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Key Elements For A Successful Employee Onboarding Program

Siyu Chen

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Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics, College of Liberal and Professional Studies in the School of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania
Advisor: Janet Greco

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Key Elements For A Successful Employee Onboarding Program

Abstract

This capstone focuses on examining key elements of employee-onboarding success in organizations. From the literature, the author extracted three crucial factors contributing to effective onboarding models, Relationship-Building, Organizational Support, and Communication, and proposed a hypothesis: *These three key elements are contributing to onboarding success*. Then, the author identified four outstanding employee onboarding models from Netflix, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google, by using the criteria from several human resource specialized websites. In the analysis, the author examined the three elements in the four onboarding models and found out that all the factors contributed to employee onboarding success individually and collectively. Furthermore, the author proposed that “People” is a core value of a successful employee onboarding process for organizations. This paper strongly suggests that it would be worth pursuing with a larger study to examine the three elements and extract more factors.

Keywords

employee-onboarding, onboarding, successful employee

Comments

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KEY ELEMENTS FOR
A SUCCESSFUL EMPLOYEE ONBOARDING PROGRAM

By

Siyu Chen

Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics,
College of Liberal and Professional Studies
in the School of Arts and Sciences
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the
University of Pennsylvania

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ABSTRACT

This capstone focuses on examining key elements of employee-onboarding success in organizations. From the literature, the author extracted three crucial factors contributing to effective onboarding models, Relationship-Building, Organizational Support, and Communication, and proposed a hypothesis: *These three key elements are contributing to onboarding success*. Then, the author identified four outstanding employee onboarding models from Netflix, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google, by using the criteria from several human resource specialized websites. In the analysis, the author examined the three elements in the four onboarding models and found out that all the factors contributed to employee onboarding success individually and collectively. Furthermore, the author proposed that “People” is a core value of a successful employee onboarding process for organizations. This paper strongly suggests that it would be worth pursuing with a larger study to examine the three elements and extract more factors.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Capstone Origin

There are two important stories behind this project, each occurring chronologically. These two stories play an essential role in my journey in the Organizational Dynamics Program at the University of Pennsylvania. The first story is about how I discovered what Organizational Dynamics (O.D.) was all about. This was thanks to my mentor, Jack Sun, who introduced me to this great, though little known, program. Getting into O.D. was not easy for me, and the second story is about an important step in the application process: the TOEFL test (Test of English as a Foreign Language). Until this day, my test preparation period is still unforgettable.

My reason for choosing these two stories is the time at which they occurred. The first event happened when I was planning for the future. I was in a transition period, moving from my accustomed life pattern to a new stage in which I did not know where I would land. The second story took place when I needed to restart my TOEFL test preparation unexpectedly. One thing that these two stories have in common is that they both happened in a transition period, where the old was changing to new.

Those who join organizations share a similar moment of transition when they, in effect, climb on board the enterprise and begin to assimilate into the group. According to Bauer, onboarding is “the process of learning through which newcomers move from being outsiders to becoming effective insiders.” (Bauer, Morrison, & Callister, 1998; Wanberg, 2012.).

It is like boarding a vessel and not knowing its destination; or doing things that have never done before. Therefore, one transition from an outsider to an insider of the vessel, the new stage of life, the new dilemma, or anything new. As Dr. Greco, my capstone advisor, once said during a capstone advisory phone call, “Onboarding is a metaphor to those people who are in the transition to a new group, or role, or team, etc.” (Greco, 2020). Therefore, I am going to speak about why I chose the onboarding as my primary research focus, and more importantly, what makes onboarding successful.

1.1.1 Story I: Getting to know the Organizational Dynamics—Where Everything Started

I first met Jack Sun in 2010 when I was studying at the Renmin University of China before coming to the U.S. All the students in the program were preparing to study abroad in the U.S. by studying for the TOEFL and the SAT. The students also had to learn American culture to adapt well upon arrival, Jack was the teacher of the culture class.

Jack and I often interacted after the class, and I always had something new to learn from him, including wisdom about life. He often invited me to join his family, and he brought me a Bible and spoke about how he understood. We talked about many things, though mostly about our lives. There were too many topics to summarize; however, I always called our sessions. “How to Be a Real Man” or “Men’s Class.” Gradually, he started to play the role of my life mentor, and I still introduce him in this way. A year later, I went to Michigan for college, and he moved back to Philadelphia the next year. We did not meet very often because of the distance, but we still kept in touch now and then.

In the spring of 2017, I had just finished college and was planning my future career, but I was very anxious about what I should do. Due to this, I gave myself a break and moved to New York City to stay with my girlfriend for two months. Since I was only a hundred miles away from Jack, I decided to visit him. I still remember that it was a pouring night. After having a wonderful dinner with Jack's family, I got to sit down and talk with him. I told him that I was confused and anxious about my future because I was not sure what I should do. The question of whether I should attend graduate school or get a job had been on my mind for the past few months. He did not talk about my problem; instead, he started to ask how my life was going.

At that time, I had started a used car business with my friends in Michigan, and I was not feeling good when dealing with customers and getting along with my colleagues. In my opinion, most things in the company were not organized well, especially the employees. I did not think they were in their best positions. The responsibilities of the employees were vague, so a salesperson was often in charge of jobs in the service department. Employees were also often confused about who to report to because of the poor management, so they usually reported to whoever was available, leading to many problems. For example, the selling prices of the cars offered to customers were inconsistent within the company. Consequently, we had to sell vehicles at the lowest price stated.

I spent the next half hour talking about how frustrated I was in this business, while Jack listened to me quietly. Then he asked me, "What do you think the problem is, and what do you want to do?" I thought there was a lot for everyone at the managing level to learn about how to run a company, and this was how I learned from the

experiences. I told Jack that I am more of a people person who feels much more comfortable associating with fellow human beings than with computers. Since I was a child, I have always wanted to find ways to improve the efficiency of communication among people. Therefore, I said I would love to learn something related to communication if there was a chance. I felt this had become another passion outside of cars.

“You just said you are also planning to get a job, and why?” He brought this question up right after the other. At the time, I had just graduated from college, and many of my friends had started to get jobs. Some of them received excellent offers. I felt jealous that they could make their living. After seeing my hesitation, a few of my friends heavily encouraged me to get a job, which made me realize how great it would be if I had a job and could start a new life without my parent’s financial support.

Jack said, “That’s it? If so, this is not your story.”

I was a little confused about what he said, so I asked accordingly, “What do you mean story? If not, then what should be my story?”

He smiled, in his signature way. “Your urge of learning is your story. Getting a job is not.” He continued, “Everyone has their own stories, and these stories contain their Zen minds or original aspiration. Your original aspiration won’t change, because it was with you when you were born. Therefore, no one can change it.” I was even more confused, but somehow, I understood what he was trying to tell me.

“You know, there is a program at the University of Pennsylvania where you can learn what you are interested in,” he stated. While I was still weighing my two options, he introduced me to the Organizational Dynamics program. “What’s that?” I asked.

“It is called Organizational Dynamics. Did you not tell me you want to study human beings? Dynamics is a formal way to summarize it.” I nodded but did not think I understood the word. “For example, you will learn to analyze human behavior, like reading people’s minds through their body language,” he continued. That was my first impression of the O.D. program, and I thought it was the thing I had always been interested in learning, so I lit up immediately. It was that night that I decided to pursue a master’s degree at Penn. Even though I only slept for two hours, I listened to my own story, my gut, and I felt relief from struggling. However, that was just a beginning, and I still had a long way to go.

I could not sleep that night because I felt even more anxious. On the one hand, could I get into Penn? That is the University of Pennsylvania, an ivy league school. I kept asking myself. On the other hand, do I still want to have a job? I could feel that the anxiety came from excitement and worry. Whenever I could not make decisions, I usually took a step back to look at my options. I imagined that if I received both offers, a job and acceptance at Penn, I was very sure that I would go to school. I had been using this imaginal method to help me sort out options for a long time since I was a kid, and it seemed very effective to me. Getting rid of limiting factors, such as whether or not I would get an offer from Penn, helped me to find out what I wanted to do, and that was what my decision was based on.

1.1.2 Story II: Making A Transition

After deciding to go to graduate school, I explored the Organizational Dynamics website. I went to an information session that was held by Alan Barstow, who is currently

my academic advisor. As an international student, a 100/120 score on the TOEFL language test was the minimum requirement for applying for the program. Even though I had a U.S. college degree, Penn still required a decent score. The most current test result I had was a score of 77, from seven years prior, so I had to retake the test.

Without preparing, I took the test, and the result was an 85. Not only was I shocked by how little my language ability had improved over seven years, but I also realized how far I was from the target score. I was utterly overwhelmed by this result, and I often doubted myself. That score made my life difficult in the following months because it destroyed my self-confidence. I felt that Penn was walking away.

I gave my dad a call, telling him what had happened and how bad I felt at the moment. Besides some encouragement, he left me with some words before hanging up, “Taking the test is just the first step of your plan, if you are not even confident of this, you may have made a wrong decision. Let’s see how well you can do!” His manner of encouragement worked well for me, and I liked the way he framed from an objective angle. Yes, how would I be able to get through the two-year program if I could not even pass the test? I laugh at myself because I knew that I had to get it done, but sometimes I was more determined if I was advised by others, especially my dad. The TOEFL is not an easy test for most people whose mother tongue is not English; getting a score of 100 was even harder. I bought learning materials and began a new lifestyle that had only one purpose: test preparation.

For two years prior, I had spent most of my time working on my racing club and my used car company. This included tasks like building cars, managing daily operations of the company, planning, and hosting racing events and selling cars. Even though it was

considered a part-time job, I did not have time to do other things. For the first week, I was still trying to finish my work and study. I thought it was my natural tendency to get everything I wanted done, but it was impossible. The TOEFL test included four parts: reading, listening, speaking, and writing. I needed to go through many articles and lectures. I was exhausted just from completing all four sections, and I did not have enough time left for sleeping. It forced me to cut out everything that was less important. Because I only had 24 hours a day, I had to learn to prioritize what was most important.

I had to tell my colleagues what was happening and inform them I might not have time to work with them during that particular period. I was glad that they understood. I then stopped my car life and focused solely on my preparation. We only talked about our business during lunchtime and eating became the only time we met in a day. However, things did not go very well. On one hand, after about three weeks of intense study, my practice test results were still not very impressive. On the other hand, because the company was still running, I had to be part of many discussions. I realized that I could not completely quit this life.

As the deadline approached, I became more anxious. I could not sleep well at night because of the difficult situation. I dreamed that I had failed the exam with a score of 60, and Penn denied my application. I dreamed that I had passed the exam with a score of 115 and felt frustrated when I woke up. I dreamed that I got a score of 99 and felt completely blank. I dreamed a lot. These crazy dreams made my brain tired, and therefore, if I randomly came across a rhythm, it would keep playing in my mind until I slept. Everything seemed to be out of control.

Looking back, I thank those bad results for forcing me to cut everything unimportant out of my life for the test. I decided to eat simply and to reduce the time I spent on meals, so I stopped eating out with friends. I had never learned how to cook, but I started to learn some basic and necessary cooking skills so that I could save some time on eating. As one of my friends said, “You disappeared!” Yes, I did. We all lived in the same area, so it only took ten minutes to drive to meet them, but it felt like I was living in another country.

With more time to spend studying, I started to set my bio clock to match the real exam timeframe. Most of the exams took place at 8 a.m., so I had to make sure that my brain would fully work at this time. It was two weeks from the exam. I woke up at 6 a.m. to go over the vocabulary and finished my breakfast before 7:30 a.m. By regularizing my time and concentrating on studying, everything became better. Hard work finally got paid off; I was lucky to get a score of exactly 100. I almost lost my voice because I shouted out loud after seeing the result. I felt that Penn was closer.

These two stories happened at a particular time when I was about to change to a new lifestyle. I realized that I had to give up some things in my old life to start a new life. According to Bridges, a transition is “a three-phase process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the details of the new situation that the change brings about” (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). Those three phases are these:

- “Ending Zone: Letting go of the old ways and the old identity people had.”
- “The neutral zone: Going through an in-between time when the old is gone, but the new isn’t fully operational.”

