

# The Onboarding Journey: From Attracting to Belonging

A Thematic Literature Review Examining the Onboarding Process



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Alice Gunnarsson

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# Abstract

Author: Alice Gunnarsson

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Supervisor: Fredrik Sandberg

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Onboarding is a critical and strategically important process that significantly affects an organization's ability to attract, retain and engage new top talents in today's competitive and rapidly evolving labor market. Despite a vast amount of research emphasizing the importance and benefits from having a structured onboarding process, many organizations continue to rely on outdated strategies and fail to invest in implementing effective onboarding strategies. This thesis aims to identify the core mechanism and patterns that constitute a successful onboarding process according to current research. Through a thematic analysis of contemporary onboarding research this study addresses three questions: Which phases and components constitute a successful onboarding process throughout the first year? What are the key enablers and tools for a successful onboarding process? What roles do key stakeholders play in ensuring a successful onboarding process? Methodologically, the study is based on a literature and thematic analysis of secondary sources, given an already extensive empirical collection of research about onboarding. Theoretically, the thesis draws on organizational socialization theory, social capital and social networks theory and Bauer's six C's framework to analyse and interpret the findings. The results show that recruitment, preboarding, orientation and onboarding programs and the first 3-6 months are crucial phases for reaching a successful onboarding. Key enablers and tools include the thoughtful utilization of technology, the implementation of formal, local and personalized onboarding practices and the alignment of both phases and stakeholder involvement. Stakeholders, and especially HR professionals, managers, a buddy and mentors were found to have great impact on employees and should therefore be actively engaged in the process to utilize a successful onboarding process.

Keywords: *Onboarding, Organizational Socialization, Organizational Newcomers, Human Resources*

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## Introduction & Background

First impressions are as the term suggests, a once in a lifetime opportunity. You do not get any second chances or retakes. For employers that means that the first impression they make can either set the path for a long and successful relationship, or it can lead to the very best candidates withdrawing their interest from the organization. Research shows that new hires resign from their new job prematurely. According to Harpelund (2019), 25% leave their new job within 12 months and 20% of those who do, do so within the first 45 days. In today's competitive and rapidly evolving labour market, onboarding has therefore become one of the most critical processes for an organization, in order to stand out from their competitors (Ford & Bauer, 2024).

Onboarding as a concept, process and practice has exponentially evolved over the past years. Ford and Bauer (2024) argue that the evolution of onboarding is partially the result of new expectations similar to those of a consumer, expecting simplicity, uniqueness and an engaging experience. In the last decade we have also witnessed several external challenges that have affected onboarding. Covid-19 posed significant challenges for onboarding which underscored a need for thought-out remote and digital onboarding processes, and with that came greater insights and new knowledge (Ford & Bauer, 2024). Technology and digital use of tools such as AI has also created a new arena for onboarding. New creative solutions are furthermore expected to add value to the process and increase further during 2025 (Stara, 2024). Beyond technological advancement, global political uncertainty is also reshaping the corporate landscape. With ongoing war, and conflicts under the new U.S administration it is likely that we will soon witness new shifts in business operations. The first quarter of this year has already been turbulent with new challenges and changes in policies, such as reversed DEI<sup>1</sup>- strategies and policies, affecting numerous organizations globally (The White House, 2025).

Furthermore the macro trend in our society has shifted towards a focus on the candidate experience and the market is hypercompetitive (Ford & Bauer, 2024). This has been amplified by the increased transparency on the labour market, through for example salary information

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<sup>1</sup> Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

directives that will apply to all in 2026 (SOU 2024:40). On top of that, today's employees are changing jobs more frequently which means that organizations have to put more emphasis on their branding and attraction strategies to create enthusiasm and excitement from the very first moment. Additionally people are working longer and the number of generations, as well as the diversity on the labour market has increased (Shepard, 2024). These evolving workforce characteristics and external challenges need to be addressed by those who design an organization's onboarding process in order to be better positioned and able to attract, retain and integrate today's new top talent.

New challenges and changes in our society is not something new as social acceleration has been present since the 1800s. However the acceleration is occurring much faster which can make it hard to keep up (Hartmut, 2014). With the diverse organizational contexts and surroundings, the demands of reality have shifted which poses challenges with regard to onboarding talent and how to develop skills and potential abilities for both the individual and the organization (Sennet, 2006). With impactful tactics and onboarding strategies employers will be able to increase employee commitment and retention rates (Ford & Bauer, 2024). This great responsibility often falls in the hands of Human resources (HR). Human resource management sustainability and its indicators have been the topic for several studies, however Petrilli et al. (2022) argues that surprisingly enough, no research has explored human resource management with regards to the onboarding process. HR is a broad profession but amongst all the different fields that HR operates within, such as recruitment, engagement and performance, onboarding appears to be the least developed discipline (Harpelund, 2019).

In a study by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) 76% of the responding HR leaders did not believe that they effectively onboard their new hires (Maurer, 2018). Job dissatisfaction, unsuccessful appointments and poor performance is according to Harpelund (2019) due to onboarding not yet being prioritised. This indicates that onboarding is already perceived as insufficient, and upcoming challenges are likely to exacerbate these weaknesses further unless onboarding is made a priority. Quantifying the economic value of the people in the organization is a complicated task when tight budgets and return of investments have amplified due to financial crisis (Strack et al. 2012) and going into 2025 costs were top of mind among CEO's (BCG, 2025). However, companies who invest in their people enjoy

better profit margins, higher revenue growth and better economic performance. Strack et al. (2012) found that attending to onboarding of new hires is one of six topics that differentiated high performing companies from their less successful peers. Among these factors, onboarding of new hires and retention ranked as the top two, with companies excelling in these areas experiencing 2.5 times higher revenue growth and 1.9 times greater profit margins (Strack et al. 2012).

## Research Issue & Aim

Despite the growing body of research on onboarding that indicates significant benefits for both organizations and employees; organizations continue to face challenges in designing and implementing effective strategies. Many organizations continue to struggle with their onboarding strategies, fail to prioritize them, or rely on outdated onboarding-processes that overwhelm organizational newcomers, resulting in delayed productivity, confusion and frustration (Klein & Polin, 2012; Pittman, 2025). The length, timing and key stakeholders of the onboarding process remain debated and the increasing role of technology and political uncertainty adds further complexity. Given the ongoing challenges and rapid changes in the workplace, there is still a strong need for further research to refine and enhance onboarding practices. Therefore, this study aims to analyse and synthesize existing research, to identify the core mechanism and patterns of what constitutes a successful onboarding process, according to current research. By researching and understanding these areas, through a sociological lens and with a business and human resource management perspective in mind, this study can contribute with evidence-based recommendations for organizations seeking to enhance their onboarding strategies. Based on the aim of the study the following research questions have been developed:

- Which phases and components constitute a successful onboarding process throughout the first year?
  - What are the key enablers and tools for a successful onboarding process?
  - What roles do key stakeholders play in ensuring a successful onboarding process?

## Delimitations

Onboarding is a topic with extensive research that has evolved much in the past decades, or even years. Some delimitations have therefore been made. Organizational socialization can occur numerous times in a person's career, because it occurs whenever a new change of some sort is implemented (Frögeli et al. 2023). In this study the main focus will be on the organizational socialization that occurs when an individual changes jobs from one organization to another, or enters the labor market for the first time. Wanberg (2012) defines these individuals as *organizational newcomers* which is a term that will be frequently used in this thesis. For variation, newcomers and new employees will also be used in the study.

The aim of this study is to identify the core mechanism and patterns of what constitutes a successful onboarding process according to current research. As the focus is on broad, overarching processes rather than individual differences, specific demographic or contextual factors such as age, gender or other organizational settings, have intentionally been excluded. Due to an extensive amount of research on the topic, any articles that are written prior to 2010 have been excluded from the analysis. This cutoff was chosen because onboarding as a concept has evolved extensively during the last decade, particularly in response to changes in workplace structures and expectations. By applying this delimitation the study seeks to ensure that the findings reflect current best practices<sup>2</sup> according to already existing research, rather than outdated approaches. A more detailed justification for this decision is provided later on in the method section.

## Onboarding in Previous Research

### Attempts to Define Onboarding

A review of the onboarding literature reveals that despite it being a widely discussed topic in research and practice, a comprehensive and uniform definition of onboarding does not exist. Depending on the source, onboarding is also referred to as *organizational socialization*,

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<sup>2</sup> a method, approach or technique that has been accepted or generally prescribed as superior to the alternatives due to a proven tendency to produce superior results

*employee introduction* and *orientation*, amongst other terms (Pinco & Crisan 2024; Wanberg 2012.). Bauer (2010, p.1.) defines Onboarding as “ the process of helping new hires adjust to social and performance aspects of their new jobs quickly and smoothly”. Radev (2023) emphasizes that onboarding is a crucial and strategic element for organizations, while for the individual it is a way to establish a basis for their future career and success (Pinco & Crisan 2024). Klein et al. (2015) emphasize that onboarding is about initiatives taken by the organization to facilitate socialization. Onboarding initiatives can be formal which means that there is an explicit plan in place, or they can be informal, lacking an existing plan (Bauer, 2010; Radev, 2023). According to Klein and Polin (2012, p. 268) onboarding refers “ to all formal and informal practices, programs and policies enacted or engaged in by an organization or its agents to facilitate newcomer adjustment”. Furthermore Klein and Polin (2012) also states what the purpose of onboarding is, stating that it both facilitates adjustment by reducing ambiguity, anxiety and uncertainty but also facilitates the development of a social capital. Chillakuri (2020) includes similar elements as previously mentioned researchers, but elaborates on some details defining onboarding as: “a process of introducing new hires into the new job, acquainting them with the organization’s goals, values, rules, responsibilities, procedures, and socializing the new employee into the organizational culture” (p. 1279).

Radev (2023) argues that the onboarding process is no longer merely about introducing and acclimatising the new employee. Going back in history this is where it started: orienting new hires to the organization (Bauer, n.d.). Today onboarding is considered a source to create competitive advantage and it is a far more complex process that involves many different steps and numerous people, departments, managers and leaders (Radev, 2023; Bauer, n.d.; Harpelund, 2019). Despite the evolution from orientation to onboarding, it is not unusual that the terms, onboarding and orientation, are mixed up (SHRM, 2024). Forry (2024) argues that it is crucial to understand the difference between a true role-based onboarding and orientation. While orientation is a basic organizational introduction, including administrative tasks and paperwork, onboarding is a rather advanced journey that evolves over time (SHRM, 2024). Harpelund (2019) makes a similar distinction and argues that orientation can be a part of onboarding but the two concepts are fundamentally different. The first three months of onboarding are centered around learning basic skills, initial team integration and role clarity. The upcoming months up to a year is about gaining deeper knowledge, advancing in skills and capabilities, contributing and establishing a career path (Forry, 2024). Orientation on the

other hand, is according to Klein and Polin (2012) a specific type or set of onboarding programs that occur during a few hours up to several days, typically in a formal format.

