



SCHOOL OF  
ECONOMICS AND  
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# Being Invisible While Being Visible

A Case Study of How the Perception of Virtual Onboarding Relates to  
Networking in a Consultancy Firm

by

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# Abstract

<b>Title</b>	Being Invisible While Being Visible: A Case Study of How the Perception of Virtual Onboarding Relates to Networking in a Consultancy Firm
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<b>Purpose</b>	Our study aims to investigate new employees' perceptions of their virtual onboarding in a consultancy firm and how their perceptions relate to networking. We saw the need to enrich the existing theories on onboarding and networking as they were not applicable to the ever-changing environment.
<b>Methodology</b>	We conducted a qualitative single case study following an abductive and interpretative research approach. In this context, our empirical material consists of eleven semi-structured interviews.
<b>Contributions</b>	With our study, we contribute to the literature of (virtual) onboarding by giving a deeper insight into the difficulties of building interpersonal relationships and networks with colleagues virtually. We uncovered the phenomena of <i>perceived invisibility</i> and <i>confirmed invisibility</i> . Here, we emphasize that being actually visible on a computer screen does not automatically lead to the perception of being visible in the eyes of oneself and others. Additionally, we found that our interviewees lacked a sufficient cultural understanding and sense of belonging to their teams and their employer.
<b>Keywords</b>	Virtual Onboarding, Networking, Invisibility, Consulting Industry, Virtual Work, Interpersonal Relationships

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We hope you enjoy reading our thesis and that you can take something from it!

Kaya Heinrichs & Ines Rommerskirchen

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# Definitions

Covid-19	Covid-19 is a newly infectious disease, which occurred for the first time at the end of 2019 (WHO, 2021). Since then, the virus has put the world in a state of emergency, resulting in an economic and health care crisis (Jones, Palumbo & Brown, 2021). In the thesis we also refer to this as Corona or pandemic.
Remote working	Remote working describes “the practice of an employee working at their home, or in some other place that is not an organization’s usual place of business” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021). In our study we also use the terms of virtual working or working from home.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Relevance and Background

When Covid-19 hit the world in early 2020, working conditions for millions of people changed overnight. In the European Union, for instance, approximately 40% of the working population has been working full-time from home since the pandemic (Eurofound, 2020). Although flexible work arrangements were already a trend long before the pandemic, it caught many organizations off guard. Remote working comes with several benefits such as more flexibility and cost savings for both the organization and its employees (Kauffeld, Handke & Straube, 2016). However, research shows that using predominantly computer-mediated communication can significantly impede the clarity and frequency of especially the informal interaction, which is essential for establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships among colleagues (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006; Hemphill & Begel, 2014; Kauffeld, Handke & Straube, 2016). Not only the working conditions for already employed individuals changed during the pandemic. Due to the current situation, most organizations are also obliged to onboard new employees virtually. This could potentially represent a great challenge for organizations as during employees' onboarding it is considered vital for new joiners to build sustainable relationships and actively engage in networking activities with their colleagues (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Harpelund, Højbjerg & Nielsen, 2019).

Onboarding, which is in organizational studies often referred to as (organizational) socialization, describes the new employees' process of acquiring both functional and social knowledge, behaviors, and skills to integrate into the new organization successfully (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). In this respect, especially social components of onboarding are highlighted in the existing literature as they significantly contribute to desirable organizational outcomes such as employee satisfaction, commitment, high performance, and low turnover (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Johnson, Bettenhausen & Gibbons, 2009). As part of social onboarding, only a few companies manage to onboard new employees on the 'connection' level, representing the development of meaningful interpersonal relationships within an organization (Bauer, 2010). In a virtual environment, Harpelund, Højbjerg and Nielsen (2019) stress that even more efforts are needed from both the organization and established hires to enable new joiners to build these relationships and diverse networks.

In this context, networking describes the goal-oriented behavior to create and utilize interpersonal relationships with colleagues (Gibson, Hardy & Buckley, 2014). Building relationships with co-workers within an organization as part of an individual's network is not only crucial for the well-being of employees but might also offer benefits for their future career and development (Morrison, 2002; Gibson, Hardy & Buckley, 2014). Further, networking helps employees to become visible, better understand an organization's culture, and facilitates a sense of belonging to the company, which is especially vital immediately after new employees' entry into the organization (Bauer, 2010; Bauer, Morrison & Callister, 1998; Morrison, 2002).

Above that, networking is particularly relevant in knowledge-intensive firms such as consultancies as they heavily rely on their employees' collective knowledge (Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018; Seufert, von Krogh & Bach, 1999). In this respect, it remains open and yet to be researched how networking is perceived during a virtual onboarding as literature on remote working raises awareness that employees who work from home might feel isolated and less attached to their teams (Landes, Steiner, Wittmann & Utz, 2020), possibly endangering networking activities.

## 1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

The topics of onboarding and networking have been studied since the 1990s. Yet, we felt like the theory was not able to keep up with the ever-changing environment. Although some studies covered aspects of virtual onboarding (e.g., Hemphill & Begel, 2014; Harpelund, Højbjerg & Nielsen, 2019; Rodeghero, Zimmerman, Houck & Ford, 2020; Wesson & Gogus, 2005), we felt like some in-depth research was missing. As scholars in the onboarding literature repeatedly stressed the importance of building meaningful relationships and networks during the onboarding of new joiners (e.g., Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Bauer, 2013; Morrison, 2002; Johnson, Bettenhausen & Gibbons, 2009), we want to explore how this is perceived in a virtual environment in a consultancy firm.

We consider the topic not only relevant for the time of the current Covid-19 pandemic but also for the time after, as many organizations plan to further encourage remote working also after the pandemic. Therefore, it is crucial to gain novel theoretical insights into virtual (and non-virtual) onboarding that shed new light on the process from the perspectives of the employer

and new employees. The need for both academic and practical research leads to our subsequent research questions:

- *How do new employees perceive virtual onboarding within a consultancy firm?*
- *How does this perception relate to networking?*

### 1.3 Research Outline

The following part presents an outline of the subsequent chapters of our thesis. After this introductory chapter that provides the reader with necessary background information as well as the study's research purpose and questions, the second chapter presents an overview of relevant theories for our thesis. In this chapter we draw on previous research for the topics onboarding and networking. We explore connections between the two topics and present the theoretical framework of our study, which will be taken up in chapter five. Chapter three describes the methodology of our study and provides information regarding our research approach, the data collection, and analysis. Furthermore, we critically reflect on the limitations of our study and highlight the importance of reflexivity within our research. In chapter four, we depict our empirical findings and analysis. Here, we show how our interviewees perceived their virtual onboarding and that especially networking is vital during employees' socialization. Chapter five contains a discussion of how our empirical findings relate to the theoretical framework of our study. To conclude our thesis, we summarize our main findings in chapter six and give an outline for future research. Furthermore, we reflect on the limitations of our study and discuss our theoretical and practical contributions.

## 2 Literature Review

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*In the following chapter, we provide the relevant theoretical background for our study. The literature review is divided into two parts, addressing our main topics of (virtual) onboarding and the relevance of networking accompanying this process. Further, we present relevant concepts such as Bauer's (2010) 4C-model, the process model of organizational socialization by Bauer and Erdogan (2011), as well as the influencing factors and outcomes of networking by Gibson, Hardy and Buckley (2014).*

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As our topic is about (virtual) onboarding, we acknowledge that there are different fields of study that relate to this phenomenon under various terms. In Human Resource Management literature, onboarding aims to integrate new employees both functionally and socially into the organization. Especially as we focus on the social aspect of onboarding, the Human Resources Management literature is overlapping with applied organizational psychology, which we occasionally used to further enrich our research. These research areas use the terms of onboarding and organizational socialization interchangeably (e.g., Harpelund, Højberg & Nielsen, 2019; Bauer, 2010; Caldwell & Peters, 2018; Chillakuri, 2020; Hemphill & Begel, 2014; Bauer, Morrison & Callister, 1998; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). In the related research field of organizational studies, authors more often refer to the integration of new joiners as socialization (e.g., Allen & Shanock, 2013; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Morrison, 2002; Wesson & Gogus, 2005). To get a more comprehensive understanding of our topic, we incorporated research from the mentioned areas of study and, thus, make use of both onboarding and (organizational) socialization as terms for the organizational integration of new joiners.

In the following literature review we address two main topics, namely, (virtual) onboarding and the related importance of networking in this process. Both are of high relevance for our study as relationship building is considered essential for successfully integrating new employees (Bauer, 2010). Networking requires the development of interpersonal relationships and facilitates the understanding of the organizational culture and its subcultures and ensures that they develop a sense of belonging (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). If they cannot build meaningful relationships and thereby are not able to develop well-functioning networks within the new organization, they tend to be less committed to their employer (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). Consequently, this might negatively impact turnover-rates, representing an undesirable outcome for organizations. We acknowledge that both the emphasis on networking and a successful

onboarding are strategic decisions, favorable for the employer. Although we recognize these long-term outcomes of onboarding, we focus on the perception of employees in our thesis. In the literature review we use strategic models and concepts such as the process model of organizational socialization by Bauer and Erdogan (2011) or the influencing factors and desired outcomes of networking by Gibson, Hardy and Buckley (2014) to provide a framework for the subsequent presentation and discussion of our empirical findings in chapter five. Here, we mainly focus on how new joiners at our case organization experienced their virtual onboarding and how this relates to their networking behaviors.

## 2.1. Onboarding

### 2.1.1. Definition of Onboarding

Onboarding defines “a process through which new employees move from being organizational outsiders to becoming organizational insiders” (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011, p. 51). In this process, they need to obtain the relevant skills, knowledge, and behaviors that enable a successful integration into the new company and facilitate future growth (Wesson & Gogus, 2005; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). Hence, new employees should familiarize themselves with the company's values, goals, traditions, rules, processes, and policies to become accepted organizational members (Caldwell & Peters, 2018). From the employers’ perspective, onboarding is mainly about ensuring that new hires are aware of what is expected from them in their new roles, encouraging them to build meaningful relationships with their colleagues and shaping the way they perceive the corporate culture (Harpelund, Højberg & Nielsen, 2019). Thus, organizational socialization can be seen as a meaningful transitional process that deeply shapes, affects, and challenges new employees intending to integrate and retain them successfully (Harpelund, Højberg & Nielsen, 2019). Here, research has shown that effective socialization significantly increases new joiners' commitment, resulting in higher job satisfaction and retention rates (Harpelund, Højberg, & Nielsen, 2019; Bauer, 2013; Gruman & Saks, 2013). Consequently, a well-working onboarding process is essential to both the new employees’ and the organization’s success (Chillakuri, 2020).

There are various opinions among researchers concerning the length of onboarding. We acknowledge that there is no clear end date to the onboarding of new employees as it can instead be considered an ongoing process. Nevertheless, for our study, we limit the time frame of

onboarding from the new joiners' first day at work, as defined in the employment contract, to a maximum of one year later. Literature emphasizes that the first months in the new organization determine the beliefs and attitudes of new hires towards their employer (Wesson & Gogus, 2005). As those remain relatively stable over time (Wesson & Gogus, 2005), organizations should put great effort into ensuring that the new hires' first impressions and experiences are positive. In this context, Allen's and Shanock's (2013) research suggests that early onboarding experiences that facilitate the development of interpersonal relationships are significantly contributing to the new employees' organizational commitment. However, it would not be sufficient to study new joiners' perceptions only within their first months of employment as it was found that it takes a long time for them to, for example, build sustainable relationships and fully understand the company culture, enabling an effective social integration into the organization (Harpelund, Højberg & Nielsen, 2019). For those reasons, we chose a time frame of twelve months.

### 2.1.2. Components of (Virtual) Onboarding

During the new employees' organizational socialization, they need to acquire the task-related and comprehend the social aspects of their new position (Bauer, 2013). Hence, according to Becker (2004), onboarding can be divided into two major components: the functional qualification process and the individual socialization process. The functional qualification process is occupation based and should empower new employees to effectively undertake their job tasks (Hemphill & Begel, 2014). In that regard, they must learn, for example, where to find and how to efficiently use important information as well as gain an understanding of their team's practices and the organizational structure more generally (Hemphill & Begel, 2014). The individual socialization process requires new joiners to learn how to work and socially interact with their colleagues by internalizing the shared beliefs, norms, and values that are unique for the company culture (Hemphill & Begel, 2014). As this process is all about the cultural and social integration of new employees (Becker, 2004), aiming at establishing meaningful interpersonal relationships, it is crucial to the onboarding success (Hemphill & Begel, 2014) and constitutes the focus of our study. Hence, the task-related aspects will not be addressed in detail in this thesis.

The above-mentioned components can be applied to Bauer's (2010) four C model of onboarding that constitutes the following levels: *compliance*, *clarification*, *culture*, and *connection*.

Here, the qualification process is represented by the first two C's *compliance* and *clarification*, whereas the individual socialization process comprises the last two C's *culture* and *connection*. Although organizational socialization should encompass all four levels to integrate new employees successfully and generate positive outcomes such as organizational commitment, few companies manage to coordinate and reach all of them (Bauer, 2010). For the purpose of our research, Bauer's four C's are explained and linked with examples from previous studies addressing the virtual work environment. We chose this model as it highlights the importance of new employees' social integration by emphasizing the aspects *culture* and *connection*, which is in line with our research focus.

The first C in Bauer's (2013) model, *compliance*, refers to providing new hires with on-the-job basics, including technical equipment and settings such as email accounts. Furthermore, it ensures that new hires are familiarized with important policy-related rules and regulations necessary for their new role in the organization (Bauer, 2010). However, in this context, Rodeghero et. al. (2020) state that new joiners who enter the organization virtually tend to experience more difficulties in finding relevant information and often encounter technical issues hindering a smooth transition process.

The second C, *clarification*, guarantees that newly acquired employees gain an understanding of their job and all related expectations (Bauer, 2013). In that regard, Bauer (2013) emphasizes that they must acquire relevant knowledge concerning the context and details of their position, the norms to undertake their tasks, as well as the company specific vocabulary. The faster this is successful, the sooner new employees are productive in their new roles (Bauer, 2010). Nevertheless, research shows that employees who onboard virtually tend to have a significantly lower comprehension of their new jobs than those undergoing the process face-to-face (Wesson and Gogus, 2005). This might be explained through geographical separation as it was found that new employees struggle to comprehend their team members' expertise virtually, which then negatively impacts their help-seeking attempts and behaviors (Hemphill & Begel, 2014).

The third C, *culture*, is regarded as a key element of onboarding and relates to facilitating new hires' understanding of the unique organizational culture and its subcultures (Bauer, 2013). In this respect, it is of great importance that new joiners feel supported by their organization in navigating and finding their place within this culture (Bauer, 2010; Mercurio, 2015). To adapt to the corporate culture as quickly as possible, which increases their chances for long-term

success, new employees particularly must learn and internalize the company's distinctive language, rituals, goals, values, and politics (Klein & Weaver, 2000; Bauer 2010). However, literature indicates that absorbing the corporate culture is one of the most challenging aspects of employee socialization (Dill, 2020). It "requires co-presence and is based on mutual observations and responses to behaviors which help people learn to understand one another's responses and reactions" (Hemphill & Begel, 2014, p.3). As new joiners need to observe their colleagues, which is virtually only possible to a very limited extent, one can expect that digitally onboarded people have fewer opportunities to grasp the company culture and, thus, are fundamentally restricted in effective socialization.

The fourth C, *connection*, in Bauer's (2010) model is especially crucial for the socialization success of new employees. According to the author, connection relates to "the vital interpersonal relationships and information networks that new employees must establish upon entering the new organization" (p.2). Therefore, important indicators of employee adjustment are, for example, how well new hires know their team members and how intense their social ties to other colleagues are (Morrison, 2002). In this context, Maznevski and Chudoba (2001) emphasize that especially early face-to-face interaction in teams favors strong interpersonal relationships. However, research indicates that virtually onboarded employees experience great difficulties bonding with their team members (Rodeghero et al. 2020). This is in line with Liberman, Trope and Stephan (2007), who discovered the positive relation between physical distance and perceived emotional distance. Further, this can also largely be attributed to two reasons, namely, reduced frequency and clarity of virtual communication (Hemphill & Begel, 2014; Gibson & Gibbs, 2006; Kauffeld, Handke & Straube, 2016).

The frequency mainly relates to less informal interaction among team colleagues, negatively impacting the quality of their social relationships, thus, disrupting new joiners' organizational socialization (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006; Hemphill & Begel, 2014). Hemphill and Begel (2014) state that this is particularly rooted in the fact that everyday informal activities with collocated colleagues, such as having lunch together or chat in another employee's office, are omitted entirely in a virtual environment. Accordingly, virtual new joiners have fewer opportunities to gain knowledge about their colleagues and build trust, which typically arises through informal interactions (Hemphill & Begel, 2014). As virtual communication usually has fewer socio-emotional components than face-to-face interaction, employees who primarily work virtually tend to lack close relationships with their colleagues (Kauffeld, Handke & Straube, 2016). This

might lead to an increased feeling of isolation (Workman, Kahnweiler & Bommer, 2003), which is especially detrimental for new joiners' socialization.

Regarding clarity, Gibson & Gibbs (2006) found that the communication clarity within virtual teams is significantly reduced compared to face-to-face teams. According to Ahuja and Galvin (2003), the reason for that lies in the lack of social cues that are usually available through non-verbal communication. In this context, Rodeghero et al. (2020) point out that especially new team members struggle to understand their team's dynamics if they communicate virtually with their colleagues. Hence, literature suggests that the lack of social cues, inevitable when using computer-mediated communication, favors misunderstandings and results in conflicts that decrease employee satisfaction (Workman, Kahnweiler & Bommer, 2003).

Consequently, research suggests that teams who mainly rely on virtual communication have difficulties forming a shared identity (Shapiro, Furst, Spreitzer, & Von Glinow, 2002). Here, both the reduced frequency and clarity of virtual communication could jeopardize team cohesion and negatively impact employees' emotional attachment to their team (Johnson, Bettenhausen & Gibbons, 2009). Accordingly, it is less likely that they show cooperative or helpful behavior, which endangers the team's performance (Johnson, Bettenhausen & Gibbons, 2009).

In our research, we aim to investigate how *culture* and *connection* are perceived during a virtual onboarding as the above-mentioned literature does not provide sufficient insights into that matter.