- “The new beginning: Coming out of the transition and making a new beginning” (Bridges & Bridges, 2017).

It is just like what I have learned in the O.D. program; if there is no end, there won't be a beginning. In the first story, in choosing to go to graduate school, I had to end the tempting thought that getting a job would financially support me. I also had to end the mindset of a college student, with time to do hobbies after finishing schoolwork. Obviously, in graduate school, just finishing the homework would not be enough if I wished to internalize material from the class and develop a deeper and more comprehensive understanding. In the TOEFL story, I had to give up my old life pattern of spending whole days with my colleagues to keep our business running. After that, I could focus on test preparation and get rid of disruption from non-test related activities. The TOEFL exam was never easy for me, so I needed to fully commit to the test to get a good grade. As Bridges said, “the kind of work you really liked to do and felt competent about may have ended when you shifted” (Bridges & Bridges, 2017).

1.2 Why Onboarding?

Looking back on my career path, I have been a student most of the time. Now, I am at a stage where I am going to enter the real world, and leaving the campus is just around the corner. As Bridges said, “transition is a process by which people unplug from an old world and plug into a new world.” Furthermore, “transition begins with an ending and finishes with a beginning” (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). I am in a critical transition period from a full-time student to an employee of an organization. My role is going to change, from paying to getting paid.

As mentioned, before going to study at the University of Pennsylvania, I started a used car company and a racing club with several friends who shared the same passion. As the company was growing, we needed new employees. We wanted people ranging from a store manager who could handle the company's daily operation to salespeople who could sell as many cars as possible.

We did not have much experience hiring, but as one of the five co-founders, it was great to learn from real cases. After the hiring process was the onboarding program. However, I did not think we were doing great because all the co-founders had different schedules and different personalities. This led to many interesting stories in our onboarding process, as new employees met different co-founders depending on who was available at the time. Therefore, the feedback from our employees was very different. Employees had different expectations for our company based on what they were taught and told, and they all behaved differently. Many of them did very poorly.

Now, as more and more problems are showing up, we realize that our onboarding process needs to be professional. We recognize that one person needs to be in charge of the program. Even though I thought it was a shame to have such a messy program, this experience has taught me a great lesson, and I appreciate that I had this chance to learn.

Besides my own experiences as an employer, I have heard quite a few stories about first jobs from people around me, such as my girlfriend, classmates, friends, and family. When we started our business, many people my age were entering organizations. Due to this, I have many learning materials for organizational onboarding from the employees' standpoint. Much of their feedback was not great. In fact, most of them were frustrated, and some even wondered why they were still working for their companies.

Therefore, I want to investigate employee onboarding further. I want to know what is most crucial to the onboarding processes and what makes onboarding successful.

Finally, as I am writing this capstone, the world is experiencing unprecedented challenges caused by the coronavirus outbreak. People's lives have changed, and organizations are making huge transitions. The economy is slowing down, and people are living lives that they have never previously experienced. The current situation has forced many of us to hit the restart button because of the pandemic. As Dr. Greco said to me during our capstone advisory phone call, "We are all being forcibly onboarded into a context that is unknown and for which there are almost no guides — stuck, for example, seemingly endless version of Bridges' neutral zone." (Greco, 2020).

According to the Society of Human Resource Managers, onboarding is "The process of integrating a new employee with a company and its culture, as well as getting a new hire the tools and information needed to become a productive member of the team" (Maurer, 2019). Etymologeek explains the origin of the word onboarding; "on board" means "Agreeing or supporting; Joining in or participating, on or in a means of transportation, on a vehicle or vessel; aboard" (Etymologeek, 2020). Furthermore, onboarding is "The process of bringing a new employee on board, incorporating training and orientation" (Etymologeek, 2020).

I think onboarding is necessary before starting any job because employees need to adjust to the fit in the organization. However, not every company has onboarding programs. This raises the question: Is it difficult to have an onboarding program? Or, is it difficult to run an effective onboarding program? To answer these questions, I raise the

following hypothesis: *There must be key factors that contribute to a successful onboarding program.*

1.3 Expected Content in the Following Chapters

In Chapter 2, I will conduct an extensive literature review in the areas of organizational onboarding (what works and what does not), employee engagement, the challenges of onboarding, as well as general findings from the literature.

Based on the findings in Chapter 2, I am going to set forth my plan for inductive research in Chapter 3. According to Dr. Greco, inductive research means to “create a refined hypothesis based on what you find in the data, in this case the descriptions of successful onboarding programs” (Greco, 2020). Specifically, I will identify four successful onboarding models that currently exist.

In Chapter 4, I will analyze those four outstanding onboarding programs using the findings from the literature review.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I will summarize my research from chapters 1 to 4, and present my findings as a means to refine my hypothesis of successful onboarding for possible future research. I will also describe the limitations of the research that future studies can focus on eliminating. Then, I will discuss the impact of this research on my own life, as a prospective new employee in an organization, and as an employer in my own business. Finally, I will mention the target audience of this paper and provide my recommendations for them.

1.4 Research Expectations

I sincerely expect this capstone to be useful for my future career. I also think many people share the same experience as me, not only recently graduated students who are entering the job market but also anyone going into a new environment, especially during this difficult time. I hope they might benefit from my paper to identify and work for ideal companies. Finally, if possible, companies may benefit from this capstone to help pay greater attention to employee onboarding. For example, I hope companies with no onboarding programs will consider implementing one, and companies that do not have ideal relationships with their employees will consider making changes to their onboarding programs.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW
ORGANIZATIONAL ONBOARDING

The purpose of this chapter is to reveal what works in organizational onboarding and what does not. Furthermore, I will study challenges associated with onboarding, as well as employee engagement. The role of this chapter is to guide the overall process by contributing further research and analyzing the best onboarding programs.

2.1 The Definition

I have found no source that explicitly defines the term “organizational onboarding;” however, there are some sources that define “onboarding.” According to the MIT Sloan Management Review, “onboarding processes have a common theme: indoctrinating new employees into the organizational culture” (Daniel M. Cable, 2013). In addition, Hillman gave a further explanation in the article “Planning for Employee Onboarding—Finding Ways to Increase New Employee Success and Long-Term Retention.” According to Hillman, “onboarding involves a special, conscious effort to make a new employee quickly become a productive member of the organization, laying a solid foundation for a long-term relationship” (Hillman, 2010). Checking other sources, they all share similar definitions to MIT Sloan and Hillman. A website called Society of Human Resource Managers once published an article on onboarding that said, “New employee onboarding is the process of integrating a new employee with a company and

its culture, as well as getting a new hire the tools and information needed to become a productive member of the team” (Maurer, 2019).

According to the Harvard Business Review, organizational onboarding has two sections. The first section is “Teach them how things work,” which included “Teaching new employees the information they need to function day in and day out.” Furthermore, “it’s also important to teach them your workplace ‘language.’” The Harvard Business Review then showed an example of the workplace language they mentioned in the article, which was the “cryptic acronyms that company’s use for key processes or roles.” The HBS addressed the language issue in the following way: “The more a new hire has to awkwardly ask, ‘Sorry, I’m new...what does SSRP stand for?’ the more they feel like an outsider” (Carucci, Johnson, al., & Daimler, 2019). The word “outsider” in this passage caught my eye because I found other sources using this term. One said, “Newcomers to an organization are outsiders who generally become insiders through a process of socialization” (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979.). Therefore, onboarding is a process in which newly hired employees from outside of the organization make transitions to fit in their company.

The second section was, “Help them assimilate.” To specify, the HBS points out that “Organizations must be intentional about helping new hires adapt to organizational values and norms, especially during that first year” (Carucci, Johnson, al., & Daimler, 2019). I looked up the word “assimilate” in the Webster dictionary, and one of the definitions was “to make similar.” Other than onboarding and assimilation, I found another term: “Onboarding, also known as ‘organizational socialization’” (Bauer, 2010; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979.). This tells us that onboarding is equated to socialization.

I found a few articles that defined socialization. One such definition was as follows:

“Organizational socialization is the process of learning through which newcomers move from being outsiders to becoming effective insiders” (Bauer, Morrison, & Callister, 1998; Wanberg, 2012.). Bauer and other authors also mention the definition in another article, writing, “Organizational socialization is typically understood as the process by which organizations help newcomers learn about their work and adjust to the workplace” (Ashforth et al., 2007; Bauer et al., 1998; Ostroff and Kozlowski, 1992; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). I found that Bauer’s point of view was quite popular, and many authors refer to his definition of socialization.

In addition to the sources above, I also found what Baker and Feldman contributed: “Successful socialization refers to newcomers’ adjustment to their work environment as well as alignment of their efforts to organizational goals” (Baker and Feldman, 1990). In comparing the meaning of onboarding and socialization, their similarities are apparent; in fact, the two concepts seem almost interchangeable. While much of the literature mentions outsiders and insiders, it seems like the core idea behind onboarding/socialization is a process of transition. It is a transition of employees from outside of an organization to insiders who can fit in the organization. The primary purpose of my research is to identify the essential elements that contribute to successful onboarding programs in general. Therefore, I am going to explore literature in organizational onboarding, and then extract critical factors that researchers have mentioned in common.

2.2 The World of the Onboarding Process in Organizations (What Works and What Does Not)

In the introduction of the book *Successful Onboarding: A Strategy to Unlock Hidden Value Within Your Organization*, written by Mark A. Stein and Lilith Christiansen, the authors write a section titled “Rethinking the Metaphor,” which is quoted below:

Before embarking on our journey through state-of-the-art onboarding, let’s reflect for a moment on this term itself. “Onboarding” is a metaphor, and a rather obvious one at that; it evokes a process for bringing a person onto a ship. The staff of a cruise ship, for example, would “onboard” a ship’s guests by getting all of the luggage to the correct cabins, conducting a safety drill, showing them around (dining room, casino, movie theater, etc.), and describing what activities they might enjoy so that they feel welcome and familiar (Stein & Christiansen, 2010).

This serves as a perfect transition from onboarding to my expansion of the following content. In this section, I am going to explain how it leads to the following content. After developing a better understanding of what organizational onboarding/socialization means, I want to explore further what companies have done for their onboarding processes, and how they have been faring. In other words, I want to know what works and what does not.

In the “The Onboarding Design Process” section, the author states, “Before your firm can hope to unveil a state-of-the-art onboarding program, it must take care to gain organizational self-awareness. Do not just grasp at the onboarding “best practices” you

read about online or in trade journals” (Stein & Christiansen, 2010). This paragraph tells us that an onboarding program within one organization might not work for others, but there still might be many sources of “best practices” online or in journals. This leads me to wonder what those “solutions” entail, as they might include some of the essential factors that determine the effectiveness of onboarding programs. The author continued explaining that those best practices might not work for all companies in the following section because “A best practice only helps if it matches your company’s unique circumstances and objectives. Under different conditions, a best practice developed by another company could prove useless, and worse yet, a drain of valuable resources” (Stein & Christiansen, 2010). Perhaps one best practice may be that the organization needs to know itself well enough to create a matching onboarding process.

I moved forward to find out what the best practices are, and I found some related articles. One of the materials is called “Let Me In: Guidelines for the Successful Onboarding of Newcomers to Open Source Projects.” This article focuses on the IT field, specifically, a software development project called “Open Source Software.” The authors, Igor Steinmacher and Marco Aurélio Gerosa, think that “newcomers face many barriers to contributing to a project” (Steinmacher, Treude, & Gerosa, 2019). They believe it is essential to “identify barriers and build a portal to support newcomers” because their results “showed that organizing existing information and strategies according to the barriers model made newcomers feel more confident and oriented.” One important barrier that the authors introduce is the “First-contribution barrier” (Steinmacher, Treude, & Gerosa, 2019). Furthermore, they explain that:

New developers face many barriers when attempting to contribute for the first time; because delivering a patch to an OSS project is usually a long, multistep process, some newcomers lose motivation or even give up on contributing. The first-contribution barriers affect not only those interested in becoming core project members but also those who wish to submit a single contribution (e.g., a bug fix or a new feature)” (Steinmacher, Treude, & Gerosa, 2019).

