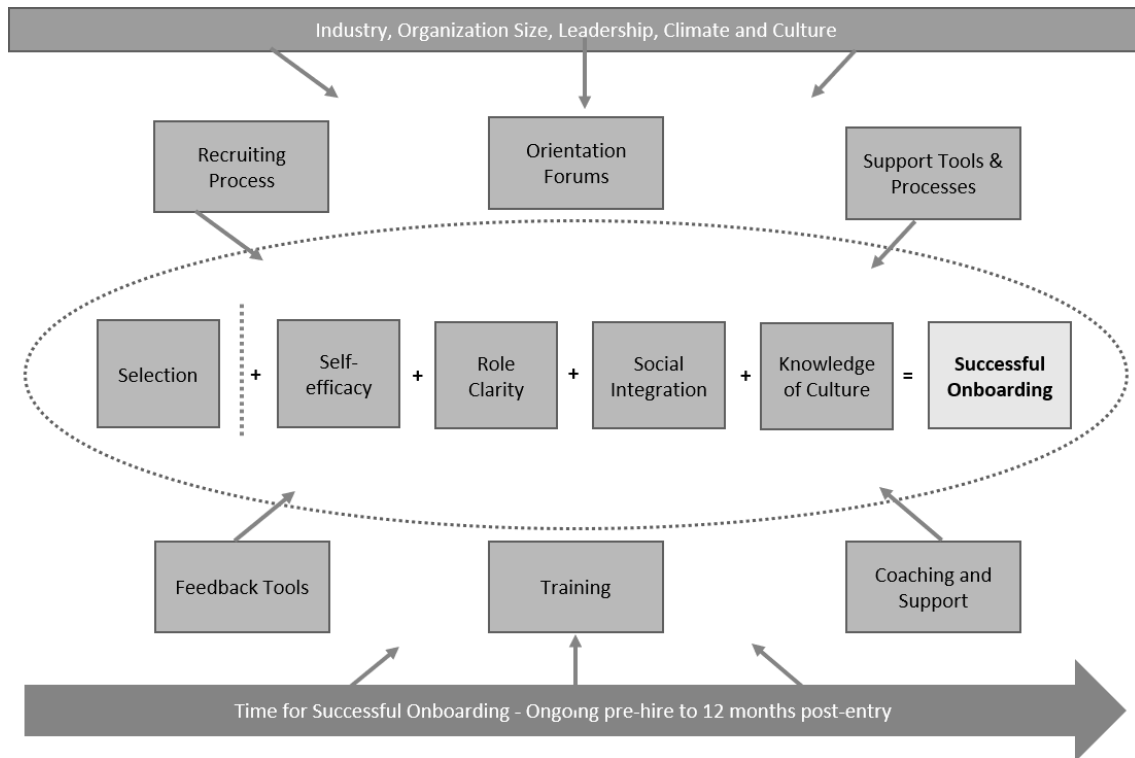


FIGURE 2 A Research-based model of onboarding (Bauer, 2010)

In Bauer’s model (figure 2), the first lever of successful onboarding, self-efficacy, aims the new hire to achieve a high level of confidence doing their work well. The second lever, role clarity, aims the employee to get a good understanding of the role expected to be performed to perform well. The third level, social integration, aims for the employee to build good working relationships with their colleagues, management, and peers. The fourth lever, knowledge of culture, aims to get the employee to understand an organization’s politics, values, and goals and therefore understand discussed items in a company context. Differentiating from Snell’s (2016) step-by-step process Bauer (2010) records the elements taking place simultaneously, rather than being completed one after another.

Framing the levers of successful onboarding, Bauer (2010) lists tools and processes that support the company and the employee in the onboarding process. Bauer has divided these sub-processes and elements into six different groups: recruiting process, orientation forums, support tools and processes, feedback tools, training, and coaching and support. Orientation forums, normally organized as written, video, or face-face interaction, give a good overview of the processes, accesses, and policies that the employee can refer to immediately and later during their employment. Support tools and processes referred to the formal part of the onboarding structures, for example, a written process for onboarding and mandated stakeholder meetings focused on the onboarding experience. Feedback tools refer to generally used structures within the company that should be utilized especially for the new hires to ensure that they understand whether their performance meets the expectations and if they can read the reactions from their peers and supervisors correctly. Training is a very important support for the new hire to perform well. Training should cover the performed

work and the general tools, like HR and IT systems which employee is expected to use extending to the information provided in the orientation. Lastly, coaching and mentoring support help the new hire get insights into the company and specific areas in their team. Support is also needed when the new hire's supervisor and peers do not have the knowledge from a specific area or in topics that the new hire is uncomfortable discussing directly with their peers or management.

Caldwell and Peters (2018) have documented the core ten onboarding steps that companies should complete as part of the onboarding if they wish the employee to feel valued as part of their study. In their paper, they deep-dive into the ethical aspects of onboarding, starting from establishing the relationship immediately after hiring via online channels, by, for example assisting new hires with any transitional logistics like a move to another city and finding a new place to live. And then further continuing preparing for smooth onboarding by appointing a trained and committed mentor coach for each new employee, ensuring that the new employees are assisted in creating relationships with key personnel by encouraging those individuals to contact and welcome the employee and in the long-term create an ongoing coaching plan to support the employee to become a highly productive contributor. They highlight the need to prepare a good, comprehensive orientation booklet, prepare the physical location, and tools like laptops for the new employee before the first day to avoid wasting time or frustration. Clarifying and confirming priorities and expectations is also one step ensuring that the new employee understands what is expected from them and how their performance is measured and aligns them with any personal goals or concerns the employee might have. They encourage upline to be involved in the training and orientation, especially in explaining values and cultural elements. Lastly, they recommend the organizations engage, empower, and appreciate the employee to become self-efficient and have the confidence to bring up their creative improvement ideas. The element of preparing a physical location for the new hire is not applicable in the remote setting; however, supporting the new hire to prepare the remote working location could be seen as the remote equivalent.

Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2006) approach the ideal onboarding model from a learning perspective, recording specific learning domains, success indicators, and learning sources in their multi-level model of organizational socialization linking the elements to each other. While their point of view differs from the previously introduced theories, domains and sources align in most parts. Learning domains can be divided into different sections of Bauer's (2010) 4Cs model. The domain of task, role, and performance and future prospects align under clarification, co-worker, social and group under connection, history, goals, values, and organization under culture. Three out of the five documented sources of learning, colleagues, manager, and mentor, are covered in Snell's (2010) and Caldwell and Peter's (2018) studies. Organization literature can be seen as the orientation booklet referred to by Caldwell and Peters (2018). Formal socialization is not referred to previously as one element, although references are

made to the overall explanations of the onboarding structure, showing a need for a structured onboarding plan as part of the clarification element. On the overall level, the element of learning, which is a key focus of the model drawn by Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2006), is not highlighted as strongly in the other research.

To get a comprehensive overview of the elements of successful onboarding introduced existing theories and models related to onboarding are summarised in table 1. Similarities between Snell’s task-based onboarding process timeline (figure 1), Bauer’s research-based model (figure 2), Bauer’s simplified 4Cs model (2010), Cooper-Thomas and Anderson’s learning-focused model (2006), and Caldwell and Peters’ (2018) ten core onboarding program steps are captured and streamlined to table 1 using Bauer’s (2010) simplified 4C model areas as top headings and the research-based model key elements as overall aims. 4C model covers the key elements mentioned in all other theories at a high level but is not completely self-explanatory as a model on its own hence the detail from the other elements is added.

TABLE 1 Successful onboarding key element overview (summarised based on Bauer (2010), Caldwell and Peters (2018), Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2008), and Snell (2006))

<p>Connection <i>drive towards social integration</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome • Insiders – team, colleagues, management • Mentoring, coaching • Support and ongoing feedback 	<p>Clarification <i>drive towards role clarity and self-efficiency</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiring • Onboarding Plan • Job clarity, tasks, expectations, future • Training and learning
<p>Culture <i>drive towards knowledge of culture</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Orientation (booklet/session) • Norms, behavior and values • Politics 	<p>Compliance <i>“must do”</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal, policy, regulations, safety • HR/Payroll admin • Security admin • Tool and workstation set up

Between the flows and models introduced, two key differences can be spotted. Firstly, Snell’s task-based, efficiency-focused onboarding process timeline (figure 1) concentrates heavily on admin and compliance elements, whereas Bauer’s overall model (figure 2), Caldwell and Peters’ (2018) ten core onboarding steps, and Cooper-Thomas and Anderson’s (2006) learning-focused model on the other 4Cs, Culture, Clarification, and Connection. Secondly, Snell (2006), as well as Caldwell and Peters (2018), mark the start of the process a bit later, starting when a new employee accepts the job offer, compared to Bauer (2010), who records the start from the selection, recruitment process although highlights it being part of another process flow but an element that has a major impact on onboarding.

When reflecting on personal experience and looking at the theories from the remote perspective, few elements can be seen as not fully covered. However, the tool and workstation set up are referred to, enabling the new hire to perform work from the office location rather than from a remote location. The order of the activities is listed in Snell's (2006) figure 1, focusing on admin and compliance elements. Focusing on cultural and clarification elements, such as introducing the role and the tasks that need to be performed, the theories do not provide clear guidance of the elements that should be prioritized or ordered. The unstructured flow of information and activities potentially results in an overload if all elements are aimed to be covered at once. This also means that specific failure points cannot be identified easily as the overall process is seen as an overall frame rather than a step-by-step process.

2.1.3 Challenges of the onboarding process

Caldwell and Caldwell (2016) state that many organizations and even HR professionals do not consider new hire onboarding important, albeit having some understanding of the negative impact of badly handled onboarding and the positive impact of handling it well. Focus is normally more on the recruitment side, ensuring that correct, skilled employees are found and hired. In their book, Mitchell and Gamlem (2017) state that well-handled onboarding has more impact on retention and engagement than tuition reimbursement and vacation benefits. The previous studies from Bauer (2010) and Snell (2006) have captured that onboarding plays an important role in new hires' successful integration to a company which normally culminates in increased employee satisfaction and productivity. Formal onboarding, well structured, and managed onboarding program within the organization (Bauer, 2010), is often overlooked. It is thought that general company rule presentation, and welcome from your manager are sufficient for the new employees together with their access badge and a desk without further formalized structure. The study done by Gruman and Saks (2011) concluded that, in general, new hires prefer a structured onboarding program over an unstructured one and saw it as one of the success factors of onboarding.

Caldwell and Caldwell (2016) defined ten errors that companies often do during the onboarding process from an HR perspective which can be summarized as miscommunicating or overloading new hires with information, not understanding or supporting the new employees with transitional stress, mishandling scheduling of training, tools, intros, or communication, failing to provide a realistic view of the role and not supporting relationship building. None of the errors is especially difficult to avoid due to virtual onboarding. On contrarily, it could be seen that virtual onboarding could help the company to organize and structure their onboarding information and process as the process cannot be just conducted when the employee arrives at the office. Snell (2006) also highlights the slowness of providing required tools, like phone or computer, to the new employees as one example of poorly handled onboarding. In those cases, employees cannot sufficiently perform their role, and therefore the time

they need to wait for their tools to be set is wasted. These challenges recorded by the referred researchers, together with benefits documented in the previous studies introduced, have been summarized in table 2.

TABLE 2 Summary of benefits and challenges of onboarding (Bauer, 2010; Caldwell and Caldwell, 2016; Gruman and Saks, 2011; Mitchell and Gamlem, 2017; Snell, 2006)

	Company	Employee
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher organizational commitment • Higher retention • Higher productivity • Increased customer satisfaction • Limited time waste 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better job satisfaction • Better team spirit • Effective communication with management • Stress free start
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Onboarding Process valuation and investment • Timing and quality of information, and tools • Dependency on new hire proactiveness and relationships • Accurate level-setting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information overload • Stress • Personality, experience, preference

Challenges are also caused by different preferences, experience levels, personalities, and approaches among the new hires (Bauer, 2010; Gruman and Saks, 2011; Mitchell and Gamlem, 2017). For example, some new hires might prefer to go through the material on their own, while some want to have everything explained to them in detail and do not like to review material on their own. Some might feel very comfortable building a social network at work, whereas others might be hesitant to reach out to new people. Gruman and Saks (2011) highlight that, in general, the onboarding studies are assuming that one style works for all and challenge the idea. In their study, they investigated the impact of employee proactiveness and personality on onboarding. They concluded that while people have different personalities and preferences that the company should consider before starting the onboarding process, a well-defined, structured, formal onboarding process is preferred. This means that while employees themselves carry a responsibility to build their relationships, companies can, and based on the research, should support them. Companies can support creating relationships between new hires and existing employees by introducing networking events such as after work and team coffee break to connect the two groups easier and encourage new hires to be proactive in reaching out to their direct and indirect teams.

2.2 Remote work

This study focuses on understanding the onboarding process in a virtual, remote environment where the new hire does not physically meet her manager, colleagues, or company representatives. Therefore, it is important to understand the concept of remote work. In light of understanding the benefits and challenges of virtual onboarding, it is important to understand the benefits and challenges of remote work and the special requirements of the virtual working environment.

The research regarding work outside of the office had used various terms in the papers, starting from the 1970s when Jack Nilles used the word telecommuting in his text covering Development of Policy on the Telecommunications-Transportation Tradeoff after coming up with the concept while sitting in a traffic jam in Los Angeles (Kurland and Bailey, 1999). Since then, the term has matured to telework (Nilles, 1997). Allen et al. (2015) have identified terms distributed work, flexible work arrangements, remote work, telecommuting, telework, and virtual teams as part of their previously conducted telecommuting research review. Additionally, the term e-work has been used by researchers Grant, Wallace, and Spurgeon in 2013. Allen et al. (2015) define telecommuting as “work practice that involves members of an organization substituting a portion of their typical work hours (ranging from a few hours per week to nearly full-time) to work away from a central workplace—typically principally from home—using technology to interact with others as needed to conduct work tasks.” basing their definition on multiple definitions used by researchers, including Jack Nilles. Summarising the researchers’ definitions, remote work can be defined as work performed from a non-traditional office location, normally from home, without colleagues at the same location (Allen et al., 2015; Mulki et al., 2009; Nilles, 1997)

Many studies have categorized telecommuting work into different subgroups. Kurland and Bailey (1999) define telework through four different types: home-based telecommuting, satellite offices, neighborhood work centers, and mobile working. Wojcak, Bajzikova, Sajgalikova, and Polakova (2016) define the term broader as “any work performance from ‘distance’” however also refer to possible locations like home, satellite center, or street location like café or a car. They also classify the term into three categories based on the extend of remote work: a) working from home once a week, b) working from home several days a week, and c) full-time remote work. Kossek, Lautsch, and Eaton (2005) have defined telecommuting as covering only work performed from home that is often supported by telecommunications technology.

This study investigates situations when the new employee's onboarding is done fully or partially in a remote environment where they cannot meet face to face their managers, colleagues, or other company representatives like HR personnel. In the context of this case study, it is irrelevant whether a new employee completes their onboarding from home or other non-office locations, like a hotel room or summer cottage. It is relevant that the employee works from

a location where he cannot meet his manager, colleagues, or other company representatives face to face during most of the onboarding process.

2.2.1 Remote employee enablers

The new hires need to have the basic remote work enablers to start their employment remotely. Nilles (1997) lists six telework enabler groups in his research: 1) Diagnosis and Operational Requirements, 2) Security, 3) Hardware, Software, and Network Needs, 4) Training, 5) Support, and 6) Key Players. Although a study from Nilles (1997) is dated over 20 years ago, the elements listed can still be seen as the core requirements of remote work.

The first group highlights the requirement of careful consideration to move towards remote work set up for certain or all employees and ensure that needed data and communication points are enabled for them operationally. Nilles (1997) also addresses the need to ensure that company data does not end up with the wrong people, although employees work from different locations. As the second enabler, security normally means that the company-provided laptop has sufficient IT security programs installed, employees are trained to understand how to handle and protect company data.

As the third enabler, Nilles (1997) lists hardware, software, and networks. Normally this group covers a computer, access to a company network, necessary data, and programs to execute daily work. Fourthly, training is an enabler to ensure that employees working remotely can perform the work without an onsite mentor or supporter. This enabler directly links to onboarding process requirements. During the onboarding, the new employee is expected to clarify the performed role and training to execute the role and other company-related tasks like compliance and time recording activities.

To enabler remote work, it is also important to ensure that remote workers have access to support, such as technical support, if needed. Nilles (1997) records support as the fifth enabler. Support generally means IT support, HR support, any specific process-related support they might need. While most companies provide this through specific departments like IT and HR, this is normally handled via a direct supervisor in smaller companies. Also, in bigger companies, new employees might prefer to contact their manager before the specialized departments to answer their questions. As the sixth enabler, Nilles underlines the importance of having the key company resources like CEO, Program Manager, and even dedicated remote work champion actively supporting and driving the execution and improvements to the program.

Sull et al. (2020) documented five ways that leaders can support remote work. Firstly, they highlight the need for communication, frequent, transparent, and consistent exchange with the employee. Secondly, they encourage managers to provide physical and mental health via frequent check-ins, providing emotional support where needed, and organizing virtual social activities. Thirdly, managers should help distributed employees stay productive and engaged by encouraging best practice sharing and helping employees remain engaged. As

the fourth support method, they recommend managers to allow flexibility in the schedule and help their employees manage their days if they struggle to ensure that even when working remotely, normally from home, work-life balance can be managed well. Lastly, they highlight the importance of focusing on continuous development and strategic priorities as, ultimately, these are the core of the business success. While these align closely with Nilles' (1997) six enablers, focus on the elements is more on the long-term performance, ensuring that employees can execute well in line with business priorities. Additionally, to the five support scopes identified and highlighted, they bring up the additional basic need for employees to have good technical tools to execute their work and communicate with their peers and client in line with Nilles' (1997) enablers.