### 2.1.3. Process Model of Organizational Socialization

After having addressed the components of onboarding in the previous section, Bauer's and Erdogan's (2011) process model of socialization will be introduced in the following to demonstrate what factors are impacting the success of new employees' organizational socialization and which outcomes for the company can be expected as a consequence. We recognize that a critical assessment of this model's quality would have been an interesting research perspective. Nevertheless, we decided only to use it as a framework to enrich our discussion as it was more suitable to our research approach. As illustrated in the figure below, three main influential factors determine how successful a new joiner manages the transitional process: Organizational efforts, new employee behaviors and new employee characteristics.

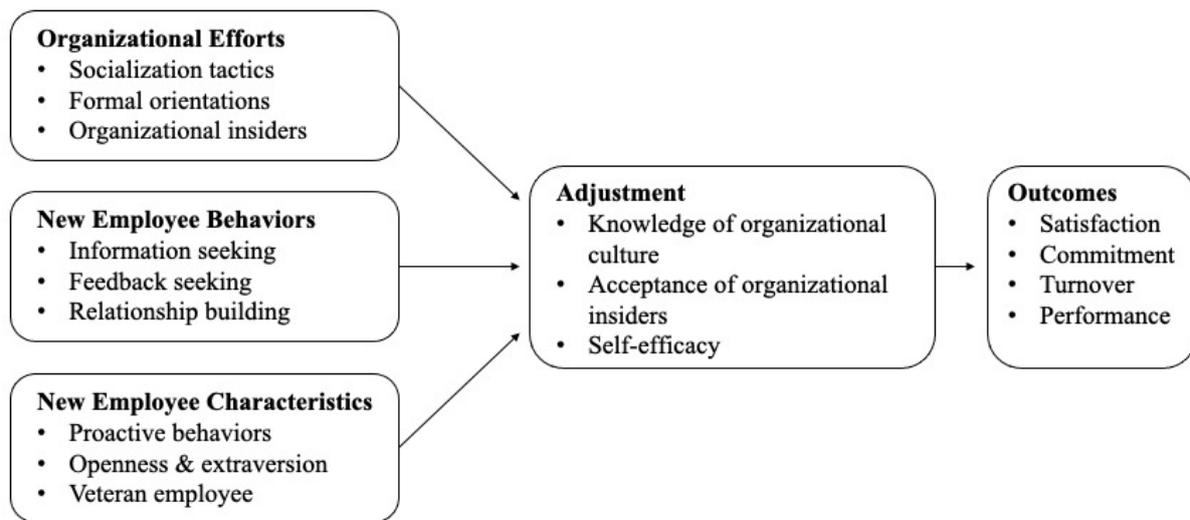


Figure 1: Process Model of Organizational Socialization (based on Bauer & Erdogan, 2011)

Firstly, organizational efforts significantly impact the new employees' socialization success (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). Here, organizations should provide an environment that facilitates the new employees' understanding of the corporate culture, social integration, and rapid adaptation to their new roles (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). In that regard, an orientation program at the beginning of their employment helps them navigate through the culture, build relationships with their colleagues and familiarize them with norms and expectations related to their new roles within the company (Klein & Weaver, 2000). Here, it is particularly crucial that new joiners have a positive perception of the organizational initiatives as they contribute to the development of organizational commitment (Mercurio, 2015). Although literature suggests that a more structured approach towards orientation programs is beneficial to new joiners' socialization, some companies follow a less systematic approach with a 'sink or swim' attitude (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). According to Bauer and Erdogan (2011), the latter often leads to confusion, disorientation, and dissatisfaction of new joiners, hindering their social integration significantly. Moreover, it is considered vital that new employees develop strong interpersonal relationships early to get accepted by organizational insiders (Allen & Shanock, 2013). However, as already mentioned, the virtual environment represents a barrier to bond with colleagues, which might negatively impact the success of computer-based orientation programs. In addition, Wesson and Gogus (2005) found that computer-based orientation programs are detrimental to gain an understanding of the company culture, further limiting the probability of a well-functioning virtual onboarding.

Secondly, according to Bauer and Erdogan (2011), the behavior of new employees is an important influential factor for the onboarding's success. Although companies usually put great effort in ensuring ideal conditions for new joiners' integration, the authors acknowledge that employees also invest much of their time and energy towards their organizational membership. Since there is mutual influence on both sides, they adopt an interactionist perspective on organizational socialization. In this context, Bauer and Erdogan (2011) name three main efforts from new employees: Information seeking, feedback seeking, and relationship building. New employees' frequent information and feedback seeking attempts are very important as they are proven to help them adjust to their new roles (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2000). However, research indicates that new joiners struggle and are hesitant to seek help and ask for advice in a remote setting (Rodeghero et al. 2020). Relationship building, also referred to as networking, is another vital behavior that new employees should actively engage in as it significantly promotes onboarding (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). Nevertheless, Harpelund, Højberg and Nielsen (2019) stress that developing networks and building relationships is particularly difficult when working remotely and is associated with greater employee effort.

Thirdly, Bauer and Erdogan (2011) emphasize certain employee characteristics and personality traits that are considered crucial to adapt to the new environment more quickly and, therefore, promote new hires' effective organizational socialization. In that regard, the authors draw a link to the, in social psychology, widely used *five-factor model of personality*<sup>1</sup> and state that especially the personality traits 'openness to new experiences' and 'extraversion' are relevant to new joiners' socialization success. Above that, they highlight proactivity as the most important characteristic because proactive individuals often engage in behaviors that favor socialization, such as building social networks and asking questions to clarify discrepancies (Thompson, 2005; Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003). Here, proactivity promotes an increased and faster understanding of the organizational culture and enhances role-clarity, which are both essential to the onboarding of new employees (Thompson, 2005). Moreover, Bauer and Erdogan (2011) suggest in their model that new employees who have worked in other companies before can benefit from their previous onboarding experiences, helping them to adjust faster to their new work environment.

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<sup>1</sup> Five-factor model of personality comprises five personality traits: openness to new experiences, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism

Finally, the three main influential factors mentioned above should ideally lead to knowledge of the corporate culture, self-efficacy, and acceptance of organizational insiders, which are valuable indications for employee adjustment (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). These factors are, in turn, connected to desirable organizational outcomes like high commitment, job satisfaction, and performance, as well as low turnover (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003; Gruman & Saks, 2013). However, evidence suggests that these beneficial outcomes are negatively impacted when employees mainly communicate and work together virtually (Johnson, Bettenhausen & Gibbons, 2009).

## 2.2 Networking with Colleagues

As stated in the previous section, it is of high importance that new joiners put great effort into establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships with their colleagues. In this context, when developing interpersonal relationships, new employees build networks relevant for both their social integration and their future career in the new organization. Hence, the following section provides theoretical insights into the concept of networking.

### 2.2.1 Definition of Networking: It's Not What You Know, It's Who You Know

When it comes to what networking is, literature offers a vast amount of different definitions. The definitions differ in aspects such as the purpose of networking, the range of contacts, or the intensity of interpersonal relationships. Some scholars argue that the sole purpose of networking is the development of beneficial opportunities, both of private and professional nature, to secure future success (e.g., Wolff, Moser & Grau, 2008; Singh, Vinnicombe & Kumra, 2006). Researchers such as Torres (2005) even claim that the quality of a person's network is of greater importance for their career than their abilities or experiences. Gibson, Hardy and Buckley (2014, p.146) summarize this under the statement, "It's not what you know, it's who you know".

Like Orpen (1996), some scholars argue that networking only considers contact with people outside their chain of command. In contrast, others contend that networking describes the behaviors to develop interpersonal relationships and exchange affect, knowledge, and influence (Michael & Yukl, 1993). In our thesis, we briefly follow the definition of Gibson, Hardy and

Buckley (2014, p. 150), who claim that “Networking is a form of goal-directed behavior, both inside and outside of an organization, focused on creating, cultivating, and utilizing interpersonal relationships”. Further, they give examples for networking behaviors, such as “inviting an influential colleague to a social or work function, contacting an expert in order to gain knowledge needed to complete an assignment, requesting assistance from a contact when seeking a promotion or raise, interacting with a professional colleague in a social context with the intent of developing a deeper relationship, and taking a new coworker out for a drink to help them integrate into the organization.” (p.150).

For our thesis, we decided to only focus on networking within organizations due to the scope of our research. However, we acknowledge that connections to clients or other organizations are of great importance for knowledge-intensive firms like consultancies. We understand networking as behaviors to build relationships to both closer work colleagues as well as connections to people outside employees’ chain of command that could be of potential importance for their future career and success. Further, we want to emphasize the importance of networking behaviors in knowledge-intensive firms, such as consultancies, as it provides the potential for great competitive advantage and is, therefore, beneficial not only for the employees themselves but also for the organization.

### 2.2.2 Influencing Factors of Networking

Several factors influence if and how networking behaviors will occur. Gibson, Hardy and Buckley (2014) divide these into individual, job, and organizational levels, which we use as an orientation for the following part. We consider the influencing factors of networking relevant for our research because they shed light on internal and external aspects, possibly impacting new joiners’ successful socialization.

On an individual level, the authors present several factors such as personality, demographic variables, or self-esteem that influence networking. Here, most of the research focuses on personality traits that either stimulate or prohibit networking behaviors. For instance, Wolff and Kim (2012) claim that some of the above mentioned *Big Five personality traits* like extraversion or ‘openness to new experiences’ positively influence networking behaviors, whereas ‘neuroticism’ supposedly has a negative impact. Furthermore, research showed that people with

high self-esteem are more likely to engage in social interactions and networking behavior (Forret & Dougherty, 2001).

On a job level, Gibson, Hardy and Buckley (2014) argue that some types of jobs require more tremendous networking efforts than others to become successful. Moreover, Forret and Dougherty (2001) found that the frequency of networking behaviors is particularly high for professionals with less work experience and managers. This is based on the assumption that individuals engage in networking to enhance visibility, develop better relationships with clients, and hope for better project options (Gibson, Hardy & Buckley, 2014). Lastly, the authors claim that individuals who work more hours are more likely to engage in networking as they have further opportunities to socialize and become visible (Gibson, Hardy & Buckley, 2014).

On an organizational level, organizational culture is supposed to be one of the most significant influences on networking behavior. Gibson, Hardy and Buckley (2014) contend that especially open and collaborative cultures are likely to encourage networking and, thus, facilitate socializing behaviors. They argue that employees who feel supported by their organization to network are more likely to do so. Furthermore, organizational decisions and policies are said to influence the frequency and extent of networking (Gibson, Hardy & Buckley, 2014).

Apart from these three influencing factors, other scholars mention additional factors that affect networking, especially during organizational socialization. Morrison (2002), for instance, argues that the effects of networking are the greatest when individuals have diverse networks with, for example, members from different organizational units. If new joiners only connect to close work colleagues but lack a diverse network, they might be less attached and committed to the greater organization (Reichers, 1985 cited in Morrison, 2002). Therefore, for successful integration, new employees need to feel like they belong to their immediate colleagues and build networks within the overall organization (Bauer, Morrison & Callister, 1998; Morrison, 2002).

Regarding the intensity of these contacts, many scholars argue that not all those networks are of only informational nature but rather resemble friendships that “provide support and a sense of belonging and identity” (Morrison, 2002, p. 1151). Further, Podolny and Baron (1997) argue that strong relationships enable a better understanding of social cues and building trust. In general, research stresses yet again the importance of networking behaviors and meaningful

relationships to both immediate colleagues and people outside their unit and level to develop stronger attachment and commitment to the organization (Morrison, 2002).

### 2.2.3 Desired Outcomes of Networking

Apart from the above-mentioned increased organizational commitment, the literature offers several other outcomes from networking behaviors stressing its relevance. On an individual level, many scholars claim that well-connected employees will experience benefits in their future career and development (Gibson, Hardy & Buckley, 2014). Here, researchers found that active networking attempts are linked to increased power and visibility and, thus, might increase future career success (Wolff & Moser, 2009; Forret & Dougherty, 2001). This might include, for example, more job opportunities, income, promotions, or resources (Tonge, 2008). Apart from those career-centered outcomes, the strong relationships with colleagues also hold tremendous advantages. As stated earlier, employees who build meaningful relationships with colleagues and bond with them are more likely to comprehend an organization's culture and are able to identify with the organization (Morrison, 2002; Podolny & Baron, 1997; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). As networking has such far-reaching outcomes, it is vital for organizational new joiners and their integration into an organization (Morrison, 2002).

However, the outcomes of networking behaviors do not only concern individuals but also the organization itself. As mentioned above, organizations greatly influence the extent of networking within the company. At the same time, networking also has a significant impact on the organization and its success. Thompson (2005), for example, found that proactive behavior and networking attempts positively relate to job performance. Here, Morrison (2002) stresses that this is especially crucial in organizations where an individual's network directly benefits the organization. This is, for example, the case in knowledge-intensive firms such as consultancies that heavily rely on their employees' accumulated knowledge and networks (Seufert, von Krogh & Bach, 1999). Further, organizations profit from their employees' commitment, which is likely to increase if they are well-connected within the organization (Morrison, 2002).

### 2.2.4 Importance of Networking in Knowledge-Intensive Firms

In today's fast-changing world, especially so-called knowledge-intensive firms such as our case organization, a consultancy, heavily rely on their employees' accumulated knowledge and

networking (Seufert, von Krogh & Bach, 1999; Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018). Here, knowledge is increasingly seen as an essential factor for achieving competitive advantage. The literature offers various definitions of knowledge-intensive firms. For instance, Teece (2000) argues that a knowledge-intensive firm is characterized by knowledge being the organization's main asset and most vital resource. In line with that, Alvesson (2004, p.17) considers them as "organizations that offer the market the use of sophisticated knowledge or knowledge-based products". Therefore, the employees working in such organizations contribute considerably to the organization's innovation and growth and can be considered as 'knowledge workers' (Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018).

To ensure that the competitive advantage is secured long-term, existing knowledge should not only be managed but also shared and further developed (Seufert, von Krogh & Bach, 1999). Here, the creation of new knowledge is of fundamental importance (Seufert, von Krogh & Bach, 1999). In this context, Seufert, von Krogh and Bach (1999) emphasize that knowledge workers should engage in networking to overcome knowledge barriers and, thus, promote a productive environment for the generation of new knowledge. A knowledge barrier is, for example, the existence of so-called knowledge islands, where knowledge is accessible only to a small number of individuals and is not shared with others outside this team (Seufert, von Krogh & Bach, 1999).

The importance of networking for knowledge-intensive firms is also accentuated by Hislop, Bosua and Helms (2018), who highlight the relevance of using social capital in intra- and inter-organizational networks. According to them, social capital describes the knowledge and resources employees get through their relationships with people in their networks (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998 cited in Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018). This network of social relations allows employees to reach out to and share knowledge with colleagues beyond project boundaries (Swart & Kinnie, 2003). Further, it enables the development of new knowledge to create value and a long-term competitive advantage for the organization (Seufert, von Krogh & Bach, 1999).

## 2.3 Summary of Theoretical Concepts

In our literature review, we focused on two main concepts: (Virtual) onboarding and networking. First, we distinguished between the functional and social components of onboarding (Becker, 2004). Here, we introduced Bauer's (2010) four C model, which comprises functional and social components of onboarding, namely compliance, clarity, culture and connection. We enriched these components with examples from virtual onboarding and remote working literature. Nevertheless, we concentrated on the social aspects 'culture' and 'connection' due to our study's purpose of gaining insights into the new employees' perception of, especially, relationship building and networking. These aspects are also part of the process model of organizational socialization by Bauer and Erdogan (2011). This model provides a comprehensive and strategic framework for new joiners' onboarding, providing crucial influencing factors, such as organizational efforts or employee characteristics and behaviors. Further, it offers an overview of new joiners' adjustments like the acceptance of organizational insiders or the understanding of the organizational culture. Lastly, it stresses the far-reaching outcomes of new employees' socialization for the organization, such as job satisfaction, performance, commitment or turnover. As emphasized in the model, relationship building is vital for a successful social integration into the new company.

Second, we provided an overview of key concepts of networking. Networking relies on relationship building within the organization and is considered a goal-oriented behavior (Gibson, Hardy & Buckley, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial during the organizational socialization of new employees. A diverse network with both organizational members in- and outside the team facilitates the understanding of the corporate culture, resulting in a sense of belonging (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Morrison, 2002; Bauer, Morrison & Callister, 1998). Besides these 'soft' factors, actively engaging in networking and becoming visible to organizational members is considered beneficial for 'hard' factors such as the career progression of individuals.

# 3 Methodology

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*In our methodology chapter, we start by elaborating on the philosophical grounding underlying our study. Next, we outline our research approach of a qualitative, abductive study. Additionally, we give a detailed description of our data collection and analysis, followed by a critical reflection and possible limitations of our study.*

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## 3.1 Philosophical Grounding

With our study, we aim to understand how individuals perceive virtual onboarding in a consultancy firm. Further, we want to comprehend how this might relate to networking. When asking about our interviewees' perceptions, we follow the assumption that there is a subjective reality that is socially constructed through interpretations (Prasad, 2018).

According to Prasad (2018), there are different research traditions for qualitative research that researchers can be inspired or influenced by. Here, our study is inspired by an interpretive approach by focusing on how individuals understand onboarding in a remote environment. Our goal is to comprehend the processes of subjective reality construction, which the author calls the principle of *verstehen*.

As we focus on individuals' interpretations, we acknowledge that there are diverse individual realities (Prasad, 2018). Prasad (2018) designates these interpretations as the starting point for knowledge generation about the social world. Further, she argues how reality is constructed in interaction and that individuals make sense through language and communication. Our study aims to shed light on the sense-making and *Lebenswelten*<sup>2</sup> of our interviewees by allowing them to freely express their perceptions, understandings, and interpretations of their virtual socialization process.

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<sup>2</sup> *Lebenswelt* refers to how individuals make sense of encountered phenomena (Prasad, 2018)

## 3.2 Research Approach

As our study explores the *how* and the perception of individuals, the research topic cannot be measured or put into numbers. Hence, we decided on pursuing a qualitative study. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) suggest a qualitative approach for researchers who intend to understand processes, meanings, or qualities. In line with that, we aim to investigate the meanings of our interviewed individuals to understand how they make sense of their virtual onboarding perception in our study.

In business research, there is typically a distinction made between three different approaches: induction, deduction, and abduction (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). According to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019), deduction describes the inquiry to either confirm or reject existing theory with empirical findings, whereas induction aims to find new theories with the empirical material collected. For some, abduction can be seen as the sole combination of deduction and induction. However, Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018) argue that abduction constitutes a new dimension as it is about moving back and forth between theory and empirical findings. That means that we entered the field with some previous knowledge about existing theory and an idea of where our research might go, but then tried to stay open-minded to new observations during our research and focused on what we found most interesting. For example, we allowed our interviewees to take the interview into other, possibly new directions and asked follow-up questions that were not necessarily part of our interview guide.