Even though it is in the IT field, this tells me that the first time an employee makes contributions plays an important role in both the newcomer’s career and the company. I believe a factor that determines the quality of newcomers’ first-time contributions’ might be the onboarding process. Therefore, I assume that this paragraph exhibits its importance to companies. Just as an article named “Successful onboarding: Follow the 5 C’s” mentions, “Just as communication at the beginning of a marriage can indicate if it will end in divorce, the foundation established early on with a new hire is crucial to productivity, engagement, and retention” (The HR Specialist, 2011).

The article included five C’s, that stand for “Clarification,” “Connection,” “Culture,” “Compliance,” and “Check back.” Among all the C’s, “connection” caught my eye because it is just like the communication quoted above. According to the article, connection “helps employees network and establish relationships within the organization” (The HR Specialist, 2011). It seems that communication could be a great tool to build connections. As far as what I have learned in the Organizational Dynamics program, storytelling has impressed me as a form of communication that helps build connections (Greco, 2019). I think it is an effective communication approach for relationship building. From what I have found so far, I believe the relationships between

employees and their organizations may reflect the relationships between them and their colleagues or even their managers. Furthermore, I think relationship building may relate to onboarding success.

I found an interesting source that considers onboarding success. The article's name is "Exploring onboarding success, organizational fit, and turnover intention of software professionals" (Sharma & Stol, 2020). In the report, the author raises several hypotheses, some of which were tested to have a positive association with the onboarding process. First of all, it indicated that "Orientation programs for newly recruited software professionals have a positive association with onboarding success" (Sharma & Stol, 2020). It also provided its own definition of the orientation, saying "Orientation typically happens during the first days or weeks of an employee joining an organization, and involves giving out essential information about the rules and policies of the company and helping newcomer interaction." This tells me that the time frame plays an important role in the onboarding process. In this case, it is the first day or weeks. Although the author didn't give further information about the best time frame for onboarding, another source mentions this: "The first 30 days matter the most." Researchers established that many professionals who "originally planned to stay an average of seven years" left sooner because they were "heavily influenced by the experiences of their first 30 days" (Hillman, 2010).

Secondly, there is also a positive association "between support and onboarding success—this hypothesis is also strongly supported by our study" (Sharma & Stol, 2020). According to the article, support reflects "a more continuous process, and ongoing support will make newcomers at ease when seeking help from seniors and peers

regarding professional and personal issues, without invoking feelings of being judged or embarrassed” (Sharma & Stol, 2020). The definition of support is very clear: “Support is either severely lacking or inaccessible to most newcomers because of their workloads and commitments” (“Improving the socialization of new employees,” 2019). In this case, the senior employees in the onboarding process are one target group. Thus, it can be assumed that a good connection with them will increase the chance that newcomers will receive as much support as possible. Thirdly, the article pointed out the result that “Onboarding success (which tends to be a short-term outcome, as it takes place within the first few months) is positively associated with job satisfaction and workplace relationship quality” (Sharma & Stol, 2020). These results demonstrate that the relationship/connection that a newcomer builds with people and the organization is highly important. Job satisfaction and workplace relationships, on the other hand, also facilitate onboarding success. Therefore, the result supports the author’s previous findings.

The following passage also touches upon employee relationships, but the authors introduced something new.

A growing body of evidence confirms that employers who create relationships with employees based upon high trust and high commitment create organizational cultures in which employees exhibit increased extra-role behavior are more creative and innovative, and more profitable than employees in comparable organizations. (cf. Beer, 2009; Caldwell and Floyd, 2014)

In this article, Beer, Caldwell, and Floyd all mention trust. It seems to reveal that trust is an essential factor in employee relationships. In an article named “New employee onboarding – psychological contracts and ethical perspectives” it is stated that “trust and

ethical expectations were closely related.” In terms of psychological contracts, Kumar provides this understanding: “Psychological contract refers to the relationship of the employee and employer and mutual expectations of inputs and outcomes” (Kumar & Pandey, 1970). Not only did Beer, Caldwell, and Floyd research twelve ethical perceptions, but they also explained: “how each of the twelve different ethical perceptions applies to new employees’ perceptions about duties owed to them in the psychological contract between employees and their organization” (Caldwell & Peters, 2018). Combining views from the various authors, I conclude that trust-building is an essential element in a successful onboarding program, which is also “essential to a healthy psychological contract” (Greco, 2020).

The author points out that three related ethical duties “are inherently a part of the construct of trustworthiness which is so critical in building high trust organizational cultures” (Caldwell & Peters, 2018). According to employees in the research, duties were “committed to employee success,” “caring in their ability to understand employee needs,” and “competent in providing employees with an efficient and effective onboarding process.” In my understanding, these three ethical duties relate to each other. Leaders who commit to employees’ success would necessarily care about what they need to help them grow. Therefore, leaders could make new hires’ onboarding process more effective and also more efficient by building trust in relationships.

The most important takeaway from this article is that organizations should care about their employees. The willingness to support them can often lead to a company’s prosperity. Just as Pfeffer puts it, “they often overlook the importance of helping employees to succeed” (Pfeffer, 1998). From the employees’ standpoint, “When new

employees believe that formal support is inadequate, a sense of abandonment often emerges” (“Improving the socialization of new employees,” 2019). While from the organizations’ perspective, “it is vital to be aware of character differences among new employees. This can lead to varying perceptions of psychological safety and mean that those with limited interpersonal skills and/or self-efficacy are likely to require more assistance from coworkers than their counterparts” (“Improving the socialization of new employees,” 2019).

2.2.1 Organizational Onboarding In New Lenses

Many of my friends used to tell me that they struggled when starting a new job, or even when they switched to a new role. There was one thing that most of them shared in common in their experiences, and it was the stress. I seemed to hear this word every time, no matter who was talking to me. Ellis et al. (2014) focus mainly on stress, which they see as a primary lens.

According to the article, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that the average number of times baby boomers changed their jobs throughout their lives was ten; future generations tended to have a higher rate (Ellis et al., 2014). “Inherent in these transitions is the assumption that entering a new working environment is stressful.” In *Managing Transitions*, Bridges discusses the psychological transitions that accompany change, and he says that they are even more stressful than the change itself. The fear, disorientation, sense of loss, and uncertainty associated with stage one, “Ending, Losing, and Letting Go,” is most stressful for individuals (Bridges & Bridges, 2017).

Berger and Calabrese believe that organizational socialization is “a process of reducing the stress of uncertainty for newcomers so they may feel confident and able to successfully contribute to their new organizations” (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Therefore, they developed an uncertainty reduction theory toward the understanding of socialization. According to Jackson, Schuler, and Vredenburgh, “Uncertainty associated with new tasks, roles, and social relationships is innately stressful and is one reason that newcomers may fail to develop positive attitudes toward their new organization” (Jackson, Schuler, & Vredenburgh, 1987). Therefore, the author of the navigating article thought that there was a need to better understand “which aspects of socialization are central for mitigating newcomer stress” (Ellis et al., 2014). They used a “person-centric” and stress-oriented approach to understanding the relationships between organizational socialization phenomena and outcomes. After their research, the authors found out that there were two types of stressors associated with newcomers. The first was the “Hindrancer Stressor;” for example, role ambiguity “would thwart goals and result solely in negative outcomes.” The second one was the “Challenge Stressor;” for example, time pressure in goal achievement “would result in positive outcomes.” Additionally, they found that the challenge stressor would “serve to offset the negative effects of strain” (Ellis et al., 2014). These findings provide a good understanding of the stressors. In my first understanding, stress was something that needed to be eliminated; I tended to regard stress as a negative element in the organizational lives. However, that is not always the case. There is positive stress that can facilitate employees’ work, especially that of newcomers.

While viewing organizational onboarding through a lens of stress can provide a different image, what would onboarding look like using still different lenses? Karen Beckera and Adelle Bishb use a lens of learning theory. In the article “A Framework for Understanding the Role of Unlearning in Onboarding,” the authors argue that the research on onboarding has focused too much on socialization, and clustered primarily within psychology literature. Therefore, they decided to use another approach; in this case, it was the learning theory (Becker & Bish, 2019). According to the article, “Learning theory provides an opportunity to consider onboarding from the perspective of what the newcomer requires, not just from the perspective of what information the organization needs to impart” (Becker & Bish, 2019). The quote above addresses the issue I have found that too much research and discussion is done from the standpoint of the organization. The authors’ approach provides a different view of the organizational onboarding process. Furthermore, using the learning theory “allows us to better consider the range of individual differences in newcomers’ learning needs and how organizations can adapt their onboarding design accordingly” (Becker & Bish, 2019).

The authors also introduce another concept, “unlearning.” They write that the unlearning process should be involved in the onboarding process to make it successful (Becker & Bish, 2019). Unlearning is defined as “the process of reducing or eliminating pre-existing knowledge or habits that would otherwise represent formidable barriers to new learning” (Newstrom, 1983, p. 36). Similarly, Klammer and Gueldenberg argue that unlearning “requires relinquishing past knowledge, behaviors, or ways of thinking; that is, changing cognitive structures and ways of thinking (cognitive perspective) or changing routines or habits (behavioral perspective)” (Klammer & Gueldenberg, 2018).

According to Rushmer and Davies, there are three stages of unlearning theory. They are “routine unlearning, wiping, and deep unlearning” (Rushmer & Davies, 2004). “Routine unlearning” refers to “times when an individual may need to replace one, often simple, behavior with another” (Rushmer & Davies, 2004). For example, “changing how an individual completes a particular administrative form or a change in a simple process” (Becker & Bish, 2019). The stage of “wiping” refers to “being accelerated and directed unlearning that is deliberate and planned by the organization” (Rushmer & Davies, 2004). For example, “wiping could be planned into activities that surface and acknowledge past experiences or behaviors, along with presenting examples of new ways to undertake tasks aligned with organizational expectations” (Becker & Bish, 2019). Finally, “deep unlearning” means “unlearning involving shock and rupture” that “results in the eventual release of long-held beliefs or ways of operating” (Rushmer & Davies, 2004). For example, “in a situation where the newcomer carries extensive socialization in environments with significantly different values and culture, deep unlearning is likely to be involved in (and indeed required for) effective onboarding” (Becker & Bish, 2019).

The concept of learning and unlearning runs parallel to Bridges’ contention that something has to end before real transition and beginnings can occur (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). Specifically, the unlearning or the idea of ending happens in the first stage, which is “Ending, Losing, and Letting Go,” according to Bridges’ three phases of transition (Bridges & Bridges, 2017).

Both the learning and unlearning theories above remind me of a coaching class that I took at the University of Pennsylvania. In my understanding, being a coach related the wisdom of being ignorant, a concept I learned from a famous Chinese book, “*Dao De*

Jing,” written by Lao Tsu. For example, the main idea leads to the understanding that because a glass is empty, we can put water in; because we know nothing, we can learn more. Just as I wrote in the class’ midterm paper,

There are many more applications of this wisdom, but the logic is always the same. If I want to know more about my client, to wear the same shoes, I want to be ignorant first. One of our class instructors had mentioned that coaches couldn’t relate themselves to the situation that the clients were, even though coaches might have great experiences. (Chen, 2019)

This piece of wisdom is similar to the unlearning concept introduced above. Yet, when I brought up this idea in class, some classmates pointed out that we certainly could not eliminate everything in our “vessels.” In fact, with some knowledge, common sense, original hearts, and mindset would facilitate the coaching result; otherwise, we would be easily redirected by our clients. I agreed. It is all about finding a balance. Sometimes we do need unlearning, such as “In a situation where the newcomer carries extensive socialization in environments with significantly different values, and culture, deep unlearning is likely to be involved in (and indeed required for) effective onboarding” (Becker & Bish, 2019). Sometimes, however, we do not. Therefore, I believe we need both learning and unlearning theory when studying the organizational onboarding process.

The concept of empty glasses also parallels Bridges’ idea about the neutral zone, a period of “going through an in-between time when the old is gone, but the new isn’t fully operational” (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). The significance of having an empty glass or being in the neutral zone is that this particular time or condition is the individual’s and

the organization's best chance to be creative, to develop into what they need to become, and to renew themselves (Bridges & Bridges, 2017).