2.2.2 Remote work benefits and challenges

It is beneficial to know what the research focused on remote virtual has discovered to understand the potential benefits and challenges that the remote aspect sets to the overall onboarding process. Nilles (1997) lists an average productivity increase of 5-20%, employee morale and retention increase, savings in the company office and parking space requirements, and even environmental benefits through decreased traffic as benefits of remote working. These benefits based on research are not related to remote new hires but rather employees in general.

From an employee perspective, remote work offers a more flexible working structure and reduced transportation times and costs, increased job satisfaction, lowered work stress through increased autonomy and flexibility (Allen et al., 2015). During the pandemic, the employees were forced to move to remote work settings instead of working virtually. This element of forced remote working can be thought to impact the previously captured benefit statements as the remote work is not offered as a flexible option, but rather the standard, the only way to work for the time being to prevent the pandemic further spreading and keeping your colleagues safe.

From a company perspective, Nilles (1997) and Mulki et al. (2009) record productivity increase, and running cost reduction, like facility costs, as benefits of remote working. Additionally, Allen et al. (2015) conclude that based on research, there is also a small positive relationship between remote work and organizational commitment when the employee can choose their location, not when one specific location like home or office is decided for them. Their review also lists reduced turnover and absenteeism as potential benefits of virtual work. At the same time, they link these benefits to flexibility rather than directly to the virtual work setting (Allen et al., 2015).

Mulki et al. (2009) document four critical challenges related to remote work, mainly from an employee perspective: work-life balance, workplace isolation, lack of face-to-face communication, and lack of visibility. In their article, they also provide management strategies to cope with these challenges. To improve the work-life balance of remote work, they suggest setting clear working times and practices when to work and when not to and prioritizing employee tasks by

regular interlocks. To ensure that employees do not feel isolated, researchers suggest managers encourage and introduce means for remote social interaction during team calls or try to bring the team members together in a face-to-face environment where possible. They also suggest managers should pair remote and onsite workers and encourage mentoring between them where possible. As the third suggestion to battle isolation, they recommend the strong facilitation of new employees who join the team remotely. Allen et al. (2015) also capture social and professional isolation as one of the virtual work challenges, which in the worst case might result in poor performance and higher turnover and therefore wipe away the benefits of remote work.

To combat the third challenge listed by Mulki et al. (2009), lack of face-to-face communication, managers should aim to meet with employees face to face at least once a year and use remote communication tools also informally to catch up on a more personal level. Communication with the other employees is equally important. Allen et al. (2015) bring up the term knowledge transfer in their paper as a critical element to achieve organizational effectiveness. This is normally a key to accomplishing tasks as a team. To efficiently transfer information and knowledge between colleagues, communication is critical, especially in remote environments using remote tools.

To compensate for the lack of visibility, the fourth challenge, Mulki et al. (2009) state that individual and team achievements should be shared through the organization to ensure that good visibility within and outside of the core team. It should also be clear to the employees that management can be contacted for formal and informal discussions. They also encourage the leadership to promote and support sharing remote work best practices among the remote workers.

From the supervisor's perspective, remote work management can be seen as challenging because the manager is not used to manage their resources remotely (Nilles, 1997). Allen et al. (2015) found out that although many consider telework a potential risk to the relationship between the supervisor and the employee, research done shows the opposite; however, this is caused by managers approving virtual work arrangements for employees with whom they have a good relationship already. Nilles (1997), Mulki et al. (2009), and Sull et al. (2020) all put first-line managers on the spot to ensure that any challenges related to remote work are mitigated. Sull et al. (2020) list ways for leaders to support remote work. They rank communication and technology as key elements to enable employees to work from home efficiently, meaning that especially in the larger firms, where IT support and general communication packages like welcoming packs are provided by IT, HR, and Communication teams, responsibility also lays on these functions to deliver timely and well.

2.3 Remote onboarding

Combining the existing research structures of onboarding and virtual work, it can be stated that remote onboarding refers to virtual execution of the process,

ensuring that the newly hired employees settle well to their organization and understands the results expected to be achieved to contribute to the overall company success (Allen et al., 2015; Bauer, 2010; Gruman and Saks, 2011; Mulki et al., 2009; Nilles, 1997). Interestingly, conclusions from researchers like Nilles (1997) and Bauer (2010) are quite similar when comparing the benefits and positives sides of virtual, remote work and well-executed onboarding. Both record higher retention, increased productivity, better employee satisfaction, and therefore better company overall performance. Based on this, the existing studies indicate that a well-executed virtual onboarding of new employees can be a success factor. The element of forced remote work during a pandemic is yet to be further studied and could be impacting the benefits seen in the overall level.

2.3.1 Recent research

Peer-reviewed academic research covering remote approach and onboarding together has been rather limited before the year 2020. Research focuses mainly on companies that have moved to a completely virtual structure like the study by Helms and Raiszadeh (2002), rather than specific HR processes like onboarding. In 2020 and 2021, prompted by the increased focus on remote, virtual work due to the Covid19 pandemic, researchers like Rodeghero et al. (2021) and McDonnell (2020) have focused on virtual onboarding covering specific professional groups, software engineers, and finance teams.

In their study, Rodeghero et al. (2021) focused on investigating the remote onboarding of Microsoft software engineers, providing an insight into the challenges and needs of more technical teams. Through collected survey data, they identified six key challenges of remote onboarding: communication and collaboration, asking for help, building team connections, finding documentation, technical issues, and hardware and permissions. They also recorded specific actions that the teams had done to make the new hire feel connected: daily interactions with the manager, welcome meetings with the team, colleagues reaching out to them to check how everything was going and if they needed any support, virtual social events and lastly, assigned onboarding buddy. Based on the study, reflecting on their results from the survey and additional interviews completed as part of the empirical data collection, they documented ten recommendations for onboarding software engineers (table 3).

TABLE 3 Recommendations for virtual onboarding (adapted Rodeghero et al., 2021)

Recommendation for software engineer virtual onboarding
1. Promote communication and asking for help
2. Encourage teams to turn cameras on
3. Schedule 1:1 meetings
4. Provide information about the organization
5. Emphasize team building
6. Assign an onboarding buddy
7. Assign an onboarding technical mentor

8. Support multiple onboarding speeds
9. Assign simple first task
10. Provide up-to-date documentation

The first four of the recommendations link to communication. Promoting open communication and asking for help is important to ensure that new hires feel comfortable reaching out to their colleagues remotely when they have a question, either within the defined timeframe or general, depending on the colleague, manager, or team's availability. To build a closer relationship with the team, turning cameras on when on a video call and scheduling a 1:1 meeting to establish better connection were seen as good ideas. Lastly, linking to the communication, providing information about the organization to enable the new hire to understand and relate their role to the overall business. Emphasizing team building to support the new hire to better connect to the team, feel part of the team. Assigning both an onboarding buddy and technical mentor, the new hires can get support for their overall integration, onboarding as well as low-level technical questions. To support the new hire to start executing their tasks, giving them an actual task to perform together with good documentation of the steps will enable them to start executing their work faster and take steps towards completing the onboarding. (Rodeghero et al., 2021)

When reflecting on the findings and recommendations captured by Rodeghero et al. (2021) to the previous remote work and onboarding research reviewed as part of this research, the researchers bring up more technical, hardware-based challenges. Tools are previously recorded as one of the remote work enablers by Nilles (1997). Snell (2006) states that providing the tools can slow down the total onboarding process, providing it as an example of the badly handled onboarding process. Also, the other challenges recognized by Rodeghero et al. (2021) align with the theories from previous studies, highlighting even further the importance of communication and collaboration that is captured by Mulki et al. (2009) as well as Bauer's (2010) 4C model.

From a recommendation perspective, their ten recommendations complement and align with the existing research, providing more comprehensive solutions for the companies to tackle the challenges of remote onboarding. The high level of technical expertise expected from software engineers impacts the recommendations they bring up, especially the need for a technical mentor and assigning a first simple task to get started.

Another recent study by McDonald (2020) studied remote onboarding from the finance team perspective, covering a more business and management-oriented role perspective. His paper lists five focus areas (figure 3) that are important to successful virtual onboarding: organization, welcome package, introductions, communication, and expectations.

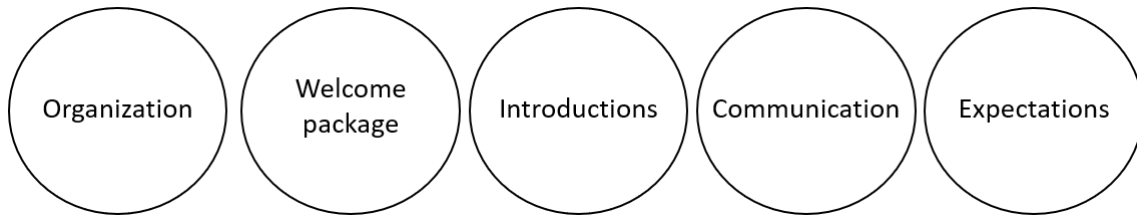


FIGURE 3 Successful remote onboarding focus areas (adapted McDonald, 2020)

With organization, McDonald (2020) refers to the importance of having all the necessary documents, contracts, and tools available for the new employee from the very start. When working remotely, especially being able to access the company network and having a company laptop becomes very important. The second focus area, the welcome package, refers to the general info with an overview of the company, policies, and any extra welcoming gifts, such as a pen or stickers with the company logo. As the third focus item, he highlights the need to introduce the new hire and existing staff to open the communication channels and ensure that the new employee feels welcome. For example, a kick-off virtual roundtable call or virtual lunch with the team could be a way to do this.

Fourthly, he lists communication as an important factor to ensure that the onboarding goes well. As the new hire is not simply able to walk to you with the questions, you need to provide the channels for the questions. Examples of the channel could be daily quick catch-up, encouragement to use internal, online chatting tools like Slack, or alike to send their questions if they have any. As the fifth focus item, McDonnell lists the importance of setting the expectations from the very start. Understanding the expectations will help the new hire perform in line with the expectations.

McDonald's (2020) findings align well with previously introduced theories covering remote work and onboarding separately, especially to Bauer's (2010) 4C onboarding elements model. The organization and welcome package can be seen as part of the compliance and connection activity, introduction and communication link to connection and culture, and expectations to clarification. The difference between the studies reviewed is how certain areas have been highlighted and separated from each other. For example, McDonald (2020) brings up the welcome package as one of the key five areas similarly to Caldwell and Peters (2018), whereas in Bauer's (2010) 4Cs model welcome package and the orientation are embedded into the overall culture element. Rodeghero et al. (2021) bring up both a technical mentor and a buddy as key elements that the new hire needs as part of the onboarding, McDonald (2020) does not bring this up directly but rather refers to the importance of ensuring that the new hire is supported and welcomed.

2.3.2 Remote onboarding framework

In this study, the focus is to understand and explore virtual onboarding, and especially the key elements contributing to its success in the case company

collectively across the process participants. A summarised view (figure 4) was drawn to support a clear understanding of existing research key roles, elements, benefits, and challenges related to the overall field of remote onboarding.

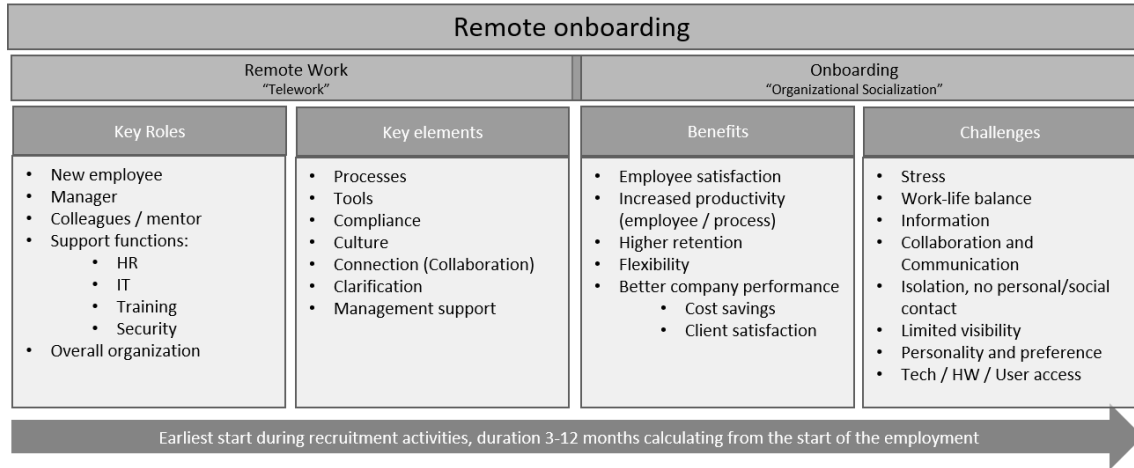


FIGURE 4 Summarised remote onboarding theoretical framework

This study investigates the case company remote onboarding process key elements through the descriptions of the key process participants collectively. The seven defined key elements based on the studied theory are processes, tools, compliance, culture, connection, including collaboration, clarification, and management support. Bauer's (2010) 4C (Compliance, Culture, Connection, Clarification) model, together with Nilles' (1997) remote work enablers (Processes, Tools, Management Support), provide a good overview of the key elements required for successful remote onboarding as all the other theories and frameworks can be linked under them. Similarities between benefits and challenges in the past onboarding and remote work can be found. However, some benefits and challenges are directly linked to the onboarding or the remote work element. For example, the challenge of not meeting anyone face to face is related to remote work structure, not to onboarding in general.

3 CASE COMPANY

3.1 Company overview

This study explores the onboarding process participant experiences in a specific case company during the Covid19 pandemic. While the case company name is not specified in the published material, the size, business area, and company growth are important to be explained and understood. Understanding the context also helps to reflect the results in a specific framework. The case company was founded in 2009 and has grown between 30 to 40 percent each year, doubling its turnover every two years since then. The company provides modern software as service (SaaS) solutions for digital trade in Europe and currently employs around 300 people across two key locations in Europe, Germany and United Kingdom.

In 2016, the company was bought by a large international company with over 14 000 employees; however, it operates as an independent subsidiary supporting over 80 retailers and 700 brands worldwide. In 2020, the company employee base consisted of 20 different nationalities, majority are German, other nationalities form around 15% of the firm's total staff. The average age of the staff was 32 years in 2020. In 2021, the company extended its operations by joining forces with another company, adding a new key office location in Europe, and increasing its staffing with over 70 new international employees.

The organization presents itself as a customer and a solution-focused company in the constant evolution process. They label their team and the team members as passionate, trustworthy, reliable, ambitious, diligent, and collegial who pull in the same direction and strive to make a difference, playing to their key strengths, loving what they are doing, and doing what they are loving stating that passion and job are compatible. The company encourages its employees to innovate and improve the processes and tools and often highlights their team spirit, which focuses on working together, caring, and helping each other. In the

subject of onboarding, they especially state on their public web page career section that they take the time to integrate new colleagues into the team, which they underline to be a very important factor in achieving further growth. One of the benefits provided to the employees is the possibility to work remotely. The company provides remote employees the necessary IT equipment to perform work efficiently from a non-office location.

3.2 Employee onboarding program structure

In 2020, the company hired 65 employees, increasing its staff size radically. Onboarding these employees was partially done face to face, partially remotely depending on the level of Covid19 related regulations. In general, with few exceptions, all the new hires visited the office at least once during their onboarding when they picked up their laptop and security badge from the office location. No overall documented onboarding process covering all the roles and activities involved has been documented within the company. The onboarding process has been recorded below based on the discussions and interviews with the company P&O representative.

The Human Resources (HR) department of the company, labeled as the People & Organisation (P&O) department, has the overall oversight of the onboarding process. The mission of the P&O department focuses on attracting the best people to the company and supporting the company team to develop their overall strength. P&O has a documented step-by-step onboarding checklist (table 4) to ensure that all the necessary steps are taken from their, and IT's side, interlocking to other teams, like the actual team and the team lead of the new hire. The list includes admin steps like setting up an employee email address, sending a welcome email to all the new hires, preparing, and setting up a welcome day for the new hires, assigning time slots for IT equipment pickups, and supporting team lead to be prepared for the new hires starting.

TABLE 4 Simplified version of the case company onboarding checklist (Company P&O)

Activity	When	Responsible
Create email address	One week before the start	IT/P&O
Welcome Day invitation email to new hires	Two weeks before the start	P&O
Assigning individual time slots for IT equipment pick-up	Two weeks before the start	P&O / IT
Info of the onboarding to the responsible leads	Two weeks before the start	P&O
Preparation of welcome day/start packages	One week before the start	P&O
Internal blog post to introduce the new hire to the existing employees	2-3 days before the start	P&O

Email with the most important links for the first days for the new employees	2-3 days before the start	P&O
Release Checklist Onboarding for new colleagues	One day before the start	P&O
Check invitation of all new employees for the remote welcome block via video conference	2-3 days before the start	P&O
New employee info to the corporate	First day of start	P&O
Creation of new files for the employees within internal storage	First day of start	P&O

The overview does not cover specific tasks related to all the teams involved, such as the tasks of the manager, training, or marketing department who play a role in the onboarding of the new employees. Based on discussions with the company P&O department representative, additional core P&O activities related to onboarding are not covered in the checklist but rather assumed as part of the activity step, such as creating the IT and security service ticket.

In 2020, due to the pandemic and requirement to handle most activities without physical contact, some changes were required to enable the new hires to join the company without being exposed to multiple people. These changes included, for example delivering general new employee welcome presentations via online tools and scheduling individual time slots for the new hire to pick up their IT equipment from the office location or, in some cases, sending the IT equipment by post due to specific quarantine regulations or location aspects.

In the company, a checklist format is also used in other parts of the new employee onboarding process, first by P&O providing the new hire a clear list of activities required during the first days as part of their welcome info and then by the actual new team of the new hire providing the new employee a clear roadmap of the onboarding activities that they need to complete to start performing their daily work independently. These team-specific new hire onboarding checklists are created within the team and normally include basic elements, like the key software education required to be done by each new hire. Other onboarding plan elements are defined by the team leads, who can decide on the areas and topics that will be included in the individual checklists within the different departments and teams. These lists are stored as an individual, employee-specific page in the company's intranet structure, initially set up by the team lead and assigned buddy. Buddy is a colleague who acts like a mentor and the first contact for any inquiries. The new hire is responsible for updating their completion status after the checklist has been provided to them.