Harpelund (2019) emphasizes that onboarding is not just about the activities that organizations build into different orientation and onboarding programs. Rather the fundamental part of onboarding is about creating emotions and a mindset when handling people. Onboarding today includes social, psychological, practical and cultural elements (Pinco & Crisan, 2024). It is about creating a sense of belonging and turning a new hire into an organisational insider (Harpelund, 2019; Frögeli et al. 2023, Bauer et al. 2021; Bauer et al. 2024). Harpelund's (2019) definition of onboarding is broad, as he argues that it is a process that facilitates integration into the organisation, strengthens engagement, retention, innovation and a personal process that sets expectations and creates a direction. Agreeing with several other researchers on the topic (Bauer, 2010; Wanberg 2012; Ford & Bauer, 2024), he argues that it is important to get the new employees working straight away, however as organizations do so, they need to carefully consider how the new employee experiences the methods that are implemented to get them working (Harpelund, 2019).

To get a new employee working, organizational socialization is an element that seems to be included in multiple definitions of onboarding (Harpelund, 2019; Klein & Polin, 2012; Klein 2015; Chillakuri, 2020.) and it will therefore be used as a theoretical framework in this study. Gaining support is an important facilitator to socialization (Wanberg, 2012) and for that reason social capital and social networks theories will also be explained and included as theoretical frameworks. Apart from socialization, Radev (2023) adds that onboarding includes the new employees' acceptance of the company culture, constant feedback of the process and much planning and customization of the plan itself. A successful onboarding has a multifaceted purpose: "It must support and amplify the EVP<sup>3</sup>, simplify the process for recruiters and hiring managers, delight candidates, accelerate productivity of new joiners, and provide a competitive edge" (Ford & Bauer, 2024 p.163). How to achieve this, seems to be the million dollar question. There is no "one size fits all" to copy and paste. Each organization has to tailor the process for it to best suit their company and their new hires specific needs (Radev, 2023).

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<sup>3</sup> EVP is short for Employee Value Proposition which is the organization's way of attracting and retaining talents.

## Why Onboarding Matters

Wanberg (2012) states that his first thoughts, when an organizational newcomer expressed doubts about their choice of taking the job, is that they should “deal with it! Adapt and move on!” (p.4). However, he recognizes that in spite of what people might think, first impressions and socialization do matter for the organizational newcomer (Wanberg, 2012). According to Bauer (2010) the result of a successful onboarding is better retention rates, hence the ultimate failure of onboarding is the loss of a potentially great employee. With a successful onboarding strategy organizations will not have wasted their valuable time, instead they will be getting a new hire that performs sooner, stays in the position longer due to the emotional impact that creates loyalty and a longer-lasting connection (Harpelund, 2019). According to SHRM (2024) research consistently shows a positive correlation between company profitability, customer and quality ratings and turnover rates.

Brandon Hall Group (Forry, 2024), a leading research and development organization, found in their onboarding study that organizations with strong and mature onboarding practices are 103% more likely to see improvements in employee engagement and new hire retention. Doepner-Hove (2012) studied the development of onboarding at a big ten research university and found that prior to their improvement their turnover rate was roughly 15-22% which meant a cost of millions of dollars a year. Higher employee retention also positively impacts the employer brand, as a stable workforce fosters a more cohesive internal environment and enhances the company's reputation amongst outsiders (Harpelund, 2019). Furthermore organizations with mature onboarding are, according to Brandon Hall Group's study, 54% more likely to experience improvements in customer satisfaction (Forry, 2024). For the organizational newcomer, onboarding practices that facilitate socialization have been linked with valuable outcomes such as role clarity, self-confidence, job satisfaction and career effectiveness (Klein & Polin, 2012). For these reasons onboarding is crucial for both employees and organizations and deserves more attention.

## Theoretical & Conceptual Frameworks

To enhance the depth and analytical quality of the study, the following section presents a selection of theories that offers relevant perspectives to onboarding. By drawing on sociological theories and theories that relate to onboarding, it is possible to explore both individual experiences and general organizational structures in the analysis, thereby enriching the understanding of the onboarding process.

### Organizational Socialization Theory

Socialization is fundamental within sociology because we are created and formed within and by the society that we live in. The same could be said about employees and organizations, since no individual leaves a workplace unmarked and no organization exists without people (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Given the amount of time that we spend at work, socialization is also fundamental to onboarding. The process in which a new employee learns to adapt to a new organization's culture and acquire the necessary knowledge, behaviour, attitudes and skills, is defined as organizational socialization (Wanberg, 2012; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Decades of research about organizational socialization has constituted the importance of this crucial and early period as it has an influence on eventual commitment, job satisfaction, cooperation, innovation and the performance of the organization (Wanberg, 2012). Yet in regards to onboarding, Klein et al. (2015) draw the conclusion that relatively few studies have examined what specific practices organizations use to facilitate socialization.

Theoretical researchers define organizational socialization as the process of the new hire beginning to feel like they belong in their new organization (Harpelund, 2019). It is an important process in order to help the new employee to develop the knowledge, attitude and skills that they need to succeed in their new work and role (Tiwari & Sharma, 2024). According to Klein et al. (2015) there are four different aspects of organisational socialization: socialization stages, content, tactics and agents. Socialization agents refers to supervisors, HR representatives and other people that provide resources, information and in other ways assist the new employee in their acculturation (Klein et al. 2015). According to Gruman and Saks (2018) socialization agents do not refer to *who* but to *how much* insiders

have gone out of their way to assist and help the newcomer. Both the identity of key stakeholders (*who*) and the extent of their involvement (*how*) in the onboarding process, will be further examined in relation to the third research question.

Bauer et al. (2024) argues that organizational socialization and how an organizational newcomer adjusts can be grouped into two broad categories. The first one is the actions taken by the organisation, including their members. This part is what Klein and Polin (2012) defines as Onboarding. The second category is the behaviour and characteristics of the newcomer (Bauer et al. 2024). According to Klein and Polin (2012) newcomers differ in their proactivity patterns and how much they take advantage of the organizations onboarding opportunities to facilitate their own adjustment. Because of that, they exclude the newcomer's action in their definition of onboarding, however they do believe that it should be referred to as transition activities, for improved conceptual clarity (Klein & Polin, 2012). Due to the fact that organizations can first and foremost control their own action plans and behaviours and that the desired outcome of this study is to provide evidence-based recommendations for organizations who seek to improve their onboarding strategies; organizational newcomers' proactivity patterns will not be given much attention.

According to Tiwari and Sharma (2024) organizational socialization includes several different tactics. Socialization tactics are strategies that describe how an organizational newcomer is socialized (Klein & Polin, 2012). Bauer et al. (2024) constitutes that the organizational socialization process by definition involves time as a factor. More specifically change over time. There is a descriptive general pattern of socialization in previous research that starts with pre-entry up to 12 months in the organization. Other milestones and stages that are often mentioned in socialization research are 1, 2, 3, 6 and 9 months in (Bauer, et al. 2024). Understanding and researching the change in itself over time, is an advancement in organizational socialization literature (Bauer et al. 2024). In sociological theory socialization is furthermore linked to culture and the transferring of cultural values are often part of the definition itself (Tiwari & Sharma, 2024; Wanberg, 2012; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). According to Bradt (2012) socialization is about adjusting to the culture, which is the way you operate, the specific combination of values, attitudes, relationships and work environments.

## The Interplay Between Onboarding & Organizational Socialization

When reading about the definitions of onboarding, taking into consideration what it means and does and the definition of organizational socialization it is not surprising that they are often mixed up or described as the same process. However, Klein and Polin (2012) argued that the emerging view is that the two terms should be differentiated and not used interchangeably. Organizational socialization is a broader phenomenon than onboarding. In fact onboarding could be a part of organizational socialization, but organizational socialization will occur with or without onboarding, as it occurs within the newcomer (Wanberg, 2012). Onboarding could be viewed as a process that could assist organizational socialization, but it could also fail to influence or assist the process. As opposed to socialization tactics, onboarding practices are more specific and describe exactly what is done (Klein & Polin, 2012). However, onboarding practices can be delivered and structured with a variety of socialization tactics. Organizational socialization encompasses learning, information seeking and other processes for adaptation while onboarding is more focused on the specific tactics that the organization is facilitating to get the newcomer going in its new work role (Klein & Polin, 2012). Socialization is furthermore an ongoing and lifelong process while onboarding refers to a limited period of time, although the exact timeframe can vary (Klein & Polin, 2012). In spite of these differences, some still imply that onboarding is the term that HR and managers use when they in fact talk about socialization (Klein & Polin, 2012). Regardless of how you define or differentiate the two concepts, onboarding is a part of organizational socialization and because organizational socialization is also included in several definitions of onboarding it is relevant to include in this study.

## Social Capital & Social Networks

Early career success has for decades been attributed to human capital: employees' knowledge, competencies, skills, previous experience and values (Zehner & Pryor, 2025). Human capital, as the primary determinant of employees ability to contribute to the organization, has emphasized the importance of achieving quick wins, credibility and a personal value in the first 90 days in a new organization (Cullen-Lester & Pryor, 2025). However, Zehner and

Pryor (2025) argue that there has been a shift that amplifies employees' social capital and social networks for early career success. Social capital is centered around social relations and the general idea is that the more social capital one has, the more help one will get in reaching their goals in all aspects of their life (Volker, 2020). According to Cullen-Lester and Pryor (2025) a social capital lens is no longer just a bonus to include, rather its imperative to enable organizational well-being and performance. The use of social capital theory has been wide since the 1990's but it has evolved much during the last decade and been used especially by sociologists who conduct a more instrumental approach to social networks (Volker, 2020). Due to this fact a relational perspective to social networks is also included.

Social networks are important to both employees and employers. According to Aggrawal and Anand (2022) “a social network is a social structure made up of a set of social actors (such as individuals or organizations) and a set of the dyadic ties between these actors” (p.1). Personal interaction is increasingly becoming a thing of the past, as an increased amount of social network platforms like Linkedin and Teams offer possibilities for spreading information globally in just a few seconds (Aggrawal & Anand, 2022). From an organizational perspective, social networks are especially relevant and most developed in the areas recruitment, socialization and onboarding (Downes, 2025). Despite this, Cullen-Lester and Pryor (2025) contend that organizations and HR-departments have yet to fully integrate this understanding into practice.

In light of several emerging labor market trends, relying solely on human capital is no longer sufficient (Zehner & Pryor, 2025). Both perspectives are valuable and together offer a comprehensive understanding of workplace phenomena; however our current and future labour market emphasize the growing importance of social capital within organizations (Cullen-Lester & Pryor, 2025). Downes (2025) argues that a network perspective on HR research and practices offer a different way of thinking about organizational phenomena and that managers with this mindset will benefit more than those who see employees as merely individuals. The ones who do focus on the individual in isolation will simply fail to see the entire picture (Cullen-Lester & Pryor, 2025). When studying onboarding, social networks and social capital theories is therefore important to keep in mind and have been included in this study to enable a fuller analysis.