To stay open during the conduction of research is also advised by Alvesson and Kärreman (2007), who introduce an approach that encourages researchers to look for so-called mysteries. Mysteries describe phenomena discovered in researchers' empirical findings that cannot be explained with existing theories or literature (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). When researchers stay open during their studies, they are able to create new concepts or enrich already existing theories (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). This is also touched upon by Timmermans and Tavory (2012), who label the development of new theories based on surprising empirical findings as essential characteristics of an abductive research approach. Keeping this in mind allowed us to improve the back-and-forth movement between theory and our findings while staying open-minded to new phenomena.

### 3.3 Data Collection

The following section examines the data collection process of our empirical material. Here, we opted for a single-case study utilizing semi-structured interviews as empirical material. According to Yin (2018), case studies are suitable when three conditions are fulfilled: Firstly, the research questions should be about the ‘how’ or ‘why’ of phenomena. Secondly, no control over behavioral actions is required, and lastly, the phenomena studied should be rather contemporary. In our study, all of those criteria are met, which, therefore, justifies an application. Further, we chose to follow a case study approach as it provides more profound insights and enhances the chance of generating novel theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). This will serve as a starting point for future research as the topic of virtual onboarding is not yet sufficiently explored in academic research. Accordingly, Eisenhardt (1989, p.548) emphasizes that “building theory from case study research is most appropriate in the early stages of research on a topic or to provide freshness in perspective to an already researched topic”. We, therefore, expect our research to shed light on a novel phenomenon that will inspire future academic discussions. We decided to focus on only one case organization, a consultancy, to get a more in-depth analysis of our phenomenon compared to a multiple-case study (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

#### 3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

As part of our study, we chose to conduct semi-structured interviews because, compared to structured interviews, which are often used in quantitative research, qualitative interviews allow more flexibility (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). We composed an interview guide in which specific topics and questions are covered but then had the freedom to react to new things mentioned by our interviewees or to vary the order of these questions. We aimed for rich and detailed answers from our interviewees, which allowed more profound insights into our interviewees’ understandings and perceptions (Boeije, 2010). Moreover, we allowed our interviewees to freely talk about new topics and share their experiences and interpretations of the social phenomena (Wahyuni, 2012). We paid particular attention to how our interviewees understood issues and events and what they considered significant to explain these situations (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). However, in semi-structured interviews, most questions are the same, so all interviews covered the same topics and, thus, allowed to compare and relate the interviews to each other (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

### 3.3.1.1 Conception of Interview Guide

Our interview guide consists of questions inspired by existing theories in the field, which are exemplified in our literature review. However, as mentioned above, we were not limited to the questions of the interview guide and stayed open for possible new questions during the interview conceptions.

At first, we composed a preliminary interview guide that we used in a pretest interview with a virtual new joiner. This allowed us to further adapt and improve the guide before conducting our interviews in our case organization. We used two different interview guides for our interviews: One for virtually onboarded new joiners and an adapted variant for the managers responsible for onboarding (see Appendix A + B). The first interview guide was modified to some extent for interviews with re-joiners, who did an internship at our case organization before and could, therefore, also talk about their offline onboarding experiences. Although we divided the interview guides into thematic blocks to better structure our questions, we did not necessarily stick to this order to spontaneously react to our respondents' answers and create a more natural conversation. The blocks cover themes such as organizational support, interpersonal relationships, networking attempts, culture, or team cohesion.

Before the interview started, we encompassed, as suggested by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), a short briefing. This included some information about the topic of our master thesis, the introduction of ourselves, and the confirmation that their names will be handled anonymously. Further, we asked for their permission to record the interview and thanked them for their participation. As suggested by Wahyuni (2012), our interview guides consist of open-ended main questions, follow-up questions, and probes. Especially at the beginning of our interviews, we tried to ask broader questions to create a comfortable atmosphere and encouraged our interviewees to share experiences and stories. A critique of open-ended questions is that they might confuse the interviewees if they are too broad, so Gläser and Laudel (2010) advise balancing the openness of questions. The follow-up questions have the purpose of exploring specific themes, ideas or thoughts further, whereas the probes were used to keep the conversation flowing and clarify topics by asking for examples or a more detailed answer (Wahyuni, 2012). Overall, we tried to formulate the questions in our interview guides as unbiased and neutral as possible to minimize any influence of the respondents' answers (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

We ended our interviews with a short debriefing, where we gave our interviewees the chance to add information or ask questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Moreover, we thanked them again for their participation and offered to share our findings with them.

### 3.3.1.2 Interview Conduction

In total, we conducted 11 interviews between the 24.-29. of March 2021, which lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. We decided not to send out our interview guide beforehand to enable more authentic, unbiased answers (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). The interviewees were only informed about our general topic ‘Virtual Onboarding’ when our company contact approached them accordingly to our pre-defined criteria. As the native language of all our interviewees was German, we conducted the interviews in German to enable more nuanced and detailed answers to our questions. We acknowledge that this might lead to difficulties due to the translation, but we made sure to translate as precisely as possible and found that the advantage of a more natural conversation outweighed the disadvantages of possible inaccuracies in translation.

Both of us researchers took part in the interviews to facilitate different perspectives, reduce possible biases and deepen our understanding and analysis. During the interviews, we took on different roles: one of us was responsible for asking questions and listening carefully, whereas the other had the task to take notes and pay special attention to not only what the interviewees said but also how they said it. After every interview, we changed the roles to further prevent any biases from happening. During and after every interview, both of us stayed critical and questioned whether the answers of our interviewees were inconsistent (Kvale, 1996). This enabled us to become more prepared and open for the following interviews and sometimes resulted in further interview questions. In general, our role as interviewers was one of a moderator who guided the interview process but stayed in the background to not interfere with our interviewees’ statements and gave the freedom to elaborate on aspects they wanted to share with us.

Due to the currently ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews on-site. Hence, we conducted all our interviews with the video conferencing tool Zoom, which video option allowed us to create a more personal atmosphere. Furthermore, we tried to loosen up the atmosphere with small talk, in the beginning, to ensure that all of our interviewees felt comfortable. As all interviewees at our case organization were required to work from home during the time of our interviews, they attended the interviews in their own

homes. This also contributed to creating a private and safe atmosphere, where no one could overhear anything and, thus, influence the interviewees' answers. However, we acknowledge that the virtual conduction of our interviews also had its limitations. We realized that it was harder for us to observe the 'how' as we could only see the upper body and the interviewees' facial expressions but could not grasp all their gestures. We deem that it would have been easier to get a comprehensive understanding of underlying tones or gestures in an offline setting. Nevertheless, we believe that we were able to get valuable insights into what our interviewees told us in terms of perceptions, emotions, and conflicts.

All our interviews were recorded so we could transcribe them afterwards. As this ensured that no important information got lost, it enabled us to focus more on listening and observing the interviewees during the interview sessions. We promised that we would not share the audio files with any third parties and further ensured our interviewees' complete anonymity to get authentic insights into their perceptions and interpretations. According to Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018), this generates more honest answers and, thus, more profound insights into our interviewees' *Lebenswelten*.

### 3.3.2 Research Sample

#### 3.3.2.1 Characteristics of the Case Organization

Our case organization, where we conducted the qualitative interviews, will be addressed under the pseudonym *Delta* due to confidentiality reasons. The pseudonym was chosen randomly and does not relate to the organization in any form. Delta is an internationally known significant player in the consultancy industry with more than 10.000 employees in Germany. Despite the company's worldwide distributed locations, we only interviewed employees based in Germany. This decision was based on the fact that the onboarding activities vary between different countries, and our data would not have been comparable if we interviewed internationally. The departments at Delta differ in size, but the Human Resources (henceforth HR) Advisory department, for instance, where we conducted most of our interviews, consists of approximately 100 employees. Within the departments, the consultants are working in smaller sub-teams of circa 20 to 30 co-workers.

We specifically decided to conduct our interviews in a consultancy firm, as consultancies are considered knowledge-intensive organizations (Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018). Therefore, they heavily rely on their employees' skills, competencies, willingness to share knowledge and commitment to the organization (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2020). As the industry is exceptionally dependent on their employees' cumulative knowledge, networking within Delta is attributed an important role to. Furthermore, our topic is particularly relevant for consultancies as Delta, for example, already heavily relied on virtual working due to the geographical separation of its employees. Almost everyone working for Delta was travelling a few days a week to customers and thus did not necessarily work at the same destination as their colleagues. In Germany, Delta's employees can choose from more than 20 different locations. However, the consultants saw their team on-site almost every day when they travelled to a customer. Although they were used to communicating virtually with colleagues, new joiners were onboarded offline before Covid-19, and the company first started an entirely virtual onboarding in March 2020. At the time of our interviews, it was unsure whether Delta will continue to onboard new joiners digitally or whether they will go back to on-site onboarding or adapt a mixture of both aspects in the future.

We will address two major organizational onboarding initiatives in our empirical findings: The Onboarding Week and the Consulting Experience. The Onboarding Week is an event that takes place in the first weeks, where all new joiners who recently started at Delta come together at the headquarters. Here, the days are filled with both functional and informal activities. Everyone is staying in a hotel during that week and can participate in various evening activities and get to know other new joiners. The Consulting Experience is another event that is usually scheduled during the new joiners' first weeks. During the two weeks, the consultants usually travel to a beach house and spend the time with consultancy trainings and games. Here, Delta emphasizes the networking aspect of the event even more than during the Onboarding Week. Since Covid-19, Delta converted both events into digital formats, which everyone can attend from home.

### 3.3.2.2 Characteristics of Interviewees

Just as for the organization, we promised anonymity to all our interviewees and will, therefore, use pseudonyms in the following. These pseudonyms do not have any affiliations with their original names and were randomly chosen.

Before the interviews, we defined our anticipated target group of virtually onboarded new consultants since March 2020 and onboarding managers. Then, we communicated these criteria to our contact person, Anna, a manager responsible for onboarding within her team at Delta, who then approached suitable employees and arranged the interviews. As we set up the criteria for our interviews beforehand, this method can be described as a priori purposive sampling (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The approach was combined with the so-called snowball sampling as we used an organizational insider to establish contact with relevant employees for our study (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Snowball sampling is sometimes criticized as it is not truly random, and the contact person who approached the other interviewees might have been biased (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). However, Anna approached the other interviewees in bigger chat groups for newly onboarded employees, where it was voluntary for them to reply. As she was not contacting specific persons, we prevented biases such as favoritism from happening. We argue that our snowball sampling approach was never intended to be random as we had pre-defined criteria for our interviewees set up. Moreover, we expected a higher response rate when interviewees are approached by an insider instead of organizational outsiders.

Regarding our sample size, we conducted eleven interviews in total at Delta (see Appendix C). Six of these were entirely virtually onboarded new joiners who started at Delta since March 2020 (Emil, Max, Emma, Lisa, Julia, Sofia). Three of our interviewees were so-called re-joiners, meaning that they did an internship at Delta before the pandemic and now returned during the virtual onboarding phase (Eva, Luisa, Ida). This way, they could share their experiences about the digital onboarding process and elaborate on their offline onboarding, which we considered valuable. Lastly, we conducted two interviews with managers responsible for the onboarding within their teams, who both experienced offline onboarding several years ago (Anna, Stefan). After conducting these eleven interviews, we felt like we reached a point of theoretical saturation as we noticed a similarity of themes present in the interviews (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). However, we acknowledge that more interviews could possibly have led to more insights and that something new always can be discovered.

All of our newly hired interviewees were from an Associate or Senior Associate level, denoting that it was either their first job after university or that they had up to three years of professional experience before. However, in general, no distinction between age or gender was made for our interviewees, as we did not consider it relevant for the purpose of our study. As mentioned

before, all our interviewees were located in Germany but worked at different locations. Further, they work at different departments within the consultancy. Yet, most of our interviewees are part of the HR Advisory department, which allowed us to get more detailed insights into their department-specific onboarding efforts.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

After the collection of our empirical material, we transcribed all the interviews. We did not use any software for that and decided to transcribe them manually to familiarize ourselves with the data and deepen our understanding. After the transcription, we found ourselves with a mass of empirical material we needed to structure before starting the analysis. To address this issue, we followed a three-step template introduced by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018): sorting, reducing, and arguing.

In the first step, *sorting*, we tried to tackle the problem of chaos (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Here, we coded the material to get a better overview and understanding of which themes were most present and worth pursuing. According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018, p. 25), coding “simply means putting words on what we see or read in our material”. In other words, our codes functioned as categories for recurring topics or themes in our empirical material. For the coding process, we used the software MAXQDA which enabled us to see connections between categories and make adaptations quickly. As we were two people coding, we attempted to increase our reflexivity as researchers by constantly challenging and critically questioning each other and our thoughts. By this, we opted to reduce any possible biases we might have had. What was vital during our analysis is that we did not only focus on what the interviewees said but also how they said it (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). Paying attention to both the ‘what’ and ‘how’ enabled us to better understand the ‘why’ and “provided explanatory power”, according to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018, p.56). Furthermore, this ‘analytical bracketing’ allowed a deeper and more nuanced understanding (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

The next step, *reducing*, partly went on simultaneously with the sorting process. Here, we decided which parts were important for our research and should become parts of our findings. We created a table where we constantly re-structured our categories and codes to reduce the mass of empirical material. During this step, we regularly went back and forth between theory and

our empirical material to ensure that we stay open for possible changes, which is in line with our abductive research approach (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). Here, it was again valuable to be a team of two, so we could critically reflect on the direction we were taking. As the interviews were conducted in German, we translated the quotes we used for the analysis into English. We attempted to translate as precisely as possible but sometimes needed to make minor adjustments. This concerned, for example, the word order or collocations that could not be directly translated to English and, therefore, had to be adapted to improve the readability of our analysis while ensuring that as little meaning as possible got lost.

During the last step, *arguing*, we needed to present our data. To enable that the data not only “speak for itself” but is also “spoken for”, we embedded our data (Styhre, 2013, p. 78). Here, we structured our argumentation according to the concept of excerpt-commentary-units by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995). This model is based on four components: an *analytical point*, which designates what we want to show, an *orientation* to introduce the *empirical excerpt*, which is then explained in an *analytical comment* (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The empirical excerpts consist of direct quotations from our interviews which, according to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019), enabled us to reinforce and illustrate the presented theme better. In the analysis of these quotes, we presented what the interviewees have said but also added some observations about how they answered the questions. This includes, for instance, their choice of word, gestures, or tone.

## 3.5 Critical Reflexivity and Limitations

### 3.5.1 Reflexivity

As the interpretation of the empirical data is a central aspect in our research, we aimed for a high level of (self-) reflexivity. In this context, Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018) emphasize two components of reflexive research, namely thorough interpretation and reflection. The former stresses that the researchers should be conscious about their own interpretation biases concerning underlying pre-assumptions and theoretical knowledge. The latter describes the interpretation of the interpretation, implying the necessity to continuously challenge how one interprets the empirical findings (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). In that regard, we found it very beneficial to work on this research project together as we constantly discussed and questioned not only our own but also each other’s assumptions and interpretations. In that way, we generated

various meanings and understandings that shed light on the ambiguity of the phenomenon (Alvesson, 2003).

When we reflected on our interview conduction, it became evident to us that we were in a somehow comparable situation as the virtually onboarded new joiners we interviewed. In that respect, we met someone virtually for the first time and actively engaged in a conversation to better understand the other persons' way of thinking. However, although we were, similarly to the new hires, at home in our 'comfort zone', we perceived it harder to establish trust and create a comfortable atmosphere in a virtual environment as the other person somehow felt more distant from oneself. We also believe that non-virtual communication would have helped to better understand and get access to the conversation partners as, in this scenario, we would have been able to fully grasp the non-verbal communication.

### 3.5.2 Limitations

When following a qualitative research approach, the empirical material and its interpretation are influenced by subjective perceptions (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Subjectivity constitutes a limitation on the part of both the respondents and the researchers. Here, the interviewees' answers are determined by their individual sense-making and the researchers' interpretation are largely impacted by factors such as personal background or education (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Consequently, there is a risk of misleading answers and interpretations (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). To reduce the subjective distortions on our part, we, for example, coded the interviews separately from each other and later challenged our understandings and reasons for the classification scheme. Furthermore, we addressed the criticism of subjectivity in qualitative studies by perusing a *show rather than tell* approach when presenting our empirical findings (Tracy, 2010). Through *showing* the empirical material in excerpt-commentary-units, we offer the readers transparency, leading to a better understanding of our interpretations and subsequent discussion.

Furthermore, there are noteworthy limitations to our study due to the virtual interview conduction. As Vogl (2013) claims, it is beneficial to the quality of the interviews if the researchers can observe the respondents' facial expressions and body language. However, the pandemic did not allow for meetings with the interviewees on-site, so we used a video platform for our interviews instead. Thus, although we could see our respondents' facial expressions, we were

not able to fully grasp their body language, which restricted us in the interpretation of the *how*. Although we ensured all interviewees anonymity to lower the risk of dishonest answers, which significantly increased the validity of our study (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019), there is still a chance that their answers were biased through their awareness of being recorded (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Additionally, we found it harder to establish trust in a virtual setting compared to a face-to-face one, which we acknowledge as a further constraint concerning the authenticity of the interviewees' answers. Nevertheless, one can argue that this disadvantage was counteracted by the fact that the interviewees were interviewed in their familiar environment and that we further created a comfortable atmosphere, for example, by engaging in small talk that 'broke the ice' in the beginning.

Another limitation of qualitative studies, according to Prasad (2018), is that they are not generalizable as this would oversimplify their complex nature. However, our empirical findings can provide a valuable point of reference for similar companies and departments, which should further be investigated in future studies. Moreover, we acknowledge that our research findings are especially related to the consultancy industry, where virtual working an integral part of the employees' work-life was already before the pandemic. Therefore, one can argue that the transferability to other industries is limited even further.

## 4 Empirical Findings and Analysis

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*In the following chapter, we present our empirical findings and analysis. We start by presenting the perception of virtual onboarding support within Delta and give more context to why networking is seen as vital during new joiner' organizational socialization. Next, we show how interpersonal relationships of new joiners are perceived and might result in the feeling of invisibility. Further, our analysis portrays the cultural understanding and sense of belonging of Delta's virtually onboarded new joiners. We finish our analysis by giving an outlook for future developments at Delta.*

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### 4.1 Perceived Virtual Onboarding Support within Delta

In the subsequent sections, we give an overview of the perceived organizational, team, and department support that were supposed to facilitate the relationship building and networking of new joiners.