2.2.2 Employee Engagement

After exploring the key aspects of organizational onboarding, I have a better understanding of it. This concept deals with the relationship between employees and organizations, which reminds me of another concept, employee engagement. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, "The term employee engagement relates to the level of an employee's commitment and connection to an organization." In addition, the Engage for Success website says:

Employee engagement is a workplace approach resulting in the right conditions for all members of an organization to give of their best each day, committed to their organization's goals and values, motivated to contribute to organizational success, with an enhanced sense of their own well-being (Engage for Success, 2019).

This concept is increasingly popular in current times. "Employee engagement has received a great deal of attention in the popular press and among consulting firms and has begun to appear in the academic literature" (Crawford et al., 2010; Rich et al., 2010; Saks, 2006). The Society for Human Resource Management has also said that "Employee engagement has emerged as a critical driver of business success in today's competitive marketplace. High levels of engagement promote retention of talent, foster customer loyalty and improve organizational performance and stakeholder value" (Shrm, 2019).

Furthermore, according to Macey, “engagement is the key to an organization’s success and competitiveness” (Macey et al. 2009).

I believe employee engagement also deals with the relationship between employees and organizations. In this section, I will outline the relationship between organizational onboarding and employee engagement. According to the article “Getting newcomers engaged: the role of socialization tactics,” it was “the first study to examine relationships between socialization tactics and newcomer engagement and to study engagement as a socialization outcome” (Saks & Gruman, 2011). Before examining the authors’ findings, I will explain two important concepts that they introduced. These were “person-job fit or PJ fit,” “person-organization fit or PO fit,” and “self-efficacy.” According to Saks and Ashforth, “One of the goals of organizational socialization is to facilitate newcomers’ adjustment to the requirements of their work tasks and roles and the values and culture of the organization” (Saks and Ashforth, 1997). Self-efficacy refers to “individuals’ judgments regarding their capability to successfully perform specific tasks and behaviors” (Bandura, 1986).

The results of the research in the article were quite impressive. The authors found out that “None of the socialization tactics were related to newcomer engagement” (Saks & Gruman, 2011). Furthermore, “Positive emotions, PJ and PO fit perceptions and self-efficacy were positively related to newcomer engagement.” In addition, they found that “the social tactics were positively related to positive emotions, PJ and PO fit perceptions and self-efficacy.” Therefore, according to the authors, “Socialization tactics were only indirectly related to newcomer engagement through PJ fit, emotions, and self-efficacy” (Saks & Gruman, 2011).

Based on what they found, the authors describe their practical implications. If organizations want their newcomers to be engaged, a redesigning their onboarding process is necessary (Saks & Gruman, 2011). The new model requires “less emphasis on providing information and more emphasis on enhancing PJ fit perceptions and self-efficacy beliefs, and eliciting positive emotions.” The authors describe that companies should pay more attention to their new hires’ fit and care less about the “routine unlearning” that is mentioned above (Rushmer & Davies, 2004). The reason why the authors suggest companies redesign is that traditional socialization tactics focus too much on routine unlearning, and they realize that the engagement would facilitate work-related well-being (Bakker et al., 2008; Schaufeli and Salanova, 2007). It is also “important for people’s sense of community and longevity” (Jorgensen et al., 2010; Xu and Roberts, 2010).

The literature above comes from the standpoint of organizations, notably the onboarding process redesign. As such, I found another source that thinks about redesigning from the employees’ perspective. The name of the article is “Reinventing Employee Onboarding” (Daniel M. Cable, 2013). The main idea was “encouraging new employees to apply their personal strengths to the job, companies can help their new hires become more connected with their colleagues, more engaged in their work and more likely to stay.” In this article, employees are able to act, and they are cast as protagonists. Organizations took on a role that supported newcomers as purposeful actors in their own onboarding.

Researchers have found that the traditional organizational onboarding process has some serious weaknesses. Traditional onboarding programs focus only on telling

newcomers about companies' culture and waiting for new hires to adapt themselves. However, researchers believe this process creates tension as "When newcomers are 'processed' to accept an organization's identity, they are expected to downplay their own identities, at least while they are at work" (Daniel M. Cable, 2013). Therefore, "newcomers actually may not internalize the organizational values even if they appear to comply through external behaviors; over and above compliance." The article explains why the inconsistency of internal thoughts and external behaviors occurs. For many years, psychologists have mentioned that people deeply "want others to see them as they see themselves" (Daniel M. Cable, 2013). They frame this as the desire "to behave authentically." Therefore, if inauthenticity occurs, then, as Cable says:

Socialization practices that get newcomers to behave inauthentically might not be sustainable because they do not fully engage the employee and they do not address broader issues concerning emotional exhaustion and work dissatisfaction" (Daniel M. Cable, 2013).

Given this fact, researchers have developed a new approach called "Personal Identity Socialization." This process involves "encouraging newcomers to express their unique perspectives and strengths on the job from the very beginning and inviting them to frame their work as a platform for doing what they do best" (Daniel M. Cable, 2013). To develop the new method, researchers did a field experiment with a company called Wipro.

The article listed several main features of the new approach that differed from the traditional process. First, in the conventional method, "Senior leader discusses Wipro's values and why the company is an outstanding organization," while in the new approach,

“Senior leader discusses how working at Wipro will give employees an opportunity to express themselves and create individual opportunities” (Daniel M. Cable, 2013). Secondly, in the conventional method, “Newcomers reflect on what they heard about Wipro (for example, what did you hear about Wipro that makes you proud to be part of the organization?),” while in the new approach, “Newcomers reflect on a decision made in the problem-solving exercise and how to apply their signature strengths to the job” (Daniel M. Cable, 2013). Thirdly, in the conventional method, “Group discussion,” while in the new approach, “Individuals introduce themselves and their decisions to the group” (Daniel M. Cable, 2013). Lastly, in the conventional method, “Giveaway: Fleece sweatshirt with company name,” while in the new approach, “Giveaway: Fleece sweatshirt personalized with employee’s name” (Daniel M. Cable, 2013).

In comparing these three aspects, the most notable feature is that the new method gives new hires not one but many chances to present themselves. They get to express themselves in a variety of ways, including talking about themselves and presenting their solutions. In contrast, the traditional process would remain the same even when participants are different. However, the new method’s focus is on newcomers, while I believe organizations could also benefit from this “Personal Identity Socialization” model. The researchers in the article present a useful perspective on the shape of the modern onboarding process. It offers a chance for leaders to learn from their new hires and bring fresh air to the company. As I had read a quote from a book, it said that the only thing that would not change was the change itself. But unfortunately, I have forgotten the book’s name. Conducting “Personal Identity Socialization” gives organizations a chance to make changes for their newcomers in work, environment, or

even culture. After all, according to Hillman, “Employee engagement doesn’t just happen; it is dependent upon the attitudes and actions of the institution” (Hillman, 2010). Therefore, when returning to the topic of employee engagement, I would assume that those organizations that apply the new method would have fewer concerns about their employee engagement.

On the topic of employee engagement, I recall that Professor Hart once mentioned in a human capital class at the University of Pennsylvania, that there were never bad employees (Hart, 2018). Furthermore, a colleague of my father, who was the managing director of the human resource department in their company at the time, told me that the job of HR is to put the right employees in the right positions. Indeed, combining the article’s results with what I have learned thus far in the HR field has given me a clear notion of what HR’s work on onboarding. This view offers a direction for organizations to develop in the future. However, it is still undetermined to what extent companies should make changes to move forward. Based on the resources I consulted, not many focused on improving employee engagement. One challenge being that it is difficult to measure success, not for a lack of criteria, but because there are too many metrics.

2.2.3 Challenges

Few resources that I found cover the topic of onboarding challenges, as I assume companies and researchers tend to present what they have seen or tested successfully. In addition, discussing challenges could appear to simply exhibit problematic examples that organizations cannot fix. However, I did find one article related to the challenges of onboarding, focusing specifically on onboarding new managers. The name of the article

is “Challenges and Solutions to New Manager Onboarding,” and the research was conducted in a health-system pharmacy administration.

According to the report, “Health-System Pharmacy Administration residencies are intended to focus future leaders in the clinical and administrative aspects of pharmacy” (O’Neil et al., 2017). When the company was hiring for new managers, the main problem encountered was that “Most entry-level managers come into the position with multiple years of clinical experience and very little administrative experience” (O’Neil et al., 2017). The transition from being a successful technician in one’s field to managing others is nearly a complete change in jobs. Therefore, I believe the problem of first-time managers above is likely true for everyone starting a first-time job.

No matter how severe the dilemma was, researchers still came up with solutions. Called “The 100-Day Action Plan” (O’Neil et al., 2017), designers of the plan combined the traditional onboarding method with the new approaches discussed above. Given that these “new” managers had already worked in the company for years in the traditional model, it was imperative to teach new managers directly about the culture, rules, current situations, available resources, and expected communication styles to superiors. In terms of their new approaches, the designers offered one-on-one meeting sessions while the traditional group session still existed. In the “one-on-one session” (O’Neil et al., 2017), each new manager got to work with one of their superiors so that they could get to know each other. “One should understand their background, what they want to change, and what they do not want to change, their biggest fear or apprehension, and advice they have for you moving forward” (O’Neil et al., 2017). Furthermore, as the article mentioned,

“building a genuine relationship with the individuals on the team is one of the main objectives of the first 100 days” (O’Neil et al., 2017).

With an understanding of how the action plan developed, the design seemed to share many things in common with my research thus far. As previously mentioned, I am not sure if their challenges and solutions have enough practical implications for many organizations, but there is always more to learn. In sum, I hope my literature review regarding the organizational onboarding process at least provides some references to those companies that seek to make changes and to my learning trajectory in this capstone project.

2.3 Critical Components of Successful Onboarding Programs

From the literature about organizational onboarding above, researchers offered either observations about or suggestions to achieve successful onboarding programs. Authors of the cited articles summarized their thoughts about the critical components of a successful onboarding program. As for the important components of onboarding programs, I found that they largely overlapped across different sources. Rather than reviewing the same things repetitively, I have extracted those crucial elements and listed them. Among all the sources that I accessed, I found that three particular elements appeared in most of the literature. I believe that the three elements below are significant indicators of a successful onboarding program:

- Relationship -Building (Refer to: section 2.2, 2.2.1, and 2.2.2)
- Organizational Support (Organizations provide support effectively for their employees.) (Refer to: section 2.2, 2.2.1, and 2.2.2)

- Communication (A culture that values communication) (Refer to: section 2.2, 2.2.1, and 2.2.3)

Based on my research thus far, I seem to find more clues in organizational onboarding because I have extracted these three elements above. I think these elements might contribute to an effective onboarding program. Therefore, I will raise my second hypothesis: *Relationship, Support, and Communication are the key factors contributing to onboarding success*. In addition to this, many researchers also mention the importance of organizations designing their onboarding programs based on their own situations. While I am unsure if this is a specific component of success, I think this suggestion could leave room for organizations to succeed in their onboarding programs.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

I think that life is like a journey that comprises many different adventures. There has to be a beginning in each one, and there is also an end. Sometimes, people struggle when their lives are about to start a new chapter, as did I. According to Bridges, I was in the neutral zone, which is the “psychological no-man’s-land between the old reality and the new one” (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). Just like the first two stories mentioned in Chapter 1, I experienced uncertainty and anxiety before a new journey. I felt anxious about whether I should go to work; I was also exhausted when I was preparing for the test to pursue a higher degree in education. As I read in a book, the only thing that would not change is the change itself. Yes, I believe the anxiety and uncertainty derived mainly from the prospect of change because I did not know what would happen if I chose to go to school and because I did not know what would happen if I could not get a hundred or higher on the test. It was the time when my old way of doing things had gone, but the new way did not feel comfortable yet (Bridges & Bridges, 2017). Painful though it is, the neutral zone is the individual’s and the organization’s best chance to be creative, to develop into what they need to become, and to renew themselves (Bridges & Bridges, 2017).

Life journeys share something in common with our work lives. The transition period between finishing old trips and starting new episodes becomes important. Similarly, the period of onboarding when new hires are about to change their lives in new

organizations plays a crucial role in their future adventures. In this vein, Bridges uses the following metaphor to characterize the neutral zone:

It is the winter in which the roots begin to prepare themselves for spring's renewal. It is the night during which we are disengaged from yesterday's concerns and preparing for tomorrow's. It is the chaos into which the old form dissolves and from which the new form emerges. It is the seedbed of the new beginnings that you seek (Bridges & Bridges, 2017).