## The Four, Five & Six C's of Onboarding

The four C's of onboarding is a concept developed by Dr. Tayla Bauer, a teacher and researcher within fields such as onboarding, recruitment and selection. She conceptualizes onboarding as occurring across three levels that are differentiated by the extent to which organizations implement the four C's: Compliance, Clarification, Culture and Connection into their onboarding strategy. Before going into the different levels, the four C's need to be defined. The first C, *Compliance*, includes legal and policy-related regulations and rules that the employee needs to know about (Bauer, 2010). The second C, *Clarification* refers to the importance of making sure that the new employee understands their new job role and related expectations. It includes basic day to day activities such as booking meeting rooms and locating the printer. However the demanding business climate also increases the importance of timelines, milestones and using a framework to check up on the employees progress in order to ensure role clarity (Ford & Bauer, 2024). The third C, *Culture*, is a much broader category in which the employee needs help in navigating the organizational formal and informal norms (Bauer, 2010). *Connection* is the fourth C and refers to interpersonal relationships and networks that are vital for the employee to establish (Bauer, 2010).

When an organization typically covers legal and policy requirements (Compliance), and may offer some limited role clarification but neglect the cultural and relational aspects of onboarding (Culture and Connection) they have a *Passive onboarding*. Passive onboarding is the first level and is typically characterized by a basic, checklist-driven approach. Notably 30 % of all organizations, regardless of size, operate at this level, without anyone to coordinate the efforts to maximize onboarding success (Bauer, 2010). The second level is called *High potential onboarding*, and at this Level all C's are in place. Compliance and Clarification are well addressed, while Culture and Connection are present, but inconsistently applied. Although the high potential onboarding is more advanced and partially developed, 50% of the organizations at this stage lack a structured, organization-wide onboarding strategy. When an organization has addressed all four C's and has a systematic organized onboarding, based on a human resource management approach, they have reached *Proactive onboarding*. Proactive onboarding is the third and most desired level (Bauer, 2010). At this level, onboarding is not

only formalized but also aligned with the organization's long-term goals. Few organizations reach this level. More specifically, only about 20% reach a proactive onboarding (Bauer, 2010), which demonstrates that a proactive and research-informed commitment to onboarding is a key HR practice.

The four C's model evolved into the five C's with the addition of *Confidence* (Bauer, n.d.; Ford & Bauer, 2024). *Confidence* refers to the new employee's self efficacy, belief that they can succeed in their new role and take on the challenges ahead. This addition recognises that onboarding should not only inform but also empower an organizational newcomer. With the addition of Confidence the model suggests that a successful onboarding is not only structured and social but also psychological in its nature. More recently the five C's model has evolved once again, and it is now the six C's model with the addition of *Checkbacks* (Bauer, n.d.). This latest addition is about the invaluable feedback in the onboarding process. Without feedback from the new hires it is difficult to know if the onboarding is achieving its purpose. To conclude the model, Bauer (n.d.) argues that the higher up an organization's onboarding is on the scale from the most basic C: compliance to the newest addition: Checkbacks, the more effective the onboarding can become. Given that the model provides a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of an onboarding process it has been included in this study as an analytical framework to be able to compare the model with the empirical material of this study.

In summary, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks included in this study have been carefully selected to align with this study's overall aim and research questions. Organizational socialization theory offers a foundational understanding of how newcomers adapt to a workplace. Social capital and social network theories provide insight into the relational dimensions of onboarding, particularly the significance of interpersonal connections and stakeholder involvement. Finally Bauer's now, six C's framework serves as a structured practice-oriented model that supports the analysis of onboarding and provides insights into how to achieve a successful onboarding process. Collectively, these frameworks offer a sociological and practice-oriented lens and support a multidimensional and sociological understanding of the onboarding process. All theories are therefore a prerequisite for understanding and for the ability to implement a successful onboarding process. With the

theoretical foundation established, the following chapter outlines the methodological approach used to analyse and synthesize existing research of the onboarding process.

## Method

This study aims to identify core mechanisms and patterns of what constitutes a successful onboarding process according to current research. To achieve this, a literature review and thematic analysis was chosen as a suitable method. Similar to onboarding itself, thematic analysis has been defined in a number of ways and whether it is a method in itself or a tool for several different qualitative approaches has been debated (Willig et al. 2017). The following section outlines how the literature review and thematic analysis has been applied in this study, as a method to synthesize the core mechanisms and patterns of a successful onboarding process according to already existing onboarding research.

### Literature Review & Thematic Analysis

A literature review and thematic analysis was selected as the methodological approach for this study due to the extensive body of research that already exists on onboarding. Rather than conducting new empirical research, this study seeks to provide a synthesized and theoretically grounded overview of current findings, identifying core mechanisms and recurring patterns across studies. This means that this study is a secondary analysis of data, which is a method that has increased in current years (Bryman, 2018). Onboarding is a phenomenon that must evolve and adapt at least as fast as new trends and challenges in our labour market, which means that there is a continuous need for updated perspectives and new understandings. New perspectives and understandings is according to Bryman (2018) in line with why it can be beneficial to conduct a secondary data analysis. The study has included both qualitative and quantitative data. A thematic analysis was a suitable choice because of the specific interest in onboarding. Furthermore a thematic analysis allows for a flexible process and more theoretical freedom without losing the possibility of generating a rich, detailed and complex account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method is therefore particularly well-suited for the desired hope to contribute to the existing collective research knowledge of onboarding

while generating practical recommendations for organizations who seek to improve their onboarding processes. To ensure coherence and analytic rigour, the process was iterative, with continuous reflection, refinements and revision along the way, as advised by Willig et al. (2017).

## Data Collection & Selection

My interest in the onboarding topic was sparked during a previous internship, where I was tasked with creating onboarding manuals for managers and new employees. This practical experience led me to explore existing research on onboarding and ultimately it was during this experience that the research issue was identified and the shape and idea of the purpose and the research questions was initiated. When I began engaging with the literature for this study, it was with curiosity and an idea of the research questions in mind which led me to research onboarding with a broad perspective and a new set of eyes. The research questions, or rather an idea of what they could look like, together with the delimitations guided the selection of articles. When searching for articles Lunds university's own database, Lubsearch, has been frequently used, along with other entrusted databases such as Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar. To find relevant articles, search terms included: onboarding, organizational newcomers, employee introduction, orientation and organizational socialization. Boolean operators and truncations were also applied to be able to capture a wider range of studies; for example (“onboarding” OR "organizational newcomers”) AND “socialization”, as well as the truncation onboard\* to ensure that different variations of the word were included. The specific terms were chosen as suitable search terms due to their recurrence in the literature when researching onboarding. In some cases articles were selected from the reference lists of already identified articles. Their titles and publication year stood out as being interesting for this study and the previously mentioned databases were therefore used to locate the articles in order to decide if they were relevant or not.

To ensure the relevance and applicability of the literature that has been reviewed, articles published from 2010 and onwards were included in this study. The decision to exclude articles published prior to 2010 in the analysis was made early on and based on several considerations. Firstly, more recent studies tend to incorporate updated theoretical

frameworks and methodologies that better capture the complexities of modern onboarding processes. Focusing on literature from the last decade will also ensure a high level of relevance and practical applicability. Secondly, onboarding has evolved significantly in the past decade, influenced by major shifts in the workplace such as increased digitalization, new work models and changing employee expectations. Research that was published after 2010 is more likely to reflect these contemporary developments and provide insights that will align with current organizational practices. Lastly, this time frame helps to avoid outdated assumptions and allows for a clear focus on trends and findings that are most prevalent in today's work environment. While articles from 2010 are still 15 years old, many remain highly relevant to the topic as they address fundamental aspects of onboarding that persist over time. Despite the chosen cutoff year, each article has been selected with careful consideration, with strong emphasis on finding the most recent and applicable sources.

In addition to the exclusion criteria for articles written prior to 2010, the relevance of different articles was assessed through reading the abstract, reviewing the keywords, and briefly skimming through the content. Articles focusing on narrowly defined populations or highly specific types of onboarding were excluded, as they did not align with the broader scope of the study. At one stage, narrowing the scope was considered, as this would have facilitated the selection process. Given that the final selection did not follow any other strict inclusion criteria, beyond the 2010 cutoff year, the choice of articles was partly influenced by my own subjective judgement at the time. However, narrowing down the scope further would have limited the generalizability of the findings.

In addition to academic and peer-reviewed literature a limited number of web-based sources have also been included. The rationale for this decision aligns with the reasoning behind the exclusion of articles published prior to 2010: some recent developments in onboarding may not yet be reflected in academic publications due to the lengthy review and publication process. Including high quality web-based sources can therefore provide more up-to-date insights. Furthermore they can contribute with a different perspective to the analysis as they often reflect the experiences and viewpoints of practitioners rather than academic researchers. According to Paez (2017) the inclusion of different types of sources may enrich the findings of a review. To ensure credibility of these sources, all selected websites were critically

evaluated. In cases where specific authors were named their background and qualifications were also reviewed to assess the reliability and trustworthiness of the content.

Only well-established and recognised organizations such as for example SHRM and the Brandon Hall group, have been included. While SHRM is a non profit organization governed by volunteer distinguished HR academic and practice leaders (Bauer, 2010), it is important to note that the Brandon Hall Group, though it is a well established and recognized research and advisory organization, is a for-profit company (Brandon Hall Group, n.d.). This means that their research, while grounded in industry practice, may be influenced by commercial interests or client demands. However, their wide recognition and practical relevance justify their inclusion, provided that they are balanced with several peer-reviewed and academic literature.

## Familiarization & Initial Coding

The first step of a thematic analysis is to familiarize with the literature to better understand the depth and breadth of the field (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the familiarization step the selected articles were read and re-read to enable a deeper and more nuanced engagement with the data, as recommended by Willig et al. (2017). As part of this process, key passages were highlighted using color coding to support later identification of codes and emerging themes. Segments that were relevant to the study's overall aim were marked in blue, while specific examples of how organizations work with onboarding were highlighted with green. Recurring themes or information that stood out as a significant term were marked with pink. When something interesting or important was mentioned around the study's methodological approach or method itself it was marked with yellow. The specific colours were randomly selected and did not have any other meaning than categorising different information into groups for later stages of analysis.

## Generating Codes & Identifying Themes

To navigate and sort out the components of onboarding, the website Mural, an online visual collaboration tool, was used to create mind maps based on the color-coded data. The decision to create mind maps was based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestions to use it as a tool to help with the process of sorting codes into themes by making it visual. This was the initial and informal first step of identifying codes and constructing themes. According to Willig et al. (2017) coding is a way of organising the data into patterns but also a way of reducing the data. In order to accomplish this, two mind maps were created. The first mind map was created to map important processes that are included in onboarding such as recruitment, preboarding and orientation and/or topics that recurred in the literature. From this mind map relationships between the codes became evident. Three overarching themes were identified: Different onboarding phases, onboarding enablers and tools, and key stakeholders in the onboarding process. Based on this the research questions were revised and the second mind map initiated. The second mind map was created based on the research questions where each question had its own mind map. Some codes from the first mind map were further developed into sub-themes while others were set aside. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance, themes were not immediately discarded, as their relevance could become clearer in later stages. The original mind map was therefore kept to preserve potentially valuable data. Once the themes had been reviewed and refined, the themes that contained important data in relation to this study's research questions were finalised, named and the remaining step was to begin to produce the report.