When we interviewed some of the new employees that joined Delta virtually, it became clear to us that all of them acknowledged networking as one of the most vital factors during their organizational socialization. This is especially rooted in the fact that Delta communicated right from the beginning that networking is essential for new hires to start a successful career within the firm. In this context, Luisa stated that networking *“is something that is drilled into us from day one”* and remembered organizational insiders saying: *“Networking, networking, networking - guys, this is super important. You're making a career together.”*. This statement indicates that Delta emphasizes networking as it contributes to both the individuals' career progression and the organization's success. By stressing the team spirit, the company specifically encourages knowledge sharing among employees, which is of great importance in a knowledge-intensive firm like Delta. This is also reflected in Emil's statement in which he highlighted that knowledge sharing is at the very essence of Delta:

*“Delta places a lot of emphasis on networking within the company. Ultimately, we are a service provider that relies on knowledge management. We don't sell cars. Instead, our product is based on the combined knowledge of our employees. (...) We as individuals may not know everything, but we have a network we can rely on.”* – Emil

This suggests that developing and maintaining efficient networks for the purpose of knowledge sharing is an essential part of Delta's culture and constitutes their unique selling point for clients. As people are only willing to share their knowledge and resources with other people they trust, networking is all about establishing strong interpersonal relationships. In that regard, Stefan stated that for consultants at Delta "*socializing is an integral part of [their] job description*". Therefore, new employees are encouraged to network right from the start, which is supported and driven forward by various initiatives of Delta.

#### 4.1.1 Organizational Support

Although remote working was long established at Delta, there never has been a virtual onboarding for new joiners. Due to the spread of COVID-19, everything changed drastically for Delta in March 2020. Stefan, an employee responsible for the onboarding of new joiners in his team, elaborated on the consequences for the onboarding process.

*"When Corona started, Delta put a hiring stop on us and we said 'Okay, why should we invest a lot of time in onboarding if we can't bring anyone new into the team anyway?'. (...) When we could hire new people again, they were immediately staffed on projects from day one. There wasn't even a minute to onboard them, it was like 'Sink or swim and get going'. So, to put it bluntly, onboarding in the age of Corona got a real slap in the face. It didn't work at all anymore."* - Stefan

Stefan's statement indicates that Delta was not prepared for their virtual new joiners and that proper onboarding was not given any priority at this point. Thus, no one really seemed to care if the new employees were ready to take on their new tasks and if they were well-integrated into the team. According to what Stefan claimed, they either made it on their own, or failed, which is why the onboarding of new hires at Delta was highly dysfunctional at the beginning of the pandemic. Especially Stefan's use of colloquial language ('slap in the face') stressed how problematic he perceived the whole situation for the new employees. Stefan also pointed out that after some time, Delta first reinstated the Onboarding Week and the Consulting Experience, which are organized for newly hired consultants. Both events were fully converted into a digital format to comply with governmental restrictions.

#### 4.1.1.1 The Virtual Onboarding Week

The interviewees explained that their virtual Onboarding Week was divided into two days of meetings in cross-functional groups and three days in groups with other new joiners of their specific division. In the beginning, they were gathered in one big virtual conference room, where some representatives of Delta talked about the corporate values, gave an overview of the different divisions and provided other useful information related to the new joiners' start. However, the presentations did not seem to have been very engaging and appealing [herunterbeten<sup>3</sup>] to the new employees. Thus, Lisa and some other new hires got the impression that it felt more like a chore to the speakers, so they rather sat out their time without actively engaging with the content. Moreover, Sofia claimed that she felt no connection to any other new joiners in the meeting.

*“You haven't even seen them yet, so when you run across them you wouldn't say ‘Ah I know that face’...No, because you don't know it. You may have seen the names when you went through the 120 names [in the virtual meeting], but we all know that this means nothing.” – Sofia*

Her statement suggests that she perceived the Onboarding Week as very anonymous due to the virtual environment. As she will not recognize any of the other participants later, no greater value in terms of networking can be seen in that case.

To maintain the networking character of the Onboarding Week, Delta randomly assigned the participants to smaller virtual meeting rooms, in which they should start casual conversations and thereby get to know each other. In this context, Eva, for example, appreciated that Delta offered the opportunity for personal interaction. Nevertheless, many interviewees raised awareness for the disadvantages of those virtual networking attempts, including Sofia.

*“In a normal environment it's easy to say ‘Okay, there's nothing more to come, I'll go to the next one and get to know someone else’ while you're kind of ‘trapped’ in your break-out session<sup>4</sup>. (...) In some groups you talked for five minutes and then many were like ‘I'm going to get a coffee, I'm going to the bathroom quickly’ and then the break-out session was almost over.” - Sofia*

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<sup>3</sup> Translation from German to English is not accurate as “herunterbeten” is an expression in German that does not have the same meaning in other languages

<sup>4</sup> So-called “Break-out” sessions/rooms represent a function on Zoom that allows the administrator of a meeting to create subgroups within a bigger group of participants. The subgroups meet in a different meeting room for a specific time before returning to the main session.

This suggests that new employees felt very uncomfortable in their meeting sessions. As they could not move as freely as they would in an offline environment, they got the feeling of being ‘trapped’ in the meeting and, thus, tried to escape the situation by finding excuses to leave the desk. According to Emma, an additional factor that hindered efficient networking was that the organizers of the event changed the members of the virtual break-out sessions every time. As there was neither a comfortable atmosphere nor the chance to bond with the same people, those virtual meetings did not lead to successful networking. After the Onboarding Week, Delta expected the new joiners to follow up on their conversations through virtual coffee meetings. In this context, Ida stressed the urgency for those meetings that the company communicated.

*“From the organization it was always said ‘You are welcome to set...not only you are welcome to, but you should set a coffee date with anyone from a group again for the next week.’” – Ida*

Ida’s statement indicates that it was not only appreciated by Delta to set up those coffee dates but that it was more of a duty for the new joiners. Max elaborated on his experiences by stating:

*“I find that quite difficult to implement now in the work environment and often it is like: ‘Hello random person on my screen, we have no topic to talk about. I like to listen to who you are and what you do, but you are the very first thing that I drop when I have to do something else’. So that is connected with such a pronounced feeling of non-commitment for me. Well, we are a relatively large company, so who knows if I’ll run into that person again.” – Max*

His description of the coffee calls suggests that he did not see personal value in the exchange with other new joiners, with whom he barely has anything in common. For Max, the whole activity seemed very arbitrary, and he thought it is unlikely to have touchpoints with those ‘strangers’ in the future. Therefore, he felt little or no commitment to maintain those appointments and dropped them whenever something, in his view, more important came up. His perception matched with many other interviewees’, who claimed that the networking efforts in the virtual environment were not perceived as sustainable. For instance, Sofia said that although they were interested in the beginning to keep up these coffee calls, people lacked initiative after some time and rarely reacted to messages anymore. In that regard, Eva added that online *“it requires much more effort from everyone involved and only a few are showing long-lasting initiatives”*. Therefore, we conclude that the virtual environment often represents a powerful barrier for networking compared to face-to-face encounters.

When we spoke to employees who experienced the Onboarding Week in person, they especially emphasized the networking character of the event. For instance, Eva, who first entered the company through an internship a few years ago, stated that *“this week is great for networking because you get to know a lot of people with whom you start together. I still have contact with many people that I’ve met there”*. Her statement indicates that new employees appreciated the networking opportunity initiated by Delta and that long-lasting relationships between many of them have resulted from it, which was apparently not the case for new joiners participating in the digital Onboarding Week.

#### 4.1.1.2 The Virtual Consulting Experience

Anna, an onboarding manager at Delta, told us that before the Consulting Experience was converted into a digital format, the newly employed consultants spent two weeks in a sequestered beach house or another lonely accommodation to fully concentrate on the experience. According to her, the new joiners were especially supposed to bond with their new colleagues and further develop their professional skills. When Anna told us about her own Consulting Experience three years ago, she still seemed to have a very vivid and joyful memory of it by stating:

*“We always had breakfast together, lunch together, dinner together. The evening was left up to everyone. Most of the time we sat together after dinner and played games. We had a little pool house with foosball and table tennis. It was a bit like a class trip for adults and all about ‘fun, games and good vibes’. (...) It was really a small group where you got to know each other and, in my opinion, networking was the purpose of the whole experience.” - Anna*

Anna’s choice of words concerning, for example, the repetition of the word ‘together’ in the first sentence of her statement suggests that she experienced a strong feeling of belonging to her colleagues at the event. This might have resulted from a casual and playful atmosphere created by the above mentioned free-time activities and the fact that they had to stay physically in one place during the whole experience. She concluded that the entire Consulting Experience was primarily about networking, which was facilitated through small groups and the entertaining character of the event.

In a virtual environment most of our interviewees also got the impression that the main purpose of the six-days Consulting Experience was networking. Luisa elaborated on her experience by saying:

*“During the consulting experience we had a safe environment, and the trainers were really cool. We did really challenging exercises, which welded us together as a team. After the experience we still schedule meetings where we can exchange ideas and I really want to push this networking further.” - Luisa*

Her description suggests that the virtual event created a strong bond among the participants (‘welded together’), which led to long-lasting relationships. In contrast to the Onboarding Week, the event was conducted in small groups, where the same break-out rooms were used throughout the entire program. According to some interviewees, this created a more personal and intimate environment, which was perceived as beneficial to networking. Luisa further added that, in her opinion, the virtual experience was almost as good as she would have expected it to be in person:

*“Although I can imagine that we would have spent more time in the evenings together if it wasn’t online, it’s roughly comparable to an offline situation... at least in terms of the intensity of engagement with each other.” – Luisa*

However, Luisa’s perception of the Consulting Experience differed fundamentally from some other interviewees’ impressions. For example, Max complained that the event did not provide good opportunities to network with other new joiners, which seemed to have disappointed him.

*“Well, I found it relatively tiresome, to be honest, it was a bit over-structured. (...) The tight schedule was actually detrimental to the networking purpose. I would have liked to have more time to get to know each other. Instead, it felt like the normal program was compensated to six days and, in the evenings, we didn’t even had drinks together.” – Max*

Max’s statement indicates that by shortening the virtual event to almost half of the usual time, there was less room for casual conversations and informal talks that would have strengthened the bond within the group. Consequently, when the official part of the program was over, his group did not spend the evening together, which is, according to Lisa, *“the most important part of the whole experience”*. The overall structure was thus perceived by Max as counter-productive to the networking purpose of the Consulting Experience. He finally added:

*“I’ve often heard people in various positions say, ‘Ah, yes, we’ve met at the Onboarding Week’ or ‘Yes, we know each other from the Consulting Experience’. I can hardly imagine how that would ever happen to me.” – Max*

This quote implies that for most new joiners, neither the Onboarding Week nor the Consulting Experience has reached the desired goal of Delta as they will not remember the people they have met at those events. This is in contrast to the offline experiences of former new joiners, where both the Onboarding Week and the Consulting Experience enabled them to establish sustainable relationships with some of their new colleagues. Consequently, the virtual environment seems to be very limiting for networking compared to face-to-face encounters and was perceived as a disadvantage by our interviewees.

#### 4.1.1.3 Young Delta Match Making

Some interviewees mentioned another initiative of Delta that was intended to connect new joiners across different departments and divisions with each other. For example, Eva explained that the so-called ‘Young Delta Match Making’ initiative constituted a networking opportunity for new joiners, where they could sign up to be randomly matched for virtual coffee calls. Sofia shared her experiences with us by stating:

*“The atmosphere was super stiff (...). The idea was nice but the implementation - not that great. I am open to such things, but if you just sit around unproductively and actually lose half an hour, that’s just a waste of time.” – Sofia*

Sofia’s statement indicates that the initiative was not perceived helpful for new employees to network efficiently. In fact, she described her virtual get-together as an uncomfortable situation that did not feel natural. Her description also implies that she will not attend another meeting with her group. Therefore, the initiative did not lead to any sustainable and valuable relationships and thereby missed its purpose. Other interviewees had similar experiences with the Young Delta Match Making initiative. In this context, Emma further elaborated on the sustainability of those contacts.

*“We set a blocker<sup>5</sup> every week where we planned to get together. I participated the first two times but when I came into the call for our third meeting, nobody was there. The fourth time was exactly the same and then I said ‘Okay, that’s it’. The blocker is still in there, but the others have either not answered or canceled.” – Emma*

Emma’s description suggests that some participants of the initiative completely lacked interest to establish long-lasting contacts. They did not even seem committed enough to cancel their scheduled meetings, which further highlights their strong disinterest to network virtually. Emma accepted the loss of contact but appeared angered and disappointed about it. Consequently, even if some new joiners are proactive and really want to engage in networking activities, both sides have to be interested and committed to the process.

#### 4.1.2 Team and Department Support

In the following, we illustrate how our interviewees perceived the support of their new team during their virtual onboarding. At this point, it has to be noted that they have started to work in different teams and departments within Delta, which is why their descriptions may differ significantly. As Eva puts it: *“The onboarding experience largely depends on how the department takes care of you virtually”*. Accordingly, great emphasis has to be placed on the subsequent section.

##### 4.1.2.1 Team Support

When the interviewees were asked about their first impressions at their workplace, Sofia was one of many who claimed to feel invisible to their new colleagues:

*“I was sitting at my desk at eight o'clock and had everything open and was ready to start working, but you don't have any tasks to start with. So, I was waiting and thought 'What now?'. They don't see that I'm online and they don't care that I'm online either.” – Sofia*

Ida seemed to have had similar experiences on her first day and added that she felt lost and somehow useless as none of her team colleagues approached her personally. Both descriptions suggest that the interviewees did not feel well-integrated by their colleagues and perceived a lack of attention, leading to a feeling of loneliness and isolation. Most importantly, our

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<sup>5</sup> A placeholder in the calendar for regularly recurring meetings

interviewees attributed this negative experience to the virtual environment. For instance, Eva was very certain that she would have been more visible in the office and thereby could have built stronger relationships with her colleagues. In that regard, she stated that especially by listening to and participating in her colleagues' daily conversations and joining them for lunch, these relationships would have intensified and ultimately made her feel more included. Concerning the new joiners perceived integration into the team, Emma also stressed that she had much higher expectations.

*“I was hoping that it would be a lot more personal... that the people on my team would come up to me and welcome me. I mean there were a lot of emails I got on my first day like ‘Welcome, talk to me if you need anything’ but it felt like copy paste, the same from everyone. So really this superficially being nice (...) I still don’t feel like I’m part of a team though.” – Emma*

By describing her colleagues' efforts of welcoming her into the team as superficial and not tailored to her person, it became clear that she did not really appreciate their attempts. In fact, Emma seemed very disappointed about the situation as she had apparently hoped for more 'honest' initiatives and more effort from her co-workers to get to know her. Consequently, her sense of belonging to the team suffered significantly. When Emma further talked about her relationship with her colleagues, she mentioned her attempts to reach out to them in the team chat.

*“We have a team chat of course but the people are very very reserved and not much comes back. Not many people reply but if they do then it's mostly the same people. (...) Within the team it is sometimes offered 'let's meet sometime', but that never happens.” - Emma*

Emma's second statement illustrates that she felt left out and that her first impression concerning the lack of interest in her proved to be true. In that regard, the received 'copy paste' messages at the beginning, where they offered their help and their suggestions to 'meet sometime' turned out to be empty phrases. As most of her co-workers ignored her questions and comments in their team chat, Emma sarcastically added, *“so much for onboarding on a personal level”*, which strengthened her overall disappointment again.

In some teams, new joiners were approached by their colleagues more openly, for example, by setting up virtual coffee dates that created a more personal atmosphere. However, this was not the usual case for all interviewees, including Ida.

*“I took the initiative at some point and approached people who I thought seemed quite nice in the team call and then asked for a coffee date. That was really nice but that just came from me. If I hadn't done that, I probably would never have really met them virtually. So, everything has to come from yourself. You have to integrate yourself - nothing comes from the others or from the leadership team.” - Ida*

Her statement suggests that she missed initiatives from her colleagues and members of the leadership team to integrate her, which made it hard for her to network efficiently. Moreover, Ida's description indicates that new hires often have to take matters into their own hands by proactively arranging virtual meetings with their co-workers. In that regard, Anna strongly emphasized that *“you really have to be very proactive as a virtual new joiner in order to build up a relationship not with twenty, but with maybe three or four people in the team.”*. This implies that compared to an offline setting, the virtual environment requires much more effort to bond with even a few colleagues within the bigger team. Additionally, Max explained that these connections are *“even harder to develop and maintain in an organization-wide context”*, which points to a problem that Anna also recognized. She concluded that networking both on a team and organizational level fundamentally suffers through virtual communication, which is problematic as networking is considered essential during the onboarding phase.

Besides what was already mentioned above, Ida expressed her concern that most of the established hires who onboarded offline are not aware of or not able to fully comprehend the new joiner's struggles related to the virtual onboarding.

*“I think it's sometimes difficult for people who had a normal onboarding process before Corona to understand these uncertainties that I have. It is difficult for them to understand that I felt somewhat abandoned working remotely and alone.” – Ida*

Ida's statement suggests that she, like many other new employees we interviewed, felt lonely and not part of the team due to the remote working situation. The onboarding responsible Stefan claimed that he is aware of the disadvantages for virtual new joiners and stated that he deliberately tried to counteract those by arranging some face-to-face meetings with the newly hired members of his team.

*“I consciously chose to establish physical contact when possible, to create the feeling that the person is part of our team and that we exist and are not just moving images on a screen.” – Stefan*

According to Stefan’s description, the face-to-face contact was intended to appear more ‘human’ and to end the perceived anonymity on both sides that was caused by the virtual environment. Thus, by interacting offline with the new joiners, he aimed to establish the feeling of being ‘seen and heard’ to strengthen team cohesion.

Our interviewees claimed that they especially missed more informal conversations to bond with their team colleagues, which, for example, would have naturally occurred at team events. Many of our interviewees stated that team meetings and other virtual conversations were predominantly functional in nature. They expressed that particularly informal team events would have provided the opportunity to get to know each other on a more personal level and establish trust. Although some new joiners heard that their team members used to meet regularly offline, they stated that those get-togethers were not replaced through online events. In this context, Luisa claimed that she and her team colleagues rarely spend time together outside of work and stressed the urgency to change that in the future.

