

**An Investigation into the Impact Onboarding in a Remote
Setting has had on New Hires Working in a Utility
Organisation.**

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Abstract

Onboarding can be defined as “the process of helping new hires adjust to social and performance aspects of their new jobs quickly and smoothly” (Bauer, 2010, p. 1). This is an empirical study focusing on the impact remote onboarding has had on new hires working within a utility organisation. This has been a topical and challenging issue for human resource professionals in recent times due to accelerated use of remote working as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sibisi & Kappers, 2022). As it is a recent phenomenon, little research has been conducted to date on the impact joining an organisation remotely has had on new hires. Statistics show that 10-25% of new employees leave their role within the first six months (Weiss, 2017). With there being so much movement in the labour market currently with lots of organisations experiencing labour shortages (Sibisi & Kappers, 2022; CIPD, 2022; BBC, 2021), it is now more important than ever for organisations to review their onboarding practices, adapt them to a remote setting, and improve them where possible in order to give new hires a great induction experience and increase employee retention.

This research investigated how onboarding in a remote setting has impacted new hires. It examined the challenges new starters and organisations have faced and has recommended ways to overcome them. This study adopted a qualitative approach, interviewing the Onboarding Specialist and six new hires who joined Company A from their laptops at home. The findings suggest that while the induction process is the same for all new hires, they each had a unique experience with it. This research found that joining a company remotely has had a significant impact on new hires working in a utility organisation. By conducting a thorough analysis of the interview results, it is evident that remote onboarding has impacted the way onboarding is delivered to employees, how they absorb the organisational culture, their training, and how they socialise within the organisation. The findings suggest that joining an organisation remotely has had minor impact on the engagement levels of new hires.

This study proves that remote onboarding has significantly impacted new hires working in a utility company, and their experience with the program differed due to them being on different teams and departments. The research suggests that organisations can improve their onboarding program by putting formal procedures in place to help new hires learn and adapt to the organisational culture and aid them in networking virtually. By implementing these steps, new hire commitment, job satisfaction and retention rates will be increased, and the delay before full performance is reached will be reduced (Harpelund, et al., 2019).

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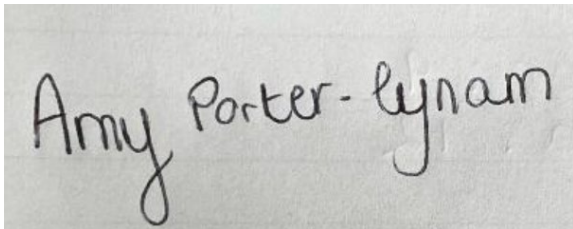
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1. Introduction

“The COVID-19 pandemic forced millions of people around the world to switch from office working to remote working almost overnight” (DETE, 2022, p. 5). As a result, organisations had to drastically change the way they operated (Czopek & Kazusek, 2021). Pre-pandemic, only 3% of job postings on Indeed.com, a popular job postings website, mentioned remote working. This grew to 18% in February 2021 (DETE, 2022). The escalation in the number of jobs allowing employees to work from home brings an increase in the number of new hires joining organisations remotely. This raises many new challenges for organisations, such as how to adapt their onboarding practices to a remote setting, how to teach an employee working from home the company culture, how to encourage the socialisation of the new employee who joined virtually, among many others. This empirical study focuses on how remote onboarding has impacted new hires and examines the perceived challenges the new hires and organisations face with a virtual onboarding program. The study investigates those challenges through a detailed review, synthesising the existing academic literature on this topic, and provides an in-depth qualitative interview process of six new hires who were onboarded in a utility organisation in a remote setting. The aim of this research is to examine the impact onboarding in a remote setting has had on new hires that has not already been addressed in academic literature and proposes directions for further research in the field.

1.1 Background

Almost all companies believe onboarding to be an essential element of the new hire’s experience and effective in helping them socialise within the company (Klein, et al., 2015). According to the Harvard Business Review (2018), up to 20% of staff turnover occurs within the first 45 days of employment. Employee retention is a huge problem companies across the globe are challenged with, yet they spend little time or money on creating a good onboarding program. With the high recruitment costs that businesses face, a lot more attention should be given to their onboarding practices. A survey conducted by Software Advice in 2020 found that 49% of HR leaders plan to employ additional remote workers once the pandemic is over (Rogers, 2021). The pandemic has accelerated the use of remote working which has resulted in a complete transformation of the function of onboarding. The concept of virtual onboarding is not going anywhere. As a result of this, we must understand the effects inducting new hires

remotely has had on both the onboarding function and new hires so we can improve our processes and adapt them where necessary.