## Ethical Considerations & Methodological Reflections

Given that a literature and thematic analysis of secondary data was selected as the method for this study, the analysis and results are based on the interpretation and results of previous empirical researchers and practitioners as well as myself. Recognizing the subjective and interpretive nature of this approach, it requires a self-critical and transparent stance. To ensure a structured and rigorous analysis Willig et al.'s (2017) framework for thematic analyses with six different steps: 1. Familiarising with the data, 2. Generating codes, 3. Constructing themes, 4. Reviewing potential themes, 5. Defining and naming themes, 6. Producing the report, has guided the process. The selection of articles has furthermore been shaped by the

academic resources and databases available for me as a student at Lunds University. While these resources are extensive, certain limitations such as access restrictions may have influenced the scope of the reviewed data.

Although this study did not include any informants or the handling of sensitive data, ethical considerations and reflections remain essential (Swedish Research Council, 2017). As Willig (2013) notes, interpretation is central to qualitative analysis because it is how one makes sense of the collected data and with that comes ethical challenges. This study includes multiple layers of interpretation, including my own, the interpretation of the original researcher and those of the informants in the reviewed data. No data can speak for itself, thereby the interpretations reflect the stance of the individuals included in the process (Stake, 2010). To address these challenges the research process has emphasized ongoing reflexivity and transparency throughout the process. Methodological decisions have been carefully considered, justified and documented. By addressing these ethical issues with reflexive awareness researcher subjectivity can be viewed as a strength and not as a bias or limitation (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

## Analysis

The analysis is structured in three parts, presenting the identified themes. First, it follows a chronological approach to outline phases and components of the onboarding process as outlined in previous research, highlighting core mechanisms and key stages. Second, the analysis turns to examine essential enablers and tools that influence onboarding outcomes, such as technology, formal onboarding practices and multilevel onboarding activities. Lastly the analysis shifts focus to social relations and the key stakeholders such as managers and HR and their roles in ensuring a successful onboarding process. This structure allows for both a phase-oriented and thematic understanding of the onboarding process.

The length and depth of the analytical sections may vary depending on the prominence of each theme in the reviewed literature. For instance the section on technology is more extensive, as digital tools and the utilization of technology in onboarding practices have

emerged as a notable trend in the onboarding research. This thematic emphasis reflects both the growing importance of technology in organizational settings and its frequent appearance in current studies. The somewhat uneven distribution content across themes is therefore a deliberate choice based on the relative significance and recurrence of topics in the sourced data.

## The Onboarding Process from Start to Finish

### Recruitment

The very first step of onboarding is the recruitment and selection process (Bauer, 2010). Organizations make big investments to be able to attract today's top talent but fail to realise that this investment might be for nothing, if the same effort does not go into the onboarding process (Harpelund, 2019). Recruitment should not be viewed as a separate function but rather as an indication of when the onboarding process begins (Bauer, 2010). Furthermore, recruitment is the first phase in which the employee receives information about the job (Klein & Polin, 2012). This indicates that recruitment is an important step for clarification which in turn is an important step to ensure an effective onboarding process in accordance with the six C's of onboarding (Bauer, n.d.).

Harpelund (2019) predicts that onboarding will become as important as recruitment, which is a well developed discipline within HR that has gotten the top management's attention for a long time. What organizations need to realise is that onboarding does affect the recruitment process since an unfulfilled onboarding process and the loss of new hires restarts the recruitment process (Harpelund, 2019). Put in other words, onboarding is an opportunity to ensure return of investments if carried out efficiently and successfully (Bauer et al. 2021). The handoff between the recruitment and the onboarding process should be a smooth one as this initial step lays the foundation for the rest of the onboarding process (Ford & Bauer, 2024). After the new hire has signed the contract, the relationship is officially sealed and the organization has the opportunity to start preparing and building a connection in the next phase: preboarding (Ford & Bauer, 2024; Harpelund, 2019). While recruitment is a smaller part of the process it is a highly important one, given that the recruitment secures the talent

but also makes way for preboarding to begin the work of retaining it; and one affects the other.

## Preboarding

The period of time that passes by from the moment that a new hire signs their contract with their new employer until their first day at the job, is defined as preboarding (Radev, 2023). In a study conducted by SHRM (Mauer, 2018) a respondent argued that there is a risk of disengagement before a new hire starts their new position if you leave them in radio silence after they have signed their offer until they have their first day. Lack of contact can be interpreted in a number of ways and by leaving the newcomer in silence you also leave the interpretation of what it means up to them (Harpelund, 2019). The consequences of not communicating with your new hire during this timeframe is that they feel less confident about making the right choice when accepting the job and the risk of them going to a competitor increases (Ford & Bauer 2024; Mauer, 2018). Lack of contact with the new employee in this initial phase may also give them the impression that the organization is overly stressed or disorganized, or worse, that the newcomer is not valued within the organization (Harpelund, 2019). Because of these risks communication is key and the preboarding should start as soon as the offer has been accepted to ensure a clear message and good employer brand (Mauer, 2018). Communicating with the organizational newcomer in this phase could be done by a simple phone call or by sending a welcoming message (Klein & Polin, 2012). Except for communication, proactive planning and preparing to make sure that the workplace is ready is also an important part of the preboarding phase.

Bauer et al. (2017) interviewed managers at Twitter who stated that they start to outline and plan the onboarding steps and interactions long before the new hires first day to ensure that they welcome the person successfully. Harpelund (2019) highlights a company where the new hires complete 25 hours of training before their first day. Even though the employees needed to allocate their freetime to training, the satisfaction rates were sky high and the completion rates 100% (Harpelund, 2019). This suggests that providing training before the first day could be a good preboarding method. Facebook is another example of an organization that has utilized a preboarding plan by making sure that their systems and other devices needed, have

been set up prior to the new employees arrival (SHRM, 2024). Their goal is that the new hire will need no more than 45 minutes before getting to work on their first day. If this is not achieved they consider it a failure on their part (SHRM, 2024).

Having the workplace ready for an organizational newcomer has been proven to be very beneficial for the new employee (Klein et al. 2010). Setting up the workplace can include creation of accounts, enrollment of equipment and ordering a computer, depending on the nature of the specific role (Radev, 2023). According to Bauer et al. (2021) availability of resources on the first day matters, and is generally related to the newcomer's early adjustment, especially in terms of task mastery and role clarity. Furthermore different resources matter and they can carry different meanings. Baur et al. (2021) gives the examples of having the workstation set up upon arrival and argues that the benefits are twofold. Firstly, providing material helps newcomers adjust to their tasks more easily, enabling them to start working right away. Secondly, receiving materials on the first day carries a symbolic value, signaling that the organization values the new employees feelings and sense of belonging (Bauer et al. 2021). Harpelund (2019) argues that being ready for the organizational newcomer is a sign of effective onboarding as making the new employee feel welcome is crucial. This can only be done if the company has a well structured preboarding plan that is set in action as soon as the contract is signed. By having a preboarding plan one can also make sure that the organizational newcomer is prepared for the first day, through including information about the initial period in the welcoming message (Radev, 2023). This suggests that preboarding is also an important step to ensure clarification. However, Bradt et al (2021) argue that even though material resources can facilitate early adjustment and growth, their results also indicate that those who are not provided these materials overcome the faults in this process in the long run. Suggesting that this step is not critical but rather ensures that the organizational newcomer is off to a good start (Bradt et al. 2021).

## Orientation & Onboarding Programs

After the preboarding when the organizational newcomer finally has its first day, research indicates that an orientation and onboarding program should be initiated. New employee orientation is commonly included as a part of the onboarding process, and approximately 93%

of all organizations use some kind of orientation (Bauer, 2010; SHRM, 2024). These orientations typically cover administrative compliance parts such as paperwork, mandatory training and reviewing policies (SHRM, 2024). It also consists of practical elements such as introducing the employee to the work environment, colleagues and other parts of the organization (Pinco & Crisan 2024). As previously mentioned orientation is according to Klein and Polin (2012) a specific type or set of onboarding programs. It is a well established fact that new hires who have taken part in an onboarding programme, stay in the organizations longer than those who have not (Harpelund, 2019), which makes it a crucial step in the onboarding process. Klein and Polin (2012) argue that little empirical research has studied the optimal onboarding and or orientation program in regards to content, timing and structure. And maybe the simple answer is that it depends on the company. However empirical research gives certain indications of what needs to be taken into consideration.

According to Maurer (2018) longer onboarding programs have results such as better business outcomes, employer reputation and stronger talent. Yet, only 6 % have an onboarding program for longer than six months (Klein and Polin 2012). Klein et al. (2015) argues that even though the practitioner and academic perspectives seem to highlight a duration over several months their results indicate that this is not the case in practice. They found that most of the onboarding practices that they researched are provided during the very first day (Klein et al. 2015). Klein and Polin (2012) studied the optimal timing of onboarding practices and their result indicated that the most common duration was two-three days (20%), 90 days (19%) or one day or less (17%). In a survey sent out to 350 HR professionals in the U.S. 24% responded that they did not have any type of onboarding program (Maurer, 2018). This indicates that the length of onboarding programs, or even the implementation of such programs, vary quite substantially. Furthermore this could indicate that the previously mentioned distinction between orientation and onboarding might not be as distinct in practice, as researchers indicate that it should be (Forry, 2024; Harpelund, 2019; Klein & Polin, 2012). Several organizations seem to use the term onboarding programs even if the duration is just a few days or a couple of hours which suggests that it is an orientation. While this might not be wrong, as orientation could be seen as an initial set of activities in an onboarding program (Klein & Polin, 2012), it becomes problematic if the whole onboarding program just consists of a simpler orientation. Those who argue that an onboarding program should be several months might equate the program with the advanced process, while those who have shorter

orientations might equate onboarding programs with an initial orientation. Regardless of what you equate a program with, simply providing an onboarding program without having a well thought plan or design does not automatically yield benefits, rather it can have negative reactions (Klein & Polin, 2012).

Harpelund (2019) gives an example of a global organisation that introduced over 4000 new hires annually, where the initial orientation consisted of several long meetings. The same company found out that the organizational newcomers had a hard time remembering what was said from the meetings and the value was limited. The organization then created a new onboarding design that reduced meeting time by 25 hours per employee which resulted in existing employees finding it easier to engage in the onboarding of their new colleague and it meant great cost-savings (Harpelund, 2019). This story is a good example of the fact that arranging activities just because, without stating the actual purpose and benefits can cause more harm than good. Their approach reminds of a passive onboarding, driven by checklists (Baurer, 2010) and a mentality that onboarding is something to execute and be done with (Harpelund, 2019). This is not the optimal way to go (Bauer, 2024). The outlined story also highlights the importance of check-backs in accordance with the six C's of onboarding (Bauer, n.d.) since regular evaluations is how one detects these issues. To structure effective onboarding programs they need to be delivered in a timely manner, delivered in a sufficient way and include relevant topics (Bauer, 2010).