In Chapter 2, I undertook an extensive literature review on organizational onboarding, which had two main focuses. Firstly, I collected sources on onboarding itself. In other words, literature that defined onboarding. Secondly, I explored some of the important characteristics that a good onboarding program should have by extracting three critical components for success. The three keywords that emerged were relationships, support, and communication, chosen because the research indicated that they were necessary factors for a successful onboarding program.

3.1 Research Design

In this chapter, I will detail my plan for the inductive aspect of my research based on the deductive findings from Chapter 2. The purpose of this study is to test the role of the three components "Relationship Building," "Organizational Support," and "Communication" that I identified in the literature review. Therefore, instead of the original hypothesis, *There must be key factors that contribute to a successful onboarding program*, my second hypothesis is that *Relationship Building, Organizational Support, and Communication are the key factors contributing to onboarding success*. There are

two major steps in this section of the paper. Firstly, I will identify four recognizably successful onboarding programs in the real world and explain the reasons why I choose these programs. Secondly, I will analyze these programs using each element on my list of successful onboarding factors.

3.2 Data Form

Based on my research design, the descriptions of the four onboarding models from real companies will be the data that I need to collect. Therefore, the majority of the data will be qualitative rather than quantitative. In terms of qualitative data, a website named Questionpro gives the following definition:

Qualitative data can be observed and recorded. This data type is non-numerical in nature. This type of data is collected through methods of observations, one-to-one interviews, conducting focus groups, and similar methods”(Qualitative Data- Definition, Types, Analysis and Examples, 2020).

I gathered the majority of the data from websites that specialized in the human resource field, and specifically employee onboarding—for example, Sapling and Talentlyft among others.

3.3 Data Collection

I am using information from highly recognized and successful onboarding programs from the four companies below. Sapling is a website that specializes in human resources, and it is a “People Operations platform that manages everything from onboarding to offboarding” (Sapling, 2020). I used Sapling to set my target companies.

According to Sapling, Netflix, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google have the top employee onboarding programs (Dewar, 2019). To test the validity of Sapling's opinion, I will use the same measurement from Comparably to test if those four companies have top employee onboarding programs. According to Comparably, "Our mission is to make workplaces transparent and rewarding for both employees and employers. Comparably reveals company cultures & market compensation (as contributed by real employees), and showcases the fairest and most accurate display of employer brands" (Comparably, 2020).

This website creates individual portfolios for every company it has on file. A company's page reflects a variety of aspects, including an overview, and pages for culture, leadership, reviews, etc. There are over 30 sections, and one of them is dedicated to employee onboarding. In this section, the website generates many survey questions that mainly reflect four areas of employee onboarding. They include "Meet Your Managers," "Negotiate Salary," "Get Acclimated," and "Professional Development." In terms of the data sources used by Comparably, the website states that:

"The data on company pages comes from employees leaving anonymous culture ratings and reviews about their employers. The raw scores are input anonymously by employees of the companies. Additional data points such as rank labels and culture grades are roll-up scores aggregated by the collection of individual anonymous employee ratings and reviews." (Comparably, 2020)

I will not use every question. Instead, I will use questions related to my findings in Chapter 2, which are the three elements of onboarding success. As every company has

its own page, and the performance data uses the same criteria, the data is comparable among all the companies researched.

The questions that I am using to examine these programs are below.

- Is there any positive onboarding experience for the new employees when joining the company?
- Is the company prepared on the first day of onboarding?
- Is the direct manager assigned a significant role in the onboarding during the first 90 days of a new employee?
- Is the employee feeling comfortable giving his/her boss negative feedback?

I identified these questions, and especially the first question, as particularly useful indicators about whether a company has an effective onboarding program. The second question reflects a company's attitude toward its process, as being prepared indicates the company cares about the program. The third question reveals the amount of support that employees receive during the onboarding. From what I had learned in Chapter 2, support from the direct manager plays a significant role in employee engagement, which is an essential standard of a successful onboarding program. Support is also one of the three critical elements that I extracted from Chapter 2. Lastly, giving negative feedback is a good indicator of the relationship between employees and bosses, and relationship building is also an important criterion in the list that I summarized at the end of Chapter 2. Next, I will explore and present the data about these four companies.

First, I will discuss Netflix. According to Comparably, 100% of employees had a positive onboarding experience when they were hired at Netflix. 100% of employees thought the company was prepared on their first day of onboarding, and 40% thought that

the company was very prepared. 100% of employees also felt their direct managers were helpful during the first 90 days of onboarding. Finally, 83% of employees felt comfortable giving their bosses negative feedback (Joining Netflix - Employee Onboarding, 2020).

Next, I will discuss Twitter. According to Comparably, 100% of employees had a positive onboarding experience when they were hired at the company. More than half of the employees (58%) thought the company was somewhat prepared on their first day of onboarding, and there 14% of employees felt it was very prepared. 86% of employees felt that their direct managers were helpful with the onboarding during the first 90 days, and 68% of people felt comfortable giving negative feedback to their bosses (Joining Twitter - Employee Onboarding, 2020).

Then there is LinkedIn. According to Comparably, 83% of the employees had a positive onboarding experience when they were hired at the company. 72% of the people thought their company was very prepared on the first day of onboarding. 100% of the employees thought their direct managers were helpful with onboarding during the first 90 days. Finally, 75% of people felt comfortable giving negative feedback to their bosses. (Joining LinkedIn - Employee Onboarding, 2020).

Fourth is Google. According to Comparably, more than half of the employees (77%) had a positive onboarding experience when they were hired at Google. 43% thought Google was very prepared on the first day of onboarding. However, compared to the previous three companies, this percentage distribution was spread out. In the rest of the employees, 27% felt prepared, 12% felt somewhat prepared, and 18% of people in total thought the company was either unprepared or very unprepared. 72% of staff

thought their direct managers were helpful with onboarding during the first 90 days. Finally, 71% of people felt comfortable giving negative feedback to their bosses (Joining Google - Employee Onboarding, 2020).

3.4 Research Limitations

There are two aspects that I identified as limitations of this research. Firstly, the measure of success in onboarding programs can always vary since people can evaluate success from different angles. There is not an agreed-upon standard for a successful onboarding program. As Kumar states, “there isn’t one right approach to handle the onboarding procedure of new contracts” (Kumar & Pandey, 1970). Therefore, even if I can conclude which elements are essential to achieve an outstanding onboarding process, it does not mean my summary is comprehensive; there will always be more crucial elements that exist.

Secondly, both the amount of the samples and the source of the data limit the research. On the one hand, I only test my list of elements against four outstanding onboarding programs, but there are more than four companies that have excellent onboarding programs. On the other hand, even though I gathered the information from onboarding specialized websites, their credibility is relatively lower than data from journal articles. Therefore, I think the two aspects above are the major limitations of this research.

CHAPTER 4

REAL ONBOARDING MODELS ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the qualitative data collected for this study. The data is comprised of descriptions of successful onboarding programs in four companies, Netflix, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google. An analysis of these onboarding programs, using the list of critical elements identified in the literature, is presented and discussed. The goal is to analyze these onboarding programs to learn if the three factors common in the descriptions of onboarding programs: “Relationship Building,” “Organizational Support,” and “Communication” are found in these model programs, which would support the following hypothesis: *Relationship Building, Organizational Support, and Communication are the key factors contributing to onboarding success.*

4.1 Companies Identified

I have chosen four companies, Netflix, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google, as examples for onboarding models. According to a report from Sapling, Netflix, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google have the top employee onboarding programs (Dewar, 2019). Sapling is a human resource specialized website, with a specific onboarding focus. One of its slogans is “Sapling helps you welcome your team with an amazing onboarding experience.” Furthermore, an essential function that this website has is to “introduce new hires to your company, culture, and team before their start date” (Sapling, 2020). The website shares articles and information about onboarding models from a variety of companies so that employees can understand their working environment.

Comparably is another website that I reference. As mentioned in Chapter 3, this website creates individual portfolios for every company that it has on file. A company's page reflects a variety of elements, with pages for an overview, culture, leadership, reviews, etc. Among over 30 sections, one is dedicated to employee onboarding. The website generates a variety of questions to reveal how a company's onboarding program is performed. Four questions were chosen to help to identify great onboarding programs (Comparably, 2020).

To reiterate, the four questions listed in Chapter 3 are below.

- Is there any positive onboarding experience for the new employees when joining the company?
- Is the company prepared on the first day of onboarding?
- Is the direct manager assigned a significant role in the onboarding during the first 90 days of a new employee?
- Is the employee feeling comfortable giving his/her boss negative feedback?

I will present the data from each company's portfolio, reflecting their onboarding program's performance in Chapter 3.

4.2 Relationship-Building

In this section, I will identify relationship building, and then examine it in the four companies' onboarding models.

4.2.1 Element Identification

According to Hillman, “onboarding involves a special, conscious effort to make a new employee quickly become a productive member of the organization, laying a solid foundation for a long-term relationship” (Hillman, 2010). I include this source to explain the definition of onboarding as mentioned in Chapter 2. Building relationships contributes to a successful onboarding program. This is further supported by Sharma & Stol, who state that “Onboarding success (which tends to be a short-term outcome, as it takes place within the first few months) is positively associated with job satisfaction and workplace relationship quality” (Sharma & Stol, 2020).

Indeed, which is “the number one job site in the world with over 250 million unique visitors every month,” has defined relationship building in the workplace as follows:

Relationship building skills are a combination of soft skills that a person applies to connect with others and form positive relationships. In the workplace, relationship building skills are essential for getting along with coworkers, contributing to a team and building an understanding between yourself and others (Indeed, 2020).

In addition, Indeed indicates several aspects and skills that relate to building great relationships in the workplace. According to Indeed, relationship building involves interpersonal skills, non-verbal communication skills, verbal communication skills, listening skills, empathy, emotional intelligence, networking skills, and team-building skills (Indeed, 2020). Therefore, I will analyze each company’s onboarding model to determine if the model includes any of the skill sets above.

4.2.2 Netflix on Relationship-Building

The first distinction of the Netflix onboarding program is its early start, which is an indicator that Netflix is trying to build relationships with their new hires. According to the article “Employee Onboarding All-Stars: 4 Lessons,” Netflix’s onboarding program starts before the new employee even arrives. As the author puts it, “The new hire’s laptop of choice and configuration are on their desk and ready to go the moment the new employee walks in the door” (Marino, 2016).

We can verify these reports by exploring testimonials of Netflix employees. Gayathri, who was recently hired by Netflix, posted his thoughts on Quora, a website where people can post questions and answers. She wrote, “Even before you are at work, every aspect of your work is seamlessly taken care of from your desk to all the technology you will use while at work” (Gayathri, 2016). Poorna Udupi, who is an engineer at Netflix, also posted that “My laptop choice and configuration was asked of me on the phone (before joining) and was ready on my desk the day I arrived” (Udupi, 2014).

Netflix connects to its newcomers before day one of the onboarding program, so that employees enter the stage of knowing what to do without instruction early. This stage is called “a fearless adventure” (Marino, 2016). In terms of fear, O’Neil notes that employees have different backgrounds. Knowing their experience, what they want to change, and what they do not want to change, as well as their biggest fear or apprehension all contribute to building a genuine relationship with new hires (O’Neil et al., 2017).

Not only does Netflix connect with new employees early, but it also offers mentoring programs to them. As Christine states, “Netflix also helps its employees ease into their new job as their new hire is provided with a dedicated mentor to help during the first days” (Marino, 2016). Gayathri corroborates this, stating “A mentor is set up for every new hire” (Gayathri, 2016). Poorna says, additionally, that “A dedicated mentor was assigned to help me bootstrap for the first couple of days” (Udupi, 2014). The mentoring program enables employees to know what they should be doing and get direct help from their mentors. This serves as further evidence that Netflix tries to build great relationships with employees by helping them have “fearless adventures” (Marino, 2016). Once new people know “what to do,” they will start to do right away (Marino, 2016);

Netflix prefers a so-called ‘right off the boat’ plan. That means they let employees get involved into large projects from the very beginning, thus making them appreciate the trust and motivating to join fast and contribute to the project success with pleasure (Yelina, 2017).