To support the new employee to integrate into the company, the standard onboarding activities also include a remote virtual meeting called "Newbie Coffee with the Management," visiting and spending a bit of time with the other teams to understand their role in the overall process better and get to know the other employees outside of their team. In addition, the company organizes an intensive seminar that focuses on giving the new hires an in-depth

understanding of the business and software products through information sessions and team casework. Currently, also this seminar takes place remotely due to Covid19. During Newbie Coffee with the Management, the new employees meet the company's top management and chat in a relaxed environment about their experiences with the company so far. They are welcomed to express their views and feedback and answer any questions they might have regarding the company strategy, changes, or anything else they wish to ask. Before Covid19 pandemic restrictions, these events took place on-site, but since 2020 they are organized virtually via video conference tools.

To support working remotely, maintain and develop the team spirit between existing and new employees, the company has developed regular virtual meetings and events for the staff working virtually. Many of these events are meant for all the personnel, both new hires and existing employees. The company introduced the Lunch Mates application, which randomly divides the remote participants into different tables and enables the employees to socialize across the departments virtually while having lunch. The managers are encouraged to organize weekly virtual breakfast meetings and regular other team events virtually or onsite. The company continues utilizing their already existing video conference, online chatting, and other virtual tools to ensure that the teams can stay connected although working in a virtual environment.

4 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The overall research approach with the empirical data collection method selection, design and execution, and the data analytics methods are described in detail in this chapter. The background of selecting the methods and explanation of the followed research steps are described in detail.

4.1 Research approach

This research aims to understand the virtual onboarding process and process participant experiences, especially their views of the components contributing to the success of the onboarding in a specific company as a case study and searching answers to the research questions. To answer the research questions, a qualitative research method is used. The qualitative research method allows the study to understand and clarify a person's experiences and provide detailed insights into specific situations (Barrett and Twycross, 2018; Polkinghorne, 2005), making it a fitting method to be used.

Through a case study, specific information related to organizations' structure, ideas, and employee thoughts can be obtained and researched in detail (Llewellyn, 2007). Woodside and Wilson (2003) additionally refer to case studies as especially good for achieving a broad, deep perspective through describing, understanding, predicting, or controlling the individual, specific item, in this case, the virtual onboarding process. Case studies focus on understanding the "how" and "why," capturing the rules, thoughts, feelings, and emotions of the research subjects (Llewellyn, 2007). Woodside and Wilson (2003) summarise the ultimate object of the case study to be a deep understanding of the item in the focus of the research, in this case, the virtual onboarding process in the company. Aligning with Llewellyn (2007), they also record that the case studies aim to answer "how" and "why" questions, but further extend the case studies also to be able to search answers to "who, what, where, when" together with "how" as part of the describing the item in focus, in this case, the virtual, remote

onboarding process in a specific company. By explaining the case item, the case study can answer the research questions to understand why certain things are or happen as they happen. Woodside and Wilson (2003) include additionally predicting and controlling as part of possible objectives of a case study. They state that through a detailed, in-depth understanding of the case process, short or long-term forecasts of certain behaviors or events can be drawn. In this case, the participant attitudes and behaviors, the new hires entering the company, can be influenced.

Case studies are seen especially suitable for periods of change (Llewellyn, 2007). In this case firm, onboarding process structure has been changing due to the requirements set by the pandemic and restrictions, which prompted the company to move to a remote work setting across most of their processes. Additionally, the case company has grown rapidly in the past years, increasing their turnover and staffing radically, impacting many processes being created, re-designed, or re-reviewed, making a case study method especially suitable to be used.

4.2 Empirical data collection method

The study investigates the virtual onboarding process from multiple process participant perspectives and collects the perspectives and experiences using semi-structured interviews. Barrett and Twycross (2018) state that interviews are an especially suitable method to gather detailed and rich data regarding a particular situation. They further explain that the type of interview can be decided based on the specific research question, the characteristics of participants, and the preferred approach of the researcher. They list open, unstructured, and semi-structured interviews as examples of different types of interviews. In this research, a semi-structured interview is selected to ensure that core onboarding process elements are covered by each of the interviews but leaves still an option for participants to bring their views and perspective to the table. Barrett and Twycross (2018) highlight the semi-structured interview method as the most common approach. The approaches ensure that the key parts of the phenomenon are covered via specific question areas and prepared questions. The semi-structured interview method still leaves a possibility for the interviewed people to share their additional comments, views, and persona.

Separate meetings took place between the company P&O representative and the student researcher to review the research scope, interview selection, status update, and gather basic information of the process and some of the terms used by the interviews. These meetings were not recorded. The actual study interviews were executed virtually using an online video meeting program. The audio of each interview was recorded with the participant's agreement.

In total, 582 minutes of audio were recorded across the 15 interviews. The average time per interview was 39 minutes. The shortest interview time was 25

minutes, the longest 52 minutes. Recorded audio material was transcribed to enable extensive and detailed analysis of the collected data. For example, some of the elements of company structure and scope of certain activities mentioned by the interviewed employees were also clarified with the company P&O representative via separate calls or by email before and after the study interviews were performed. Across the 15 performed interviews, 132 pages of transcribed data were written. Transcribing was started simultaneously with the interviews and took one month altogether to complete in March 2021. Greetings and clarifications related to the overall study initially and at the end of the recordings were not fully transcribed. Crutch words, like “like” and “you know,” were transcribed as well as sounds of hesitation like “um” where it was seen beneficial for the student researcher to understand hesitation or uncertainty. Remarks of confirming listening like “yeah” made by the interviewer were not transcribed unless seen as important to the overall understanding of the text section.

4.2.1 Semi-structured interview design and scope

The study investigates the virtual onboarding process and the key elements contributing to its success, as seen by the multiple process participants collectively. The perspectives and experiences are collected from the process participants using semi-structured interviews. Polkinghorne (2005) highlights that selecting the interview participants requires a strategic and iterative approach, ensuring that appropriate descriptions of the experience can be collected sufficiently. Participants should not be selected because a certain amount is required to reach a certain statistical coverage point. Instead, they should be picked based on their ability to contribute substantially to the study of the experience from different perspectives, ultimately leading the researcher to locate the core meaning and deepen the understanding of the experience. There can be several iterations of selecting the sources during the study in case the researcher identifies a need to include further participants to expand on or better understand the experience.

In this study, the company P&O department representative identified the participants based on the specifications provided by the student researcher, aiming to target roles who actively participated in the process and could therefore provide substantial experiences regarding it. The P&O representative approached each of the selected participants to understand if they would be willing to join the study sharing a summary of the research topic and relevant data privacy information (Appendix 2). Each participant was given an option to refuse the interview and withdraw from the process. Altogether 15 interviews were executed across February and March 2021. These 15 interviews covered five new hires, four hiring managers, three new hire buddies, two P&O department representatives that actively work in the onboarding area, and one internal software trainer. The managers and buddies were selected based on the new hires interviewed. One manager of the five new hires was not interviewed due to the workload, and two buddies of the new hires were not interviewed as they had left the company since the onboarding took place. The interviews with the

onboarded employee, their manager, and their buddy were executed, focusing mainly on the specific onboarding regarding the onboarded employee. Some interview questions were extended to cover also general impressions of the interviewee. The interviews with P&O and the training department representative focused on capturing the experiences and views in general rather than focusing on specific new hires.

Five new hires were interviewed as part of the study. All the new hires were from different departments to provide different perspectives. Four of them were hired at the team member level, one of them at the management level. Each new hire had a different manager and a buddy. All the interviewed new hires were in the company for over 90 days. The average time they had been employed by the company when the interview took place was seven months. Two of the new hires were hired directly after finishing their education, three of the new hires had some post-study work experience before joining the case company. The onboarding structure followed a similar structure for all. However, there were key differences whether the new hire could remain at the office after picking up their laptop or whether they needed to go home to start their remote onboarding. Two of the new hires started working remotely; three got to spend at least a few weeks at the office before moving to a remote setting. The longest time that the new hire spent continuously at the office during their six-month probation period was six weeks.

Interviews were performed in English which was not a native language for any of the interviewed employees. English is regularly used in the company as a working language, and none of the interviewees expressed concern regarding the language used in the interview. The interviews were scheduled in advance for 30-45 minutes by the company P&O representative; however, the P&O representative did not join them. Each interviewee was informed that the interview would be performed virtually via a video conference program, and audio would be recorded. The video was not recorded. Each participant was informed that they could request a copy of their recorded interview after the interview.

The interviews were performed using a semi-structured interview method. A semi-structured interview frame (Appendix 1), also referred to as an interview guide by King (2004), was built based on existing theoretical information regarding traditional and remote onboarding areas (figure 6) and initial discussions with the case company P&O representative to ensure that interviews focused on correct overall areas and the analyzed interview material ultimately can answer to the research questions. Additional basic information questions were included in the beginning to collect information from each participant covering their position, department, relation to the new hire, and other demographic information. The drafted interview frame was shared with the thesis instructor and company P&O representative in advance to collect feedback and capture any adjustment suggestions. Small adjustments were done to the interview frame during the interview cycles to ensure a good interview flow, enable the participants to understand the questions better, and capture better

different role perspectives. The same interview structure was used across all interviews; however, questions were modified slightly to suit each of the interviewed roles.

Before executing the interviews, the recommended, good research practices on how to plan and conduct the interviews were studied carefully using the guidance provided by Barrett and Twycross (2018), King (2004), and Polkinghorne (2005). During the interviews leading questions or remarks were aimed to be avoided. In line with King's (2004) advice, interviews were started with simple, easy-to-answer questions like the role in the organization and ended with a positive tone. Multiple questions were avoided to be asked at once. If these appeared during the interview, questions were broken into separate questions or re-formatted to support the person interviewed to understand better and answer a specific question. During the interviews, the interviewer aimed to be neutral and only direct the discussion when the semi-structured frame so required to ensure that the topics were covered. Leading questions and non-verbal signals were avoided to mitigate influencing the participants as per guidance from Barrett and Twycross (2018).

4.3 Data analysis method

The thematic analysis was used in a precise, rigorous, and methodical manner to ensure trustworthiness and achieve meaningful results in line with the best practice documented by Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017) and King and Brooks (2018). King and Brooks (2018) explain that the thematic analysis method aims to capture themes, repeating and distinctive features of participants' views, characterizing specific perceptions or experiences that the researcher sees relevant to the research question. It seeks to identify, understand, and highlight the key themes in well-prepared qualitative data so that the researched subject can be explained and understood by the audience. They highlight that thematic analysis can be performed in multiple ways; however, all styles of the thematic analysis include two parts, defining and organizing themes into a structure showing relationships between them.

The analysis process used in this study followed the phases documented by Nowell et al. (2017).

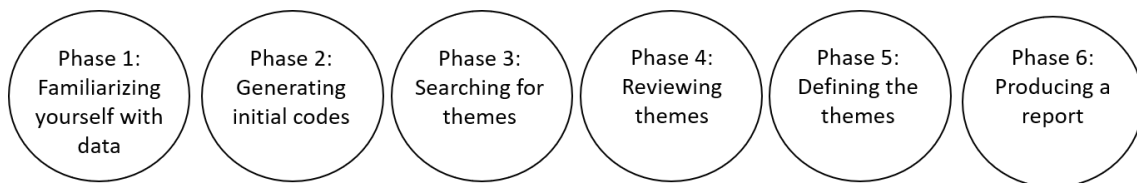


FIGURE 5 Phases of the thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017)

The analysis of the interview data was started already during the transcription process. The student researcher familiarized herself with the data while listening and reviewing the transcribed interview texts. Specific, re-occurring subjects in the documents were noted. A more structured data review was started after transcriptions were completed. By reading the transcribed interview texts, re-listening the recorded semi-structured interviews was necessary to understand better and highlight specific categories and codes, some of which the student researcher had already made a note of during a transcribing process. Each code identified was linked to a specific text string found from a text. At the beginning of the analysis process, also the material provided by the case company regarding company organization structure, values, and other information was reviewed for reference. Having a clear view of the company supported the student researcher in analyzing the data in a company context and understanding the specific roles, team structures, and activities better. These materials provided by the company were also re-visited during the other steps of the analysis process.

Once the initial codes were captured through the detailed review across all the 15 transcribed interviews, specific re-occurring themes were searched. During this phase, the texts and records were further reviewed, initially recorded codes adjusted to two different layers (code 1 and 2), enabling filtering and viewing the data from different perspectives. Specific themes summarising the main views arising from the data were drafted. No second layer of the code was recorded in a case where top code was seen descriptive enough.

Polkinghorne (2005) states that the actual transcribed data word by word is not the evidence, but rather the evidence is in the ideas and thoughts that have been explained by the interviewed people using their terms. When the researcher analyzed the data and looked for the themes, especially when maturing the themes, this was considered. While the wording of certain elements might have differed between the interviewed employees, these were summarised under the same theme if the overall meaning or idea of the statement was the same.

Phases 2-5 of the analysis process (figure 5) were repeated multiple times, maturing the codes and themes and organizing them in a structured way until the student researcher had a clear view of the repeating themes at an overall level. Data matrix was used to logically organize the captured themes and start identifying differences and similarities with the views of the different roles. King (2004) refers to a data matrix as a structure to display the collected, qualitative data in a format where it can be further interpreted. Excel-based descriptive data matrix format was used to structure the captured themes and codes together with the interviewed roles, each interviewed person specific on their column into a table. At this point of the analysis, the initial text strings were streamlined further and combined under one line were mentioned by many different interviewees, enabling the student researcher to see more clearly if multiple roles brought up certain specific elements. An example of the used codes and themes in a simplified is shared as table 5, giving a view of how the student researcher categorized and analyzed the data. In the example, each of the interviewed

personnel is not divided into specific columns like in the actual datasheet but combined enable presentable format.

TABLE 5 Example of the research data with themes in a data matrix format

Data element	Sub-theme	Theme	NH	L	B	S
Online after virtual work tools used to encourage communication within the team	Digitalization	Defined, evolving process and structure		X		
P&O hour enables the NH to raise their questions and concerns and communicate with P&O	Encourage asking questions	Enable clarification and learning				X
The social aspect is important when forming a relationship with your colleagues; it is easier to form it face to face	Use face-to-face meetings	Establish and maintain a connection	X			
It is easier to understand the actual way to do things when you do it yourself	Learning by doing	Enable clarification and learning			X	

The captured themes were further reviewed in the data matrix format, updated, aligned, divided, combined, and adjusted multiple times during the analysis process when re-reading and re-listening the empirical material. After the first review of the data altogether, 27 top-level themes were recorded, covering 638 sections in the transcribed data. During the analysis process, which took place across two months, these were further streamlined to four overall themes with 14 sub-themes (table 6).

TABLE 6 Overview of the identified themes and sub-themes

Defined and evolving process and structure	Ensure a fit	Establish and maintain a connection	Enable clarification and learning
Onboarding plan	Hire the right people	Buddy	Encourage asking questions
Timely quality information	Customization	Don't lose the new hire	Learning by doing
Standardization		Use face-to-face meetings	Learning from others
Digitalization			Sufficient time to support
Continuous improvement			

In addition to the overall data matrix containing the interviewed employees, the codes, and the themes, a separate data sheet containing basic background info of each person interviewed was created. This enabled the student research to analyze better if any background elements, like the length of the employment with

the company, study background, or career history, played a role in how the interviewed persons experienced the virtual onboarding. The completed data matrix table was used to produce the final study report covering the results and conclusions, referring to specific sections of the transcribed interviews. Adjustments and re-wording of the codes and themes were done during the report writing phase when the research approach and data analysis were further matured.

5 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter, the analyzed results based on empirical data are opened in line with the research questions. In the cited text, the new employees are coded as NH1, NH2, NH3, NH4, and NH5, team leaders are coded as L1, L2, L3, and M4, buddies are marked as B1, B2, and B3, and the shared services function representatives from P&O and training department are marked as S1, S2, and S3. Firstly, results are opened at the collective level explaining the key elements and themes of successful onboarding identified from the analyzed data. After introducing key elements, the results are opened from a process, and role perspective, reflecting on the key themes identified and specifying the role that the process participants have in the process and how they contribute to the key elements of successful onboarding.

Transcribed interview text is cited with specific themes or overall impressions identified, providing transparency and clarity. Any references to gender or specific departments are removed or replaced to ensure the anonymity of the interviewed personnel. Repeating terms and grammatical errors are updated seen as helpful to understand the sentence. Context and referred areas are explained using box brackets if necessary to understand the cited sentence.

5.1 Elements of successful remote onboarding

The study seeks to understand and describe the case company remote onboarding process key success elements collectively based on the process participants' descriptions of elements they saw as important and critical for the success of the process. On an overall level, the process participants were satisfied with the onboarding process they had experienced either from the new hire or other process participant role perspective, indicating that the elements of the current process are elements of successful onboarding. Some interviewed personnel also referred to the additional positive feedback they have received

from recent new hires. They described the important overall remote onboarding success elements as part of their explanations and, in some cases, highlighting them clearly as the most critical element impacting the success of the onboarding. No one expressed direct dissatisfaction towards the process they had been part of, and some appeared to be surprised by how well the process worked in a virtual environment. Some initial feelings of fear towards remote onboarding were brought up in the interviews. In each case, the fear had disappeared during the process, indicating that the initial attitude might not impact the overall success of the onboarding process.

So, I have to say that I was kind of afraid to start a new work and I knew that everything must be remote.- - I was super surprised about the onboarding process because it worked and, it is still very structured- - I did not miss a lot in my onboarding. (NH1)

I think that [remote onboarding] is really well organized now. (B2)

I think it [remote onboarding] is really working. That's everything I can say. It has really worked for the new hire. And that's also the new hire's response. So I'm pretty happy that it has gone this way. (L3)

I was quite surprised, it [remote onboarding] worked really good. (L4)

Four overall themes of successful remote onboarding can be observed from the analyzed empirical data: Defined process and structure that keeps on evolving to respond to the needs, ensuring that the new hire and the used remote onboarding approach is a good fit, structure establishing and maintaining the connection with the new hire, and lastly enabling clarification and learning platforms. Further sub-themes were identified, linking to the overall themes, further explaining and specifying the elements and approaches required to achieve success in remote onboarding.