According to Chillakuri (2020) the first step in designing a well-structured onboarding program is to understand the new employees' attitudes, behaviours, values and thinking. Furthermore an onboarding program should reflect as well as reinforce the organization's culture (Klein & Polin, 2012). In fact, onboarding is a process in which the culture is formed, changed and maintained and it offers a timely moment to teach new hires what matters. It is also a time in which the organization shapes the organizational newcomers behaviors through rules and procedures (Harpelund, 2019). Reflecting the culture can be done through for example telling success stories as well as stories of how the organization was founded, vision, norms and goals for the future (Klein & Polin, 2012; Bauer, n.d.). It is important that onboarding is managed to meet the cultural needs and represents the organization in the best way in order to retain and avoid new hire attrition (Morris, 2024), which can be done through

activities and structured programs. This finding is in line with the six C's of onboarding that includes culture as one of the C's that needs to be in place in order to reach an effective onboarding (Bauer, 2010). Furthermore the focus should not be on bragging about the company, rather the program should emphasize the critical role that the new employee plays to ensure a continuous success path (Harpelund, 2019). By focusing on the new employee's role rather than the company's accomplishments so far, the organizational newcomer can find meaning and experience a higher purpose of the job that they are going to do which means that the organization fulfills a basic, psychological human need (Harpelund, 2019).

### The First 3-6 Months of Onboarding

The first three to six months are the most critical for a new hire. According to Bauer et al. (2017) a new employee is more susceptible to turnover during the first three months. Conventional wisdom and research both imply that a new employee has 90 days to prove themselves in their new role (Bauer, 2010). 80% of all new hires make the decision to stay or leave the organization during this timeframe, and the average number for those who do leave during the first three months is 17% (Bauer et al. 2017; Ford & Bauer, 2024). Harpelund (2019) created a global onboarding index and found that new hires are in general excited and positive about starting a new job. However, this energy starts to decrease during the first three months as the new hire unveils the complexity of their new role. Harpelund (2019) defines this pattern as *the honeymoon effect* and states that this knowledge tells an organization when it is crucial to support or change focus of the onboarding activities.

If we fast forward to the first six months the Brandon Hall Group (Forry, 2024) found that 50% of all new hires who left voluntarily did so during this window of time. According to Harpelund (2019) six months is the average time it takes for a new hire to start adding value to the organization. Hence an organization can expect to receive its return of investment after the first six months. This indicates that these initial months in the company is crucial for the onboarding being worth the resources and time that it requires. It also indicates that key stages of onboarding aligns with key stages for organizational socialization (Bauer et al. 2024) and that it is extra important to include socialization tactics and agents in these phases, in order to

retain the organizational newcomer. How to best support the organizational newcomer is addressed later on in the analysis. However the onboarding process does not end here.

## When Does Onboarding End?

It has previously been mentioned that the length and time dedicated to onboarding varies quite substantially (Klein & Polin, 2012). Given that previous research indicated different time frames depending on which perspective one has in mind it is hard to say when the onboarding process has come to an end. If one is talking about the orientation or onboarding program the answer might be that it ends during the first few days or initial weeks (Klein et al. 2015). If you define onboarding according to a checklist then one might say that the onboarding is done when every box is ticked. When socialization is included as part of the process and definition of a successful onboarding it extends the process (Bauer, 2010). Klein and Polin (2012) argue that an effective onboarding should extend to at least a year. Given that socialization is connected to emotions such as feeling like you belong in your team and/or organization, it indicates that it is an ongoing process without a specific end-date (Harpelund, 2019). As previously mentioned, organizational socialization is a life-long process while onboarding is concluded once the organizational newcomer feels like they belong (Harpelund, 2019; Frögeli et al. 2023, Bauer et al. 2021; Bauer et al. 2024). It is hard to tell exactly when an organizational newcomer feels confident in their new job role and feels like they belong in the organization. Hence this exact timeframe for when this happens can not be defined in terms of generic patterns, and surely it varies from different individuals. However, with a structured and satisfactory onboarding process that helps the individual acquire these feelings one can reach the goal sooner (Harpelund, 2019). With the help of check-backs as emphasized in Bauer's six C's framework, it might also be possible to get some indications of when these feelings might have appeared.

To summarise, this section of the analysis has outlined the identified themes of which phases and components constitute a successful onboarding process according to current research, presented in a chronological order starting with: recruitment. The second step is preboarding in which communication, proactive planning and installation is crucial. Following the preboarding is an orientation and/or onboarding program. The next crucial step spans over the

initial 3-6 months in the company and lastly the end state of the onboarding process which is hard to define. In the next section the identified enablers and tools that support a successful onboarding process, as outlined in current research, will be presented.

## Onboarding Enablers & Tools

### Delivering on Promises: Alignment of Recruitment, Preboarding & Orientation

A critical enabler of successful onboarding is the alignment of the initial onboarding stages: recruitment, preboarding and orientation. Preboarding and orientation are the new employee's first indication of how well the company meets the expectations that were set during the interview and recruitment process (Harpelund, 2019). Until the contract is signed, the relationship is built on the employee value proposition, consisting of praise and promises, but once the deal is sealed it is time to turn words into actions (SHRM, 2024). Chillakuri (2020) found in his study that Generation Z, are not likely to do a job that they were not hired for. Instead, they tend to leave the organization during the first couple of months if the work did not align with what they expected (Chillkuri, 2020). According to Harpelund (2019) more than half of newly hired people regret their decision, and six out of 10 feel that they have been misled as the job did not live up to their expectations. Morris (2024) suggests that by transferring data that was obtained during the hiring process into learnings, one can accelerate onboarding, increase retention rates and reduce time to proficiency. These findings highlight the importance of consistency between what has been promised in the recruitment process and the rest of the onboarding experience. Showing that you live up to what you promised is crucial for an honest and good first impression (Klein & Polin, 2012).

However, Harpelund (2019) argues that this might be a double-edged sword, as organizations may be reluctant to disclose aspects of the workplace that are not functioning as desired during the recruitment process. While choosing not to disclose every detail may help to attract candidates, it can have adverse consequences if newcomers later on, uncover the realities and choose to leave as a result. Who chooses to leave may depend on generational traits or personality differences and some newcomers may choose to persevere despite unmet expectations (Harpelund, 2019). However, organizations can not predict this with certainty.

For this reason it should be a more sustainable and strategic investment for organizations to prioritize transparency during the recruitment process and ensure that communicated expectations are aligned with the subsequent stages of recruitment, preboarding and the rest of the onboarding activities. If organizations struggle to present a realistic portrayal of the work environment, it may signal deeper internal issues that need attention. The simple fact is that you will be able to employ desired candidates if you have an attractive employer brand (Harpelund, 2019) and research indicates that you will be better positioned to retain them if you live up to expectations which can be done by aligning different processes.

## Technology & AI

A tool and enabler for onboarding that is much recurring in the onboarding literature is the use of digital technology and AI. According to Pittman (2025) organizations need to embrace the power that technology brings and utilize it to automate tasks, simplify and streamline workflows in the onboarding process. Organizations that use technology as means to improve efficiency can expect great advantages (Ford & Bauer, 2024). By automating the process HR-practitioners will have more time to allocate to the most important parts of onboarding and human errors can be avoided (Radev, 2023). The utilization of digital technology in the onboarding process is something that was forced upon many organizations due to Covid-19, which amplified the need for a thought out remote onboarding program (Ford & Bauer, 2024). According to Bradt (2012) technology is something that can be used as a tool to help the socialization process, but should not be used as a tool to lead it. In the following paragraphs different ways of utilizing technology in onboarding will be presented. Given that the use of technology is an apparent and clear trend in more recent studies, this section has deliberately been given more room in this essay to mirror the significance and recurrence in the onboarding literature.

### Automating Task with Technology

A growing body of research indicates that many aspects of the onboarding process could be completed before the first day, with the help of technology (Pittman, 2025; Bauer 2024; Temsirimongkol et al. 2024). This early engagement can help organizational newcomers feel

welcomed and partially acclimated to the organization prior to their physical arrival (Klein & Polin, 2012). Pittman (2025) suggests that organizations should consider using digital technology to create an onboarding platform, integrating HR systems, that automates key tasks such as welcoming messages, assigning personalized training and tracking onboarding progress. Similarly Ford and Bauer (2024) argue that a pre-entry portal would allow for new employees to sign paper-work, connect with other newcomers and receive company information before their first day. An organizational newcomer typically has frequent questions but the hiring manager is not always available to answer questions (Bauer, n.d.). This could be yet another reason to invest in an onboarding tool because the use of software could help with clarification, compliance parts and connection which increases the employee satisfaction (Bauer, n.d.). Technology could, if used as a tool that streamlines and automates processes, also help to improve a seamless transition from the recruitment to the first day (Morris, 2024). Bauer (n.d.) argues that today's HR software and technology is a great opportunity to streamline and automate onboarding processes, such as paperwork or sending out an onboarding handbook, and that there are zero reasons not to. According to the Brandon Hall Group's research (Forry, 2024) organizations that utilize technology in their onboarding process are 33 % more likely to experience improvements in organizational newcomers' time to proficiency. From a business perspective this should be incentives enough to implement technology in the process.

Morris (2024) presents that a potential use for AI in recruitment could be to auto-populate onboarding plans. He even suggests that a generative AI, such as ChatGPT could be used for “Just-in-time” onboarding, and argues that it could improve performance and time to proficiency greatly. However Morris (2024) admits that there is a risk that the generative AI answers with untrue assertions and is unsuitable to analyze large amounts of data as of right now. According to ChatGPT (OpenAI 27/3, 2025) itself the benefits of using Generative AI for just-in-time onboarding would be efficiency and speed, consistency, scalability and cost-effectiveness. The drawbacks on the other hand would be lack of human contact, dependency on technology and the fact that some employees may prefer human contact (OpenAI 27/3, 2025). ChatGPT concludes that a hybrid approach would be ideal, since AI can enhance onboarding, but should not replace the human touch entirely. While ChatGpt is not a peer-reviewed or academically reliable source and therefore not suitable as a primary reference in a master thesis, the perspectives it offers align with existing research which will

be presented below. As such, it is worth mentioning here as a supplementary insight in the broader discussion on the use of technology in onboarding.

### Hybrid Onboarding

During Covid-19 organizations learned the consequences of having digital onboarding. Gruman and Saks (2018) argue, like ChatGPT, that a hybrid approach for onboarding practices is preferable. Digital onboarding takes away the face-to-face social interactions which makes it harder for an organizational newcomer to clearly understand the organization's culture and their work (Sani et al. 2022; Petrilli et al. 2022). When the onboarding is performed online the newcomer misses out on the unspoken messages conveyed through body language, hand gestures and facial expressions (Sani et al. 2022). This means that the employee can't observe the actions and behaviours of their manager or colleagues through which they usually learn organizational norms and culture (Petrilli et al. 2022). Organizational charts with formal role descriptions and reporting lines can only tell us so much. What really matters, is what NG (2021) calls "invisible swimming lanes", which are the unspoken loyalties, expectations and norms that shape a team's culture. In order to identify the swimming lanes he recommends that new hires pay attention to how people talk, and behave, as formal role descriptions often do not fully reflect the actual dynamics and responsibilities within the team (NG, 2021). Without any interaction with managers or colleagues this is not possible, and the result of digital onboarding is social disconnections (Petrilli et al. 2022). Put differently, one can argue that digital onboarding decreases the social capital of the new employee and makes it more difficult to understand the informal norms.