According to the employees’ input, Gayathri says that “new hires are given chances to work on meaningful projects” (Gayathri, 2016), while Poorna notes that “my first code check-in and production push was in the first week of joining” (Udupi, 2014). Furthermore, he says that “new hires are given significant responsibility and can have a solid impact from the get-go.” According to Olic, “this gives them a big confidence boost and makes them see value in their work” (Olic, 2017).

Letting employees start on big projects is an effective way to build positive relationships. According to Dr. Legg, “anxiety is a feeling of fear, worry, or unease. It can be a reaction to stress” (Legg, 2020). Dr. Humphreys also points out that

If anxiety is a disorienting experience in the face of nameless, faceless threats to our identity that we do not fully understand and are barely even aware of, fear is an emotional response to a threat that we are aware of and do understand (Humphreys, 2018).

In Chapter 2, I introduced two types of stressors that employees have when starting new jobs. One was “Challenge stressors” (Ellis et al., 2014). For example, time pressure and goal achievement “would result in positive outcomes.” The author also found that the challenge stressor can “serve to offset the negative effects of strain” (Ellis et al., 2014). This resonates with the concept of the “fearless adventure” (Marino, 2016) above. Big projects that employees work on establish both time pressure and goal achievement. Projects play the role of a challenge stressor, reducing employees’ level of fear. Therefore, offering large projects enables Netflix to build positive relationships with their new hires.

In conclusion, connecting new employees before day one, matching them with mentors, and assigning large projects to newcomers are the three aspects that indicate Netflix pays attention to employee relationship building during its onboarding program.

4.2.3 Twitter on Relationship-Building

To build relationships with new hires, Twitter invented a program that moderates the stress of social relationships for new hires. The process was called “Yes to Desk.” According to Robinson, this program was designed to “deliver an exceptional experience to the new team member from the moment that they agree to join to the moment they show up for work on day one” (Robinson, 2018). In addition, according to Kempton, “the

program includes 75 different touchpoints between the new hire, recruiting, HR team, IT, and more” (Kempton, 2020). In terms of relationship building, Jackson, Schuler, and Vredenburg state that, “Uncertainty associated with new tasks, roles, and social relationships is innately stressful and is one reason that newcomers may fail to develop positive attitudes toward their new organization” (Jackson, Schuler, & Vredenburg, 1987).

Other than the challenge stressor discussed in the Netflix section, which can be used to offset the negative effects of strain, another stressor is called “Hindrance stressor” (Ellis et al., 2014). For example, role ambiguity can “thwart goals and result solely in negative outcomes.” Twitter tried to reduce the amount of stress that new employees had before and during the onboarding process. Alex McCauley, who used to work at Twitter, revealed what was inside the Yes to Desk” program.

We make sure you have the email address you wanted, a t-shirt and bottle of wine ready at your desk, a desk assigned strategically based on what you’re working on and with whom, in all internal systems, and colorful PDF’s sent to you to explain what to expect on your first day, etc. (McCauley, 2011).

Anxiety is a feeling of fear (Legg, 2020). To resonate with the concept of the “fearless adventure” (Marino, 2016) above, Twitter reduces the fear of new hires while they are in the onboarding program. According to O’Neil, reducing employees’ fear allows companies to build a genuine relationship with new hires. Therefore, in Twitter’s onboarding model, the company pays great attention to relationship building with newcomers.

4.2.4 LinkedIn on Relationship-Building

The onboarding process at LinkedIn starts before day one. Similar to Netflix, LinkedIn connects with new hires early. This is an indicator that LinkedIn is trying to build relationships with their new hires. On the official website of LinkedIn Talent Solutions, the company posts the timeframe of employee onboarding from pre-arrival. Rather than sending new hires congratulation emails, LinkedIn does something more. According to Dowling, the company shares helpful documents to alleviate first-day concerns. For example, information that showcases everything a new hire can expect on the first day. In her opinion, “providing these details in advance will not only help calm those first-day jitters but also allow new hires to already feel like they belong to the company and their team” (Dowling, 2016). Connecting to my findings in Chapter 2, Jackson, Schuler, and Vredenburgh express their thoughts about relationship building. Uncertainty is one of the reasons why new hires may not develop positive attitudes toward their new organizations (Jackson, Schuler, & Vredenburgh, 1987). Therefore, reducing the level of employee stress becomes essential.

LinkedIn has made an effort to relieve newcomers’ stress. For example, on day one, Dowling said, “from the moment they walk through the door, we roll out the blue carpet, immediately greeting them and making them feel welcome.” She and her colleagues, who are in charge of the onboarding program, ensure that the “new hire gets the essentials, such as their badge and their laptop, completes their paperwork and gets introduced to the things that matter” (Dowling, 2016). This demonstrates, therefore, showing that LinkedIn attempts to alleviate employee stress. The stress at play here is the

“Hindrance stressor.” For example, role ambiguity, which “would thwart goals and result solely in negative outcomes” (Ellis et al., 2014).

Fear and worry become anxiety, which can be a result of stress (Legg, 2020). Releasing stress reduces the amount of fear, worry, or unease new hires experience. Feeding into the concept of the “fearless adventure” (Marino, 2016) above, LinkedIn enables new hires to have less fear during the onboarding program. Furthermore, according to O’Neil, reducing employees’ fear allows companies to build a genuine relationship with new hires. Accordingly, in LinkedIn’s onboarding model, the company pays great attention to relationship building with newcomers.

4.2.5 Google on Relationship-Building

Similar to Netflix and LinkedIn, Google starts connecting with new hires before the first day of the onboarding program. To recall what I discovered for Netflix and LinkedIn, making connections early with new employees contributes to building positive relationships. According to Mulholland, there is a list of tasks that is sent to hiring managers one day before the onboarding program starts (Mulholland, 2018). However, Google also helps new employees building relationships by training them first. Mulholland said that one task for the employer was to “help the new hire build a social network” (Mulholland, 2018). According to Buttenham, because Google’s inner workings are top secret, new Googlers will attend a two-week in-person training, as well as an orientation program that is about “organizational structure, core technologies, and programming practices” (Buttenham, 2016).

In terms of the workplace training, Indeed defines it as follows: “Workplace training is the process of developing knowledge, skills, and efficiency in your job” (Indeed, 2019). Through training, new employees arrive at a stage where they know “what to do when no one’s there telling them what to do.” New tasks and roles cause uncertainty, which makes newcomers stressed, and is one reason why they may not have positive attitudes toward the organization (Jackson, Schuler, & Vredenburg, 1987). Marino named the stage of “knowing what to do,” or having less uncertainty, as “a fearless adventure” (Marino, 2016).

Since fear generates anxiety, which is a reaction to stress (Legg, 2020), less fear leads to less stress. This supports my previous analysis for Netflix and LinkedIn. According to O’Neil, reducing employees’ fear allows companies to build a genuine relationship with new hires. Furthermore, Google also pays great attention to communication, and according to the resources that I have referenced thus far, communication contributes to relationship building. As described in the article “Successful onboarding: Follow the 5 C’s,” “Just as communication at the beginning of a marriage can indicate if it will end in divorce, the foundation established early on with a new hire is crucial to productivity, engagement, and retention” (The HR Specialist, 2011).

Besides training, communication is what Google focuses on while building relationships with new employees. After training, when senior leaders talk about their experience and share engineering perspectives, they are better able to “establish rapport and reach the Nooglers because everyone shares engineering values and language” (Buttenham, 2016). Google seems to help new employees prepare very early to be ready

to join the team with which they will work. I have not found further information about the purpose behind that. However, it can be assumed it is a marker that the company values communication with newcomers, especially because they start to get involved at the beginning of the onboarding process. Being prepared before joining teams is the way that Google helps new employees build connections with their teams. According to the article “Successful onboarding: Follow the 5 C’s” (The HR Specialist, 2011), one of the five keywords is connection, which “helps employees network and establish relationships within the organization” (The HR Specialist, 2011). Therefore, in Google’s onboarding model, the company does try to build relationships with newcomers, also known as Nooglers.

4.3 Organizational Support (Organizations Provide Support for Their Employees.)

According to Sharma, onboarding success is positively associated with workplace relationship quality. Besides that, there is a positive association “between support and onboarding success” (Sharma & Stol, 2020). Among the three elements on the list, the second is organizational support. Specifically, companies providing support for their employees. In this section, I will identify and examine Organizational Support as an element of successful onboarding in four outstanding onboarding models at Netflix, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google.

4.3.1 Element Identification

According to Sharma, support reflects “a more continuous process, and ongoing support will make newcomers at ease when seeking help from seniors and peers

regarding professional and personal issues, without invoking feelings of being judged or embarrassed” (Sharma & Stol, 2020). Above their definition of support, they also found that there was a positive association between support and onboarding success (Sharma & Stol, 2020). Therefore, if organizations support their new hires more, they will have more successful onboarding results. However, measurement of the support that employees receive from their employers is often intangible, as it is hard to measure the adequate amount of support for employees. Therefore, we may need to consider looking from a different angle.

Eisenberger, Malone, and Presson studied organizational support from a different angle, the employees’ standpoint, and they introduced a concept called “Perceived Organizational Support” (POS). According to them, POS is “an employee’s perception that the organization values his or her work contributions and cares about the employee’s well-being” (Eisenberger, Malone, & Presson, 2016). They also found that optimizing POS enhances employee engagement.

Limeade, a website that helps employees to know their company cares, has identified several aspects of POS. According to Limeade, “organization-wide support” and “local support” are the main aspects of POS (Limeade, 2020). In organization-wide support, there are four subsections: “Strategic alignment,” “Leaders,” “Well-being tools and programs,” and “Culture.” Under local support, there are an additional four subsections: “Manager,” “Team/Peers,” “Social networks,” and “Physical work environment” (Limeade, 2020). I will now examine each company’s onboarding model to determine if their models contain any evidence of the aspects of support that Limeade introduced.

4.3.2 Netflix on Organizational Support

Netflix starts to support its new hires as early as day one, while they set up their workspace. Poorna Udupi shared the following anecdote about his time as an engineer at Netflix:

I requested a desktop workstation server over a self-serve portal. The next morning a brand new ThinkStation was humming under my desk with a note from the IT team that said, ‘We assumed you wanted the latest Ubuntu. Please advise if not.’ (Udupi, 2014).

Thinkstation is the name of a computer, in other words, it is hardware. Ubuntu is the name of an operating system, in other words, it is software. Both hardware and software are essential parts of a computer. According to Poorna, the company acted in such a short time and provided the best solution to his computer needs (both hardware and software), which made him describe the “No BS approval process” (Udupi, 2014).

In terms of the workplace support at Netflix, Jayakumar Muthusamy has written an article about lessons from Netflix’s onboarding programs (Muthusamy, 2020). In his words, the story from Udupi is one of his suggestions to “keep workspace prepared.” He explained that this idea was to “make it easy for the new employee to hit the ground running quickly.” The reason behind this was that “Time wasted setting up the workspace after the new hire has joined, is productive time wasted for the employee” (Muthusamy, 2020). When referring to Limeade’s list for POS, this workplace support belongs to the “Physical work environment,” under the local support aspect.

Udupi had shared another experience in which Netflix supported him. He mentioned that there was an orientation program to explain the Netflix technology stack and make introductions to “ever-helpful” coworkers. He thought that this part of the onboarding program made his life as a software developer “super easy and exciting” (Udupi, 2014). This directly refers back to the definition of the organizational support from Sharma, which said that the support “will make newcomers at ease when seeking help from seniors and peers regarding professional and personal issues, without invoking feelings of being judged or embarrassed” (Sharma & Stol, 2020).

On the one hand, Udupi’s feedback above is evidence that Netflix provided a great amount of support that he needed. On the other hand, from the employees’ standpoint, “When new employees believe that formal support is inadequate, a sense of abandonment often emerges” (“Improving the socialization of new employees,” 2019). I didn’t see a sense of abandonment in his feedback to the programs that Netflix provided. Therefore, based on Poorna Udupi’s experience of Netflix’s onboarding process, the company did support him and provide an experience that was, in his words, “easy and exciting” (Udupi, 2014).