5.1.1 Defined, evolving process and structure

The process participants saw a defined, but at the same time continuously evolving remote onboarding process with clear responsibilities and a standardized approach to the onboarding plan and the key roles as one of the important components of successful onboarding providing a clear base and structure for everybody to execute their roles and understand what elements were covered and when. As a basic element, the onboarding plan and the information shared are seen as two successful onboarding elements together with standardization, digitalization, and continuous improvement, helping the process further mature, become more efficient, and evolve when needed.

Onboarding plan The provided digital onboarding plan, checklist forms a large part of the onboarding setting structure in most of the onboarding. The plan, which is accessible to the new hire but also the buddy, the lead of the team, and the P&O representative, supports the new hire to get an idea of the necessary elements and the timeline, enabling them to go through the information and

necessary onboarding activities in an organized manner. The structure and the usage of the onboarding plan varied across the new hires and the teams, but all new hires described the checklist as something that included basic items to learn. The teams, mainly the lead, and the buddy assigned, updated the checklists based on their views and preference. Each of the checklists was in a digital format, but it was seen that streamlining and standardized structure might benefit the teams and the new hires to provide the information in the most beneficial way.

-- I think it's only us that have it [checklist] like in that structure, that onboarding plan. And I said it before. I think more teams should work in that way because it gives the newbie, like the feeling of okay, I know how to start, where to start. And what do I need to get more knowledge than just asking everyone, so I can really take and go back again and see okay, whatever was done yesterday and so on. So I think that is a pretty helpful way. (L3)

Sometimes the checklist covered the initial months, sometimes the whole six-month period culminating in completing a certification presentation. The checklist is considered valuable to get a clear view of the items required to complete and independently proceed with the education required, both of new hire and other participant perspectives. Some teams included cultural elements in their onboarding plan and some focused on more task-specific elements.

For me, the checklist is really perfect for people who work independently, like me. I could see all the things that I had to do and the timelines - -. (NH3)

Also, as part of the onboarding plan, the buddy is explaining what is meant with culture and explaining just that we are a pretty open team, I would say. A team that also wants to sometimes grab a cup of coffee in the kitchen or after work is joining a lunch or whatever. (L3)

The interviewed personnel suggested few improvements. Suggestions focused on the accuracy of the documentation linked to the plan, usage of a video where possible, recording the activity points in a more comprehensive matter, specifying the actions in a detailed level enabling the new hire to execute them without further support, adding more elements covering the social aspect of the onboarding and in overall level, enabling cross-team standardization of the checklist structure to ensure that best possible structure is used across the board.

Timely quality information Aligning with one of the findings of the existing onboarding study by Caldwell and Caldwell (2016) as well as recent remote onboarding paper from Rodeghero et al. (2021), the high volume of information, reaching the level of overload during the onboarding was highlighted by the interviewed personnel as an element impacting the onboarding. The quality of the data provided, especially linking to the work instructions provided as part of the onboarding plan, was brought up, impacting the ability of the new hire to easily review the education or guidance documents as the links provided were linking to the old, outdated information or not working at all.

And you are flooded with information when you're starting with the company. And if there is more information and more and more, you really get stuck. (L2)

So I think it's like, yeah, sometimes a little bit overwhelming with a lot of information. (S1)

- - I realized because the first four weeks was like too much information, maybe also the first six weeks, and I said I would never, ever understand anything of this. Um, and then there was this where when everything falls into place somehow ah, and I really started to understand what's it all about. (NH5)

The information overload was generally linked to the team-specific onboarding, work task information provided as part of the onboarding plan, checklist. While the checklist as a structure was seen as useful and beneficial; many brought up outdated links, too generalized elements, the importance of reviewing the information in a structured order and

Some menus in our intranet are not that actual, they are sometimes a bit old, and not every step is included. (B3)

- -the plan, the onboarding plan, is pretty good but needs a lot of work to make it more specific and more human as well. You know, make it like tasks. (NH3)

I think it's not. It's not the topics that are covered. But I think it's the order because some topics are covered too early, then it's useless because you need information upfront or knowledge upfront to understand things, and you need it much later. And I think it's more getting the things and the content of the plan into the correct order that it makes it more efficient. (L2)

The approach to maintain the documents linked to onboarding plans varied across the teams. In some teams, each document was assigned an owner who was responsible for updating it. In some, the information was not updated at all due to other workloads, and in some teams, the updates were done when possible. Previous research regarding onboarding and remote onboarding has highlighted similar issues making it a rather general issue faced by the new hires as part of their onboarding, virtually or at the office (Caldwell and Caldwell, 2016; Rodeghero et al., 2021).

Standardization Generally, the remote onboarding process was seen to work well. At the same time, it was seen that it could be further improved, structured, and matured. Snell (2006) refers to a standardized onboarding process from an efficiency perspective, stating that a documented and understood, reviewed, and tracked process enables the companies to improve their onboarding efficiency. In the study interviews, standardization of the buddy role, checklist, and forum to share best practices of onboarding which targets a certain level of standardization utilizing the practices that work across the teams, were seen as possible improvements to the existing setup.

The overall process flow followed similar steps across the teams. The responsibilities that the different roles have during the process, especially the role definition and the expectation related to the buddy role, differed between the teams. One of the buddy experiences was very different from the others resulting that the role of the buddy was not seen as important by the new hire. In this case, the new hire identified additional support for themselves on their own, indicating that the role of the buddy is important and needed when executed as

per general expectations in the company. The teams might benefit from a more standardized approach to ensure that each new hire gets the benefit of the role. Standardization and the clear expectation setting across the buddies might also benefit the buddies themselves. Role training for the buddies was also seen as a potential improvement.

The company should offer specific training for our employees in the role of an instructor for newbies and apprentices. Additionally, I suggest creating a group with regular meetings with all instructors within the business units to give them the possibility to share "best practices", discuss concerns and share the experience. (L2)

Digitalization A theme linking to the overall improvement of the remote aspect of the process and highlighting the positive side of remote onboarding at the overall level was observed from the analyzed data as an element to support the successful remote onboarding. The challenge of remote work, in general, has also resulted in solutions that had been experienced positive from an overall workflow perspective and at least partially suitable to try to bridge the social gap resulted from the pandemic. Most of the company tools and applications were already online. The company utilized more virtual structures and tools like the Lunch Mates application to randomly allocate the employees joining the lunch session to separate virtual tables to support the social aspect. While some of the interviewed personnel described virtual events not to be the same as the face-to-face ones, the new hires brought them up as positive experiences, which helped to better understand the company's culture.

It was the Christmas party, like the virtual Christmas party. We had 60 people virtually, and we were in different groups, and the groups changed every 30 minutes. It was just like a situation, we are a young company, and I do not know, it was kind of a different spirit. I do not know how to describe it, but it is young, and everyone was just like not business casual. It was just cool because everybody was super motivated to drink and have a chat and do some games, and so it was just like this is the situation, remote, this is the culture in the company, everybody is super helpful and super communicative. (NH1)

The workflows were improved, especially from the cross-team support perspective, enabling digital data handling instead of using paper formats.

A great advantage for myself is that we have the digital [contract] signature and also that the new hires upload upfront their personal and relevant information. Normally, they just brought it to us in a paper form, and we needed to put it in, which was time-consuming. (S3)

Nilles (1997) recorded productivity as a benefit of remote work, partially linking to the aspect that the work was performed with online tools, partially because the distractions of the office were not present at the remote work. Snell (2006) refers to the usage of the virtual tool to enable improvement of the overall process efficiency; hence the subject is not completely new in the onboarding research, although it can be seen more critical in the remote environment as digital tools enable the completion of basic work activities and connection between the team members. In the case company, the digital tools had improved efficiency and

resulted in new, virtual tools being used to bridge the gaps linked to remote work, like lack of social connection.

Continuous improvement The need to re-review, adjust and improve the onboarding process in the new, virtual situation was highlighted in the interviews. A culture of continuous improvement was brought up regularly in the interviews, reflecting the company culture, which supports open feedback and prompt execution of correcting actions when issues are identified. The continuous improvement element was brought up especially strongly in relation to the possible improvements or removal of time-wasting elements in the process, targeting improving it when issues were identified. Most of the improvement and time-wasting factors mentioned were generally already fixed because the action was already taken.

I think we're always raising such topics [waste in the process]. So if we see that something that doesn't make sense or does not work, we change it. (L1)

- - from the beginning on, you can make a difference. You can bring in your ideas and improvements and everything. (NH5)

I think a great part of our [case company] spirit is that you're not just a number and that you can improve things on your own. And it's not like this process is stuck like this for five years, and we don't get to change anything on it. (B3)

The case company has grown each year rapidly since it was founded in 2009. Rapidly changing organization, frequently changing processes resulting outdated documentation, increase in the recruitment needs, and therefore overall staffing, the high workload in the teams and more international workforce were described to impact the overall company set up and, therefore, impact remote onboarding. The process that had previously worked was no longer a good fit due to the growth – the process needed to be adjusted to respond to the new requirements.

Yeah, I guess it would be created more formats or possibilities to have time, to get more people in the meeting, more bigger rounds, or options that you can get like an exchange with team members from other teams that had newbies or like experts or whatever. I guess that could be helpful because you're losing the spirit in the company. Because when I started, we had fewer people and I knew everyone at this time, and now we hire every year 50 people, and it is really hard to understand, who is this person, what are they working at the moment, do we need exchange way. You lose the kind of understanding off each other and like, working style, way culture. (L4)

Most of the identified sub-themes can be found from existing onboarding research, which does not directly link to remote aspect onboarding, but normally describes the onboarding in an office environment. This indicates that there is no major difference between remote and office-based onboarding from a process and structure perspective. It can be said that onboarding plan, structured information, standardization, continuous improvement, and digitalization are elements of onboarding in general. The importance of these elements is the difference between the two. For example, digitalization is much more important in remote onboarding, as it enables the teams to connect and work in a remote

environment; however, it can be seen it would also benefit from onboarding that happens in an office environment avoiding repetition of standard education elements. Because the new hires are not surrounded physically by their colleagues, the structure and standard of roles and processes become more important. Clear structures provide a clear path for the new hire on how to complete their onboarding with the support of the buddy and their team. The quality of the information also becomes more important as the new hires cannot always quickly check with their colleagues if they have a question on specific tasks and need to count on the documentation.

5.1.2 Ensure a fit

The process participants highlighted the importance of ensuring that the new hire fits the team and the company as one of the fundamental components of successful remote onboarding, making the process much easier and smoother from the very start. Additionally, looking at the fit from a slightly different perspective, it is seen important that the remote onboarding process is customized to fit the new hire's personality, experience, and preferences.

Hire the right people In the interviews, the importance and significance of finding and hiring the right people concerning remote onboarding were raised. The results align with Bauer's (2010) view that the recruitment process should be seen as an opportunity to provide basic role descriptions to the new hire to lower the stress from the start of the employment and identify candidates suitable for the team already before the actual start date.

If the new hire is suitable for the role and the team, both from the skill and personality perspective, the onboarding becomes easier and is likely to be more successful. The case company invites the candidates to join an intro day, sometimes referred to as training or a trial day, before the position is offered to them. The trial sessions work as a platform for the candidate to get more information of the role and the team to understand if the candidate has the skills and personality that fits the team.

I think the critical thing is already when we hire people, so it's not in progress itself. It's more at the beginning because you really look for the people that are a fit, not only from an operational perspective but from experience also, that they are a real fit for the team. We also have a whole hiring process, the intro days, where we take a lot of time to invest that they know us and we know them a little bit, the first day. And we get a good look at the people, yeah, themselves. And to estimate kind of, if that was a good fit to us. This also includes the drive-in people. Are they able to connect to the company, to the dive to the topics? We invest a lot that they get onboarded. (L1)

Normally we started with, like, an introduction day or in training day, when the new hire met the team and gets an understanding about work and so on, and it's more like that the new hire will fit in the team, fit the job, to the style of work. I was sure that I really want to have a new hire -- I was 100% sure that that the new hire was the right one. How do you say in English, like a match from the beginning, perfect match. (L4)

In the case company, the initial step of the onboarding is already taken during the beginning of the recruitment process when the suitable candidates are assessed as part of the trial day. The trial day provides a good structure to assess how well the new hire will fit the team and set a good base for the onboarding, both in virtual and office environments.

Customization In line with Gruman and Saks (2011), this study indicates that a certain level of customization of the onboarding plan, based on the new employee's needs and preferences, is beneficial to the total success of the onboarding. The new hire personality, preference, and skills, and the approach taken by the other members of the remote onboarding process team were seen to impact the success of onboarding. Some new hires described that they spent a lot of time reading the materials from the intranet; some new hires preferred joining the calls to listen. Some new hires wanted to get started immediately. Some new hires preferred to get an idea of the tasks and how they are done before. Some new hires were comfortable reaching out to other teams on their own. Some new hires needed a bit of support to reach out.

So I was, like, reading a lot, trying to get to know the teams and who is responsible for each team. So I was just sending them invites for coffee breaks. You know, without them knowing me. (NH3)

It was seen that the existing remote onboarding structure was not suitable for short-term employees, like trainees and working students. In some cases, the teams had successfully adjusted their onboarding to make it more suitable for short-term employees.

We had a trainee. And she/he told us it [remote onboarding] was a nightmare. Then I said: Ok, what we should change to the next coming? And then, we adopt it a little, so every new one gets a little bit better. (L4)

-- which people it works well, for which people it does not work. As I mentioned a working student is a special situation, same for the apprenticeship. I would say it's a special situation. I guess this doesn't work out in a virtual in a fully virtual environment. For full-time employees who are already experienced. I would say it's been a personal and cultural thing. (NH4)

In addition, supporting central training to cover areas needed in the role but not necessarily yet obtained through previous experience, especially when joining the company straight from university or another school, might make the overall onboarding of the new employee faster.

Yeah, I think that maybe some more training would be interesting. For example, some of us are right from the university --. And maybe it's interesting to have some training, like how to interact with customers or how to interact, how to act different and situations, for example. (B3)

Ensuring that the new hire fits the company and the team and that the onboarding plan is a good fit for their personality and skills is important in remote and office-based onboarding. Both of the elements target completing the onboarding with minimal issues. In remote onboarding, this can be seen as more important

than in office-based as solving issues and conflicts might be harder in a remote environment, although possible.

5.1.3 Establish and maintain a connection

Aligning with one of the 4Cs, connection, defined by Bauer (2010, establishing and maintaining social connection, enabling the new hire to social integration to the company was seen as important to be successful in the remote onboarding. Based on previous studies, it is also seen important element in office-based onboarding. The company culture can be seen as strongly impacting this element. Forming and finding friendships with colleagues and discussing non-business-related topics was seen as important in integrating into the company and becoming part of it.

- - I say, sometimes it is a bit like, like a religion, you know, because you, the people you're doing, you're starting to do some extras or some things with them also in private. And this is something that is so much fun – This is a really, really big part of your life. (NH5)

And I had from the beginning exactly that feeling that they do not know me, but they still trust me to override things and be part of the family. (NH4)

We [company] like combining the job with a passion and so on, so that it's not only a job, it is more than that. (S1)

I think it is not that big difference in our company if it's, uh, remote or onsite when it comes to how we do it together. (L1)

Establishing and maintaining the connection was seen as especially challenging because of the remote environment. The limited personal connection, limited visibility of the new hire's overall well-being and feelings, and the different kind of atmosphere in the virtual meetings and events compared to previous non-virtual events were seen the more negative impacts of the remote onboarding, mostly linking to the overall concept of remote work.

The only thing that always missing it's like, you know, you are not having personal interactions, like something did not go so well or like complex topics, it's much easier to be in the office or have like, a short talk or chat. (L4)

But in a virtual room, you sometimes do not see--, you do not have any idea. Is the new hire frustrated? Is the new hire not feeling well? Is the new hire able to do their job? (NH4)

It's also better than nothing that you can make, like the virtual meetings, but sometimes, some people are also too shy. And they are in a meeting, and it's easy to meet face-to-face because then you are also talking maybe a bit differently than just during a video call. (B1)

The buddy was seen as the key existing team member, ensuring that the new hire did not feel alone or left out and, therefore, a key element in the successful onboarding. Establishing a close personal relationship and regular, daily

meetings with the new hire, encouraging other team members to interlock with the new hire, and highlighting to a leader if there are any issues raising or additional support needed.

To have someone [as a buddy] taking care of you and who is willing to enable you and educate you. That was the best thing that you can do during the onboarding. (NH1)

The buddy is responsible for the new hire's onboarding. Mostly, I would say so. They should show the new hire the onboarding plan. They should talk daily basis with the new hire, explaining the stuff where they can help. (L3)

The role of the buddy was seen as significant in the success of the onboarding, especially in a remote environment when building close relationships with colleagues was seen harder. The relationship formed between the buddy and the new hire is seen as important to the success of the remote onboarding, although based on the interviews, not something that cannot be replaced. In the cases where the relationship between the buddy and the new hire was not very close or was not working in an ideal way, the new hire could identify another to mitigate the gap, replacing the buddy. The change was either formally recognized by the lead, taking over all the buddy activities like the checklist, or informally used by the new hire to understand specific topics.

But this other person that I kind of adopted as my buddy was really, really great to explain to me a lot. I learned a lot, so I think that the failure was just, um, choosing someone wrong for my type of person [as my buddy]. (NH3).

The role of the buddy, a mentor both from the social and technical aspect, is recorded as one of the recommendations of Rodeghero et al. (2021), focusing on the software engineer remote onboarding experiences. The role of the software engineer can be seen as similar to some of the interviewed roles.