Social disconnections also have an effect on the employees wellbeing and newcomers are more likely to experience increased anxiety in the process of integrating and acclimatising to the new organization (Sani et al. 2022). Petrilli et al. (2022) found that the newcomers, in their case young graduates, struggled with understanding how they fit into the organisation, finding the right information and with receiving feedback in a digital context. This suggests that a digital onboarding lacks clarification, connections and check-backs in accordance with the six C's of onboarding (Bauer, n.d.). Sani et al. (2022) highlights that digital onboarding can also increase mistrust among colleagues at work and diminish meaningful work.

Organizational newcomers typically feel excited and motivated when starting a new job, even if it can be stressful and filled with emotions of anxiety as well (Harpelund, 2019). Digital onboarding does not affect this excitement and motivation right away, however Sani et al. (2022) argues that the lack of social interaction extinguishes the excitement after just a few days or weeks into the onboarding. This shows that the decrease in motivation appears to come earlier as a result of digital onboarding than the typical decrease that Harpelund (2019) describes as *the honeymoon effect*, which typically occurs during the first three months. With that said, digital onboarding does not only have negative impacts, it could also reduce bullying and reduce hostility (Sani et al. 2022). However, previous research indicates that digital onboarding makes clarification, checkbacks and connections more difficult compared to physical onboarding. When taking everything into consideration, it seems best to use technology as a supplement and not the main tool when it comes to onboarding an organizational newcomer.

### Technical Tools: Gamification & Nudges

Another trend in regards to technology and onboarding is gamification and nudges. Gamification is an emerging trend within onboarding that is described as promising by Ruiz et al. (2024). It refers to a way of designing already existing organizational activities into a game, using different game elements, in order to foster higher engagement levels, enjoyment and motivation (Ruiz et al. 2024; Harpelund 2019; Tamsirimonkol et al. 2024). The games can have different outlooks and need to be tailored to each organization's specific characteristics (Harpelund, 2019; Ruiz et al. 2024). Some of the most common game mechanics that are applied in typically nongame settings are according to Tamsirimonkol et al. (2024) different levels, points, leaderboards and feedback systems. The idea behind gamification is to make daily activities more fun, fostering higher participant interactions (Tamsirimonkol et al. 2024). Gamification can furthermore be utilized to solidify learning (Ford & Bauer, 2024). Other than that, gamification can also reflect dynamics such as collaboration, feelings of autonomy and relationships through their design, which enhances the onboarding experience (Heimbürger et al. 2019). With that said gamification could improve connections and confidence amongst organizational newcomers.

In a study conducted by Siswanto et al. (2024) aimed to analyze the effect of gamification on enhanced employee engagement, the results indicated a significant improvement. Employees who experienced very high levels of engagement increased from 10-25 %, after the use of gamification (Siswanto et al. 2024). This results indicates that gamification successfully addresses employees psychological needs such as competence and autonomy (Siswanto et al. 2024). Another study also found that the impact of gamification on onboarding is enhanced engagement, motivation, perceived utility and learning outcomes (Temsrimongkol et al. 2024). However it does not come without challenges. In order for gamification to work it is crucial that such games align with technological readiness and with employees preferences (Siswanto et al. 2024).

A different tool that offers a potential new area for automating support that could be particularly useful for managers and new hires is nudges (Morris, 2024). Nudges are electronically reminders, similar to emails, but program specific that are triggered based on user-configurable criterias (Morris, 2024). Bauer and Erdogan (2017) highlights an experiment conducted by Google where they used nudges on a group of managers. The nudges reminded the managers and timely suggested ways in which they could help and support their Noogle (their internal name for a New Google employee). The result showed that the managers that received the nudges were 14% more proactive in helping their newcomer adjust which resulted in them being onboarded 10% faster (Bauer & Erdogan, 2017). According to Bock (2015), former Vice President of People Organizations at Google, this nudges experiment also increased their new hire productivity by 25%. Nudges are not specific to a certain stage in the onboarding process; rather they could be a helpful tool throughout the process to give reminders at every stage. For example, Bauer (n.d.) argues that nudges can be used to encourage and help build the new employee's confidence by sending out communications when the new employee needs it the most.

### **Bridging the Gap: Localized, Personalized & Clear Onboarding**

Effective onboarding is not only about what is offered but also about how it is delivered and how it is experienced by new employees, as onboarding practices need to meet the expectations and needs of its new workforce. Most organizations have an onboarding program

that is centralized, some even global and designed by the headquarters or the HR department (Klein & Polin, 2012; Harpelund 2019). To fully address an organizational newcomer's need there is no single practice that can cover all aspects, rather a range of different activities are needed (Klein & Polin, 2012). Offering more than one onboarding practice is furthermore positively related to becoming socialized as the activities help facilitate socialization (Klein et al. 2015). Harpelund (2019) argues that one onboarding programme is not a sufficient solution to successful onboarding because there are great variations of the internal effects of the program, once it is over. While a centralized onboarding program can help the employee understand the bigger picture it will not help with the understanding of their specific role in their local department (Harpelund, 2019).

The local onboarding efforts that differ between departments appear to have a greater impact on newcomer integration than global and centralised efforts (Harpelund 2019). Building on this, Klein and Polin (2012) argue that personalized onboarding efforts also have a greater impact, as personalized efforts are a way of facilitating a sense of purpose and greater value. However, their research has shown that it is less common to onboard an organizational newcomer into their new department, function or team than into the broader organization (Klein & Polin, 2012). Given that the organizational newcomer spends most of their time with their colleagues and supervisors who are not typically involved in the onboarding program, these individuals exert more influence on the newcomer than the distal organization (Nifadkar & Bauer, 2016). This indicates that organizations need to make changes to their current activities and onboarding programs as local and personalized onboarding efforts need to be improved. As Dixon et al. (2012) note, organizations are composed of several subcultures, which significantly influence a newcomer's ability to establish a career path and transition into an organizational insider. Accordingly organizations need to pay more attention to the immediate context but also implement different levels in their onboarding strategies and practices, such as organization-, division- unit-, department- and team level (Klein & Polin, 2012; Nifadkar & Bauer, 2016). By including different levels in the onboarding, organizations can enhance the newcomers' sense of belonging, increase the understanding of their role and contribution to the organization and reinforce the feeling of being part of something larger and meaningful (Harpelund, 2019; Klein & Polin, 2012).

In practice, Klein et al. (2015) found that there is a significant discrepancy between the onboarding practices organizations report offering and what organizational newcomers actually experience. While organizations claim to frequently offer several onboarding activities, new employees report that they receive fewer onboarding initiatives (Klein et al. 2015). The reasons behind this gap is not entirely clear, but the discrepancy itself suggests that organizations may need to refine existing practices or increase their overall onboarding efforts. Klein and Polin (2012) identified several barriers that limit the amount of onboarding activities. 60% of HR respondents in their study stated that time constraints are the most common reason for not offering more onboarding activities. Another 52% of the HR respondents stated that there is not enough HR staff to implement more activities (Klein & Polin, 2012). Additional factors included lack of support from the senior management and financial strains reported by 30% of the HR staff (Klein & Polin, 2012). Harpelund (2019) presents an alternative explanation for the discrepancy, suggesting that onboarding is overlooked because onboarding activities are not communicated clearly, explained or explicitly spelt out. Due to this, Harpelund (2019) recommends that the onboarding process should be communicated with a clear message and transparency.

## Formal Onboarding Practices

Research indicates that many organizations are not doing as much as they can and should regarding formal onboarding practices (Klein et al. 2015). Formal and structured onboarding practice and on-the-job training is according to Frögéli et al. (2023) the most effective onboarding strategy for successfully supporting organizational newcomers. Baur (2010) also emphasizes that organizations who implement formal onboarding processes, through structured step-by-step programs that help organizational newcomers learn organizational norms and their roles, tend to be more effective than organizations without such practices. According to Perrot (2014) organizational newcomers adapt a more active orientation towards their new role and experience increased learning when socialization tactics are institutionalized. As onboarding inherently involves socialization tactics these findings further highlight the importance of a formalized onboarding. Formal onboarding assists the organizational newcomer in terms of both learning tasks connected to their work role and socialization (Bauer, 2010). Additionally it contributes to more consistency across the organization, ensuring that all organizational newcomers are provided with equal

opportunities for integration and development, regardless of their manager or department (Baur, 2010). By formalizing the onboarding process the organization ultimately increases the chances of reaching a proactive onboarding (Bauer, 2010). Despite these benefits, a report from the Aberdeen Group found that due to concerns about the return of investment, merely 37% have implemented a formal onboarding program that runs for 2 years (Laurano, 2013). As mentioned earlier, longer onboarding programs also results in better business outcomes and stronger talents.

## Feedback & Evaluations

To achieve a successful onboarding process and desired outcomes feedback, early on and throughout the process is crucial (Bauer, n.d). Feedback is a two-way mechanism: organizations must provide the organizational newcomer with feedback so that the individual can adjust their behaviour if needed, while also collecting feedback from newcomers to evaluate and refine the onboarding experience (Bradt, 2012; Klein & Polin, 2012). For a new employee adjusting is a big part of the initial period in a new organization since it is only natural to have some missteps when navigating a complex new organization, a new role and culture (Bradt, 2012). Early and regular check-ins have an effect on the organizational newcomers' socialization with the general rule that it makes the process easier (Bradt, 2012).

In addition, regularly gathering feedback from new employees has been linked to notably higher employee engagement levels (Forry, 2024). Harpelund (2019) emphasizes that it is the perceptions of the organizational newcomers that ultimately defines the overall effectiveness and not the activities themselves (Harpelund, 2019). Again, checking everything from an onboarding checklist does not mean that you have a successful onboarding process, rather a passive one (Bauer, 2010). It could very well be this kind of thinking that is yet another reason for the previous mentioned discrepancy of experienced onboarding practices. By continuously collecting feedback, organizations can learn which activities are appreciated, generate meaningful outcomes and which ones that can be revised or removed. SHRM's research indicated that one of the biggest challenges in reaching one's goal in the onboarding process is the lack of data and insights, as was stated by 51% (Forry, 2024). This also supports the importance of collecting feedback. New generations' entry on the labor market has also

affected the need for feedback with growing emphasis on speed as they are used to gaining quick responses in all other areas of their lives (Harpelund, 2019). This shows that even though feedback and regular check-backs have been important for a long time, this need is accelerating with the new generations' changed needs.