*“I would have liked to get more integrated into the team and I would still like to see more efforts. (...) I miss to feel as a part of the team and to experience team cohesion. I miss the effort from my team to organize regular evening meetings or something. As I said, it's not so easy to find your way into the team when you only see each other online, and I think we need to come up with better concepts, so that's what I am missing.” – Luisa*

Luisa’s statement emphasizes the importance of informal interaction within the team as it creates a feeling of belonging, which she was hoping to experience. Furthermore, by using the word ‘missing’ multiple times, it became clear that she had expected something different and felt very disappointed about her team members’ efforts. Although she expressed above that ‘better concepts’ are needed in the current situation, she mentioned in the further course of the interview that a Delta-wide survey revealed that many colleagues are getting tired of online events. Nevertheless, our interviewees hoped for more initiatives in the future as these get-togethers are perceived as vital for understanding the team culture, networking and, thus, helps them to get started at Delta.

#### 4.1.2.2 Department Initiatives

In our interviews, Stefan and Anna explained that, especially in the early beginning of COVID-19, virtual networking at the department level did not work at all. Therefore, they decided to convert the so-called ‘HR Advisory Quickstart’, a specifically designed training for the HR Advisory department, into a digital format for new hires. Anna and Stefan pointed out that the sole purpose of this training was to connect new employees with colleagues from all different teams within the HR Advisory department. According to them, the participants used to stay at the same location for two days, where they had the chance to learn about the different teams’ expertise, engage in casual conversations over dinner and get to know some members of the leadership team. Anna stated that after the training, *“ideally everyone goes home knowing at least one person from each team”*. When Anna told us about her impression of the online conducted HR Advisory Quickstart this year, she seemed to be very disappointed about the number of participants.

*“We noticed that the attendance rate was much lower than in previous trainings. People canceled at short notice, which rarely happens when you have already booked the flights and hotels. (...) We had people who left the meeting with an excuse after an hour. Of course, the whole idea of it was lost. In the end we were more trainers than participants and that is not what it was intended for. Obviously, it is not only occupational therapy for us but should also help others to get to know each other, to make contacts and to learn more about the team.” – Anna*

This statement suggests that the trainers’ efforts to organize the online networking event were not appreciated by the new joiners as expected and that the barrier for people to cancel a virtual meeting is much lower than face-to-face meetings. Most importantly, Anna perceived that the whole purpose of the event was lost, which is why it seemed to her like a waste of time. In that regard, by stating that *“it is not only occupational therapy for us”*, one can conclude that she was really angered about how the training turned out. According to Stefan, *“this training is not for functional onboarding, it's for socializing. And socializing better works in person.”* Therefore, he attributed the failure of the digital HR Advisory Quickstart to the general limitations of virtual networking.

Interestingly enough, none of the interviewed new joiners from the HR Advisory department talked about the HR Advisory Quickstart. As some of them claimed earlier that they were hoping for more opportunities to network, this seems contradictory to us. One might interpret that

the low attendance rate was caused by some of the negative networking experiences they had, for example, during the Onboarding Week. Thus, they might have been afraid of another uncomfortable situation, in which they feel trapped in a meeting with random people with whom they have nothing to talk about.

## 4.2 No Strings Attached: Perceived Intensity of Interpersonal Relationships

In general, when we spoke about how the new joiners perceived their relationships with both close colleagues and cross-functional contacts, the atmosphere during the interviews was somewhat aggrieved. We got the impression that the interviewees highly emphasized the need for meaningful bonds as well as beneficial networks. Consequently, they seemed frustrated and disappointed about the restricted opportunities to develop those virtually. This became especially present in the frequent use of words and phrases such as ‘unfortunately’, ‘missing’ or ‘losing the chance’.

### 4.2.1 Weak Personal Bonds to Colleagues

When we asked our interviewees how they perceived the informal content of conversations with their colleagues, many of them pointed out how they spoke more often about personal matters at the beginning of the pandemic. Eva attributed this, for example, to the fact that personal backgrounds during video calls sometimes evoked informal conversations in team calls.

*“When everyone still had to settle into the remote working situation, my manager sat in his daughter’s nursery, and you could see painted pictures on the walls in the background. That loosened things up to a certain extent. Now, almost everyone is using artificial backgrounds. So, what was a bit personal before is now somehow more anonymous again.” – Eva*

Unfortunately, these personal insights quickly faded when everyone started using artificial wallpapers, which led to the situation being even more anonymous than before. This shift might indicate that no one wants to share personal matters anymore or give insights into their personal life, resulting in a more distanced atmosphere within the team. This distance makes it especially hard for new joiners to settle into their team and connect with their colleagues. Luisa shared her

experiences on how she tried to get a better understanding of informal team dynamics by entering the virtual meeting a few minutes earlier:

*“Before the team meeting the others often discuss personal things, where they ask someone ‘How’s the moving going?’ and you think ‘Okay, I didn’t know that’ and then more and more topics come up where you think ‘I don’t know anything about my colleagues’. (...) But personal things are important to me, and I would like to have a closer relationship with some colleagues beyond the working relationship. I’ve always had that in the past, and I’m still missing that I don’t have these private conversations with 80% of my colleagues.” – Luisa*

During those minutes where private topics were discussed, she realized even more how she is still not a genuine part of the team and misses having more profound relationships with her colleagues. The feeling of being an outsider within the own team and the worry about not being able to improve the relationship virtually was also shared by Lisa, who is sure that the relationship would have been better if she had met her colleagues offline.

*“I’m only on a personal level with the people I’m closely working with. (...) There is some joking around, but I know very little about my colleagues, and my colleagues don’t know that much about me either, unfortunately. (...) I play field hockey, and nobody or only a few people from my team know that, but after two days in the office, everyone would have known. (...) My colleagues would know a thousand things about me if I had met them offline. Of course, I’ve seen them remotely countless times but haven’t really gotten to know them yet, unfortunately.” – Lisa*

The repeated use of the word ‘unfortunately’ indicates the deep regrets Lisa has about not knowing anything personal about her colleagues and vice versa. When she spoke about how she saw her colleagues countless times but did not get to know them, she clarified how the intensity of regular contact differs in a virtual setting compared to an office situation. This impression is shared by many of our other interviewees, who argued that the virtual environment is perceived as a barrier to personal interaction. Max, for instance, highlighted how he “can talk on the phone for quite some time without getting a real impression of the person’s personality”. Emil agreed when he stated that “you can build a closer relationship faster when you see each other in person”. However, almost everyone emphasized how important the development of meaningful bonds with colleagues is for them and, therefore, seemed disappointed about their deprived possibilities.

#### 4.2.2 Loss of Tone in Virtual Communications

Another factor that hindered our interviewees from creating a bond and thus restricted their networking abilities is the loss of tone during virtual communication. Emma worried that her colleagues might not fully understand what she wants to convey in virtual conversations: *“I still feel like not everything I want to say and express with my gestures make it to the other end. (...) It just doesn’t come across as I feel it would if we saw each other in person.”*. Due to the virtual context, it is hard for new joiners to express themselves as some things get lost in transmission. Furthermore, they were not only worried about how others may perceive themselves but also mentioned their problems to assess situations and understand the character traits of their colleagues.

*“You can’t really grasp how people are like in real life. Some are super funny maybe or super serious or totally bad-tempered - I can’t really interpret that yet.”* – Lisa

Lisa’s statement shows that it is difficult to evaluate how her colleagues might behave in ‘real life’, suggesting that the virtual setting is not perceived as a substitute to offline interactions and might distort important information about the counterpart. This issue was also present during the interview with Luisa, who shared her difficulties to *“break the ice”* in virtual situations and that this is usually easier for her in everyday conversations. Virtually she experienced troubles to ‘read’ and connect to people: *“I feel like I can no longer trust myself. I actually have a good feeling for people and can also deal with people and ‘crack’ them even if they are rather reserved.”*. We got the impression that it was notably hard on her because she described herself as a ‘people-person’, a strength she is proud of, and that is, according to her, heavily restricted in a virtual environment. Julia also picked up the concern about missing social cues to evaluate other people:

*“If you don’t really know the people yet and how they tick, because you don’t hear them talking to other people, I found it very difficult at the beginning to assess ‘Is someone angry with me? Is he maybe just stressed? Is he having a bad day? What’s going on now?’. There are situations in which you are somehow irritated, but that totally overwhelmed me in some cases. In retrospect, I know that he simply had a lot to do. He was hectic and didn’t mean any harm. He just wanted to get it over with quickly, and that had nothing to do with me. If you had done it in person, you might have noticed that he has a big pile of papers on his desk, or that everyone is lining up to talk to him.”* – Julia

She felt insecure and frustrated at times when she realized that she had misinterpreted situations or people. This phenomenon was shared among many new employees who had similar difficulties in understanding situations in which they could not observe their colleagues. As they would have gained a better understanding of why people are behaving the way they do if they were on-site, the virtual environment often caused misinterpretations that might lead to conflicts or isolation of new joiners.

#### 4.2.3 Loss of Chance Encounters: Just Another Meeting in the Calendar

During the interviews, it became evident that many new employees at Delta reported a particular lack of casual encounters that were considered valuable for developing relationships with colleagues. *“Virtually you lose the chance of running into each other in the hallway or chatting at the coffee machine and asking, ‘Hey, aren’t you from team Alpha, do you know anything about this project and can help me?’”*, elaborated Emma. This shows how these chance encounters are valuable for relationship building with close colleagues as well as for developing a broader network outside the usual work-related contacts. Many of the new joiners missed the opportunities to share and profit from knowledge with others outside their team and explained how chance encounters, for example, at the coffee machine, are of great importance for effective networking as a new joiner. This reinforced our impression that the virtual version of drinking coffee is not perceived as an actual substitute. Stefan, one of the onboarding managers, further encouraged this when saying that the organizational efforts to enhance informal conversations through virtual coffee chats cannot replace ‘real’ informal talks:

*“We don’t meet for coffee anymore. Even the coffee meetings I set up aren’t about coffee. The interaction that happens there is nothing like what you had when you met your colleague at the coffee machine. (...) There are no more casual conversations, no more conversations without an agenda. Even during the virtual coffee calls, we feel pressured to share personal matters. Topics such as ‘Are you happy right now? Would you like to be promoted this year?’ usually come up in informal formats that we don’t have anymore.”* – Stefan

He stressed that scheduled calls always have a purpose – whether it might be professional or personal. This prevents more natural conversations that usually would enable them to talk about more sensitive topics. Consequently, this indicates that new joiners might feel inhibited to address these topics and, therefore, miss out on career opportunities or are afraid to share if they

are dissatisfied. The appeal to engage in virtual coffee chats with new joiners is also perceived as pressuring by established hires like Anna:

*“I’ve set myself the goal of having a coffee chat with a colleague at least once a week. It doesn’t matter with whom, but that I simply talk to someone for half an hour to ask them how they are doing in their private lives and how their projects are going.” – Anna*

When she said that it ‘does not matter with whom’ she talks, she showed how the calls are rather seen as an obligation than a casual, informal conversation and are, thus, not genuinely based on serious interest in the other person. Instead, the employees feel pressured to talk about something private and consequently see the calls as duties that are no longer enjoyable or relaxing. Another factor mentioned by Anna is the time limit of half an hour, which creates pressure for both parties to prepare for the call and destroys any chance for casual and spontaneous conversations. We conclude that due to this enforced atmosphere and agenda, networking is significantly impeded and will rarely create meaningful and sustainable connections. We were reminded of non-binding encounters similar to speed-dating, where one meets a lot of people, but it is highly unlikely to keep in touch with many of those contacts. In the end, no one really profits from those fast-moving interactions if there is a lack of commitment.

## 4.3 (In-)visibility: The Survival of the Fittest

### 4.3.1 There is More to it than Meets the Eye: The Feeling of Being Invisible

This perceived ephemerality and the lack of deep connections possibly led to new joiners becoming invisible in a virtual environment. Although new joiners regularly are visible on their colleagues’ screens, many of them claimed to feel invisible to their coworkers and were often unsure whether managers even know who they are. One of the interviewed managers confirmed this concern by stating:

*“I don’t know the people who joined between March and December 2020. I have no idea who they are. Of course, I know the ones from my team, and we still tried to maintain the integration to some extent, but within the department, I have no network to new joiners.” – Stefan*

Despite the organizational efforts to initiate networking with new joiners, Stefan did not connect to new joiners outside his team. Even though this is a disadvantage for both sides, the new joiners seem to suffer significantly more from this circumstance. Emma, for example, described that her perceived invisibility made her “*often feel alone, although [she is] not alone*”. We could tell by her voice that she almost started crying, which suggests that this must be a mental burden for her. In this context, she mentioned that she is hesitant to talk about these issues with her manager as she is afraid they will not come across as intended. Here, the virtual environment does not create the comfort needed to address such issues, as already mentioned above. To counteract invisibility, Stefan, the onboarding manager, put great emphasis on the proactivity of new joiners:

*“I wouldn’t say that you have a disadvantage in general, but I’d say that those who display less proactive behavior have a disadvantage. Within Delta, the principle ‘Everything you want, you have to take yourself’ is always valid. In Corona times, this was intensified quite drastically because coincidental encounters in the office were completely taken away, and you could no longer meet by chance. Therefore, people had to become more proactive, which means that there are definitely winners and losers.” – Stefan*

According to him, proactivity becomes the mediating factor for (in-)visibility. His drastic choice of words when it came to the winners and losers further enhanced the ‘sink or swim’-mentality and raised the question of whether established hires really care if someone feels invisible and alone and ‘sinks’. The new joiners similarly had the impression that they had to become more active in networking. Emil compared his former work experiences to the current situation:

*“Usually, networking comes naturally offline, and now you definitely have to show more initiative. So, I don’t think it has to hold you back, but I think you have to invest more to reach the starting point of the others who started offline.” – Emil*

In general, our perception was that the interviewees felt like they had to put in more effort to make up for the ‘virtual disadvantage’.

### 4.3.2 Ghosted by a Partner: Perceived Consequences for the Career

This disadvantage is particularly severe as the interviewees commonly understand networking as an essential key to success within Delta. Lisa exemplified how this is emphasized since day one:

*“At Delta, you learn from day one that networking is the most important thing in such a large corporation. In our company, the managers have the projects, and they choose the people with whom they want to carry out this project. Of course, they choose the people they know, people they’ve heard positive things about, or people they’ve worked with before.” – Lisa*

Lisa’s statement implies that new hires have to be visible for managers to get staffed on projects. If this is not the case, new employees will not have the chance to make a name for themselves, resulting in a vicious circle of invisibility that represents a severe disadvantage for their future careers. Consequently, this statement suggests that new joiners are greatly deprived when it comes to the staffing of new projects compared to established hires that joined the company in a non-digital setting. Anna, one of the onboarding managers, also addressed the invisibility issue in a virtual environment and stated that this is usually easier when new hires can meet colleagues and the leadership team face-to-face:

*“Performance counts, but how many people actually know about your performance? Visibility is most important here. I think it’s easier to achieve visibility if you regularly go to events where the managers and partners can see you. (...) Usually, you would be together with your team on the project and have time to eat dinner together, practice the pitch, and so on. Therefore, you were able to build a network very quickly. So, when people hear your name, they know who you are, which always helps for sure.” – Anna*

According to her, it is harder for digitally onboarded new joiners to make a name for themselves with the managers. The lack of opportunities to become visible might also be disadvantageous when it comes to promotions, argued onboarding manager Stefan:

*“We live from our network, and because we have such a complex partner structure, you need visibility with our overarching partners if you want to be promoted. Our overarching partner Rolf manages HR Advisory Germany, and he gives the thumbs up or down for every single*

*promotion in our team. So, if you don't know Rolf, you've lost. Of course, the new hires who joined had less time to make a name for themselves.” – Stefan*

He emphasized the importance of building a network and becoming visible to the managing partner. When he put it bluntly, ‘you’ve lost’, it became clear how crucial it is for new joiners to get noticed. As already mentioned, proactive behavior frequently was stressed to become visible. However, Emma claimed that even proactive behavior did not help her:

*“Since I’ve started, I only spoke to the partner of our team once. I don’t even know if he knows my name. I actually was on a project with him, and I’ve already addressed him several times. He has never reacted to my messages or tried to get me on board. (...) That doesn’t exactly help with employee retention. So, I really don’t feel appreciated or recognized. Why should you continue to work there?” - Emma*

This statement clearly shows how Emma felt rejected and deprived of networking opportunities and growth within the company. As a result, she feels distant, less committed, and even mentioned the possibility of leaving Delta.