Don't lose the new hire In line with the researchers from onboarding, remote work, and remote onboarding areas (Bauer, 2010, Sull et al., 2020, Rodeghero et al., 2021); this study highlights the importance of not losing the new hire, losing the connection by using daily check-ins, assigning a specific colleague to support the new hire and introducing social team events. Many study participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that the new hire is not lost, left on their own with the onboarding, that the company or the team shows and explains to the new hire that they are there for the new hire to support and help them. This element was especially critical in remote onboarding as a new hire is sitting alone in their home office. From the leader and team perspective, understanding and seeing how the new hire was feeling was seen as challenging.

The critical part in that is to still get them the feeling you can make it. And we are here. You're not alone. (S2)

- -it's like a top of an iceberg, you just see like 10% of it, and the rest is like, I don't know, sometimes if they, if they are feeling uncomfortable or in a bad mood--. It is sometimes difficult to see how they feel and how they react. (L4)

To avoid losing the new hire, establishing open, friendly relationships and communication channels with the new hire from the beginning across the team are important. Also, regular daily meetings with the team and the buddy, explaining clearly to the new hire that they are welcome to reach out to their lead and the team when needed and that they are not alone and encouraging the new hire to join virtual social structures like coffee talks were described as the actions that can be taken to avoid the new hire feeling alone and losing the new hire.

So the others should also get in contact with them [new hires] when they have interesting topics or something specific to show them that it could be interesting for them so that not only one person is focused on them so that they have contact with everyone in the team. (B1)

Each of the roles interviewed as part of the study saw keeping the connection with the new hire, ensuring not losing the new hire, important. From the role responsibility perspective, the new hire was expected to be open and actively participate in the social forums provided. The leader was expected to be available and support where needed, especially if alerted by the buddy or the new hire. The team was expected to proactively reach out to the new hire if they had an interesting topic. The support team was seen as having important tasks during the initial orientation and the education, establishing the relationship, and ensuring that the new hires understood that they were welcome to reach out to them in case of any issues. In addition, the role of the overall company was highlighted as important as the new hire was ideally having interactions with multiple team members daily.

I think the new hire as well is responsible for the onboarding. Yes, I think that's also a topic, to be open to trying, make time to join the lunches. Take the chance. Everything is provided, use it. (B2)

- -this is the most important in the first days or weeks to have someone to be connected to. (S3)

Use face-to-face meetings Supporting Bauer's (2010) view that while online onboarding is possible; it is not the best to give a good understanding of the role and the company to the new hire, the findings of this study indicate that there is still a need for face-to-face interaction in a virtual onboarding if possible, to be organized. Also, Mulki et al. (2009) recommend a face-to-face meeting with the employees at least once a year for the managers to maintain the relationship.

Meeting face to face was seen as positive and needed when possible, especially to form stronger relationships between colleagues, increase the team spirit, and in more formal meetings like performance reviews. The connection formed with the team members face-to-face was seen stronger and better than the connection with the colleagues only met virtually. All the new hires described meeting their colleagues and teams face to face as a positive, beneficial element that improved their relationship afterward and helped them integrate into the team and the company better.

That [meeting colleagues face to face] was quite, it was crazy. Because I talk to them, at that point I was in the company for three months, and you saw them for the first time, and you are like I know who you are, but you look so real. Not real, but different in real. I was just staring at them. For me, it was really important to meet them in person and not just talk about work but also a little about private stuff and have a beer and something. We could see that after the weekend, it was kinda different, better. (NH1)

You get stronger relationships with working in the office. Because also the social aspect, yeah, you will not have the social aspect in a video call like you have in the office kitchen. (NH2)

- -we met all the team for the first time in person. And that was one moment where I thought, well, okay, this feels comfortable. And this was really fast because it was about, like, after two months or something. (NH5)

When possible, some members of the team saw meeting the new hires as well their other colleagues at the office or in a social event outside of the work when possible important to highlight the lack of social connection in the remote work in general. While the teams were organizing social events virtually and saw the benefit, they still felt that the events organized face-to-face were better. The company supports teams to organize social events and team days face-face within the regulations at the office or outside.

I always tried to be in the office as often as I could, even during the lockdown, right. On the other hand, the direct contact with my colleagues also with the newbies and my co-workers anyways, and it's very important. (L2)

Okay, in the current situation, I think these [face-to-face social meetings] are very important. And also we have some. Yeah, we talk to each other. (L1)

It was also seen that face-to-face meetings are sometimes a more suitable option, especially in more formal meetings like performance reviews.

- -I think trial period talks with people or with grading talks, employee development talks. It doesn't feel good in a virtual environment. I still think it would be better to be in an office. (NH4)

Many interviewees reflected their experience of the remote onboarding to face-to-face experience. They explained that certain aspects of the onboarding have become slower because you cannot involve the new hire in the regular activities but rather separately need to organize reviews and time for video meeting. Suppose there is a group of people at the office performing similar activities. In that case, it might benefit the new employee, although generally onboarded remotely, to join the team at the office location for few days or more. If the team is split across different locations, this approach would not be possible; however, bringing all the people together in one location might still benefit the overall team spirit creation.

5.1.4 Enable clarification and learning

In line with one of Bauer's (2010) 4Cs, clarification, also in this study, the importance of providing clarity and clarification where seen needed to support the success of the onboarding. The two most efficient learning strategies, learning by doing and learning from others, were seen as something that should be facilitated and done to succeed in the onboarding.

Encourage asking questions The new hire's responsibility of asking questions and clearly stating if they need more support was highlighted strongly in the interviews aligning with the recent research from Rodeghero et al. (2021). The case company had introduced multiple virtual forums in a team and overall level to facilitate the team spirit and social connection across the employees. Together with a specially assigned buddy, the lead and the team want to support the new hire to get settled, learn to perform their activities, and ultimately become a productive part of the team. Orientation and the onboarding plan were provided to them to support the onboarding structure, providing specific education and contacts. Without the new hire asking questions, it was seen that the support and elements provide might not be sufficient to complete the onboarding successfully as potential gaps or issues are not realized, or all the information might not be understood correctly by the new hire.

So you can ask everyone. - -I think the team did very, very well because I did not have the image, the impression that the new hire did not receive help if he asked for it. So, of course, proactively, the new hire had to ask in the end. (L2)

It was seen important to explain that asking questions is perfectly fine and even expected from new hires, establish trust and ensure they did not feel afraid to ask questions and that they understood what forums and contacts they had in their use. Some new hires described being afraid to raise their questions only to realize that they should not have been. Team chats where multiple team members were available to answer the questions, set meetings with the new hire, especially between the new hire and buddy, and in general, clearly providing an overview of the forums together with encouragement and guidance to use them were seen as the methods on how to support the new hire to ask questions.

Yeah, so I think this is a big point to tell them [newbies] that it is ok to ask questions. And there are no silly questions, and that they can reach out to you even with the tiniest little things and feeling comfortable. (B3)

Yeah, there's a buddy at my side, and I can ask questions not only to my direct colleagues but also to others in the team and especially as we are in a supportive team for the others, I try to build a foundation kind of trust so that they want to come to us to ask questions, maybe to give us impression so what we can change - -. (S2)

In the beginning, I was afraid to ask because I did not know the people, and as a newbie, you always have tension, and I don't want to be that newbie that asks stupid questions. That would not be a good feeling for me. And also, just ask. It is not a problem to ask. Like the one that does not ask has the problem. (NH1)

The overall responsibility was seen on the new hire themselves. Only new hires can use the forums and contacts provided to raise the questions needed to get answers and highlight their support needs. In line with Bauer (2010), the role of the buddy can be very important to overcome the challenge, as the relationship and daily interlock between the buddy and the new hire normally support the new hire to ask the question they might be otherwise hesitant to ask.

The company expects me and to see what I'm able to deliver and what I'm maybe not able to deliver, and to communicate that, so my boss understands that and helped me to be able to deliver that. (NH4)

The buddy just gave me their hand and said we will get thru this, and we had our daily check-in and check-out. Like in the morning, we just talked about what will be the day, how it is structured, what kind of meetings we will have, and at the end of the day, we had a real recap and just what happened, what was good, and bad, what was interesting. For me, it was really good and had a daily basis person to talk to and ask all my questions. (NH1)

The availability to answer the questions if asked was seen as a challenge, especially in a remote work environment, when a separate video call was sometimes needed to reply clearly to the questions. Remote work, in general, was seen to increase the number of meetings and therefore limit the time to guide the new hire. From the perspective of the new hire, it was hard to understand when the person was available to answer their questions, and from the team member's perspective, it was sometimes hard to find the time to answer the question.

And we [buddies] want to be welcoming. But sometimes when, in remote work, so that everything is working you also need a lot of organization, and then sometimes you want to be welcoming, but you have no time because you know. Okay, I have a meeting at three and a meeting at four. And I don't have time to talk a bit or so. And that's sometimes a bit tricky then. (B1)

I think that, yeah, that's a challenge in virtual onboarding because you're not there; maybe give a short look, and then the newbie can start a task instead of waiting for a day to get an answer. Yeah, and then maybe the question is gone. (B2)

Learning by doing Linking to Bauer's (2010) 4C model clarification and the role clarity element in the research-based onboarding model (figure 2), learning by doing was brought up often as a method to gather understanding and eventually start performing activities independently. German saying "ins kalte Wasser springen" directly translated as hopping into cold water, but generally in English referred to as "hopping into the deep end" was referred to in the interviews. The courage and ability of the new hire to take responsibility for the tasks, sometimes even without knowing them fully, were seen as important for successful remote onboarding.

While the general approach was naturally to educate and train the new hire to perform the task, many saw that the sooner the new hire took on the tasks, the better for them and the company. Learning by actually doing the tasks was also experienced as positive by the new hires. The new hires felt that as they

contributed to the team and were able to perform their tasks independently, they were closer to the point of becoming fully onboarded.

They [new employees] love to be responsible as quickly as possible, do things which are really valuable, not just sitting around and turning and looking and getting bored. (S2)

What really helped was the feedback. Like my buddy always said, you have to try it. I would always try and after that learn a lot about it. Let me give you an example. We had so-called kick-off calls that are the first contact with the customer. And the first call was with my buddy, I just made a lot of notes, and after that, she said, so the next call, you will do. (NH1)

And then we moved to the home office. And for me, to be honest, it was even better because then I, yeah, I could do things at my own pace, you know, on my own time. (NH3)

It was also seen that knowing the basics before executing the tasks is needed to avoid issues both to the company and the new hire. Learning by doing was sometimes also needed as the team did not have the capacity to support the new hire closely.

Yeah, first the general know-how, but I think in our job, it's easier to understand when you are doing it on your own. (B1)

And sometimes and in the beginning, it was like a lot of stuff, the new hire had, where there were no options like to say no, I don't like, we have two less so we can support you, but you have to swim in the cold water. (L4)

The key challenge related to the new hires performing their tasks on their own was linked to the user accesses provided. The new hires could not perform tasks that they needed to and would have been able to, at least with guidance, before they had completed mandatory education or stayed at the company over six months, despite the efforts from a buddy and the leader to get an exception. Delay in training and, therefore, in the access was seen as a waste and unnecessary delay by the new hire, buddy, and the leader.

And for example, uh, our newbies are working with the application X., And for the application, you need the so-called Master Login 1. It's essential basic training. And without this one, you will not get access. But you need access to start your business and to start working, but these meetings are only once a month. And the new hire could not start on the first. So the new hire started with two weeks delays in the middle of the month. And so the new hire passed this training, and we had to wait 1.5 months. I tried the best I can to speed up to get an exception, but it was not possible because of resources. And this is why, for example, the new hire had to wait 1.5 months to really and do the process in the application on their own. (L2)

There's only one thing that bothers me, and that's the Master Login user. As I told you before, you can start with working on the customers. You need a user for it. And there are different levels of our users. And with the user on the first level, you can do some things, but you can't do everything. And you still need to ask always your colleagues for little stuff. And it's, yeah, hindering their progress in their projects. So, to get to the next level, they need to wait at least, I think, six months, from level one. (L3)

Learning from others Another sub-theme linking to a learning style that can be categorized under Bauer's (2010) 4C clarity element and seen as important by the interviewed personnel was learning from others. This learning method was seen especially hard in the remote environment as the new hires were not in the office environment where they heard how their colleagues handle specific situations with the customers or the team. The new hires were often invited to a call to shadow and listen to gather that information and generally satisfied with the experience. When joining the calls with other teams, it was seen that without a separate session where they can ask questions related to the call or clear context of how the call links to their responsibilities, the benefit of the call was hard to see.

I think it [onboarding at the office] would probably be a bit faster when you understand what the others are facing because you hear them all the time. And you can just turn around and say, okay, what did you mean by that? And oh, you know, I heard that as well. It's all you know. This is something that is missing because you cannot do this. And you don't know if there is somebody calling who asked the same questions you just got yesterday. So this is something that's, of course, missing. And this would speed up this whole thing. Maybe a bit. (NH5)

Sufficient time to support Impacting the colleagues, buddies, and leaders, the difficulty to find a time for the new hire from a calendar full of meetings were seen the more negative impacts of the remote onboarding, mostly linking to the overall concept of remote work. Also, explaining and showing certain activity to the new hire was seen as more time-consuming in a remote environment as a separate meeting or a video call needed to be organized to facilitate this.

But in comparison to the office, it's really hard [to find time for the new hire] because your whole timetable is locked with meetings, and the time between, you need to do your daily business. (L2)

We [buddies] want to be welcoming. But sometimes when, in remote work, so that everything is working you also need a lot of organization, and then sometimes you want to be welcoming, but you have no time because you know. Okay, I have a meeting at three and a meeting at four. And I don't have time to talk a bit or so. And that's sometimes a bit tricky then. (B1)

- it's easier to understand when you are doing it on your own. And then we told them [new hires], yeah, just check on your own. And then later, maybe in an hour, we will check together before you are sending it. (B1)

In a growing company, allocating the time might be challenging because of the high volume of work and the high volume of the new hires starting. Utilizing shared forums where all the team members can support the new hire by answering questions might reduce the workload from the buddy or the leader.

Similar to the previous themes, clarification and learning are not new elements in general onboarding research. The importance and challenge of covering the elements are seen as more significant. For example, instead of quickly stopping by the new hire at the office to help with a specific issue, a separate call needs to be organized, which is more time-consuming.

5.1.5 Summary and contradictions

The majority of the key elements identified from the analyzed empirical data align with the theoretical framework key elements and highlight specifics important to the success of remote onboarding. The identified theme of ensuring a fit between the new hire personality and the values as well as between the new hire skills and preferences and the onboarding structure cannot be observed from the captured theoretical remote onboarding framework as a key element but rather raised as a challenge (Gruman and Saks, 2011). This case study indicates that understanding the new hire's personality and values and ensuring these fit the team and company and are also considered when designing a suitable onboarding plan for the new hire is one of the key elements in successful onboarding.

Reflecting on the identified key elements to the theoretical framework, there are three key elements (compliance, tools, and management support) recorded in the framework that are not significantly visible in the results as key themes but are observed during interviews and can be seen as part of the overall process and structure element of remote onboarding. Firstly, the element of compliance is recognized as an element that needs to be covered as part of the process but not as something that is seen as important from an overall remote onboarding perspective but rather a standard element of overall requirements set by the company. Secondly, tools are referred to as suitable for remote onboarding but not especially important. This is likely to be because the standard tools used in the company worked well in the remote onboarding and, similarly to compliance, are not seen specific to the remote onboarding. If the tools are not suitable for remote working, the descriptions would have been most likely different. Partly linking to the tool side, to enable a good ergonomics good chair, large screen, and peaceful workspace or a room at home were seen as elements to enable working remotely by the new hires. These elements are seen as important and useful for the employees, indicating that the company could improve this area's coverage.

Thirdly, management support is not highlighted strongly in the interviews as a key element of successful onboarding. Nilles (1997) described this element as an important enabler for remote work in general as management is required to support the approach for it to be successful. During the pandemic, the management automatically supports the remote onboarding due to the government guidance and instructions given to the employees, which means this element is present but seen as given.

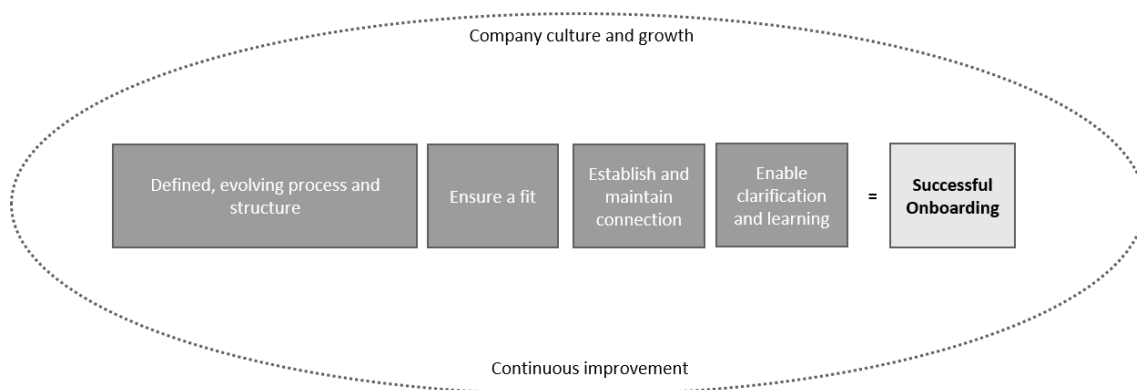


FIGURE 6 Case company remote onboarding key elements

The explained identified key themes of successful onboarding are drawn as figure 6. Certain contradicting areas or strong differentiating views can be observed in the results and the analyzed empirical data. These contradictions are explained to enable a further, detailed understanding of these areas and avoid misunderstanding the results. Firstly, the contradiction between the overall experience statement and the detailed description of the process can be observed. Each of the interviewed personnel described being satisfied with the remote onboarding process. At the same time, they were reflecting on the process of face-to-face onboarding and situations, describing many situations as harder or slower because of the remote environment. While the views are partially contradicting, it could be observed that the personnel were overall satisfied with the process however could see challenging and improvement areas going forward.