## Providing Support

Organizational newcomers should not be left to figure things out on their own. In fact Perrot (2014) studied the interactions between perceived organizational support and socialization tactics amongst blue-collar apprentices, and the findings indicated that perceived organizational support is more important than the specific tactics. This is not to say that socialization tactics are not important. However the *how* “pales in comparison with the importance of the amount of support newcomers perceive from the organization” (Perrot et al. 2014, p. 265). According to Bauer (n.d.), feeling safe and finding connections results in positive outcomes for both the individual and the organization, such as willingness to engage more within their role, with their coworkers and to try new things. Connection is furthermore the factor that makes an organizational newcomer feel that they took the right decision when they joined the organization (Bauer, n.d.). If an organizational newcomer experiences conflict with a colleague after six months of joining the organization the risk of not becoming a productive member of the organization increases (Nifadkar & Bauer, 2016). Information seeking is a key factor for a newcomer to adjust and become productive. However, when conflict arises with a coworker, the availability of information decreases due to triggered social anxiety and reduced willingness to seek support from colleagues. Because of this it is crucial to support and involve stakeholders such as coworkers in the onboarding process (Nifadkar & Bauer, 2016). Given the critical importance of perceived support, it is essential to examine which stakeholders are responsible for delivering that support, and how their roles shape the onboarding experience for organizational newcomers.

# The Role of Key Stakeholders in the Onboarding Process

## Stakeholder Integration in Onboarding

According to Ford and Bauer (2024) onboarding should not be a one department job, rather it should be something that involves several stakeholders to reduce the risk of a new employee “falling through the cracks of the system” (p. 170). The fact that onboarding needs the involvement and engagement from many different people at different levels is evident in previous research (Bauer, 2024, Harpelund, 2019; Bradt, 2012). From a social capital and social networks perspective, an organization is a network of social relations and the more effectively the newcomer builds relationships with others in the network, the better access they will have to information (Harpelund, 2019). Different stakeholders play different roles throughout the onboarding process, however all of them function as socialization agents that shape interactions, influence and support organizational newcomers' progress and understanding of the organization (Klein et al. 2015).

The first person that the organizational newcomer meets is the recruiter, who plays a significant role in setting the expectations and subsequently the experience of organizational reality (Bauer & Erdogan, 2017). HR is usually responsible for creating the onboarding process while managers are the ones that implement the process (Radev, 2023). As such HR professionals and managers are key facilitators of onboarding and play a pivotal part in creating a psychologically safe space for the new employee (Ford & Bauer, 2024). Their commitment and investments in the newcomers are crucial for their successful adjustment (Bauer & Erdogan, 2017). Other key contributors include colleagues and support functions such as IT. Harpelund (2019) adds that meeting directors, executive leaders and influential people in the organization is also of great value to the new employee because it symbolises that they are important and prioritized by the organization. However, extensive executive support for onboarding initiatives is only reported from  $\frac{1}{3}$  of organizations (Forry, 2024). Although including executive leaders leverages value, the relationship and behaviours from the local leaders is especially critical for day-to-day adaptation (Harpelund, 2019).

Despite the variety of actors involved, the reality of onboarding is according to Bradt (2012) that it is fragmented across multiple individuals, with little to no coordination or structured handover between them. This fragmentation can lead to inconsistent messaging, lack of connections and support. The alignment of different processes and the importance of providing support has already been emphasized as important enablers, and in order for this to happen different stakeholders must also be aligned. When stakeholder roles are defined and aligned, the onboarding experience can become more seamless and consistent. The roles of different stakeholders will be further examined in the following section.

## The Role of a Manager

Relationships, and especially the relationship between the organizational newcomer and their hiring managers, matter. Bauer et al. (2021) found that meeting the manager on the first day matters for the newcomers feelings of early acceptance. A strong and early relationship between the organizational newcomer and the hiring manager has also been shown to increase employee engagement by 58%, according to a study conducted by Harvard business school (Baur, n.d.). Furthermore the relationship between a manager and a newcomer can compensate for a lack of relationships to coworkers as the manager can create a feeling of belongingness (Bauer et al. 2021). Beyond structural support, managerial perceptions also shape how successfully newcomers integrate in their new roles (Bauer & Erdogan, 2017).

Bauer and Erdogan (2017) conducted a study examining managers' perspective and experiences during the socialization process of an organizational newcomer. Their findings indicated that managers' evaluations of newcomers' behaviour and proactive efforts are closely linked to the managers' supportive behaviours, as such efforts signal commitment. As a result, newcomers who actively seek information on their own, have an advantage as managers are more inclined to share information with them (Bauer & Erdogan, 2017). Managers' perceptions of their newcomers' adjustments can in turn influence the actual adjustment process, since these perceptions affect the resources and opportunities that are made available to the newcomer (Bauer & Erdogan, 2017). For example Baur et al. (2021) illustrate that when a manager perceives a newcomer as being “up to speed” they are more likely to delegate new tasks and present new challenges, demonstrating how managers' beliefs

shape interactions. Given that managerial perceptions significantly impact organizational newcomers' adjustments period, it is important for all managers to recognize the fact that all newcomers do not engage in the same amount of proactive behaviours (Bauer & Erdogan, 2017). Considering the critical role that managers have, organizations should consider how to encourage managers to support all newcomers, regardless of initial behaviour in order to level the playing field (Bauer and Erdogan, 2017).

While managers play a crucial role in onboarding, they often face competing priorities that limit their capacity to fully support the organizational newcomer. According to Ford and Bauer (2024) managers want to support their employees but can be overwhelmed by the day-to-day demands of being a manager which includes intense meetings and quarterly reviews, amongst other operational tasks. These obligations may distract managers from engaging in their new employees onboarding. The current volatility of the talent market and the increasing frequency of new hires has also placed a growing pressure on managers to engage in onboarding (Ford & Bauer, 2024). However due to competing demands, consistent managerial support is not always feasible, often resulting in uneven onboarding experiences. According to a study conducted by SHRM (Mauer, 2018) one of the main reasons as to why onboarding is neglected is that managers do not have time to engage in the activities, which was stated by 57%. Doepner-Hove (2012) argues that managers are unaware of the realities of our labour market trends influencing recruitment and retention. They understand the changes happening in regards to demographics and population but do not go as far as thinking about what that does to our ability to retain and attract new employees (Doepner-Hove, 2012). As such they might not realise the consequences of not engaging in the onboarding of their new employee and will therefore not make time to engage in the process. In contrast recruiters are more likely to understand these realities which would be a good reason for collaborating more with the recruiter or HR professionals.

## The Role of HR

HR professionals play a central role in designing, coordinating and supporting the onboarding process. According to Harpelund (2019) few organizations connect the onboarding process to their business goals which imply that they fail to realise the strategic value of onboarding, and

miss out on opportunities to capitalize on the process. The importance of understanding the strategic value of onboarding has previously been emphasized. Given that HR professionals design the onboarding process it is especially important for them to understand the strategic value and not only the compliance parts of onboarding, in order to be able to improve and gain the possible benefits of a successful onboarding process (Radev, 2023). Maurer (2018) stated that 40% of the researched onboarding programs consisted of completing paperwork and filling out other forms and compliance documents, suggesting that compliance takes up a big part of the whole onboarding program. Sani et al. (2022) argues that HR must recognise the importance of first impressions, and making it last, as a crucial factor for employees retention and their long-term performance. In addition to strategy and program design, HR is responsible for creating and implementing supporting tools in the onboarding process (Bradt, 2012). If there aren't any tools then it is HR professionals who should create them and inform new employees and managers about them (Bradt, 2012). Given the challenge of competing priorities for managers, this represents an opportunity for HR to explore tools or systems that could help free up managerial time and enable more meaningful engagement with organizational newcomers.

HR may also have a broader network than the hiring- or local manager and should therefore help new employees connect with key functions. Sani et al. (2022) argue that HR professionals and managers must work together to ensure the new employees successful integration and socialization into the organization. In this process they need to utilize institutionalised socialisation tactics driven by the organisation rather than leaving it up to the individual newcomer (Sani et al. 2022). Leaving it up to the individual means leaving it to chance (Bradt, 2012) which in turn, could turn out to be a gamble with expensive consequences. Both the new employee and employer have much more to gain if the employer introduces the employee to important people, behind-the-scenes networks, special projects, different meetings and events and connecting tools such as a buddy or mentor (Bradt (2012).

## Buddy & Mentor-Based Support

Employees who quickly integrate into the organization's social patterns, are more likely to experience better employment outcomes (Scott, 2025). But figuring out the social dynamics

and the unspoken rules of how to interact with your new colleagues is rarely a simple task. Identifying trustworthy colleagues can be challenging on one's own, but much easier with a little help. According to Klein et al. (2015) assigning an organizational newcomer a colleague who will act as a "buddy" or mentor is a highly beneficial onboarding practice that organizations should utilize more because of the perceived helpfulness. Downer (2025) found that working alongside a higher performer for a week increased the improvements in performance the following months with an average of 2%. While a 2% improvement may appear modest on an individual level, even small performance gains can translate into meaningful organizational outcomes when applied across teams or entire departments.

Including a Buddy in the onboarding process offers a way of orienting and introducing the organizational newcomer with a more personal approach (Klein & Polin, 2012). According to Bradt (2012) a buddy is someone on the same level as the new employee, a colleague, whom the newcomer can ask trivial questions without fearing repercussions. DDI, a global leadership consulting firm, ranked among best employers by Forbes 2025, argues that having a buddy with a lower tenure also increases the chances of emphasizing with the experience of the organizational newcomer (Resk, 2023). People who have worked in the company for a very long time might be unable to relate to the difficult period of time that the organizational newcomers are experiencing and therefore be less understanding. An effective Buddy, should be eager to help the organizational newcomers adjust into both role and organisation, demonstrate strong interpersonal skill and reflect the organization's values (Resk, 2023).

While a buddy is preferably someone on the same level, a mentor is a more senior colleague (Bradt, 2012). Having a formal mentor can be very valuable since that person can share insights and long-term advice (Resk, 2023). Dixon et al. (2012) argues that structured mentoring supports a newcomer's ability of gaining organizational cultural competence, accelerating performance, establishing a career path and transitioning into their new professional identity and job role. They studied how a big US automotive factory used mentoring as a part of their onboarding with two different designs; one-to-one and one group scenarios (Dixon et al. 2012). In the case of the one-to-one mentoring the results indicated that the reason for the new employees willingness to stay for the last 18 months, even though many challenges and obstacles were presented, was assigned to the fact that they had a trusted

mentor, who coached, listened and kept them from derailing (Dixon et al. 2012). In the case of the group mentoring the result indicated that the mentees assigned their success to the support they got from their mentor. The group mentoring accelerated the productivity and performance of the mentees while the one-to-one mentoring supported the transition into the new role and retention.

Both a Buddy and a mentor is something that organizations should consider as a part of their onboarding strategy, as they act as bridges in the newcomers networks. According to Harpelund (2019) it is typically the successful connections to others that creates feelings of belonging as well as making them more confident and autonomous. This shows how important it is to include stakeholders such as buddies or mentors. However the organizational newcomer might be more ready for a buddy in the initial phase than a formal mentor which can feel overwhelming (Harpelund, 2019). To maximize effectiveness, onboarding strategies may therefore benefit from a phased approach, starting with introducing a buddy early on, to support day-today adjustment, followed by introducing a mentor relationship to help with long-term integration and career development.