## 4.4 Cultural Understanding and Sense of Belonging

### 4.4.1 Understanding of Organizational Culture

According to our interviewees, new joiners need to understand the company’s culture to identify with its values and develop a meaningful bond with the organization. We acknowledge that it is often difficult for established hires to articulate their cultural understanding as they are usually too embedded in it. However, we did not get the impression that this was the case for our interviewed new joiners as we interpret that the reason for some not being able to express the company culture was that they did not seem to understand it. Stefan, one of the interviewed onboarding managers, pointed out how the virtual environment represents a barrier for new joiners to grasp the ‘authentic’ organizational culture:

*“Corporate culture is relatively strongly addressed during Onboarding Week, meaning that values, for example, are communicated well. You probably know it yourselves, values are good, but without behaviors, they don’t work. (...) My understanding of culture is how people act with each other, (...) which is expressed in ‘the way we do things around here’. You can only notice*

*‘the way we do things around here’ when you stop seeing the purpose of meetings and have ‘natural’ conversations. This is when culture actually shows itself in its purest form. Unfortunately, those casual conversations come too short in a virtual environment.*” – Stefan

According to him, new joiners cannot fully understand Delta’s culture since it is impossible to have ‘natural’ conversations virtually, and thus, the ‘true’ culture cannot be observed. Delta’s authentic culture seems to be hidden in highly structured formats, and only hearing about values will not make new joiners feel connected if they did not experience the culture first-hand. A statement of Emma aligned with these concerns, where she mentioned a discrepancy between the communicated and experienced culture: *“I would say there are two sides. Two cultures almost. There is the culture that is communicated by the organization (...), but there is also a completely different culture that I perceive in my team.”*. This indicates, for one, that she experienced difficulties understanding the culture and secondly, that the communicated culture differs from her expectations, resulting in even more confusion. In general, many of the interviewees stated that they had trouble understanding their team’s culture. Luisa exemplified how she tried to get a better understanding by entering the virtual meeting room a few minutes earlier:

*“I gained more personal insights somehow and got to know ‘Who gets along well?’ or ‘What are their roles within the team?’. That was totally helpful for me in the team meetings to see what the team dynamics are like and how I can fit in. It’s still not easy for me to find my place in the team because we don’t have typical office situations.”* – Luisa

In addition to the lack of understanding, she mentioned how she struggled to find her place within the established team structures and, therefore, took every chance she had to fill these gaps. The new joiners often are only in close contact with a few people they directly work with and do not have the opportunity to experience the culture in their day-to-day work. Luisa added that she would *“have a better feeling for the culture offline when I see what my colleagues are doing, how they deal with each other, how my boss deals with them, and how they speak about Delta or other teams”*. Thus, in an offline setting, the new joiners would have enough social cues to better assess situations and better understand the team’s culture. During our interviews, we felt like many of the interviewees could not fully understand the team’s culture, let alone the organizational culture. Max expressed his uncertainty, whether the team culture he is experiencing is a valid representative of the organizational culture:

*“I have no idea, in the sense of I don’t know what the organizational culture is like outside of my team. (...) I really couldn’t make a statement about that now. I just haven’t experienced it yet; I don’t know - maybe the culture within my team is a good reflection of the corporate culture, maybe not.” – Max*

Sofia agreed by stating how she *“really [has] no idea what the rest of the people at Delta are like. Whether they are all suits or relaxed people, I don’t know, I really don’t know”*. The phrase ‘no idea’ both used, made clear how unsure they were and how they tried not to say something wrong. Another thing they have in common is that both are aware of their blinders due to their limited perspectives in a virtual environment and admit to their lack of understanding regarding the corporate culture. Max added that he would easily get a more comprehensive understanding if he had the chance to, for example, observe his colleagues in the cafeteria. In general, when we asked the interviewees about their perception of the organizational culture, many reacted very evasively. Emil, for instance, only explained Delta’s formal structure as if he repeated something he heard in a presentation. He did not show any emotions and seemed distant, as if he is not a part of the company’s culture. However, Lisa reflected upon her previous answers to colleagues and friends and acknowledged how she was evasive when they asked about Delta’s culture:

*“I was asked the other day about the corporate culture, and I realized that I dodged the question a bit. I could say something about my team’s culture, but to be honest, I still find it difficult to say something about the corporate culture because you get to know it through events, Christmas parties, or any informal talks. And I haven’t really had that yet.” – Lisa*

Previously, she seemed uncomfortable to admit her lack of understanding, which is probably the same for many other new joiners. As mentioned above in the team effort theme, this might be caused by a lack of sympathy for their situation by offline onboarded colleagues, who hardly address these issues. Another factor mentioned during the interviews is the value of attending company-wide events to better grasp the organization’s culture and its members to observe how they behave and ‘how things are done around here’. Many interviewees wished for more chances to attend such events as they did not have any chance yet.

#### 4.4.2 Sense of Belonging

The lack of cultural understanding, caused by, for example, missing events, led to many interviewees not feeling like part of the team and organization. Luisa further elaborated on this:

*“I’m missing the personal interaction. That’s why I feel like I don’t really belong to my team and the organization yet. The problem is that we don’t share common experiences, for example, through team events right now. How long do you talk about Christmas parties that you experienced together? Usually, you share the stories until the next Christmas party, which creates a special bond with the others. Through these shared experiences, you get to know them on a more personal level and not just in a professional context.”* – Luisa

She missed the personal connection with her colleagues and emphasized how shared experiences outside of work usually intensify the relationship. As a result, she cannot identify with her team or Delta in general. This was supported by re-joiner Eva, who stated that her offline experiences when she was an intern are still the main reason for her motivation and sense of belonging with the organization:

*“During my internship, I was really able to establish a bond with my work and Delta, simply because I went into this cool building every day. I was really proud to work there. (...) I’ve realized and also heard from other colleagues in the team that this is what gets you through the Corona time. You know what kind of brand Delta is, what they actually do. (...) I noticed now that the people who started virtually don’t know that - they don’t know Delta at all. So, there are many people who say, ‘Although I’ve been with Delta for a while now, I’ve never been to a Delta office, I don’t even know what Delta looks like. I don’t even know what Delta kind of feels like because Delta for me is just sitting at my desk at home.’”* – Eva

In this statement, it becomes clear that Eva only feels a sense of belonging with the company because she had the chance to experience the culture of Delta offline. Furthermore, it should be noticed how she also developed commitment due to external factors such as being able to work in a Delta building that helped her get an even better understanding of what Delta is and how it feels like to be a part of the organization. In contrast, entirely virtually onboarded people did not have that chance and, consequently, might feel more distanced. They lack an understanding of what Delta is because they could not be in one place with other organizational members sharing the same identity. The expression ‘Delta for me is just sitting at my desk at home’ illustrates how loose the bond of new joiners to their employer is and that it really could be any

other employer. In this context, Eva remembered something a colleague of her said during the onboarding week:

*“He worked somewhere before and has now changed to Delta. He says the only thing that changed for him is that there is a different laptop on his desk. One day he sent away his old laptop, and the next day the one from Delta came. The new joiners don’t have an attachment or an image to their employer because they don’t know anything about it.” – Eva*

In contrast to her own experiences, her colleague never had the chance to experience first-hand what Delta stands for. It did not make any difference for her colleague except for a new technical device that he is working with. He did not develop any emotional attachment to Delta because he has no bonding memories or shared experiences and feels isolated at home. This indicates how physical distance might also lead to emotional distance and a lack of attachment to the company. Sofia agreed with this when saying that *“this whole network, this ‘we are one-thing’ kind of got lost virtually”*, which denotes how she could not experience a culture she only heard of. Similarly, Ida expressed how she felt isolated in her remote office situation: *“In the office, I feel like a small part of a large unit, and now that I work from home, I’m just sitting here and doing my work. Somehow, I don’t feel as part of the company as I would if I were directly in the office.”* The statement shows how new joiners are identifying less with the company due to the virtual setting. This impression was shared by many of our interviewees: Emil, for instance, pointed out how he struggled to identify as a Delta employee at a client meeting in the beginning:

*“Especially if you’re not in the Delta building, it took me a while to realize that I am part of Delta now - it’s just a bit abstract. When I was at a client’s for the first time, he said, ‘Yes, you’re here as a [Deltee]<sup>6</sup>’. I thought, ‘That’s right, I haven’t noticed that yet.’ (...) Now I feel part of the construct, but I didn’t feel it right from the start, like “Yes, I’m a [Deltee] now”. It took me a bit of time to find my way into it. I think this is perhaps something that takes a little longer online.” – Emil*

The statement shows how it took longer online to develop a sense of belonging because Delta as an employer was not tangible at first. When realizing that he was indeed a part of Delta now, Emil seemed confused, which indicates that the connection between him and Delta is rather surface-level because he did not experience a shared identity. Furthermore, he stated that he

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<sup>6</sup> Deltee = expression for Delta employees, indicates strong sense of belonging

mainly relates to his team members because of work-related issues: *“I wouldn’t say I’m part of the team because I feel emotionally connected, but simply because we work on the same topics.”*. This is a further indication for a mainly task-related cohesion and the lack of an emotional bond with colleagues and Delta. In general, many of our interviewees wished for an offline onboarding because it would have strengthened their feeling of belonging to both the team and organization.

## 4.5 Work Hard, Play Less: The Future of Delta

When it comes to the future development of the situation, onboarding manager Anna gave an outlook in terms of new joiners’ attachment to the organization and colleagues:

*“I think sooner or later this personal bond is simply missing. And I don’t know if you can really make up for it. I think it actually takes a few company trips, events and workshops to somehow catch up or make up for what they ‘missed’ during their first year.”* – Anna

The statement highlights how digitally onboarded new joiners have a disadvantage compared to offline onboarded colleagues concerning the personal connection to the organization. In this context, Anna doubted if the new joiners can ever make up the missed opportunities to build sustainable networks, which would have served as a valuable base for their future careers. This designates how networking and ‘making a name for oneself’ are particularly crucial at the beginning of a career. Here, the virtual environment represents a barrier, and it remains at this point unknown whether new joiners will ever stop being invisible.

In addition to this issue, many interviewees spoke about the loss of benefits they usually would have had as consultants. Eva elaborated on this:

*“The thing that made it so attractive for young people before is that you learn a lot, you also work a lot, but it is more like ‘work hard, play hard’. That means that Delta does a lot for its employees to keep them happy. The problem is that right now this part simply disappears and is not being compensated for. (...) For Delta it was a great year, because a lot of costs were saved, for example through all the team events that no longer took place. (...) Everything is virtual now, which means that this experience is now taken away from us, the company saves a lot of money, but currently, there is no replacement.”* – Eva

According to her, offline events allow building sustainable networks and deeper relationships that cannot equally be replaced virtually. In the first theme, Anna mentioned how the events often are like ‘class trips for adults’ with the purpose of creating a shared identity as a consultant. This suggests that the lifestyle of consultants is two-fold and consists of two identities: a hard worker and a ‘party-animal’. Right now, the new joiners only get the workload without any compensation for the fun part, which is a crucial factor for developing commitment. Eva and other interviewees sounded frustrated about their current situation and mentioned how the job as a consultant might become less attractive.

Although the events are seen as fundamentally important for new joiners, Stefan pointed out that *“We’re never going to get back to where we were. That’s not going to happen. We’ve saved too many costs for that. You can’t argue that to any executive anymore.”*. Therefore, Delta needs to decide in the future whether they continue to save costs or if they reinstate networking events and other events that are of enormous intangible value to the employees. Ultimately this benefits the company to a great extent as this leads to organizational commitment.

Undoubtedly, it will be hard for executives to assess the value of personal connections caused by organizational efforts. However, we got the impression that re-joiners as Eva, who experienced Delta offline before, claimed that the ‘play hard’-aspects and the understanding of the organizational culture are what made her stay: *“I am strongly convinced that if I wouldn’t have had the offline experience, I would have left the company. What I got now virtually wouldn’t have been enough to keep me.”*. Her choice of words made clear that the current organizational efforts to make up for the virtual disadvantages alone would not have been enough for her. She predicted that the lack of commitment of new joiners caused by the virtual environment would increase the chance of turnover:

*“I do believe that colleagues that don’t have the understanding and bond to Delta are more likely to leave if they get a better offer after a year - because the only thing that changes is their laptop.”* – Eva

This statement opens the discussion, whether the possible increase in turnover of new joiners might be more expensive for Delta than the costs they saved due to the omission of physical onboarding events. As new joiners become more valuable over time after some time of guidance, it might be cheaper to develop the future talents within the company instead of recruiting

them later on in their career. It remains uncertain how Delta will decide on the economic outlook and how the value of physical activities will be assessed.

## 4.6 Chapter Summary

In sum, we argue that although Delta tried to provide support for the new joiners' virtual socialization, those initiatives did not lead to sustainable relationships and networks. In this context, we found that many new hires perceived the virtual onboarding programs as over-structured and anonymous. Further, they did not perceive the virtual encounters with other new employees as an adequate substitute for real-life conversations as those felt unnatural and enforced in a virtual environment and made them feel less connected and committed to each other. Moreover, many new joiners claimed to be unsatisfied with their team members' efforts to integrate them into the team, which often made them feel lonely and isolated. They also pointed out that they mostly have loose ties to their colleagues as the remote setting eliminated chance encounters and reduced the frequency as well as clarity of their everyday, especially informal, communication. In this case, we emphasize that the physical distance of virtually onboarded employees to their colleagues led to emotional distance not only to their team but also to Delta as an employer. Above that, some new joiners stated to feel invisible to their colleagues even though they were physically visible on their screens. This highlights that being visible digitally does not necessarily lead to a feeling of visibility for new joiners. In this respect, they also expressed to be worried about potential negative consequences for their future career at Delta as visibility is necessary to get staffed on projects and ultimately get promoted. All these aspects mentioned above resulted in severe difficulties to understand their team and organizational culture and made them feel less emotionally attached to their colleagues and their employer Delta. Lastly, the concern was raised that the virtually onboarded new joiners might not be able to ever make up for the missed opportunities to network, especially at informal events that were not replaced virtually but would have strengthened their bond. Consequently, our findings suggest that the virtual environment represents a powerful barrier to build interpersonal relationships and hinders networking, which is considered vital for their organizational socialization.

## 5 Discussion

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*In the following chapter, we aim to connect our empirical findings to the theoretical framework we outlined in the literature review. Here, we highlight how networking becomes even more central in a virtual context and how it is impeded. We contribute to the existing literature by introducing the phenomena of perceived invisibility and confirmed invisibility of virtually onboarded new hires. In this context, we argue that proactive behaviors either decrease the perceived invisibility or, in the case of rejection by other organizational insiders, further enhance the feeling of invisibility, helplessness and isolation. We end this chapter by outlining possible consequences for the virtually onboarded new joiners and Delta.*

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### 5.1 The Importance of Networking during Organizational Socialization at Delta

Before we start discussing how new joiners perceive virtual onboarding and how this perception relates to networking, our data suggests, yet again, to stress the importance of networking in knowledge-intensive firms such as Delta. Our empirical findings show that networking is considered an ongoing process within Delta that is of immense importance for the organization's success. Further, the data suggests that knowledge-sharing through networking is part of Delta's culture and considered their unique selling proposition. This is, for example, supported by interviewees, who stated that Delta is not selling any substantial products but is instead offering intangible solutions to customers based on the accumulated knowledge of the employees' network within Delta. Moreover, they stressed that it is impossible to know everything themselves, and it is rather crucial to know someone who can help find the solution. Here, the literature respects Delta as a knowledge-intensive firm (Alvesson, 2004; Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018; Teece, 2000), characterized by a strong reliance on knowledge as a resource and source of competitive advantage. Thus, it is of enormous importance for knowledge-intensive firms to enable their employees to share, develop and create knowledge to form a network within the company, enhancing the organization's growth and innovation (Seufert, von Krogh & Bach, 1999; Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018).

According to this strategy, Delta encourages its employees already from the very start to engage in networking as they claim it is one of the most vital factors during new joiners' organizational socialization. Morrison (2002) emphasizes that employees with a large and diverse network are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and commitment to the organization. This is a particularly desirable outcome for the organization, in our study Delta, as they want to retain valuable knowledge workers. Our empirical findings present how Delta urges the new joiners to connect to others and uses phrases such as 'making a career together' or 'we are one' to promote the new joiners' networking behaviors. We acknowledge that the organization's emphasis is probably not exclusively aimed at the employees' well-being but also of strategic nature. Here, literature indicates that although the employees' well-being or job satisfaction are desirable outcomes for organizations, they are always connected to strategic goals such as lower turnover or higher performance levels of employees (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Gruman & Saks, 2013).

Our findings indicate that the new joiners were aware that Delta as a knowledge-intensive firm heavily relies on networking and appreciated the encouragement to engage in networking during various onboarding activities and initiatives. Further, many of our interviewees seemed motivated to create meaningful relationships to feel better integrated into the organization. Hence, the interviewed consultants recognized the importance of strong interpersonal relationships and that those are best built during their first months in the organization to secure a sustainable connection with other new joiners and colleagues. They understood socializing as part of their job description and were aware that it is essential to begin early with networking behaviors to start a successful career at Delta. Further, they recognized that they should become visible and try to understand the organization's culture with the help of their network. In accordance with the literature, the interviewed new joiners at our case organization showed a similar understanding of networking behaviors, such as meeting with colleagues in a more informal, casual context or contacting others if they needed help with a task (Gibson, Hardy & Buckley, 2014).

The literature refers to social capital as the knowledge and resources employees have because of their relationships and networks within a company (Nahapiet & Goshal, 1998 cited in Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018). This network of social relationships enables employees to share knowledge and contact colleagues besides their immediate coworkers (Swart & Kinnie, 2003).

As a knowledge-intensive firm, the development of this social capital is a significant part of the organization's strategy and explains why Delta is emphasizing the networking of new joiners.

## 5.2 Organizational Support during New Joiners' Virtual Onboarding

Formal orientation programs are especially vital for new employees' understanding of the corporate culture and the development of interpersonal relationships, both ensuring a successful socialization (Klein & Weaver, 2000). Therefore, literature emphasizes that these programs should take place early in the employment of new hires and promote networking among the participants (Klein & Weaver, 2000; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). This is in line with what we investigated in our case organization, Delta. Here, the orientation programs, namely the Onboarding Week and the Consulting Experience, were conducted promptly after the new hires' entry and had a strong networking focus, according to the onboarding managers. This was also recognized by the interviewed new joiners. However, these events were held in virtual meetings for the first time due to the COVID-19 pandemic and were often perceived negatively by the interviewees. In that respect, our research suggests that the virtual environment represents a barrier for new employees to build sustainable relationships and gain a feeling of the company culture, which is in accordance with some literature on virtual onboarding (Rodeghero et al. 2020; Wesson & Gogus, 2005; Harpelund, Højberg & Nielsen, 2019).

Concerning the communication of the corporate culture, the majority of the new employees perceived the online presentations of the company's goals and values during their Onboarding Week as not appealing. This was mainly caused by a perceived lack of the presenters' enthusiasm as well as an apparent anonymous and impersonal atmosphere during the virtual conferences. As a result, the new employees did not fully concentrate on the company's presentations and felt disconnected not only from the content but also to the other participants in the digital meetings. Although we acknowledge that the presentation itself could have been perceived similarly by the new employees in a non-virtual setting, the interview statements indicated that the virtual environment was significantly detrimental to creating engagement and appeal to the hearts and minds of the audience. This is also in line with Liberman, Trope and Stephan (2007), who claim that people tend to feel emotionally distant from events and other people that are physically out of reach.

Furthermore, Liberman's, Trope's and Stephan's (2007) phenomenon serves as an explanation for the negative perception of the virtual networking attempts during and after the orientation programs. As already mentioned, Delta strongly emphasized the relevance of networking from day one and, therefore, provided many opportunities for the new employees to meet virtually in smaller groups and have informal conversations. These efforts are consistent with research by Bauer and Erdogan (2011), highlighting the importance for organizations to offer an environment that encourages new hires' social integration through relationship building. However, our findings suggest that the new joiners struggled to bond virtually with other new hires. Thus, although Delta provided several possibilities for informal interaction and thereby encouraged networking at these events, the implementation did not lead to the desired outcomes due to the virtual environment. In this context, the participants felt uncomfortable and trapped in their - according to our interviewees' perceptions - artificially induced encounters during the break-out sessions and generally perceived the orientation programs as over-structured. These aspects were seen as adverse to the networking purpose of the events as there were no 'natural' or spontaneous opportunities for interaction, resulting in dissatisfaction among the participants. Therefore, contradictory to the onboarding literature that stresses the need for more structured orientation programs for a successful new joiners' socialization (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011), a less structured approach when onboarding new employees in a virtual environment would be adequate in that case. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that a less structured approach would not necessarily lead to higher satisfaction among the new joiners, as it would require more proactive behaviors from them. Generally, we got the impression that the new joiners were discontented with both structured initiatives and less structured formats that required more proactivity from them, as illustrated in the following.