Secondly, the sub-themes of standardization and customization contradict each other in the overall naming level; hence, it is beneficial to explain why the sub-themes complement each other. A Standard and well-established onboarding process is useful to understand, communicate, mature, and enable the overall remote onboarding process to work in a fast-growing company. At the same time, there needs to be a possibility to customize some parts of the process. Especially to tailor the plan to be suitable for the new hire's personality, skills, and preferences. Standardization elements observed, like the definition of the buddy role, are not going to reduce the ability to customize the onboarding process or plan, but rather support it as buddy will be aware of the basic structure of the onboarding and understands how they can customize the elements in favor of the new hire onboarding success.

These themes can be seen as linked to different levels of the remote onboarding elements. Standardization of the roles and the overall concept of the process tools like the checklist is looked for to ensure that each new hire receives the best possible remote onboarding experience. The customization of specifics in the remote onboarding plan to fit the needs is still possible, although the overall structure is more defined based on the shared, well-working practices. It could also benefit from standardizing the short-term employee onboarding

structure, leaving still space for customization rather than customizing the normal remote onboarding new hire plan to be suitable for them.

Thirdly, the contradiction between set and flexible business processes can be observed impacting the remote onboarding timeline. From the support team perspective, delivering the virtual sessions regularly is seen as the most efficient from the task management and resource perspective, enabling the teams to prepare for the new hire in an organized manner. From the business perspective, the need to get more resources to perform the activities to support the overall workload results that there is a need for more flexible schedule enabling the new hire to get necessary tools and accesses set up for them to perform the necessary work to support the team and the company. This should be considered when planning the improved structures to ensure that there are sufficient resources to deliver on-demand service when needed.

The fourth contradiction can be found in the descriptions of virtual meetings and training setups. Between the different roles interviewed, different preferred setups were seen. Some personnel seemed to prefer smaller groups, enabling more discussion and a more personal approach in a remote setting. From a support team perspective, larger, wider groups were planned to enable a more professional approach covering multiple teams.

We always have like three to six people in a group, and that helps a lot, too, just asking questions in the room. It still feels like asking the questions in an office space. (NH4)

Maybe we should like to do a welcome day out each month, but maybe also one time during a quarter. And then it would be like a big one because, at the moment, we just do it each month in a smaller setup, but maybe less professional than it could be potentially. (S3)

The planned structure enabling larger groups can be seen linking to the requirements set by the company's growth. From the remote onboarding perspective and based on the preference recorded by the study participants, smaller groups enable more personal, open discussions that benefit the new hires being onboarded. Therefore, the ideal structure would most likely be a large, general, overall level introduction on the top-level, giving a good understanding of the overall company and the departments together with a more personal welcome session with a smaller group.

The fifth contradiction observed links to remote work experience and how different people and roles experience it. While some saw the remote working being peaceful because there was no noise from the other people, some saw it opposite as the working from home was too quiet.

During the workday, you are just in your room. It's quiet, no cell phones, you do not hear anything, other co-workers, you just communicate on your computer. (NH1)

There is an advantage of the home office because when you're in the office and, I don't know, eight people are in one room, and you have calls with your partners, and everybody has a call, then it gets really, really loud in the office. (NH2)

The new hire's role can be seen impacting this point of view as some new hires performed their work mainly using application-based communications, whereas some had many business calls.

The sixth contradiction links to the responsibility in the process and who has the lead in executing the process. The view of the overall process owner differed: the new hire, the lead, and the buddy were all mentioned as the owner of the process. When describing the process followed and the specific task owners, no major variations were seen; hence the only the role of the owner is unclear. As seen in the overall case company remote onboarding process (figure 6), remote onboarding is not an effort from one role or a person. It is a combined team effort, each of the roles having their tasks to perform linking to the other tasks performed by their colleagues. From the theoretical point of view, the process is part of the Human Resource Talent Management process, aligning in the company under the ownership of the P&O department (Snell, 2006).

On an overall level, looking at the remote onboarding across the roles, elements, challenges, and benefits, few topics feature in the existing remote onboarding research but could not be observed in this study. The components of work-life balance, hardware, and limited visibility towards the management were not present, potentially indicating that they were generally satisfied with these aspects. As the focus was on the employee's first six months, these elements were not seen as applicable. While right-level access to the tools was seen as a potential improvement point, no technical or hardware challenges related to the onboarding were raised. This could be because all the new hires were used to using IT equipment, online tools, and the offered training was sufficient to close any knowledge gaps there might have been. From the benefits side, the total company savings and client satisfaction were not raised as subjects as the focus was more on the individual level.

5.2 Remote onboarding process and roles

To understand the overall remote onboarding process and the roles involved in the case company, an overview of the case company's remote onboarding flow is presented to provide a clear overview of the tasks and the roles. A summarized, partly simplified, process flow (figure 7) following the design of Snell's (figure 1) standard onboarding process was drawn based on the descriptive information from the interviewees and the additional information provided by the P&O department contact as part of the regular interlocks. Specifying the roles that the participants play in the process and their contribution to the key elements of successful onboarding, an in-depth overview is provided by role and summarised as an overall table.

5.2.1 Remote onboarding process

The summary of the process includes the basic steps related to the process and key roles that perform activities as part of the process in a swim lane model enabling understanding of the sequence of the activities. The roles of the overall management of the company and the corporate office have been left out as the activities related to them were not seen substantial enough. However, both are required to support and enable the process.

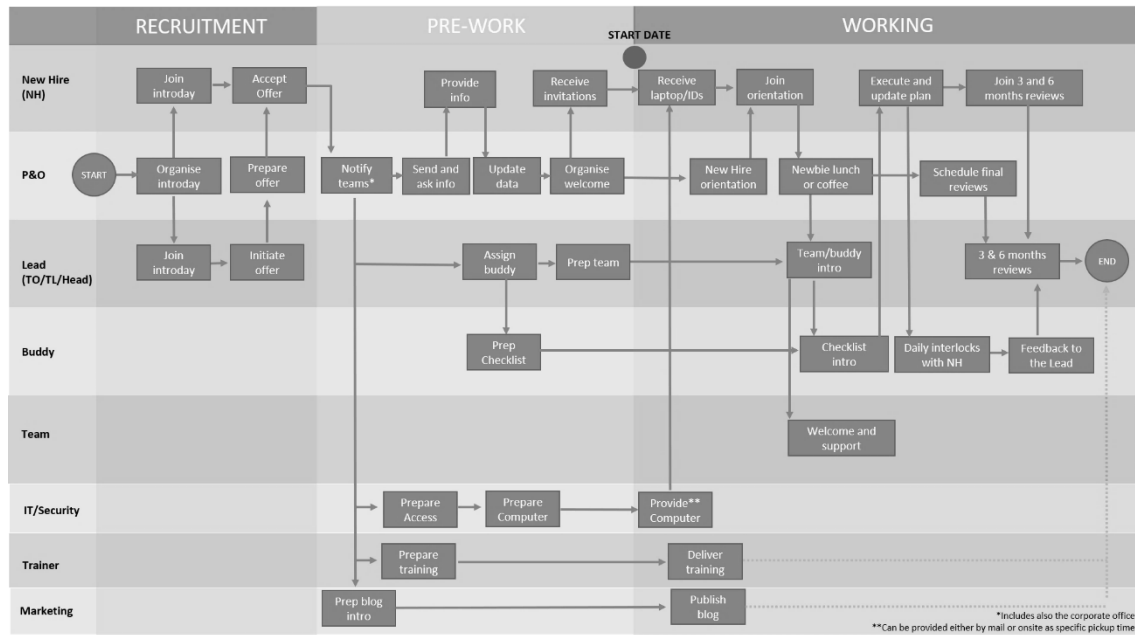


FIGURE 7 Case company remote onboarding process by role and task (larger version available as appendix 3)

Drawing the remote onboarding process as a series of tasks performed, the process (figure 7) shows the new hire's path to complete their onboarding in a remote environment starting from the hiring phase and ending at the end of the probation period. A larger version of the process is available in appendix 3. The new hire is supported in the process by multiple different roles, each carrying the lead of the support in different phases of the onboarding process. Initially, the new hire's key support and the interface is the P&O department who guides the new hire through the hiring process and communicates with them before their start date. After the pre-start activities and the overall welcome orientation and IT equipment and set up are completed, the team leader takes over as the key supporting role. After introducing the new hire to the team and the buddy, the team leader delegates the key responsibility to the buddy identified to be suitable for the new hire. The buddy acts as key support to the new hire until completion of the onboarding process. The other roles of the process, the P&O department, training department, manager, and the team support the new hire and the buddy where needed and requested ensuring that the new hire is not left alone with their onboarding and providing the necessary elements to get them integrated

and educated in their new roles. Also, the roles of the overall company and the corporate office were referred to in the empirical data supporting the process; however not included in the chart as tasks were seen as rather minor or not detailed enough.

Based on the understanding built during the interviews, the process of onboarding at the office is the same as remote onboarding. The difference between onsite and offsite onboarding is on the delivery methods. Instead of face-to-face meetings and training, the new hire meets their colleagues through virtual connections receiving, in general, the same information they received at the office in the onsite onboarding model. Overall, the task flow shows that the onboarding, whether done face-to-face or virtually, is a team effort and not a task for one single role.

While some elements were seen to work differently in remote onboarding than the onboarding at the office environment, the basic concepts and coverage remained the same. A key switch was from face-to-face communication to virtual communication. The sub-theme of the overall theme of defined, evolving process and structure, *digitalization* plays a significant role in bridging the gaps seen between face-to-face and virtual working environments. Meetings were held through video conferences, training delivered through virtual, video classroom rather than in an actual classroom, chats during coffee break replaced with virtual coffee break, Christmas party, and quarterly updates were held virtually, face to face chats replaced by online chat tool, onsite office tour changed to virtual office tour and lunch breaks changed to virtual Lunch Mates application supported meetups. Company essential tools and applications were seen as suitable and easy to use to execute work virtually, as they were online and used by the team daily. New structures and formats were designed to support socializing in a remote environment and, therefore, the social aspect of remote onboarding.

-- it is for sure different. I would say to talk to someone in person. But I talked to all the people very often already in the office, so there was just, yeah, switch of technology. (NH4)

I think overall, it [remote onboarding] has been successful. We are a software company. We have to be able to work from home. (NH2)

It [remote onboarding] works. I don't feel a big difference. (S2)

To be honest, I was a little bit afraid of how it would be if you're not seeing the person face to face all day. But I think as we are talking right now [video interview], it's possible to see each other in a digital way and ask questions, and also, we have a chat function. We simply can chat with each other and ask questions. Um, that worked pretty good. (L3)

-- the welcome day is also completely remote. It's normally like two hours. Via video, we present the new hires something about the first steps, about the training platform, about the first training to be done during the first week. What is also new, normally we would have done a newbie lunch with a networking background so, and everyone could get a chance to meet the other newbies started within the month and also get a chance to meet the management. --it is now remote. Also, it's called virtual newbie lunch or virtual newbie coffee --.(S3)

And what we also do is having after-work sessions when we might have a quiz or something like that, or any specific topics, like on Christmas everybody has to put on a costume or something like that. (S1)

In the company, the length of the onboarding, remote and onsite, is considered to be six months as the formal probation period ends after six months. Based on the data, six months is also when the new hire is expected to perform their job entirely independently. For up to eight weeks, the initial weeks are considered the time for the new hire to learn and listen and build relationships. The actual work starts as soon as possible, when the basic concepts are understood, generally around the second month of the employment. After three months, the new hire is expected to perform the activities mostly independently, requiring help only with activities not performed before.

So the new hire started the official work, I would guess after six to eight weeks, and after three to six months, you are like of the level that you can work on your own. And now the new hire is, like, totally working independently. After three months, you get really productive, and after six months, you are in a position that you can mostly handling everything on your own. (L4)

The first four weeks are just for you to check out what's going on here. (NH5).

Reflecting the case company process flow (figure 6) to Snell's (2006) onboarding process timeline (figure 1), few observations can be made. Firstly, a difference between the initial contact point on the first day can be observed. Snell (2006) records the manager as responsible for greeting the new hire. In the case company, the initial welcome is done by the P&O department, who, after the initial orientation and set up, connect the new hire to the leader of the new team. The mission of the P&O department differs from the traditional HR department, which might explain the difference. In Snell's (2006) model, the tasks allocated to HR are admin items based on the data provided by the new hire and the payroll.

The second difference can be seen in the method used to capture the feedback related to the onboarding. Snell (2006) records a survey as the method to capture feedback regarding the onboarding and, based on it, continuously improve the process to make it more efficient. In the case company, the formal reviews between the manager and the new employee after three and six months of the start date covered this element. Additionally, P&O was mentioned to do one-to-one sessions with some of the new hires to capture an element of this. Snell's (2006) structure looks at onboarding from an efficiency perspective making it more suitable in larger firms. As the case company grows, collecting feedback at the P&O department level through individual meetings might no longer be possible. At this point, an online survey might be an option, although it removes the personal connection between the P&O and the new hire.

Thirdly, when comparing the two process timelines to each other, it can be observed that the case company, prompted by remote working, has recently taken a step towards the more efficient model presented by Snell (2006). By capturing the new hire information digitally instead of receiving it as a paper copy from the new hire, they have improved overall process efficiency. To further

improve their admin efficiency, it could be reviewed if the digital format of capturing the information from the new hire can be further streamlined with other digital tools in use and if any other manual virtual onboarding process steps could be automated.

The drawn process can also be reflected in Bauer's (2010) researched-based onboarding model (figure 2), which models the onboarding process from an overall perspective focusing on elements that need to be achieved and elements that support the overall success of the onboarding. The case company process can be seen targeting the achievement of self-efficiency, role clarity, social integration, and knowledge of the culture and having most of the supporting elements in place, especially in the hiring and recruitment process side. The impact of industry, organization size, and culture is very evident in this study.

Few improvement areas can be observed when reflecting the case company process to Bauer's (2010) research-based onboarding model. In training, further soft skill training for the new hires and onboarding training for buddies was looked for by the interviewed personnel indicating an improvement possibility. To continuously improve and develop the overall onboarding process across the parties involved, Bauer (2010) has listed integration meetings as beneficial. Currently, cross-team onboarding process-focused forum is not in place, indicating that one could be set up to enable all the process participants to bring their ideas and opinions to the discussion. The elements of Bauer's (2010) 4C model: clarification, connection, culture, and compliance can be observed from the data; however, the role of compliance was somewhat limited, it is seen as a necessary element that needed to be covered as part of general training.

Often in the descriptions, remote onboarding and generally working from home was reflected against working from the office, referring to working from the office as a better, more efficient option.

I would love to go back to onsite sessions. But it's okay, it works. (S2)

The thing is that I have done the new hire sessions so many times before on-site that it's hard for me to do it remotely because I'm like more of the feeling type of human, and I like to socialize and that I think it [virtual connection] like a barrier that I have in front of my face. (S1)

I think the new hire was pretty lucky that the new hire could start face to face. (B3)

The highlighted gap in the existing research studied, the forced remote work aspect, did not appear directly. However, it could be partially the reason why the employees compared remote onboarding to office-based one. All except one interviewed person across the roles interviewed had the experience of being at the office at least a few times. Remote, virtual meetings were seen differently, not as good as face-to-face meetings.

5.2.2 Roles of successful virtual onboarding

Each of the participants looks at the remote onboarding process from their perspective, reflecting on their own experience as well as the discussions they might have had with their peers and colleagues. In a process-based view, as presented in figure 7, each of the roles has their specific task contributing to the overall remote onboarding process following their swimlane. In addition, it is interesting to look at the process participant roles from the vital element perspective, as each of the process roles contributes to the remote onboarding key elements differently. An overview of how the roles contribute to the critical elements of successful onboarding, the key, and sub-themes together with three additional elements observed after reflection to the theory are recorded in a table format with the contribution of each of the key process participant roles who were interviewed as part of the study reflecting on the descriptions provided by the process participants collectively.

TABLE 7 Process participants contribution to the themes of successful onboarding

Element	New hire	Buddy	Leader	Support
Defined and evolving process and structure				
Onboarding plan	Perform	Customize, introduce	Monitor	Define structure
Timely quality information	Use	Create, provide	Create, provide	Create, provide
Standardization	Understand	Contribute, use	Contribute, use	Define, drive
Digitalization	Use	Use	Drive	Drive
Continuous improvement	Contribute	Contribute	Contribute	Contribute
Tools	Use	Use	Use	Provide, use
Compliance	Understand	Understand	Understand	Define
Management support	Understand	Understand	Perform	Engage, encourage
Ensure a fit				
Hire the right people	Contribute	Support	Drive	Enable
Customization	Contribute	Perform	Review	Perform
Establish and maintain a connection				
Buddy	Use	Perform	Nominate, support	Define, support
Don't lose the new hire	Use	Perform	Perform	Perform
Use face-to-face meetings	Use	Use	Enable	Enable
Enable clarification and learning				
Encourage asking questions	Perform	Encourage, provide	Encourage, provide	Encourage, provide
Learning by doing	Perform	Encourage, enable	Encourage	Encourage
Learning from others	Use	Show, enable	Show, enable	Show, enable
Sufficient time to support	Understand	Organize	Enable	Enable

To provide further descriptions of the contribution to specific success elements, role-specific process journeys, and their contribution and specifics are described in detail in the role-specific chapters.

5.2.2.1 New hire role

The *new hire* is expected to understand, perform, use and contribute to the success elements of remote onboarding. In most parts, the elements are provided to the new hire, and the new hire is expected to utilize and consume them as provided. The new hire can improve the process, contributing to the continuous improvement of the remote onboarding in general and specific steps required to be taken by them. The new hire can be seen having a role in each of the elements. In some cases, the new hire carries the primary responsibility. For example, it is the new hire's responsibility to ask questions. In some cases, the new hire is only required to understand the element. For example, it is beneficial for the new hire to understand the process and role standards.