## Summary & Final Discussions

This study aimed to synthesize current onboarding research to identify the core mechanisms and patterns of a successful onboarding process according to current research, by answering three questions: Which phases and components constitute a successful onboarding process throughout the first year? What are the key enablers and tools for a successful onboarding process? What roles do key stakeholders play in ensuring a successful onboarding process? The findings of this study indicate that the onboarding process should extend well beyond a traditional orientation period. Recruitment, preboarding, orientation and onboarding programs and the first 3-6 months were identified as crucial phases for a successful onboarding. The recruitment process secures talents but also sets the expectations that should be realised in the preboarding phase (Klein & Polin, 2012; Bauer, 2010). Thus it was emphasized that recruitment should not be separated from onboarding.

The analysis has outlined preboarding as a pivotal moment to demonstrate that the organization is prepared and ready for the organizational newcomers' arrival by initiating communication, making logistical preparations and beginning to build a relationship early on. By doing so an organization can ensure that clarification and connection, in accordance with Baur (2012) six C's model, is initiated, which signals that organizations are laying the foundation for a successful onboarding process. While this is not the most critical phase it ensures that the organizational newcomer gets a good first impression and off to a good start.

The third phase of the onboarding process is according to the findings and orientation and onboarding programs. While the findings suggest that comprehensive onboarding programs are essential and that longer onboarding programs are linked to better outcomes, findings also indicate a persistent gap between research and practice. Despite 15 years of emphasis in the literature on the value of extended onboarding programs, many organizations continue to deliver short orientations and label them as onboarding. This practice not only conflates two concepts that arguably should be two distinct processes, orientation and onboarding, but also fails to meet the broader developmental and social needs of organizational newcomers. A basic orientation program may provide enough structure to support the development of human capital, such as technical skills or job specific knowledge, but it is insufficient for fostering a social capital as it requires more time, repeated interaction and embeddedness in the organization's networks (Cullen-Lester & Pryor, 2025). If organizations continue to rely solely on orientation, it suggests that they are still operating under the outdated assumption that human capital alone is the key to employee contribution. However, as outlined in previous research, research continuously shows that social capital, built through interpersonal relationships, informal networks and trust is equally, if not even more, important for newcomer success and long term retention (Cullen-Lester & Pryor, 2025; Zehner & Pryor, 2025). The findings also outlined that there are still organizations that have no onboarding program at all, which based on Bauers six C's model (Bauer, 2010; nd.) would suggest that their chances of reaching a successful onboarding are zero to none.

Building on this, the findings indicate that the onboarding process must extend beyond the first few days or weeks as the first 3-6 months are crucial for retaining organizational newcomers that tend to leave (Harpelund, 2019). A decrease in motivation during this period

was outlined as a natural consequence of learning the complex nature of a new role, however that makes it extra important to focus on continuous support and social integration (Harpelunde. 2019). The findings of this study has shown that it is essential not to lose sight of the importance of socialization, but rather to find more effective and structured practices that facilitate socialization and make it last over time (Petrilli et al. 2022). The second research question addressed which tools and enablers organizations could use to achieve this.

To enable successful onboarding several enablers and tools were identified. The utilization of technology to automate and streamline the onboarding process was an important finding of this study, reflecting new trends in onboarding design. Several technological key tools such as digital platforms, gamification and nudges were identified. By utilizing these tools, organizations can enhance compliance, provide clarification, spread the culture, send out regular check backs and build connections, all of which foster confidence and are essential for successful onboarding, as outlined in the six C's framework (Bauer, 2010; Bauer n.d.). With that said, technology could be utilized in different ways and in different phases to ensure that various outcomes that are necessary for a successful onboarding are utilized in the process. For example, a pre-entry portal could be implemented with the help of technology which would ensure communication in the preboarding phase even without a phone call. However, from a sociological perspective, digital onboarding tools can either support or hinder the development of social capital depending on how they are implemented. The potential risk for social disconnection in digital onboarding highlighted a balanced and hybrid approach, combining digital and in-person elements, as a key enabler for successful onboarding (Petrilli et al. 2022; NG, 2021). This suggests that even though technology has been given more attention in current research, and that there are a lot of potential areas and ways in which it could be utilized, the human factor is still critical for a successful onboarding process and making an organizational newcomer feel like they belong.

The alignment of different phases, from recruitment and throughout the process, was also emphasized as an important enabler in the analysis. This would decrease the risks of setting expectations that are not met during the onboarding experience but also ensure that all organizational newcomers receive the same premises no matter when they start. However, the alignment of different processes might be easier said than done due to different interests and

the fact that in practice, stakeholders operate in silos (Bradt, 2012). For example HR professionals might design a structured onboarding program but local managers might bypass it. Similarly recruiters may promise something about the job or company culture that is not fully realized once the employee starts due to a poor onboarding design or implementation. As disconnects can undermine the onboarding experience and have a negative impact on retention rates, it was emphasized that the key stakeholders must also be aligned. This would require more planning, collaboration and coordination between different actors involved in the process. In accordance with social networks theory this finding should not come as a surprise as the dyadic ties between different actors is included in the definition itself (Aggrawal & Anand, 2022). Exactly how different stakeholders should align their work and collaborate with each other has not been within the scope of this study. Future research could address this gap by identifying practical approaches to cross-functional collaboration in the onboarding design as well as the execution of the process.

Other important enablers that were identified in this study was the need for onboarding programs to be clearly communicated, formalized, personalized and designed with activities at multiple levels in the organization. However, local onboarding activities were found to be especially valuable and the result suggests that they are offered less even though they matter more and therefore need to increase to enable a successful onboarding process (Harpelund, 2019). By increasing the local onboarding practices organizations could also increase the personalized efforts as the two go hand in hand, addressing the organizational newcomers specific roles and needs. Given that today's workforce consists of several generations and diverse people this could be a good example of learning that needs to be transferred from the hiring process to be able to make the onboarding activities more personalized, and thereby accelerate the onboarding experience (Morris, 2024). Although this may strike as time-consuming it does not necessarily have to be if the organizations come up with a smart way to use another identified tool: enable technology for this purpose. The previously mentioned tools and enablers would, according to organizational socialization theory, classify as socialization tactics as they all in some way foster socialization. Although socialization tactics are important, the findings also suggested that the amount of received support is even more important. This leads us to answering the third question regarding the roles of key stakeholders.

A simple answer to the third question would be that stakeholders have a huge role in ensuring a successful onboarding process and integration of the organizational newcomer. Elaborating on this the findings suggest that HR professionals have the main responsibility for designing the process but also coordinates and supports which makes this role especially important prior to initiation of the onboarding process, but also throughout the whole process. The managers are the ones who need to implement the process and their presence and support in the onboarding process have a vital impact on employee engagement. However the findings suggested that managers may be distracted with other managerial responsibilities suggesting that the implementation of the onboarding plan might suffer. Thus, this could explain the lack of local onboarding practices. Furthermore it indicates that organizations need to increase the managers presence and support in the onboarding process due to the extensive impact it has on the new employee. This finding highlights HR roles as important for making sure that necessary tools to help are implemented in the process.

The findings also highlighted the value of incorporating both a buddy and mentor programs into the onboarding process. A buddy, colleague at a similar level, can help the new employee navigate the initial period through informal support, day-to-day clarification and cultural integration into local departments and social connections. This type of support has previously been shown to be particularly important during the first 3-6 months suggesting that this could be a suitable time to implement a buddy system. Although support is important from the start and while it might be extra important three months in, it should be beneficial to implement a Buddy at an even earlier stage. This study has not explored the length or other specifics of a buddy system, which could be a suggestion for what future research needs to explore, to gain further insights. While a buddy is important in stages of navigation and increasing clarity, mentors on the other hand provide long-term guidance and help the newcomer navigate career development and a deeper organizational understanding. Thus they should be introduced later on in the process as the findings indicate that a mentor would be overwhelming if introduced too quickly (Harpelund, 2019). Together, buddy and mentor roles act as bridges within the organizational network. Both a buddy-program and a mentor-program could furthermore be used as a practice that takes some load off the managers. The overall emphasis on connections and the inclusion of several stakeholders illustrates the practical application of social capital

and social networks, where access to information and relational support enhances early career success.

## Limitations & Suggestions for Future Research

Connecting all three questions, the findings indicate that how well the different phases, enablers and tools and roles are executed will influence how quickly and successfully the newcomer adjusts socially and professionally. However the findings also indicate that there is no universal best practice onboarding that automatically works for all. A limitation of this study is that it only examined onboarding broadly, leaving out specific contextual factors such as demographic characteristics, job levels or sectors. Thus findings may not generalize across all contexts, nor can it be generalised across different work-roles in different organizational levels. Onboarding for someone entering a blue-collar, workshop position versus onboarding for someone in a higher leadership position can not be handled exactly the same due to different complexities and responsibilities in their roles. However the socialization needs of the two should remain the same but the specific onboarding tactics needs to be tailored to suit the work role. Suggestions for future research would therefore be to dive deeper into specific processes such as onboarding programs and examining it including contextual factors, different entry-level positions or sectors.

Another limitation of this study is that it did not include any primary empirical data that could have contributed with firsthand perspectives and contextual depth. Given the prominent role of technology in this study, future research could examine both organizational and newcomer readiness for implementing these tools, as readiness is a prerequisite for successful adoption (Siswanto et al. 2024). Furthermore the findings of this study indicates that despite new and up-to-date research about onboarding highlighting the strategic value and potential benefits from it, a significant gap between research and practice remains. This raises an important question: Why is it that organizations still do not have effective and structured onboarding processes in place? Future research could explore this disconnect further, with the aim of identifying specific organizational barriers that hinder the adoption of successful onboarding practices. Conducting such a study would mean helping organizations to help themselves by

realising what stands in their way of retaining employees and increasing their competitive advantage.

## Implications for Onboarding Practices

Based on the findings of this study some concluding recommendations can be made for organizations seeking to strengthen their onboarding processes. First, onboarding should be recognized as a procedural process that starts with the recruitment, but also a strategic opportunity to retain talent, increase the newcomer's time to proficiency by efficiently integrating them into the organization's social and professional networks. Thus even if onboarding and organizational socialization are two separate phenomena I would argue that while onboarding could be a part of organizational socialization, organizational socialization should always be a part of onboarding if you want to use onboarding to increase employee engagement and generate better business outcomes. Second, organizations should include several stakeholders and increase alignment between them to ensure consistency throughout the process. Third, leverage technology, but do it thoughtfully to avoid undermining the human relational aspects that are essential for socialization. Use it as a tool to help and reduce workload on stakeholders involved without sacrificing important phases for the organizational newcomer. Fourth, strengthen local onboarding efforts without neglecting organization-wide alignment. And finally it should be acknowledged that onboarding has no visual finish line. The ending of the process coincides with the new employees' feelings that they belong, and reaching that point sooner depends on the sustainable investment of time, resources and people to the onboarding process. An investment that no matter how you twist or turn it is worth it as it will ensure both sustainable human resources and better business outcomes.

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