After the formal orientation programs, the new joiners were strongly encouraged to follow-up on the conversations they had and get to know more of the participants by setting up virtual coffee-calls. In this context, literature states that employees who feel supported by their employer to engage in networking are more likely to do so (Gibson, Hardy & Buckley, 2014). Further, the organization can impact the frequency and extent of networking among the employees (Gibson, Hardy & Buckley, 2014). Nevertheless, our research has shown that although the new joiners acknowledged the importance of networking and generally appreciated the related organizational efforts, the frequency and extent of it could not be ensured by the organization in a virtual environment long-term. In this respect, many remotely onboarded employees

perceived pressure to network, which led to more virtual meetings in the beginning. However, these encounters did not lead to sustainable relationships among the employees for two reasons: First, the atmosphere during the virtual coffee-dates felt ‘unnatural’ and enforced, and second, the remote setting made them feel less connected and committed to their conversation partners. The latter can be explained with Liberman’s, Trope’s and Stephan’s (2007) mentioned phenomenon concerning the link between physical and emotional distance. Consequently, the new employees stopped scheduling virtual get-togethers with other participants of the orientation programs and lost touch with them, which missed the purpose of the organizational efforts.

We also outlined that it is considered vital for successful socialization that new joiners feel supported by their organization in navigating and finding their place within the existing company culture (Bauer, 2010; Mercurio, 2015). However, our findings showed that the remotely onboarded new employees at Delta did not feel supported by their organization and, therefore, struggled to find their place within it. In that regard, we found that they felt lonely and isolated due to a lack of effort from their team members to integrate them into the team. Furthermore, they missed informal conversations with their colleagues and team events that would have led to a better understanding of the team dynamic, established trust, and enabled the development of strong interpersonal relationships, indispensable for an effective onboarding (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Bauer, 2013). The main reasons that we uncovered for the lack of team effort were the phenomenon of being ‘digitally tired’- in popular literature also referred to as ‘Zoom Fatigue’<sup>7</sup>- as well as an insufficient understanding of the new joiners’ situation by organizational insiders in the team. Additionally, we can again relate this to Liberman’s, Trope’s and Stephan’s (2007) assumption concerning the link between physical and emotional distance.

To put it in a nutshell, this section resembles the ‘organizational efforts’ component of Bauer’s and Erdogan’s (2011) process model of organizational socialization. We found that the virtually onboarded new joiners at Delta generally had a negative perception of both the organizational efforts with regard to the orientation programs and the team efforts that should ensure the social integration into the company. We consider this very problematic as the literature on onboarding stresses that the first experiences in the new organization determine the new joiners’ attitudes and beliefs towards their employer (Wesson & Gogus, 2005). The negative perception was mostly related to the fact that their networking attempts were significantly impeded by the virtual environment. Thus, employees could not build strong interpersonal relationships that are

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<sup>7</sup> The term ‘Zoom Fatigue’ describes the perceived tiredness of using digital media for communication

vital for their satisfaction and commitment (Allen & Shanock, 2013). That the virtual environment was responsible for the lack of meaningful relationships became particularly evident when comparing the descriptions of employees that have experienced the onboarding face-to-face with those of who underwent the process virtually. Therefore, the organization was not able to provide an environment that facilitates the new hires' social integration, which is, according to Bauer and Erdogan (2011), of fundamental importance. Consequently, although the new employees attributed the negative experience to the virtual environment and did not blame the organization for it, negative outcomes for the organization can be expected.

### 5.3 Relationship Building and Proactive Behaviors of Virtually Onboarded New Employees

As stated in the previous section, efficient networking among Delta's employees was severely limited in a virtual environment, as it made them feel less committed and attached to one another. Hence, virtually onboarded employees had great difficulties establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships in an organization-wide context and even struggled to bond with their close work colleagues. The former resulted in the lack of rich and diverse networks, which according to Morrison (2002), are essential for new joiners as they help them understand the company culture and make them feel committed to the organization. The latter is of particular concern because the new employees claimed to have hoped to develop 'friendship-like' relations with their colleagues. As strong relationships ensure trust and a better understanding of social cues (Podolny & Baron, 1997), Morrison (2002) states that having loose ties with team members further constrains the feeling of belonging both to the team and the organization.

In line with our findings, the literature on remote working suggests that the virtual environment especially leads to reduced frequency and clarity of communication, hindering new employees to bond with their colleagues (Hemphill & Begel, 2014; Gibson & Gibbs, 2006; Kauffeld, Handke & Straube, 2016). In that regard, Harpelund, Højberg and Nielsen (2019) emphasize that it requires great effort of employees to connect with other organizational members virtually. We, therefore, argue that the proactivity of new employees, as highlighted by Bauer and Erdogan (2011) in their process model of organizational socialization as the most important employee characteristic for a successful socialization, is in a remote setting even more vital than before.

According to Hemphill and Begel (2014), the reduced frequency of, especially informal communication, among employees who work remotely is related to the elimination of everyday informal activities, negatively impacting the quality of their relationships. This is consistent with our findings, as the interviewed new joiners at Delta claimed to miss chance encounters with their colleagues, such as running into each other in the hallway or meeting spontaneously at the coffee machine, which were considered valuable to bond with them. Consequently, proactivity is particularly vital to make up for the loss of chance encounters with colleagues. In that regard, many of the interviewed new joiners set up virtual coffee dates to bring about informal conversations with their team members or other colleagues outside their team. According to an onboarding manager at Delta, these proactive behaviors significantly decide over the successful socialization of new employees and potentially even their future career at the organization. However, our findings reveal that the new joiners at Delta did not perceive the virtual coffee dates as adequate substitutes for conversations that would occur face-to-face at a real coffee machine. In this context, they stated that these virtual encounters did not feel any ‘natural’ as there was a pre-defined timeframe for the conversation that they felt obliged to fill even when there was nothing more to talk about. Additionally, it was said that there was a special agenda connected to every virtual coffee date, which did not offer much room for spontaneous conversations that usually are considered most beneficial to networking. Therefore, these initiatives did not facilitate sustainable and meaningful relationships, similar to the situation after the orientation programs. This phenomenon can be compared to speed dating in that the new employees in our case organization had fast-moving, superficial interactions with others but did not feel committed enough to sustain those relationships, resembling a sense of ‘no strings attached’.

The reduced clarity of virtual communication is related to the insufficient availability of social cues, which are normally conveyed through nonverbal communication (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003). Thus, especially if employees communicate mainly in chats or emails, misunderstandings can occur, possibly leading to conflicts that decrease employee satisfaction (Workman, Kahnweiler & Bommer, 2003). In accordance with that, the loss of tone in a virtual environment was also detrimental to the relationship building of new employees at Delta. In that regard, we found that the virtually onboarded employees not only had difficulties in interpreting their colleagues’ messages but also were afraid that their own messages did not come across the way they intended to. This sometimes led to misunderstandings and frustration, resulting in perceived

isolation, following a study from Workman, Kahnweiler and Bommer (2003). Furthermore, the virtual environment did not offer enough comfort for new joiners to address sensitive topics, such as promotions and problems with the workload. This is also considered problematic as it contributes to the dissatisfaction of employees. Therefore, we emphasize that new joiners who show proactive behaviors are more likely to overcome their inhibitions to address misunderstanding and issues.

Although we stress that the proactivity of new joiners in a remote setting becomes even more significant for successful organizational socialization, our findings suggest that proactive behaviors not necessarily led to sustainable relationships. Besides the mentioned reasons above, we found that some new hires proactively reached out to their colleagues but missed the initiative and engagement from ‘the other end’. For instance, some did not get a response to private emails and messages in the team chat or perceived their colleagues’ offers to get together as ‘empty phrases’ as they were not approached by them for informal conversations afterwards. The lack of encouragement led for many of the interviewees to a feeling of distance and less commitment, which is exactly the opposite of what Bauer (2013) stresses in the ‘connection’ component of her model. Hence, it is of great importance that organizational insiders and especially team members appreciate, encourage and nurture new joiners’ proactivity through showing initiative as well.

## 5.4 Perceived and Confirmed Invisibility of Virtually Onboarded New Employees

In our empirical findings, it quickly became evident that many of the interviewed new joiners felt invisible during their organizational socialization. This was often based on the perceived lack of interest from colleagues as well as the ephemerality and deficiency of deep connections to other organizational members. In our literature review, we touched upon the concept of visibility in relation to networking and argued that well-connected employees are said to have more power and visibility and consequently a better chance for future career success (Wolff & Moser, 2009; Forret & Dougherty, 2001). Here, Tonge (2008) claimed that visible employees with a broad network are more likely to receive job opportunities, promotions, or resources. We contribute to that by presenting how the virtual environment represents a barrier, especially

for new joiners, to build a network and become visible, possibly restricting new employees' future career opportunities.

The theme of invisibility is particularly fascinating as virtual new joiners are constantly 'visible' on their colleagues' screens due to the virtual collaboration, where they possibly see each other even more often than it would have been the case offline. However, it becomes apparent that this visibility cannot be compared to a physical one as it is perceived as less profound and significant. This is further supported by statements such as the one from Emma, where she explains how she feels alone in the remote setting, even though she is not. The situation is perceived as an emotional burden and deeply affected new joiners like Emma. A further problem that relates to this feeling of isolation and invisibility is that the virtual environment does not create a comfortable environment to address these concerns and issues with the new joiners' managers, which makes them, in turn, even more invisible. We consider this phenomenon *perceived invisibility*, which describes virtually onboarded new joiners' feeling of being unseen despite being physically visible. Therefore, they do not feel like they are 'seen and heard' by colleagues and managers.

Apart from the new hires' perceived invisibility, our empirical material shows that the interviewed onboarding managers confirmed their perception by stating that they did not make any connections to virtually onboarded new joiners apart from their team so far. Further, these managers raised the concern that new joiners might not be able to make up for the missed opportunities to become visible to colleagues and managers in the future. In contrast to the phenomenon described above, we call this phenomenon *confirmed invisibility*, which denotes that virtually onboarded new joiners not only feel like they are invisible but that this concern is proved to be true by the interviewed established hires.

According to our empirical data, a crucial factor to counteract the invisibility of new joiners in a virtual environment is their proactivity. This is exemplified by statements from Stefan, one of our interviewed onboarding managers, who classified proactive new joiners as winners in a virtual setting and individuals who do not manage to become visible to colleagues and managers as losers. Thus, the encouragement of proactive new employees in a digital environment might decrease the *confirmed invisibility*. However, our empirical material also showed that even new joiners who proactively tried to become more visible through networking and asking for help sometimes stayed invisible and, thus, were not accepted by organizational insiders. The

acceptance of organizational insiders is, according to the process model of organizational socialization by Bauer & Erdogan (2011), considered a necessary condition for onboarding's success. The lack of acceptance manifested itself in a feeling of helplessness, indicating a decrease in self-efficacy (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). Moreover, it resulted in further emotional detachment to Delta in the form of perceived isolation, which is in line with Liberman, Trope and Stephan (2007), who found that physical distance leads to a perceived feeling of emotional distance. For those reasons, we argue that the feeling of rejected proactive behaviors increases the *perceived invisibility* of virtually onboarded new joiners.

As mentioned above, networking is often considered necessary for employees to become visible and increase their chance of future success. In line with the literature, our findings suggest that networking and, thus, visibility as keys to success are related to an employee's position in the organizational hierarchy (Forret & Dougherty, 2001). In our case, Delta frequently emphasized how crucial networking for junior new joiners within the company is to develop strong relationships with colleagues and 'make a career together'. This is supported by our empirical material, indicating that new joiners who cannot become visible for the managers staffing the projects would be disadvantaged, which was perceived as significantly more challenging in a virtual setting. Hence, they might end up in a vicious circle of invisibility, including both *perceived invisibility* and *confirmed invisibility*, which would then negatively affect their professional career at Delta.

To conclude, we argue that *perceived invisibility* is often not only an emotional burden for new joiners, which decreases their well-being, but also might bring negative consequences for their future success in the new organization. Our empirical material indicates that engaging in networking to become visible and make a name for oneself is of great relevance during new hires' organizational socialization. Further, we found that this need increased in an entirely virtual setting, which our interviewees perceived as an obstacle, requiring additional effort to be recognized and accepted by organizational insiders to counteract *confirmed invisibility*. The two identified types of invisibility concern people's perceptions and differ in terms of perspective. The *perceived invisibility* exists in the eyes of oneself, whereas the *confirmed invisibility* occurs in the eyes of others. Here, it is particularly noteworthy that both types of invisibility exist independently from the actual physical visibility on one's computer screen.

## 5.5 Understanding of Organizational Culture in a Virtual Environment

Altogether, the provided organizational efforts and the proactive behaviors of new employees could not facilitate efficient networking and, thus, sustainable relationships did not result from it, which are considered essential to understand an organization's culture and enhance new joiners' social integration into the organization (Morrison, 2002; Podolny & Baron, 1997; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). The cultural understanding of new employees is highlighted as an integral part of the process model of organizational socialization by Bauer and Erdogan (2011) as it contributes to the onboarding's success. Nevertheless, our empirical material clearly shows that the virtual environment is perceived as a barrier to grasping the authentic organizational culture as a new joiner. This is supported by various interview statements, where new joiners at Delta uttered how they lack an understanding of the corporate culture because they only hear about values during presentations or onboarding initiatives and cannot observe or experience the culture first-hand. This is in line with the literature, which contends that new employees can only comprehend a company's distinctive culture when they can observe colleagues and their behaviors (Hemphill & Begel, 2014). As expected, virtually onboarded employees could only experience the culture to a limited extent, which is why they often reacted evasively when being asked about their cultural comprehension. The reasons for this lack of understanding in a virtual environment were, for instance, a lack of sympathy from colleagues, missed opportunities to observe colleagues during lunchtime, or a lack of shared team events, where new joiners usually get to see 'how things are done around here'. Further, the deficiency of natural or casual conversations online and highly structured formats that were supposed to provide opportunities for informal interaction resulted in a lack of cultural comprehension.

Despite some attempts to grasp the team dynamics and culture, for example, through entering the team calls earlier, the new joiners at Delta only became more aware of how little they know about their colleagues and the organizational culture. As they did not have the opportunity to share experiences with colleagues apart from online activities, many of our interviewees struggled to find their place in the team and form a shared identity. This correlates with Shapiro et al. (2002), who argue that team members who work together remotely often experience difficulties developing a shared identity. Furthermore, the literature suggests that virtual onboarding programs, in general, are disadvantageous to gain a cultural understanding and, thus, potentially harm the success of new joiners' organizational socialization (Wesson & Gogus, 2005). As a

result of the lack of cultural understanding and what Delta ‘feels like’, our empirical findings suggest that virtually onboarded new joiners at Delta only had loose ties to their colleagues and lacked attachment to Delta as an employer. Compared to the interviewed re-joiners and their offline onboarded colleagues, they did not develop a strong emotional attachment to Delta as a, so far, only virtual construct. This aligns with Liberman, Trope and Stephan (2007), who argue that the physical distance to colleagues and the organization also leads to an emotional distance. Further, Bartel, Wrzesniewski and Wiesenfeld (2012) claim that this perceived isolation results in less identification with the organization, which is present as many new joiners at Delta claim that they did not experience a strong sense of belonging.

Although the re-joiners stated that their offline experiences are a primary influencing factor on their motivation, we acknowledge that other new joiners might have glorified their expectation of an offline onboarding and expected everything to be better in a non-virtual setting. Nevertheless, the interviewed re-joiners experienced a significant advantage in their cultural understanding and integration due to their on-site experiences. Compared to them, the virtual new joiners did not feel like a part of ‘something bigger’ or like they would make a career together, which indicates that they do not have a deep sense of belonging. The connection to their new colleagues is more on a surface level and not as profound as those re-joiners or offline onboarded colleagues have. Moreover, for some of the interviewees at Delta, the connection was primarily task-related nature and less emotional.

## 5.6 Possible Consequences for Virtually Onboarded New Joiners and Delta

The process model of organizational socialization by Bauer and Erdogan (2011) suggests that an effective onboarding process has far-reaching consequences and might result in outcomes such as increased employee satisfaction, performance, and commitment as well as a decreased chance of turnover. A study by Johnson, Bettenhausen and Gibbons (2009) claimed that a predominantly virtual communication negatively impacts these beneficial results. However, in their study, they did not necessarily refer to organizational socialization but rather virtual teamwork in general. We add to this with our empirical findings that suggest as a consequence of a reduced cultural understanding, the *perceived invisibility*, and a lack of strong interpersonal

relationships and networks, the desired outcomes will be restricted in the situation of a virtual onboarding.

Our empirical findings indicate that the virtual environment represents a barrier for virtual new joiners' development of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. This is supported by interview statements predicting that it is unlikely for new joiners to make up for the missed experiences and opportunities to network and become visible. The virtually onboarded consultants at Delta complained about their lack of profound interpersonal relationships and sustainable networks, which would have been a valuable base for their future careers and their feeling of belonging to Delta. This is following Johnson, Bettenhausen and Gibbons (2009) and Morrison (2002), who emphasize that well-connected employees with a distinct network are more likely to identify with their organization and develop organizational commitment. In that regard, we argue for a potential lack of commitment and job satisfaction as in our empirical material, most new joiners felt less connected and not belonging to their colleagues and Delta. Some even claimed a lack of appreciation, which, combined with their *perceived invisibility* and isolation, led to little commitment. Here, some even mentioned the possibility to leave the organization, which suggests another possible consequence: an increase in turnover of virtually onboarded employees.