The new hires themselves described their role as new hire as proactive, curious, and open to learning to succeed in remote onboarding. The view aligned with the views of other roles interviewed. The level of new hire independence and responsibility of the onboarding varied across the interviewed personnel. Overall, the new hires were expected to be able to act independently even if the team was not able to support them immediately and learn by doing.

I see that it's kind of 80% my responsibility to onboard myself to the company. And I think that the other 20% is for the company to be open to the idea of having someone and also give me the tools and the accesses and the possibilities to onboard myself to it. So I feel like the main responsibility comes from me. (NH3)

From a process perspective, the new hire starts their onboarding journey during the hiring process when they are invited to join intro days if they are seen as a suitable, potential candidate for the role open within the case company. Before this, they have applied for the job; however, the initial step of recruitment is not valuable from the onboarding process perspective. During the intro days, trial-like workshop days, the new hire gets to work on real business cases, and their suitability for the role and the team is tested. During the days, they also get a better understanding of the role and the company and get to meet their management and sometimes the team members. Intro days are currently organized virtually.

If the new hire is offered the role and accepts it, they received email information from the company P&O department. The email includes their individual IT pick-up slot and requesting information that they can voluntarily provide, such as clothing size and personal interests data. Requested information will help P&O pick up the right size of company T-shirt given to new hires as part of the orientation package and provide information to marketing who prepare welcome publication to the company intranet blog and page reaching all

the company employees. Usually, the new hires pick up their laptop from the office location, but in some cases, if a person does not live near the office location or cannot come to the office otherwise, the equipment is sent to them.

The new hires join a remote orientation session with P&O, get introduced to their team and assigned buddy, and get the first view of their long-term onboarding plan, checklist. If they have not received or set up their laptop yet, they join the onboarding using their personal computer and email. On their second day, they join IT remote education and sometimes the mandatory software education supporting them to use the essential tools, like their email. In the coming days, weeks, and months, they complete the mandatory education as part of their onboarding plan, checklist and gather a further understanding of their roles. The new hires start performing activities independently and have regular interlocks with the other employees. In some teams, the timeline of onboarding and expectations during the first six months were clearly explained to the new hire, whereas in some teams, it seems that the broken-down timeline was not shared, resulting in the new hire thinking that no work will be performed in the first six months.

In the beginning, I was a listener. I had to listen a lot. I had to learn a lot. And that was at the beginning. It was my role. And they said to me, the first four weeks are just to get, you know, things to get to know that the team and there is no just take your time. No pressure. The first four weeks are just for you to check out what's going on here. What's going on here to get some information, and then you are getting part of the team and not only of the team, but as a is something which can if some or some input and have an impact and yeah, okay, also the success of the period, but the first four to six weeks is just getting the information. (NH5)

In the beginning, I was a little bit surprised because they told me that my onboarding would be throughout six months, and I told my lead at the time: I can't, six months, it's too much. I want to work already. (NH3)

In the beginning, the new hires are receiving a lot of information, sometimes described as an overwhelming amount of information. After the initial weeks and months, the information settles to a manageable level. The new hire can understand the linkages in the information and between different teams and tasks better. In the interviews, it was raised that an overview of the company, especially now as the company is growing rapidly and organization changing, giving a high-level overview of the departments and tasks related might benefit the new hire understanding the overall picture faster, providing the overview before starting to explain the more minor elements. The new hire onboarding culminates in the completion of their onboarding plan and their six-month trial review. There is also a formal three-month probation period review to officially ensure that the new hire is on track with their onboarding and overall journey to becoming a productive team member.

New hires own personality, or specific skills were raised in relation to how they experienced and handled the virtual onboarding process elements. New hires who had previous working experience felt that they benefited from their experience and understood and handled the stress related to the onboarding better. A new hire who was hired directly after completing education expressed

a fear towards the remote start from a social perspective. The new hire described themselves as someone who likes to meet people face to face and enjoy social interaction in general, indicating that a particular level of *customization*, focusing on ensuring the social connection establishment, might have been helpful to improve the experience. For example, providing more social interaction elements for those who feel they need it and supporting new hires without previous work experience. The new hires also referred to their personality concerning how they prefer and succeeded to learn. Some preferred to read through the documents and learn independently; some preferred to join calls, listening and *learning from others*.

What really helped was the feedback, like my buddy always said, you have to try it. I would always try and after that learn a lot about it. (NH1)

The most important thing was basically that my buddy invited me to the call with the others. And I got to know what my buddy was discussing with them, how my buddy works - -. (NH5)

Key challenges described by the new hires were getting timely support via online channels, especially understanding when the person had availability to answer questions linking to *ask questions* theme, coping with the amount of information, understanding non-written rules, behaviors, and culture, and forming relationships, especially when the new hire was not experienced in remote networking or did not have the opportunity to form the relationships at the office prior moving to remote work setup.

It was good to have the opportunity to go to the office in the beginning because it's easier to ask just a colleague who is sitting next to you or near you than chatting with someone spontaneously. I do not know anything that could be better. (NH2)

In the office, you see who is available. If people are not answering, you do not know if they are in a meeting, are they on their computer. You do not know where they are. When you are in the office, you see when they are available or not. (NH1)

All the new hires felt like part of the company after their onboarding. However, some did not feel fully integrated into their teams or felt like new employees among the more experienced team members. It can be understood that they have become insiders, and therefore, the onboarding has been successful. However, they still have more elements to learn to be able to have the same knowledge base as their more experienced colleagues. Feeling less knowledgeable than your more senior peers can be seen as rather usual and not a result of the remote onboarding.

5.2.2.2 Buddy role

The buddy can be seen as the key member of the team supporting and guiding the new hire in their onboarding process, carrying the primary responsibility of the new hire after the lead delegates the responsibility to them. The buddy is seen as the person who is the closest to the new hire and, therefore, can keep an eye

on the new hire and how they are integrating into the company. Performing the buddy role, including the customization of the onboarding plan, is the core of their activities. They encourage, enable, contribute, use, provide, organize and create, working actively, daily with the new hire, aiming to complete the remote onboarding successfully. They also interlock with the leader, providing an insight into the status of the new hire's progress and feelings and asking for support when needed.

So I would also say that the responsibility is on my [as a buddy] or is it is my responsibility that the new hire is onboarded well and knows the things that are needed for the daily work. And, yeah, I will be supported by my colleagues. And if there should be anything, I will have my team owner ask or check with when I'm not sure. (B1)

In some cases, the buddy was the person from whom the new hire took over; in some cases, the buddy was an experienced colleague from the same team. Most of the new hires had daily interlock with their buddy. In one case, the interlocks were limited to weekly or less frequent meetings. Choosing the right kind of buddy who has sufficient time to allocate to the onboarding activities with the new employee was raised as an essential practice. In two cases, the initially selected buddy was not seen as the best fit due to limitations or personality. Therefore, new support channels were identified either by the management or the new hire themselves. Between the teams, significant differences in the role can be observed. However, most followed the same pattern; some level of *standardization* and documentation of the critical responsibilities could be beneficial here to ensure that each new hire gets the same support when they start.

From a process perspective, the buddy joins the remote onboarding process team relatively late when their team leader assigns the buddy responsibility to them. In some cases, the buddy might have met the new hire as part of the intro days, a trial day organized before the contract is offered. Once the new hire start date is known, the buddy starts preparing for the new hire. Buddy creates a digital onboarding plan, checklist in a virtual format in the company intranet portal and structures their schedule to have regular interlocks with the new hire once they start. The buddy has the initial session with the new hire on the day they start, initially meeting the new hire virtually in a team introduction call which was done by some teams, and then having a one-to-one meeting with them explaining the checklist and giving the overview of the activities and agreeing on the regular schedule to interlock in daily basis. At this point, *customization* might support the overall remote onboarding success. Based on the initial information gathering of the new hire, the onboarding plan could be adjusted to enable the new hire to absorb the new information in a way that is most suitable for them, requiring, of course, that the plan has elements that can be adjusted based on the preference.

Following the initial review, the new hire owns the execution and the overall onboarding plan completion. The buddy has the responsibility of helping the new hire tackle any obstacles they might face. Most importantly, interlock with the new hire daily to ensure that *the new hire is not left alone* with the onboarding activities. In some cases, twice a day, calls were used. In some cases,

the weekly review was used. In general, daily interlock between the buddy and the new hire was expected by the leadership, which was also the standard structure. The remote onboarding process concludes from a buddy perspective when the new hire no longer needs their support, when the new hire has finalized remote onboarding plan steps, and when the final probation period review is completed six months after the start date.

5.2.2.3 Leader role

The leaders described their role as *the leader* as oversight of the overall successful onboarding. They assign the appropriate buddy for the new hire, utilize standard structures and processes, handle formal trial period and performance reviews and keep an eye on things ensuring that all goes as well as possible. In conflict, capacity, or other situations, they support the new hire, buddy, or other team members. They count on most parts of the buddy and the updated onboarding documentation to understand the onboarding status. They give and set the overall expectations to the new hire.

And besides the buddy, the new hire can always chat with us. Every person in our team will help the new team member. (L3)

The role of the leader was not very active in the remote onboarding process daily, although important. Leader actions and their recognition was seen as having a significant impact on the overall team integration of the new hire, aligning recorded key element of successful onboarding, management support.

But also, it was one, I think. Oh, yeah. I remember one thing because the leaders of the business unit, he went on holidays, I don't know, about one or two months after I started and when he came back, and I was telling him in the morning what I was going to do for the rest of the day, the lead was laughing and saying, okay, it's like you've been here for ten years. (NH5)

Looking at the overall progress and process from some distance also enables them to identify improvement points in the overall steps, visible in the descriptions provided. Improvement points are identified, and actions contribute to the overall culture of continuous improvements, targeting improving the remote onboarding process to be even more successful and efficient. User access allocation linking to training and security guidance and cooperation between the teams regarding onboarding were brought up as potential improvement elements. The leaders were looking for more best practice sharing across the teams, recommended timelines for onboarding and training for the buddies. Also, structuring and updating the documentation to ensure that the new hires were provided accurate *information* without overloading them was an essential focus and improvement area. From the overall coverage perspective, the leaders looked for general information, more vision, and value-specific company information as part of the onboarding.

From a process perspective, similar to the new hire, the team leader also starts their role in the remote onboarding process from intro days. The lead is part

of selecting a suitable candidate for the open role and deciding on whom to offer the role based on the trial days. They play a crucial role in ensuring that the personality and the new hire's values fit the team contributing to the overall success of the onboarding. If the candidate accepts the offer and once the leads receive the information, good preparation is needed to ensure that the team is prepared to welcome the new employee. The lead needs to ensure that the buddy is identified and assigned, the team informed, and in general, that all is ready for the new hire to start their work from a team perspective. After preparation and the initial welcome of the new hire, the team leads delegates the overall onboarding responsibility rather quickly to the buddy assigned.

Although the lead delegates the critical responsibility of the new hire's onboarding plan support to the buddy, it does not mean that the lead is entirely out in the process. The lead needs to understand from the buddy how the process is ongoing regularly and action if any issues are flagged, for example, from capacity or performance perspectives. To close the onboarding process, the lead is responsible for completing the probation time review at three months and finally at six months which is considered the formal end of the onboarding in the company. If any issues arise from these meetings, they need to be flagged by the lead to the P&O department to take further action where necessary.

The changes linked to the company's growth, for example, process and organizational changes, were raised as challenges to the overall onboarding structure, not from a virtual perspective but in general. Guidance documents needed to be constantly updated, and the high volume of work impacted their ability to give time to the new hire, even when they might have needed it.

5.2.2.4 Cross-team support services role

The different teams of cross-team support services play a role in the virtual onboarding, defining, setting, and supporting the new hire and other process participants to complete the remote onboarding successfully. The support team members describe their role to welcome the new hires to the company at an overall level, giving the new hires a feeling that they are welcomed and needed. Through the orientation and training sessions, they equip the new hire with basic information about the company and give them the tools and skills to enable them to integrate into the company as fast as possible and to start doing productive work, supporting the new hires to remove any blockers they might face.

We are problem solvers also, trying to get things done or speed up processes to start and support the teams. (S3)

The possibility to get support from the cross-team support teams was described multiple times in the interviews linking to the sub-theme of *asking questions*. The new hires are offered multiple channels to raise their questions, weekly question hour, coffee break discussions, and of course, they are welcome to raise their questions also during the actual virtual sessions. While many support and feedback forums are offered, developed, and described by the interviewed cross-team

support team members, it was highlighted that in a remote environment raising the questions is sometimes more challenging because the informal chats during the formal sessions are not possible as people are at home instead of at the office where they would have a cup of coffee together between the sessions. Asking questions is especially challenging for new hires, although ultimately, only they know and can raise the questions bothering them. The support team members aimed to build trusting relationships with the new hires to make them feel comfortable reaching out to them, even with complex subjects.

Yeah, there's a buddy at my side. I can ask questions not only to my direct colleagues but also to others in the team, and especially as we are in a supportive team for the others, I try to build a foundation kind of trust so that they want to come to us to ask questions, maybe to give us impression so what we can change-- (S2)

To support building relationships with the new hires, the central support team members brought up the importance of spending the time, informally, with the new hires. They described building a trusting relationship with new hires, having one-to-one discussions, introducing and using structures like virtual coffee breaks and lunches to meet the people. By welcoming the new hires, having a laugh, and answering any questions, the new hires can feel more comfortable and supported, and therefore *losing the new hire* can be avoided. This approach was recommended for the whole company team to make the new hires feel welcomed and appreciated.

--this is the most important in the first days or weeks to have someone to be connected to. (S3)

One of the onboarding process elements is also completing the mandatory education. The training department schedules and delivers the training based on the notification from P&O, enabling the new employees to use the business application they need in their daily work.

The roles and tasks are divided into specific teams from a process perspective rather than covered under the cross-services heading. P&O plays a significant role in the remote onboarding process, setting up the framework and initially coordinating all the elements related. They start the process by organizing a trial day, where the team leader, some of the team members, and the new hire meet each other and gather more information about each other. If the team leader wishes to offer the role for the new hire, the P&O function manages the contract process culminating in the contract signature. The tasks have become faster through digitalization as the contract signature is now obtained through the online tool. The information from the new hire is collected in a digital format instead of managing them through more traditional paperwork, highlighting the positive aspect of the new hire's remote onboarding. In addition, P&O plays a vital role in the company designing and promoting the usage of the digital tools to bridge the social gap caused by the remote work, for example enabling the teams to join lunches virtual via Lunch Mates application and organizing social, virtual events.

After contract signature, the P&O function reaches out to the new hire with information regarding the specifics of their start date and information request. P&O notifies the leader, IT security, marketing, and the training department of the new hire start date and other relevant details and pushes the other teams to start the process from their perspectives. P&O provides a warm welcome to the new hire on their start day, delivering the general welcome orientation presentation virtually, providing an overview of the company, benefits, virtual tools that the new hires can utilize to socialize, giving them a virtual office tour and showing them video footage of the legendary company party which is seen as a good way to explain the company culture and spirit. P&O also gives the new hires an overview of the activities that need to be completed during the first few days.

While the P&O team had been able to replicate the face-to-face welcome presentation in a virtual format, it was seen that the more informal parts of the welcome were now lacking, and the delivery of the welcome was not as personal and warm as they would like it to be. Further participation from other teams was seen as a possible improvement, making the session a complete company overview, aligning with the feedback from other teams looking for a more cross-team approach and visibility as part of the onboarding.

After the welcome session, the P&O department connects the new hires with their teams and hands over the key responsibility to the team leader. P&O continues monitoring that the necessary reviews as part of the probation period at three and six months are completed, and key educations are done as part of the mandatory learning. Also, they support the new hire or management if there are any specific questions regarding salary, probation period, or pension payments, such as part of their normal support channels.

As central team members who are closely working with the process, the cross-team support team members had several improvement suggestions to the overall and specific elements of the process. They considered the process working well as it is; however could see specific elements that needed further focus, some required due to the growth of the company, some to mitigate the negative impacts of remote approach, especially the social element. Positioning, documenting, involving the top management and the other departments in the orientation sessions, further developing more virtual interactive methods, reviewing the delivery methods and frequency of the orientation and training sessions to drive them more efficiently and professionally were highlighted as potential improvements the existing process. Both P&O and the training team followed a monthly cycle with their new hire onboarding and training. The monthly cycle was seen as good from the capacity and structure perspective but lately seen challenging as more of the new hire's started quickly and not necessarily at the same time as the others, highlighting the need to enable a certain level of customization in the user process.

5.2.2.5 Other roles

In addition to the interviewed roles, the roles of IT security, marketing, the team, and the overall company were highlighted during the interviews. Especially the *role of the team* was brought up strongly by the study participants, some even highlighting as the most critical team for the success of the onboarding. The team is expected to be open, helpful, and supportive towards the new hire; hence this element is included in the overall process flow (figure 6). The actual team of the new hire is naturally closer to support; however, in general, the same approach is expected from any team in the company to ensure that everyone welcomes the new hire. Each of the buddies interviewed described the role of the team as significant to welcome the new hire, sharing their expertise areas and supporting the new hire with any question, especially when the buddy was busy with another task. Across the interviewed roles, the expectation from the team was to show interest towards the new hire, introduce themselves to the new hire, invite the new hire to listen to any interesting calls, and in general involve the new hire in activities beneficial to them playing a critical part ensuring that the *new hire is not lost*. The time that the team had available to support the new hire was mentioned as a challenge item.

So I think it's easier for a newbie to be a part of the team when everyone is welcoming and open-minded to someone. And it's just also going through the through a newbie and tell them: hey, do you want to drink a coffee or just talk a bit. So I think it depends also on the team itself. (B1)

The challenge of *learning from others*, learning from the team was highlighted in the remote environment context. At the office, the new hire hears without actual formal meetings a lot of information, non-written information, from their colleagues. A remote environment is not possible to be shared unless formally recorded and covered. Team chat and review meetings might give insight into this; however, not full exposure. If all the team members work remotely, the discussion and usage of digital channels increase, which benefits the new hire in completing their onboarding virtually.