4.3.3 Twitter on Organizational Support

Twitter offers new hires a five-week rotation program of scheduled 30-minute presentations every Friday. According to McCauley, people in different departments take turns giving presentations every Friday. Many departments are involved in this program, for example, Web team, Support, International, Communications, etc. Therefore, new

hires “meet with just about all of the leads/PM’s/managers and ask questions” (McCauley, 2011).

According to Limeade, the rotation program that Twitter offers belongs to the aspect of “Social networks” under the “Local support” section (Limeade, 2020). Limeade more specifically explains the support provided by social networks. One such explanation is, “Find ways to connect employees across business groups and locations” because “formal and informal social networks can provide great support for well-being improvement” (Limeade, 2020). Therefore, employees are supported through connections. This recalls Eisenberger’s thought that “optimizing the perceived organizational support would enhance employee engagement” (Eisenberger, Malone, & Presson, 2016). Cable also discussed employee engagement, stating that “companies can help their new hires become more connected with their colleagues, more engaged in their work and more likely to stay” (Daniel M. Cable, 2013). Therefore, I conclude that Twitter supports new hires by building employee connections, which then contributes to higher employee engagement and Twitter’s onboarding success.

4.3.4 LinkedIn on Organizational Support

During the onboarding process at LinkedIn, the company supports new employees with continued education. The company offers two kinds of onboarding resources. The first is called the New Hire Roadmap. It is a week-by-week online guide that is designed to “help each new employee transition into LinkedIn and their new role.” The other is called the New Hire Resource Kit. This kit includes “additional content and information on their day-to-day activities” (Bevegni, 2015).

The introduction of the New Hire Resource Kit is evidence that LinkedIn supports new hires. According to Limeade, providing the resource kit belongs to the section “Culture support,” under the “organizational-wide support” section. Referring back to Limeade, culture support indicates that companies might “Build well-being measures into corporate policies (e.g., paid vacation time, volunteer days, on-site fitness events)” as well as “Create tangible processes and materials that incorporate your company mission and values” (Limeade, 2020).

The New Hire Roadmap is additional evidence that LinkedIn supports newcomers. According to the website Nuevista, the roadmap is a twelve-week program that charts a course toward acclimation. Furthermore, the roadmap “gives each employee everything they need to complete the journey, but the employees must execute onboarding themselves. LinkedIn says this helps build an ownership culture” (Nuevista, 2019). In terms of the phrase “execute onboarding themselves,” LinkedIn provides an explanation. The company encourages new hires to create their own roadmaps and make it a one-stop destination for essential resources. According to LinkedIn, the roadmap is everything that hiring managers need to do to onboard their new employees (Bevegni, n.d).

To recall the organizational support literature in Chapter 2, from the organizations’ perspective, “it is vital to be aware of character differences among new employees. This can lead to varying perceptions of psychological safety and mean that those with limited interpersonal skills and/or self-efficacy are likely to require more assistance from coworkers than their counterparts” (“Improving the socialization of new employees,” 2019). The reason for this is that “when new employees believe that formal

support is inadequate, a sense of abandonment often emerges” (“Improving the socialization of new employees,” 2019). Encouraging new employees to create their own roadmap enables the company to be aware of personalized differences among new hires. After all, like Beer, Caldwell, and Floyd mention, “being willing to support them can often lead to the company’s prosperity” (Caldwell & Peters, 2018).

LinkedIn’s offerings for the newcomers are slightly different than the companies I analyzed above. Instead of helping directly, the company has made more of an effort to support new employees indirectly. Thus, in LinkedIn’s onboarding model, it is apparent that the company is supporting new employees in its own way.

4.3.5 Google on Organizational Support

Google supports its new employees during the onboarding period via the mentoring program. According to Mulholland, hiring managers must “match the new hire with a peer buddy” (Mulholland, 2018). According to Buttenham, the mentoring program is “successful within the company and who has taken a course on typical new hire needs” (Buttenham, 2016). The website Hired by Google says that “mentors can show new employees around the office, answer questions, help new employees find resources on career advancement, and give cultural insight into the company” (Hired by Google, 2020). Buttenham also describes that the formal relationship between new hires and mentors “spans an average of three months” (Buttenham, 2016). The support that Google’s mentoring program provided for new hires, or Nooglers, has two aspects. The first is that “mentors can show new employees around the office, answer questions” (Hired by Google, 2020). According to Limeade, this area of support belongs to the “Culture

support,” which is under the “organizational-wide support” section. Furthermore, culture support means to “Create tangible processes and materials that incorporate your company mission and values” (Limeade, 2020). Mentors play the role of creating “tangible processes and materials,” as new hires can directly locate the available resources by asking questions.

The other aspect of support that mentors provide is to “help new employees find resources on career advancement, and give cultural insight into the company” (Hired by Google, 2020). To recall the organizational support literature in Chapter 2, “when new employees believe that formal support is inadequate, a sense of abandonment often emerges” (“Improving the socialization of new employees,” 2019). Therefore, “it is vital to be aware of character differences among new employees. This can lead to varying perceptions of psychological safety and mean that those with limited interpersonal skills and/or self-efficacy are likely to require more assistance from coworkers than their counterparts” (“Improving the socialization of new employees,” 2019). At Google, Nooglers receive direct assistance from their mentors. Because mentors work with their mentees one-on-one, this enables them to have a more comprehensive understanding of their mentees’ characteristics, personalities, strengths, weaknesses, etc. Therefore, mentors can help new employees more effectively “find resources on career advancement, and give cultural insight into the company” (Hired by Google, 2020).

Besides the mentoring program, Bутtenham reports that Google has created a mailing list for the new hires, named Noogler Engineers Helping Engineering Nooglers (NEHEN) (Buttenham, 2016). According to Google,

A dedicated mailing list entitled Noogler Engineers Helping Engineering Nooglers (NEHEN) allows new engineers to ask ‘newbie’ questions. Although not used by all new employees, it does enable new engineers to team up with peers and solve problems and questions collectively (Google, 2011).

Referring back to the definition of support, it is “a more continuous process, and ongoing support will make newcomers at ease when seeking help from seniors and peers regarding professional and personal issues, without invoking feelings of being judged or embarrassed” (Sharma & Stol, 2020). According to Bутtenham, Google has tried to solve the perennial problem of newcomers being afraid of asking stupid questions. With the mailing list, Nooglers can seek help without invoking feelings of being judged or embarrassed. In conclusion, in Google provides support for new employees in the onboarding program.

4.4 Communication (A Culture That Values Communication)

Returning to one definition of onboarding, “new employee onboarding is the process of integrating a new employee with a company and its culture” (Maurer, 2019). In addition, onboarding processes are designed to indoctrinate new employees into the organizational culture (Daniel M. Cable, 2013). The culture of a company plays an essential role in onboarding success. In this section, I will identify the last factor on my list of successful onboarding elements—Communication (A Culture That Values Communication). I will then test it in the four outstanding onboarding models from Netflix, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google.

4.4.1 Element Identification

What is corporate culture? Investopedia, a website that focuses on providing information and concepts from the financial and business field, gives the following definition: “Corporate culture refers to the beliefs and behaviors that determine how a company’s employees and management interact and handle outside business transactions” (Tarver, 2020). In terms of the importance of having a culture, the Society for Human Resource Management says that

When an organization has a strong culture, three things happen: Employees know how top management wants them to respond to any situation, employees believe that the expected response is the proper one, and employees know that they will be rewarded for demonstrating the organization’s values (Shrm, 2020).

As Tarver states, “corporate culture is implied, not expressly defined, and develops organically over time from the cumulative traits of the people the company hires” (Tarver, 2020). While consulting onboarding literature, I noticed that companies who have successful onboarding programs tend to have an organizational culture that values communication. In other words, companies are willing to hear their new people. There is little direct evidence showing that companies value communication; however, the four companies I chose with good onboarding programs all implied that they paid great attention to communication. The article “Successful onboarding: Follow the 5 C’s” mentions that, “Just as communication at the beginning of a marriage can indicate if it will end in divorce, the foundation established early on with a new hire is crucial to productivity, engagement, and retention” (The HR Specialist, 2011). Furthermore, according to Indeed, communication is one of the crucial skills that contributes to

building positive relationships with employees (Indeed, 2020). Therefore, in the following section, I will analyze these companies' models through the lens of communication.

4.4.2 Netflix on Communication

On Netflix's official website, one of the values that the company lists is communication. Netflix lists the following description of behaviors that facilitate the effectiveness of communication:

You are concise and articulate in speech and writing. You listen well and seek to understand before reacting. You maintain calm poise in stressful situations to draw out the clearest thinking. You adapt your communication style to work well with people from around the world who may not share your native language. You provide candid, helpful, timely feedback to colleagues (Netflix, n.d.).

Netflix gives a lot of chances for employees to speak out, enabling them to communicate with whomever they need. The flexible communication culture benefits from the company's structure. According to Anderson, the "corporate structure is relatively flat compared to many businesses that have a hierarchical organizational architecture" (Anderson, 2019). For example, all the main business executives report directly to the CEO. He finds that this design "reduces the management levels needed to escalate issues from the online company's bottom-line to its organizational headquarters." Therefore, as Anderson stated in another article, "the flatness of Netflix's corporate structure aligns with this aspect of the organizational culture by supporting effective and efficient communication throughout the enterprise" (Anderson, 2019).

4.4.3 Twitter on Communication

While Netflix has a flat hierarchy that encourages communication among all the employees, new hires at Twitter have a chance to talk to their CEO during the onboarding period. According to McCauley, “for a long time, we had managers greet new hires on their first breakfast, so they had a familiar face, now our CEO Dick Costolo has breakfast with everyone instead” (McCauley, 2011). Even though the CEO is now a different person, the tradition remains. Not only does the CEO come out and interact with newcomers but people in many departments also join in to meet their new colleagues, allowing new employees to communicate with different people in various departments throughout the morning. According to Son, after having conversations with the CEO, “employees do the dance with HR, facilities, and IT. Once they’re squared away, new hires have lunch with the folks they’ll be working with” (Son, 2016). Thus, having both breakfast and lunch with people from different departments of the company gives new employees a chance to interact and have “a familiar face” (McCauley, 2011). Per Muthusamy’s idea, this makes it easy for the new employee to hit the ground running (Muthusamy, 2020).

Quick transition becomes essential to organizations. According to Hillman, “onboarding involves a special, conscious effort to make a new employee quickly become a productive member of the organization, laying a solid foundation for a long-term relationship” (Hillman, 2010). In the article “Successful onboarding: Follow the 5 C’s,” the HR Specialist also points out the importance of establishing an early foundation with new hires (The HR Specialist, 2011). Thus, the structure of early interaction in

Twitter's onboarding model indicates that the company has a culture that values communication with new hires.

4.4.4 LinkedIn on Communication

While Twitter's new hires have early communication with their CEO, new hires at LinkedIn have a chance to meet some executive leaders in the company. During the onboarding period at LinkedIn, there is a session called Exec Q&A. According to Bevegni, new employees have the chance to chat with members of senior leadership. The executives have this open-door policy because they want new hires to feel close to various company leaders on the first day (Bevegni, 2015).

Similar to having breakfast with the CEO at Twitter, LinkedIn provides a formal platform for new hires to communicate with senior leaders. Both LinkedIn and Twitter share the same core idea behind the activities of these interactions, and that is to let leaders hear their new employees, especially on the first day. In terms of communication, the article "Successful onboarding: Follow the 5 C's" proposed five criteria that contribute to effective onboarding, and one of them is the connection (The HR Specialist, 2011). Through communication, leaders and new hires build connections. Furthermore, the article mentioned that connections "help employees network and establish relationships within the organization" (The HR Specialist, 2011). Therefore, the company values communication with new hires.

Outside of the fact that LinkedIn encourages leaders to hear their newcomers, as far as the other companies that I researched are concerned, LinkedIn is the only one that designs this specific Q&A session between the employees and executives. By referring to

a document named: Onboarding in a Box, it is a particular event on the onboarding agenda. (Bevegni, n.d), which is another significant evidence showing that LinkedIn pays great attention to the communications between executives and new hires.