Although our findings cannot provide reliable numbers of increased turnover, the empirical material predicts a high probability. Our interviews indicate that virtually onboarded employees feel invisible, cannot comprehend the organization's culture, and miss sustainable and profound connections within the organization. Consequently, the new joiners felt less satisfied and committed, which might indicate that they are more likely to leave the organization as colleagues who were onboarded offline and had the chance to build meaningful relationships, understand the culture, and bond with their teams. This is further supported by Eva, one of our interviewed re-joiners, who claimed that her source of commitment lies in her prior offline experiences and that her experiences during the virtual onboarding phase would not have been enough to make her stay. The interviewed onboarding managers also acknowledged this issue. They doubted that the organizational efforts could make up for the virtual disadvantage and recognized how virtual new joiners' successful integration and socialization might have been permanently impeded and endangered. Further, they questioned whether virtual new joiners will ever be able to make up for their deprived opportunities. Here, the literature claims that new joiners that lack emotional attachment to their team and the organization are also less likely to show cooperative

behavior, which negatively impacts the team's performance (John, Bettenhausen & Gibbons, 2009). Accordingly, if an onboarding process is not considered successful, the literature predicts a decrease in an organization's success (Chillakuri, 2020).

Especially in knowledge-intensive firms, such as Delta, we predict that the consequences of an entirely virtual onboarding might be far-reaching if the networking suffers to a large extent. As the competitive advantage of knowledge-intensive firms is based on their employees' accumulated knowledge and networks, they heavily rely on knowledge sharing (Seufert, von Krogh & Bach, 1999; Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018). Due to the virtual environment, networking was significantly hindered, which limited opportunities for knowledge sharing. This is why organizations that conduct a virtual onboarding might have to expect a decrease in new joiners' performance and organizational success. Here, the literature emphasizes that new joiners are more committed to the overall organization if they have a diverse network (Reichers, 1985 cited in Morrison, 2002). For successful integration, new joiners need to develop relationships with both their immediate work colleagues and others within the overall organization (Bauer, Morrison & Callister, 1998; Morrison, 2002). As this was not possible for the virtual new joiners at Delta, we argue that the socialization and integration of virtual new joiners were unsuccessful and predict consequences for organizations such as a decrease in job satisfaction, commitment, performance as well as an increase in turnover.

## 6 Conclusion

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*In the following chapter, we summarize our most important empirical findings, namely the disruptive relationship building, the phenomena of perceived and confirmed invisibility and the lack of team and organizational culture in a virtual environment. We continue with our theoretical contributions by stressing our newly discovered phenomena of invisibility in relation to the proactivity of virtual new joiners. We conclude our study with possible limitations and further research opportunities as well as practical implications for both offline and online onboarding.*

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### 6.1 Summary of Empirical Findings

In our study, we aimed to address the research questions of how virtual onboarding is perceived in a consultancy firm and how this perception relates to networking activities of those employees.

Our first empirical finding shows that the virtual work environment represents a barrier to networking activities and, thus, significantly disrupts the relationship building of new employees, which is vital for their successful onboarding (e.g., Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Bauer, 2010; Morrison, 2002). In that regard, we found that the interviewed new joiners were aware of the importance of networking at Delta and tried to bond with other new joiners, their team colleagues and other organizational members. Nevertheless, they were not able to establish and maintain sustainable relationships with them. Our research suggests three main reasons for that. First, there was a reduced frequency of informal interactions due to the elimination of chance encounters in a remote setting. Second, virtual get-togethers were not perceived as an adequate substitute for real-life informal conversations because they felt enforced, unnatural and did not provide enough comfort to address sensitive topics. Third, virtual conversations led to considerably less commitment and attachment between the conversation partners. This feeling of ‘no strings attached’ could, in a different context, be perceived as something positive in the sense that no commitment is needed, but in this particular situation, it was not possible to develop commitment even if they wanted to. Ultimately, this resulted in a lack of initiatives to build

meaningful relationships, leaving new employees with only loose ties to their colleagues and an insufficient network within their new organization.

The second finding uncovered that, due to the lack of deep connections, virtually onboarded employees felt invisible to their colleagues even though they were technically often visible on their computer screens. We consider this phenomenon *perceived invisibility* and, hence, our research raises awareness that actual, physical visibility does not automatically lead to the feeling of being ‘heard and seen’ in a virtual environment. Accordingly, some of our interviewees experienced severe frustration and felt isolated from their colleagues. Further, our interviewed onboarding managers proved the new joiners’ perceptions to be true when stating that they do not know any virtually onboarded new hires outside their team. We call this phenomenon *confirmed invisibility*. This is particularly harmful to new joiners at Delta as they have to be visible for managers to get staffed on projects. If this is not the case, new employees do not have the chance to make a name for themselves, resulting in a vicious circle of invisibility that represents a serious disadvantage for their future careers. In this respect, our research casts doubt if the new joiners can ever make up for the missed opportunities of building sustainable networks and become visible.

Further, we identified that the proactivity of new joiners becomes even more vital in the context of virtual onboarding. Here, we emphasize that proactive behaviors of these new hires are needed to connect with their colleagues and counteract both *perceived invisibility* and *confirmed invisibility*. It became evident in our research that proactivity was considered the decisive factor for their successful virtual organizational socialization and probably also their future career in the company. However, we acknowledge that proactive behaviors do not necessarily compensate for the virtual disadvantages in terms of enabling new joiners to overcome their invisibility and developing sustainable relationships. This was especially rooted in the fact that some new joiners reached out to their colleagues but were discouraged due to lacking initiatives, engagement and commitment from ‘the other end’. We argue that this form of rejection of new joiners’ proactive behaviors further facilitates the *perceived invisibility*, possibly resulting in a feeling of helplessness, further frustration, and, thus, endangering their well-being.

Our third and final finding is that the virtual environment hinders new employees from understanding their team’s culture as well as the organizational culture, leading to the emotional detachment from both their team members and Delta as an employer. One could even say that parts of the organizational culture remain invisible in a metaphorical way. This is especially

related to the lack of a diverse network and the limited amount of social cues available when communicating digitally. For instance, they were not able to observe their colleagues, which would have helped to comprehend ‘the way things are done around here’, and thereby did not get a picture of the authentic corporate culture. Furthermore, computer-mediated communication often entails the loss of tone, which made it significantly harder for new joiners to ensure that their messages were interpreted correctly and at the same time reduced their understanding of their colleagues’ messages. Consequently, our interviewees struggled to find their place within the established team structures and often did not feel part of neither their team nor the organization.

All in all, we emphasize with our research that the virtual environment was perceived as a substantial disruptive factor for the successful onboarding of new employees as it significantly impeded networking and the development of interpersonal relationships. Here, the physical distance also led to the new joiners feeling emotionally distant from their colleagues and the organization. Therefore, the aspects outlined above are likely to negatively impact the desirable outcomes of onboarding, such as employee satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover. Above that, we assume that the remote working situation, especially due to less informal interaction, led to many missed opportunities for knowledge sharing among employees. This is not only detrimental to Delta’s business but also the new joiners’ future performance.

## 6.2 Theoretical Contribution

As indicated in our research purpose, the concepts of onboarding and networking have been researched for almost three decades now. Still, there was a need to enrich the existing theories as they were not applicable to the ever-changing environment. In this respect, we recognized the necessity to conduct an in-depth study on how onboarding is perceived virtually and how this perception influences the networking behaviors of new joiners.

Our research shows similar findings with the few literature published on virtual onboarding (e.g., Hemphill & Begel, 2014; Harpelund, Højbjerg & Nielsen, 2019; Rodeghero et al. 2020; Wesson & Gogus, 2005), for example, with regard to the difficulties to bond with colleagues virtually and the decreased understanding of the company culture. However, we contribute to the literature of virtual onboarding in the field of Strategic Human Resources Management by

uncovering the two phenomena of *perceived invisibility* and *confirmed invisibility*. Here, our research raised awareness that being actually visible on a computer screen does not automatically lead to the perception of being visible in the eyes of oneself and others. Further, even though proactive behaviors should counteract both forms of invisibility, we found that the *perceived invisibility* even increases in case of rejection. Here, we added to the existing research of (virtual) onboarding that the *perceived invisibility* of digitally onboarded new employees impeded their well-being and resulted in the fear of being deprived of future career opportunities within Delta. Therefore, in addition to strengthening and enriching previous research, we believe our study will stimulate more research in the field of virtual onboarding and evoke a discussion on the phenomenon of invisibility. Further, we have examined and stressed the importance of networking and relationship building during virtual onboarding in a knowledge-intensive firm, which is, according to our knowledge, something new and worthy of more attention in this field of study.

In general, our study is of high relevance for organizations as they undergo a continuing digital transformation. Therefore, it should be noted that our research is not restricted to the pandemic circumstances but rather can be seen as a blueprint for future Human Resource Management practices concerning the onboarding of organizational members.

### 6.3 Limitations and Future Research

While our study provided in-depth research on the perception of virtual onboarding in relation to networking, we acknowledge that some limitations might have confined our findings and offer the potential for further research.

The first limitation of our study is generalizability. Here, we acknowledge that networking is specifically important in knowledge-intensive firms such as Delta, which was shown both by our empirical findings and existing literature (Seufert, von Krogh & Bach, 1999; Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018; Swart & Kinnie, 2003). However, further research is needed for other industries that also allow for remote working and, potentially, virtual onboarding as they might be affected in similar ways. Moreover, the limited scope and resources of the thesis only allowed us to conduct eleven interviews. We suggest that future research could cover a vaster sample, preferably in multiple case organizations, to enhance the generalizability and comparability of

our study. Further, we see the point in time and the short time frame of our study as restricting as we conducted our research relatively at the beginning of virtual onboarding as many organizations only started recently to transfer the process into a digital environment due to the Covid-19 pandemic. We find it necessary for future research to investigate the long-term consequences to assess whether virtual onboarding actually results in our predicted consequences of lower job satisfaction, commitment, performance and higher turnover.

Furthermore, there are limitations to our case study due to Delta having specific ‘offline’ onboarding formats before that were digitally converted. The organization did not customize the onboarding formats to a virtual environment and stuck to their established onboarding initiatives. Here, future research could investigate whether there are other ways to design virtual orientation programs and other onboarding activities that possibly create more engagement among the participants. These could possibly prevent perceived and confirmed invisibility of virtually onboarded new joiners.

In general, we see our study as a valuable starting point for further research and hope that it potentially evokes fruitful discussions about the perception of virtual onboarding and the relevance of networking during organizational socialization. We are especially curious for future research to investigate the phenomenon of perceived invisibility and whether it applies to other organizations and industries.

## 6.4 Practical Implications

We believe that our findings are relevant for practitioners as our insights into the perceptions of virtually onboarded new joiners also offer valuable practical implications for onboardings both in an online and offline setting. As mentioned several times in this paper, it is of fundamental importance for new joiners to become visible to colleagues and managers (e.g., Wolff & Moser, 2009; Forret & Dougherty, 2001; Tonge, 2008), which is severely restricted in a virtual environment. Our findings indicate that even though virtually onboarded new employees showed proactive behaviors, they were often unable to overcome the *perceived invisibility* barrier. This was caused by managers and colleagues’ passive behavior to include new joiners and engage with them in informal conversations. Hence, we urge established hires to become proactive themselves and ‘walk the talk’ to really encourage and nurture new joiners’ initiatives,

essential for their effective socialization. Accordingly, this would possibly prevent further isolation, frustration and dissatisfaction of virtually onboarded new hires.

Moreover, we found that both highly structured formats such as the official onboarding events at Delta and less structured formats that allowed more flexibility, such as the integration into the teams, were not perceived positively in a virtual environment. Our interviewees criticized in both cases the lack of networking and bonding opportunities as the situation was not perceived as natural and the relationships they could build seemed unsustainable and superficial. As a consequence, we argue that organizations should, if possible, remain with non-virtual onboarding components to a certain extent.

Here, especially the social aspects of onboarding initiatives with the purpose to connect employees with each other (Bauer, 2010), serving as a source of informal interaction and fun, should be conducted offline. We acknowledge that our interviewees might have glorified their expectations towards an onboarding on-site but argue that especially the social components are of immeasurable value for both employees and organization. Particularly knowledge-intensive firms such as consultancies that heavily rely on the knowledge network of their employees (Seufert, von Krogh & Bach, 1999; Hislop, Bosua & Helms, 2018) might otherwise miss vital opportunities to nurture the networking behaviors of new joiners. Further, the social components during new employees' organizational socialization in a virtual environment did not enable new joiners to grasp the organization's culture and resulted in a missed feeling of belonging. Here, we advise organizations to conduct presentations about corporate values and culture offline if possible. Moreover, these presentations should be better incorporated into activities as they were not perceived as engaging and appealing to our interviewees.

Nevertheless, apart from the social parts of onboarding, we suggest that the functional parts should remain online in a future after Covid-19, even when on-site onboarding would be possible again. In our study, we found that informational aspects were not restricted by digital formats and could, thus, remain online. For organizations, this is especially beneficial for economic reasons as the conversion of functional parts into virtual formats already demanded considerable resources. We did not find any evidence that a conduction in person would provide a greater value and, therefore, commend organizations for reverting to their digital version of functional onboarding.

In conclusion, we argue for a hybrid version of onboarding in the future. We believe that functional aspects of onboarding should be conducted online to save costs, whereas we urge organizations to offer at least some on-site experiences regarding the social part of onboarding. A hybrid version would, in our opinion, offer a sustainably successful onboarding experience for new joiners who get to build relationships and cultural understanding while becoming visible for organizational insiders, as well as a cost-effective socialization program for employers.

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# Appendix A: Interview Guide – Virtually Onboarded Employees

[Note: Further questions for the re-joiners, who previously experienced an offline onboarding before and then came back in a virtual setting can be found in brackets]

## Introduction

- Thank you
- Recording & Anonymity
- Time frame (30-45 minutes)
- Introduction to the topic and necessary definitions
- General information about the interviewee (Start, position, name, age)

## General onboarding process

1. Tell us about your first weeks/months in your new organization. How do/did you perceive the onboarding process so far?
2. [further questions for re-joiners]
  - a. How did you perceive the offline onboarding process during your internship at Delta?
  - b. How did it differ to the current situation?
3. What do you find challenging during the onboarding process?

## Organizational support

4. Can you come up with examples of how the organization supports you with the socialization process? What efforts have they made? (eg. initiatives) How did you perceive those?
5. Do you have someone in the organization that helps you with the socialization? (eg. a mentor)

## Intensity of interpersonal relationships

6. How would you describe the relationship with your colleagues?
  - a. Do you share informal, personal or non-work-related matters with your colleagues? Do you talk a lot about personal or other non-work-related topics?
  - b. Do you think your relationship would be “better” if you would have started offline?
7. How do you seek help in your virtual team?
  - a. Do you think that you have a barrier due to the digital environment?
  - b. Do you think that it would be easier to ask for and give help in a non-virtual environment?

## Team cohesion

8. How much do you feel like you belong to your team?
9. How much do you feel like you belong to your organization?
10. Do you see the team's/organization's problems as your own?

## **Culture**

11. How do you perceive the culture in a digital setting?
  - a. Do you feel like you are understanding the organization's culture to a full extent in a virtual setting?
12. Based on how you experience the culture, do you feel like you can easily relate to the shared beliefs, norms and values?
  - a. Was it easy for you to internalize and act according to them?
  - b. Are you sharing the company's values?
13. [Further questions for re-joiners]
  - a. Do you feel like your impression of the company's culture changed/is confirmed in a digital setting?
  - b. Do you think that you would have understand the culture equally in a virtual environment?
  - c. Do you feel like you had an advantage due to your offline start when it comes to understanding the corporate culture?
14. Are you talking a lot about your work/organization in your personal life?
  - a. Are you proud when talking about your employer to friends, family etc.?

## **Networking**

15. How do you experience the virtual networking so far?
  - a. What do you do to network virtually?
  - b. What does the organization do to support networking among colleagues?
16. [further questions for re-joiners]
  - a. Is it any different to the networking in person?
  - b. Do you feel like it is easier for you to network because you started offline?
  - c. What do you do to network virtually?
17. Do you think you have any advantages/disadvantages due to the virtual onboarding in regard to networking or your career?

## **Outlook**

18. What do you consider valuable for onboarding processes? How did that work virtually?
19. Do you think there are any advantages to the virtual onboarding?
20. Do you think that onboarding should be conducted offline when possible in the future (if there is no pandemic etc.)?
21. How do you imagine the situation in the office to be once you can go back? How do you think it will feel?

## **Conclusion**

- Any questions? Anything to add?
- Thank you!
- Offer to share our findings

**Probes**

- Could you share an example with us?
- Can you elaborate a bit further....?
- Do you mean that...?
- Do you have other examples showing the same/contrary?

# Appendix B: Interview Guide – Onboarding Managers

## Introduction

- Thank you
- Recording & anonymous
- Time frame (30-45 minutes)
- Onboarding definition (first year)
- General information about the interviewee (Start, position, name, age)

## General onboarding process

1. Please share how the onboarding process at Delta usually looks like?
  - a. What are your own experiences?
2. Can you tell us about the onboarding efforts of the organization/departments/teams?

## First reactions

3. What were your first thoughts/reactions when you heard that onboarding will be conducted virtually for the next time?
4. How do you think the virtual onboarding would go?
5. How do you perceive the reality?

## Organizational support

6. How is the organization supporting new employees who start online with the socialization?
7. Is there anything specifically that you do to help them yourself? Can you come up with examples?
8. Did you hear from managers what worked well?
9. What is the purpose of these efforts?

## Networking

10. How do you perceive the networking attempts of new employees in a virtual setting?
11. How does it differ from the usual offline situation?
12. Do you feel like they are experiencing any disadvantages concerning their future career?
  - a. What could be done against that?
  - b. Is there anything you do to prevent that from happening?

## Outlook

22. Do you think there are any advantages to the virtual onboarding?
23. Do you think that onboarding should be conducted offline when possible in the future (if there is no pandemic etc.)?

**Conclusion**

- Any questions? Anything to add?
- Thank you!
- Offer to share our findings

**Probes**

- Could you share an example with us?
- Can you elaborate a bit further....?
- Do you mean that...?
- Do you have other examples showing the same/contrary?

## Appendix C: Sample Group

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Entry</b>
Anna	Onboarding Manager	June 2018
Stefan	Onboarding Manager	March 2019
Eva	Re-joiner <sup>8</sup>	February 2021
Luisa	Re-joiner	November 2020
Ida	Re-joiner	November 2020
Emil	New Joiner	July 2020
Emma	New Joiner	September 2020
Max	New Joiner	November 2020
Lisa	New Joiner	October 2020
Julia	New Joiner	November 2020
Sofia	New Joiner	November 2020

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<sup>8</sup> Re-joiner: First entry through an internship in the case organization, without proper onboarding before pandemic