IT and *Marketing* were brought up as teams who play a role in the process. For *IT Security*, the key focus is to prepare necessary accesses and technical equipment before the new hire start date. Depending on the situation, the laptop can be sent to the new hire by mail, or the new hire can pick it up safely from the office by organizing an individual appointment. After providing the equipment to the new hire, they also organize online education sessions to support the new hire to complete their laptop setup and are contacted if there are any issues with the equipment. The marketing department is collecting and publishing the information of the new hires across the company internally and also externally. These teams were described as dependent on the P&O department to notify them of the new hire details before taking action.

6 CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, the results recorded based on the empirical data analysis are reflected in the research questions. The existing previously published research highlights the study's actual findings and the meaning of those findings, bringing up the potential improvements to the case company process. Together with the findings, the student researcher captures the possible limitations of the study, which should be considered when reading the report. The reliability of the study is reflected with explanations on how the student researcher has taken the key elements of establishing trustworthiness into consideration during the research process. Potential, interesting, further research topics based on the findings and observations done by the student researcher are provided, enabling further clarification of certain areas and questions that the study data and findings did not answer.

6.1 Remote onboarding in the case company

This qualitative case study gathers information and describes how the employee onboarding process is performed virtually in a remote setting, focusing on understanding the key elements of successful remote onboarding and the key process roles in a specific case company. The company's growth and strong culture focus on continuous improvement and social, family-like spirit set the scene and frames the overall descriptions and identified themes. Employees describe their role as more than a job. Due to the pandemic, the company promptly moved from a social, family-like office-based environment to a virtual environment, meaning that onboarding new employees would be done virtually.

Through the existing virtual tools and additional structures introduced to bridge the social gap caused by the remote approach, the team could continue and even improve the efficiency of the overall onboarding process flow from the original, office-based onboarding structure. The process followed was seen as

satisfactory by the process participants, and some participants were surprised how well the process worked, losing their initial fears. The change in the process is seen simply as a switch of technology, moving from face-to-face interactions to virtual interactions. The culture of continuous improvement and the drive across the teams to identify ways to close the social gap of remote work in general have and will benefit the overall remote onboarding process in the company. Together with the buddy process, onboarding plan, and introday structures that the company had in place already before although some level of standardization and further adjustments might be required to ensure a streamlined remote onboarding experience across the new hires joining the company.

As a key research question, this study wants to understand *how the onboarding process participants describe their views of key elements of successful remote onboarding in the case company*. The key elements can be summarised to four overall key themes of successful remote onboarding identified from the analyzed empirical data: defined, evolving process and structure, ensure a fit, establish and maintain a connection and enable clarification and learning.

Overall, the identified key themes align with the theoretical framework key elements; however, they do not cover all of them. Partly contradicting the theory, compliance, tools, and management support are not described as significant elements. The reason could be that these elements were in place, and no issues were seen. It cannot be said that they would not be important; however, they could be seen as part of the process element rather than separated categories. Culture is seen as important underpinning each of the activities and approaches. Adding to the overall list of key elements, the importance of ensuring a fit of the new hire to the company and the team from the very beginning and enabling customization of the onboarding plan are highlighted as critical to the success. The key elements of successful remote onboarding recorded based on theory can be updated based on this study, streamlining elements of compliance, tools management support under process element, and adding the element of fit.

- Process
- Fit
- Connection (collaboration)
- Clarification
- Culture

Results indicate that top-level critical elements of successful onboarding are the same between office-based and virtual onboarding. At the sub-category level, differences can be seen in the importance and challenges of the elements. In office-based onboarding, the means of connecting and working are different compared to remote work. Digitalization is seen as more important, critical in remote onboarding, as that enables the teams to connect and work in a remote environment and provides tools to bridge the social gap. In the office environment, digitalization is additional, a beneficial element that can be used to avoid repetition of standard education elements and support the efficiency of the process rather

than critical to the success of the onboarding. Because the new hires are not surrounded physically by their colleagues, the structure and standard of roles, processes and the onboarding plan become more important to provide a clear path for the new hire on completing their onboarding with the support from the buddy and the team. The quality of the information becomes more important as the new hires cannot always quickly check with their colleagues if they have a question on specific tasks and need to trust the documentation provided. The study also indicates that although the onboarding is done mainly virtual, even a one-time face-to-face meeting with the colleagues, informal or formal, can deepen and improve the relationships and team spirit. However, it could be argued whether the face-to-face element can be considered as part of virtual onboarding at all. In a normal, flexible, not worldwide pandemic situation, when people can meet face to face if the company supports the approach, this could be considered a possibility to organize as part of generally remote onboarding.

The sub-categories of successful remote onboarding, avoiding losing the new hire, finding the time to support the new hire, asking questions, and learning from others can be seen as more challenging elements to be covered in a remote environment. Remote connection makes it harder to establish and maintain contact with the new hire. The forums asking questions are restricted to the virtual platforms, which are seen as slower to use than quick checks with a colleague sitting next to you at the office, and shadowing a colleague needs to be separately scheduled.

Based on the study, some aspects of improvements linking to the key elements of successful remote onboarding can be observed, enabling the case company to improve their remote onboarding process further. Detailed documentation of the process and roles, further investigation of possibilities to customize and digitalize the process, enhancing and timing the information shared smartly, and removing the identified waste elements will enable the case company to improve their existing remote onboarding process. It is important to remember that all the participants were satisfied with the process. Therefore, the updates to the process should be done carefully to avoid breaking the well-working process.

As the second research question, this study wants to clarify *what role do the process participants have in the successful remote onboarding*. The results indicate that the new hire and the buddy together with the overall team are seen as critical roles in the process. The critical roles are supported by the leader and the cross-team support functions. In line with the existing research, the study indicates that new employees are expected to be proactive and actively drive the completion of the onboarding activities, take ownership of the plan and ask for support when they need it. The buddy is expected to support the new hire closely throughout the process, building a close connection to them and ensuring that any issues are tackled when they appear. The role of a buddy, a mentor, is seen as important both in the past onboarding research mainly focused on office-based onboarding. The position can be seen as more important in the remote environment, aligning with the recent studies, providing a close, assigned contact for the new hire to

build a relationship and ask their questions. Also, the role of the team is seen as important to welcome and support the new hire and the buddy, supporting existing research.

The lead of the team and the cross-team support groups are seen as consulting and supporting process members, setting the basics, the frame, and enabling the teams and employees to reach out to them. The lead role is seen as important but less active in the overall process than in the previous research. The buddy and the cross-support teams cover activities that previous research links with the leading role—for example, the initial welcome to the company on the first day. Compared to previous studies, this study shows the role of the cross-support teams, especially the company P&O, more people-focused, covering welcoming and connecting with the new hire as part of their role rather than only completing the admin steps of the onboarding process. The importance of the new hire approach and the supportive buddy align with existing research.

6.2 Possible limitations of the study

This case study captures the findings from a case company perspective and is not generalized to cover remote work overall. However, linkages to the other research findings can be made, and it can indicate elements and challenges linked to remote onboarding in similar companies. The size, business area, and the culture of the company can be seen impacting strongly the overall themes identified and, therefore, the results and conclusions. The result could be different in a larger company with an older workforce or another business area.

The focus of the research is virtual, remote onboarding; however, many of the new hires interviewed as part of the study only had partially virtual onboarding experience, which can be seen in the data. The participants reflect the overall onboarding experience, including elements not directly linked to the virtual aspects and raising improvements points relevant not only to the virtual side but also in general. The approximated average time they had spent at the office during the whole onboarding was 20 days. By initially selecting new hires that had completed the entire onboarding remotely instead of partially might have provided data that would be purely focused on the remote aspect and potentially focused less on reflecting the remote onboarding to office-based onboarding.

To enable the interviewed participants to describe their experience rather openly, the semi-structured interview frame was left rather generic, aiming to cover the elements arising from the previous remote onboarding research conclusions but at the same time leaving enough flexibility for the study participant to cover aspects that had the most significance to them. During the data analysis phase, the study researcher realized that more clear empirical data could have been obtained by formatting some of the questions differently. For example, it might have been more interesting and beneficial for the study to ask

what positive aspects are seen in a remote onboarding rather than try to identify them from the transcribed data. The data generally leaned to a more negative side as remote onboarding was described as something required due to the restrictions rather than the preferred method.

To get a clearer sequence-based view of the steps taken during the onboarding process, a specific interview technique, like timeline interviewing, could structure the interview personnel's input to time-based on order. Using timeline interviewing would have supported the overall process flow, which was completed as part of the study to see the process and roles related in a clear format. Using another technique could have resulted in the focus being on the timeline rather than the overall experience providing more specific information of the steps but fewer descriptions of the elements of success which was the key focus of this research.

A language and terms are significant factors in qualitative research where information is collected via interviews. In this case, none of the interviewed people used their native language in the interviews, possibly limiting their ability to express their views using rich vocabulary. None of the study participants expressed discomfort related to the language, and most of the participants were using English in their daily work. In some interviews, the interviewed person needed to think to find the right saying or word; however, this was not seen as a significant issue by the student researcher from a data analysis or richness perspective.

6.3 Trustworthiness of the study

Polkinghorne (2005) highlights the difficulty of studying a human experience due to the multi-layered and complex structure. The qualitative research methods are specially structured to consider this and provide a structure to facilitate the investigation of the specific experience. Together with suitable, accurately applied, and justified research methods, the study's trustworthiness and the anonymity of the participants were considered through the process to mitigate any issues or exposure.

Nowell et al. (2017) list credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and audit trails as critical elements of establishing trustworthiness, reliability in qualitative research. Credibility, recognition of the study by the readers can be supported by peer reviews, referential adequacy, and checking the findings with the participants (Nowell et al., 2017). During the writing process, parts and the finalized and complete thesis were shared with other students, the supervisor, and the case company to review. Across the study, the references have been documented carefully and accurately, referring to the sources of the findings and theories used. Turnitin, originality checking, and plagiarism prevention service, was used during the writing process and at the

end of the process to support the student researcher and provide further validation of the references and originality of the text.

Nowell et al. (2017) explain transferability as the generalizability of inquiry in qualitative and case research only refers to case-to-case transfer, which can be enabled by providing clear, in-depth descriptions of the methods, scope, and findings. A detailed case company description is provided in chapter three, setting the context of the case study. The findings are supported by citations from the interviewed study participants and explained in detail, providing transferability and transparency.

Dependability, the third key element documented by Nowell et al. (2017) to establish trustworthiness, can be achieved by documenting a logical and clear research process. A clear, detailed description of the methodology used to collect the empirical data and analyze it with examples of the thematical grouping is documented in chapter four, providing transparency to achieve dependability and support the case-to-case transferability.

Special care was applied to executing and later analyzing the empirical data collected through recorded interviews. Polkinghorne (2005) states that producing accurate, good interview data requires practice and skills that mature over time. The student research reviewed and studied the theory and good research practice related to planning and executing semi-structured interviews extensively before executing the interviews to ensure a good quality of the interviews from the beginning. The researcher remained conscious of the recommended practices throughout the executed interviews and matured further the skills to format the questions, remaining neutral, probing the interviewees to explain their views and experience further, avoiding influencing the interviewed employees, and limiting non-verbal signals.

Polkinghorne (2005) states that one-shot interviews are most often insufficient to produce in-depth descriptions of the research subject. Using multiple interview times, the interviewer can develop a better rapport with the interviewee and further deep dive into the experience. In this study, only one interview session was planned with each of the 15 employees. Each interviewee was advised at the end of the interview that if they wish to add any views and explanations to their recorded material, they can approach the student researcher by email. They were also advised that if any areas should be further clarified by the interviewer or by the interviewee, additional meetings can be organized. One out of the 15 interviewed virtual onboarding process participants sent the researcher an additional email. The points included in the email were added to the transcribed interview material and analyzed together with the interview transcribes. Any unclear points were clarified with the company P&O representative, and no need for further interviews with the process participants was seen necessary to clarify the empirical data obtained.

Confirmability, the fourth element of establishing trustworthiness, refers to a clear linkage between the data and findings, requiring the researcher to document how conclusions have been reached (Novell et al., 2017). Audit trails provide evidence of this and other decisions and choices made by the student

researcher (Novell et al., 2017). As part of the audit trail and other confirmability, King (2004) recommends researchers to be conscious of their part of the interviews and reflect their involvement similarly to the interviewees' participation when reviewing the recorded and transcribed empirical material, focusing on reflexivity.

The student researcher recorded questions and updates in a separate booklet from the start of the process, enabling further exploration of the research process and different versions of the study documentation and the analysis templates. The steps taken in the research were documented in the study. In the analysis phase, by using the matrix template to capture the found themes, the findings and conclusions can be tracked easily to specific interviews stored together with transcribed documents privately. Original themes captured were also highlighted in the transcribed documents in printed or in online formats. To reflect the student researcher's impact on the empirical data, the researcher especially reviewed any parts of the interviews during the analysis process where potentially leading questions were asked, or unnecessary additional comments were made to assess if this impacted the interviewees' reply. However, this was aimed to be avoided during the interviews.

A specific focus in the study was also applied to ensure the anonymity of the interviewed personnel and the case company as per agreement with them. The case company and the names of the interviewed personnel are not published as part of the study. The recorded material and transcribed documents are stored privately as reference and evidence for audit purposes; however, both the company and the interviewee names were removed from the audio file names and the transcribed documents. Files were not shared with anyone during the process, although the interviewed personnel could request a copy of their recording. Participants were sent a summary of the study and related data privacy information before joining the interview call. This information was also summarised to them at the beginning of the interview before the recording was started. Each study participant was given the option to withdraw from the research if they wished to do so, and participation was not mandated in any way.

6.4 Potential further research topics

Multiple possible further research topics to deepen the findings can be seen as interesting based on this case study. The area covered by the case study was rather generic, covering the overall process. Extending the research to employees onboarded in a traditional face-to-face method and comparing the results to this study would be interesting to capture the differences in their experience and better understand the key differences between the two approaches. In the long term, it would be fascinating to understand if there are any patterns or major

differences in employee career success, attrition, or employee satisfaction based on whether they were onboarded remotely or in an office environment.

The social culture of the case company frames the results and therefore highlights the challenges and aspects very much from a social perspective. In a larger company with an older workforce, the results might be different. For example, no technical equipment challenges were brought up in the interviews. It would be interesting to test if the findings from this case study are applicable in such a company or if the key success elements they describe with remote onboarding are similar to understand further the impact of the company structure and culture on the needs of remote onboarding.

Further to the social aspect, the social connection, and the establishment of close, family-like relationship with colleagues is part of the case company culture and seen many as the most challenging element in the virtual onboarding as the ad hoc coffee breaks and chats while walking to a meeting room or during the seminar break are not present. The study highlighted the importance of even partial face-to-face interaction to improve and make the relationships deeper, which was possible for most new hires in the case company. Two aspects of the social connection established would be interesting to study further. Firstly, it would be fascinating and beneficial to understand the specific meetings or events that should be handled face-to-face to have the best possible outcome socially. Understanding these meetings could enable the companies to invest in the right events and gatherings. Secondly, it could be beneficial to understand further what virtual structures provide the best possible platforms to create social connections in an online environment. Understanding these platforms could give the companies further options when travel is not possible due to government regulations, employee health issues, or company financial restrictions.

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APPENDIX 1

Semi-structured interview frame

Basic information from the researcher:

- Data privacy and distribution of the recorded material
- Date, interview tool, and name of the person interviewed
- The scope of the discussion (specific new hire/general)

Interview areas (duration 30-45 minutes per person):

1) Basic information:

- Title / Role in the organization
- How long with the organization?
- Previous career background
- Education background
- Face to face interaction with new hire(s) during onboarding

2) Describe your overall experience of the (specific) onboarding process

Probe: When in your opinion, the process started/ended

Probe: Were there any changes deployed due to Covid19

Probe: What's your opinion of the process

3) In your opinion, within the process, what enabled you/the new hire to achieve:

- Clarity of role expectations (Clarity)
- Perform work well without support (Clarity)
- Integrate to the team (Connection)
- Communicate with peers and management (Connection)
- Understand company culture (values, goals, non-written rules, knowledge of culture) (Culture)
- Understand and follow compliance, data privacy rules (Compliance)

4) Your (role's) impact on successful onboarding of the new hire/you

5) Your opinion of other key process participants and their responsibilities in the process (new hire, manager, buddy, colleagues/team, P&O)

Probe: Did everybody perform as per their responsibilities

6) Your views and experiences related to the virtual onboarding process

- Critical for the successful onboarding
- Very good and beneficial for the new hire/for you
- Useless for the new hire/for you

- Especially challenging situation(s)

7) Suggested improvements to the process with reasoning based on your experiences, feedback, or comments from others

8) Any other comments related to the virtual onboarding subject

APPENDIX 2

Participant information and consent - Scientific research interview

Thank you for taking the time to talk through your experiences regarding specific remote onboarding experience(s) and join the study. Below you can find a summary of the research and other relevant information. Please read the material before joining the interview.

Interview subject: Your experience with specific remote onboarding situation(s) related to you, colleague, or employee

Duration: Maximum 45 minutes

Language: English

Meeting participants: 1:1 between you and the researcher (Satu Vaara Blöndal)

Aim of the study: To understand and deep dive into the used remote onboarding activities and your experience of them. The study's findings can be used to improve the case company's virtual onboarding set up further to ensure that the new employees are set to be successful from the very start of their journey with the case company, even when the support and guidance are only available virtually.

Your interview (voice only) will be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed as part of the research process. You can request a copy of the interview recording if you wish to obtain it for your records. Your name is not published in connection with the published study and research materials; however, your role in the organization, your background, comments, views, and experiences will be described in the written material if relevant and beneficial for the research. Participation in the study is voluntary, and you can at any time declare that you no longer want to participate in the study. The research data collected until then can be utilized in the study. Where needed, you might be contacted for further research or clarification of certain comments made in the interview.

By joining the scheduled interview, you consent to the above.

If you have any questions, please contact XXX within the case company team or the researcher Satu Vaara Blöndal (xxx@gmail.com).

APPENDIX 3

A large version of the case company remote onboarding process