4.4.5 Google on Communication

Google values communication in its own way. According to Mulholland, Google sends a list of tasks to hiring managers one day before the onboarding program starts. One task is to “Encourage open dialogue.” Specifically, the purpose of this is “to get useful feedback to improve your own processes” (Mulholland, 2018).

As mentioned, Netflix has a flat corporate culture, which reduces the level of the hierarchy structure. Similarly, open dialogue is the way that Google tries to provide a platform that facilitates a more flexible communication style within the company. As Mulholland states, “Google will put trust in you as part of the open approach to company culture and inclusion” because Google believes “it’s the ‘people that make Google the kind of company it is.’” (Mulholland, 2018). Mulholland’s mention of trust recalls a quote referenced in Chapter 2 from Caldwell and Floyd: “Employers who create relationships with employees based upon high trust and high commitment create organizational cultures in which employees exhibit increased extra-role behavior are more creative and innovative, and more profitable than employees in comparable organizations” (cf. Beer, 2009; Caldwell and Floyd, 2014). In their opinion, trust is an essential part of organizational culture. Kumar and Pandey also mention that one important element of onboarding success is trust (Kumar & Pandey, 1970). Therefore, by

encouraging open dialogues, Google is building a culture of trust through communication.

As gathered from the onboarding literature and other companies' onboarding models, communication is an effective way of making connections between the company and new employees. A good connection with newcomers increases the chance that they will get support. According to Sharma and Stol, "there was a positive association between support and onboarding success" (Sharma & Stol, 2020). Therefore, I believe Google's efforts to build a trusting organizational culture through open communication contribute to onboarding success. It is my conclusion that Google has a culture that values communication with new hires.

4.5 Summary of Analysis

In this chapter, I referred to the list I generated on the essential elements of a successful onboarding program in Chapter 2. There were three criteria on the list, "Relationship Building," "Organizational Support," and "A Culture That Values Communication." Using the list, I analyzed four companies, Netflix, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google, that are known for having outstanding employee onboarding programs. The result of the analysis aligns with my findings in the literature review, which means that the three identified elements are essential to a successful onboarding program. Therefore, my hypothesis that "*Relationship Building, Organizational Support, and Communication are the key factors contributing to onboarding success*" is supported by the evidence I analyzed.

In the next chapter, I will identify and explain key findings from analyzing the four companies' onboarding models; specifically, those elements that improve on my hypothesis of onboarding success. Next, I will summarize what I have done in this paper from Chapters 1 to 4 and discuss the research limitations that future research can focus on eliminating. Then, I will discuss the implications that this research has on myself, from the standpoint of a company's future employee as well as from the standpoint of an employer in my own business. Finally, I will describe the target audience of this paper and provide my recommendations for them.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.1 Research Findings

After analyzing the onboarding models at Netflix, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google, I determined two takeaways to improve the hypothesis *Relationship, Support, and Communication are the key factors contributing to onboarding success*. The first takeaway concerns the third element “Communication.” Examining Google’s culture led me to the understanding that a focus only on communication might be vague. On the one hand, communication as an aspect of cultural values can also be a narrow concept. Therefore, specifically analyzing the communication element means that an onboarding program must have evidence of the formal use of communication to be successful. However, in some companies, I could not find that evidence. Taking Google’s onboarding program as an example, I did not find any direct evidence showing that communication was one of the critical values in Google’s culture, but Google trusted its employees and opened its culture to everyone, especially Nooglers. This indicates that there was a significant amount of communication involved. Therefore, even though I can conclude that Google has a culture that values communication, this also indicates an additional element that is more valuable than just the communication itself. In other words, communication is only a form of something that Google values very much, which I now believe is people.

As stated, communication can be a broad focus. In examining other onboarding processes from companies outside of this research, the differences that emerge among

programs are only the extent of the communication. Even though the list of elements specifically focuses on the value of communication, focusing on communication itself is still too broad. Onboarding programs at Twitter and LinkedIn are good examples of this. Employees can have conversations with executive leaders and the CEO, which is evidence of communication, but I assume many other companies include communications in their onboarding processes as well. The topic is so broad because communication is indispensable for any event that an organization is offering, including the employee onboarding program. Who would not speak with anyone during any program? Therefore, focusing only on “communication” does not differentiate regular onboarding programs from successful ones.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the HR Specialist states “Just as communication at the beginning of a marriage can indicate if it will end in divorce, the foundation established early on with a new hire is crucial to productivity, engagement, and retention” (The HR Specialist, 2011). The role of communication becomes important only if the couple values their relationship. Therefore, similar to my opinion on Google’s example, there must be something more valuable than just the communication itself at play. I believe that this value is people, in this case, the new employees. Therefore, I am proposing a third version of the hypothesis. “Relationship Building,” “Organizational Support,” and “A Culture That Values New Employees” are the key factors that contribute to onboarding success.

The second takeaway is that I have found connections among the three elements on the list. Providing support to employees is an important component of building good employee relationships. Building relationships and providing support are more effective

because of communication. Therefore, I suggest a connection between all the elements. When a company values its newcomers, it supports employees through effective communication and builds healthy employee relationships. If a company follows this chain of values, it will likely design a successful onboarding program.

5.2 Summary of My Capstone Journey

In this capstone paper, I began with personal stories related to my journey studying Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania. I told the stories because they happened at critical moments of my life, moments on the cusp of a transition to a new life. These moments share the same characteristics as onboarding when outsiders make transitions to become insiders (Bauer, Morrison, & Callister, 1998; Wanberg, 2012). Combining my career experiences and my current situation, I decided to find out what defines successful employee onboarding. Therefore, I conducted this research to summarize the key factors of successful onboarding models.

I explored the world of employee onboarding and did an extensive literature review. Other than the definition of onboarding, topics also included concepts and theories that made onboarding effective, a lens (stressor) that provided a new perspective of onboarding, employee engagement, and onboarding challenges. Then I extracted three critical elements from the literature that contributed to successful onboarding, which are “Relationship Building,” “Organizational Support,” and “Communication.”

Next, I analyzed four of the world’s best onboarding programs using this list of elements. According to the result of my analysis, the three standards were closely associated with those successful onboarding models in the real world. Finally, based on

this work, I proposed a third version of the hypothesis: *“Relationship Building,”* *“Organizational Support,”* and *“A Culture That Values New Employees”* are the key factors that contribute to onboarding success.

5.3 Research Limitations

Aside from the findings in this research, it is worth noting that there are limitations that preclude this research from being comprehensive. In this section, I will mention the three limitations of my study. First of all, the measure of success in onboarding programs is variable because people can evaluate success from different angles. Therefore, there is no standardized answer to all onboarding programs. There are elements beyond the findings in my research that are crucial for successful onboarding programs.

Secondly, the amount of data samples used is another limitation of this research. I have only identified and analyzed four successful onboarding programs using my list of factors. These companies cannot speak for other companies. As mentioned in Chapter 2, many researchers believe that organizations should design their onboarding programs based on their unique situations. Therefore, this limitation allows room for organizations to succeed in their own ways.

The third limitation is the source of the data. Since I could not find comprehensive data from academic journals, I had to gather data mainly from onboarding specialized websites. These websites are less credible compared to journal articles, thereby limiting this research. With these three major limitations, my research on

identifying success factors of employee onboarding programs cannot be considered comprehensive or exhaustive.

5.4 The Capstone Impact on Me (As A Future Employee)

This capstone paper has the main focus of employee onboarding, a process of transforming an organization's outsiders to insiders (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979), and I am currently in the same transition period in my life. My status will soon change from being a student for more than twenty years to an organization's future employee, from paying for my education to getting paid to work. How to effectively manage this transition period becomes important. In other words, I need to learn onboarding myself to make this transition effective. Now, as the world is suffering from the COVID pandemic and the resultant economic fluctuation, both employees and employers are having a hard time in the job market. As a graduate student looking for jobs, I do feel the difficulty at this particular time.

From this capstone research, I have learned that there are important factors that make an onboarding program successful. The three essential elements that I have extracted and tested play the role of guiding my future career. In my opinion, all the factors share one thing in common, and that is the value of people. I can almost assume that a company will have a successful onboarding program if the employer values new people.

This capstone paper has made two impacts on me. First of all, the importance of choosing the right company. Admittedly, just getting a job is difficult at this time, but this does serve as an excuse to work for any company. From those three elements, I have

learned that the core value is people. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, I am a people person. Therefore, knowing and understanding the culture of a company becomes crucial. After researching organizational onboarding in this paper, I genuinely think that an onboarding program provides a great opportunity for employees to get to know the company. This kind of program lasts for a short time compared to how long an employee will work for the company, but it is like sampling cake. People know what it tastes like from only a small bite (inspired by Dr. Greco's cake metaphor). Furthermore, I have learned ways to find companies' onboarding models, so it would be beneficial to research companies before I apply for jobs.

Second of all, no matter which company I will be working for, whether it values people or not, I always know that I add value to the company, which is an important mindset to have. I regard having this mindset as a kind of self-confidence. Regardless of its onboarding program, or even the culture of people, I always need to build positive relationships with the company and my colleagues. It is worth mentioning that having good quality communication skills is helpful. With great relationships, I will gain enough support from the company, and use my value to generate more value. Therefore, I will always have a positive attitude and gain more self-confidence.

5.5 The Capstone Impact on Me (As An Employer)

Besides the scenario of being an employee, this capstone paper also benefits me from my standpoint as an employer. As mentioned in Chapter 1, I started a car business a few years ago with some of my friends who shared the same passion. Unfortunately, at the time of writing this chapter, we have sold the company. However, the car business

played a crucial role in my career and life as it taught me great lessons. One reason for the sale is the company flagging performance. Furthermore, the relationships between the employees and employers are not healthy, which dates back to the time of hire when the onboarding program for our company was poor.

From this research, I learned that a great onboarding program contributes to a company's success, and employees are the core value of effective onboarding programs. In my own business, I do not believe we valued them as much as the company. Instead, we tended to see them as a source of profit. Yes, they did generate profits for the company, but we cared too much about how much money they could make and ignored their value as human beings. We did not care enough about their lives and their relationships with other colleagues. Thus, the employees looked more like robots in a warehouse than team players in a company.

In our onboarding experiences, the five co-founders took turns to be in charge of the program. As for relationship building, after we introduced our company, goals, and rules, we did not have any more conversations with them. We did not even ask what they liked doing in their lives. Though we did provide support for newcomers, we only did so when they asked. Therefore, I do not believe they got enough support from the company.

Now, as I reflect on this experience, it is unbelievable and terrible. Especially after researching successful onboarding models, I realize how poorly we performed as employers. I feel guilty that I did not take care of my employees, but I also know that I have learned this lesson so as not to make the same mistakes again. I appreciate that this terrible onboarding experience at least happened when I was still young.

In the time that this business failure occurred, my capstone also took place. I now have both knowledge and understanding of onboarding success and how to run businesses from the perspective of both the employee and the employer. This combination of real-life experiences and academic research will add value to myself and my future career.

5.6 Target Audience

Next, I will mention the group of people I think could benefit the most from this paper. Generally, I believe anyone who may need any information about successful onboarding programs can be the audience. However, the targeted audience comprises employees and students. This paper is for students, like me, who are soon going to start their professional careers. This paper is also for people who are looking for companies that value employees, who want to work for a company for a long time, or who are not satisfied with their current jobs. In contrast, the other audience is employers who need to redesign their onboarding process and are considering making changes to their onboarding models.

5.7 To My Audiences

Not only did I do this research to benefit myself as a student who is about to experience life changes, but also I would love to see this paper help my audiences. As I have concluded in this research, the three important elements that I extracted and examined make an onboarding program successful. I think these elements reveal one of the most essential value that both employees and organizations should pay great attention

to, and that is the value of people. Not only should organizations value their employees, but employees should also value themselves. Therefore, I have one significant recommendation for my audiences, no matter whether your company values you or not. It is important to actively build relationships to get the support you deserve to augment your personal value and that of the company. Finally, I hope this paper benefits people who are starting a career, switching jobs, or making changes to their organizations. I hope they might at least gain some insights into employee onboarding, which could have a profound influence on their careers.

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