1.2 Current Academic Work

Although the function of onboarding has been thoroughly discussed by previous authors such as Bauer, 2010; Watkins, 2016; Chillakuri, 2020; Schroth, 2019; Harpelund, Højberg & Nielsen, 2019; Elembilassery, Chakrabarty & Rangaswamy, 2021; Hillebregt, 2019; Caldwell & Peters, 2018; Czopek & Kazusek, 2021; Klein, Polin & Sutton, 2015; Merson, 2021; Meyer & Bartels, 2017; Morrison, 2021; Prince, 2021; Stone, 2021, little research has been conducted to date on the impact onboarding in a remote setting has had on new hires. The previous research provides HR professionals with useful and constructive information about what onboarding is, how to build a good onboarding program, what virtual onboarding and remote working are, how the pandemic and remote working has impacted new hire engagement, and the relationship between onboarding and organisational culture. Little attention has been paid to the implications remote working has had on the onboarding of new hires. The limited research on this topic is due to the fact that virtual induction of new hires is a relatively recent phenomena. Therefore, there is a requirement for in-depth research to be conducted on this topic. The results of this study will add to the existing literature written on the field of onboarding. They will help guide organisations and HR professionals in designing their induction program, help them adapt their current practices to a remote setting and better support their new hires during their virtual onboarding experience.

1.3 Structure of Dissertation

Having introduced the dissertation in Chapter 1, a thorough literature review is presented in chapter 2, which examines the current body of research carried out on the field of onboarding. The purpose of the onboarding function is discussed, as well as virtual onboarding, remote working, employee engagement and organisational culture. Chapter 3 outlines the research question and sub questions. The objectives of the dissertation have clearly been specified. This is followed by chapter 4, which presents a discussion on the methodological framework of this dissertation, outlining information on the data collection process. Reasons are provided for why the author opted for the qualitative method and the approach to the interview process is discussed. The purpose of the interviews is to understand the new hires experience with the

virtual onboarding process, identify the challenges that they faced, and discover ways in which to improve the remote induction experience for new hires. Chapter 5 presents findings and analysis of the data collected during the interviews. This is followed by a discussion on these findings in chapter 6. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are discussed in chapter 7, followed by a brief reflective piece on the learning outcomes of this research for the author in chapter 8.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Onboarding can be defined as “the process of helping new hires adjust to social and performance aspects of their new jobs quickly and smoothly” (Bauer, 2010, p. 1). Watkins (2016) defines it as the process of familiarising a new hire with their role, ensuring the new employee understands the company’s goals, values, policies, and procedures, and socialising the employee into the organisation. This literature review will focus on the field of onboarding, focusing in on the below areas:

- What Onboarding is
- Virtual Onboarding
- Remote Working
- Employee Engagement
- Organisational Culture
- The Relationship between Onboarding and Organisational Culture

2.2 What is Onboarding?

Onboarding is a key component of the recruitment process and should begin as soon as the selection process is complete (Chillakuri, 2020). It commences when the recruiter makes a job offer and can last up twelve months from when the new hire joins the company (Chillakuri, 2020). Having good procedures in place for inducting new hires can be very beneficial to organisations. "Onboarding increases new hire commitment, reduces the delay before full performance is reached, reduces stress, and increases job satisfaction and retention rates" (Harpelund, et al., 2019, p. 11). An exceptional program can reduce new hire anxiety and uncertainty (Schroth, 2019). The more onboarding practices the organisation offers, the more opportunities the new hire has for socialisation (Klein, et al., 2015). An ineffective program can eradicate the advantages attained by hiring capable staff and increase the possibility that the time and effort used in recruiting those staff will be wasted (Smart, 2012).

Bauer (2010, p. 2) recommends that organisations have “formal onboarding”, i.e., “a written set of coordinated policies and procedures that assist an employee in adjusting to his or her new job in terms of both tasks and socialisation”. According to Sibisi and Kappers (2022, p. 3) “companies that implement a formal onboarding program could see 50% greater employee retention among new recruits and 62% greater productivity within the same group”. Having

formal practices in place makes the program more effective. Bauer (2010, p. 2) defines informal onboarding as “the process by which an employee learns about his or her new job without an explicit organisational plan”.

Bauer (2010) identified four critical elements to an effective onboarding process that helps to improve performance, reduce employee turnover, and increase job satisfaction. These four elements are known as The Four C's: Compliance, Clarification, Culture, and Connection (Bauer, 2010) (see appendix A). The Four Cs are building blocks for onboarding. A basic program will include the first one or two elements, a well-designed program will include all four (Bauer, 2010). “The degree to which each organisation leverages these four building blocks determines its overall onboarding strategy, with most firms falling into one of three levels – passive, high potential or proactive” (Bauer, 2010, p. 2) (see appendix B). It can be difficult to incorporate all four elements into a virtual onboarding program, with Culture and Connection being difficult to achieve remotely (Prince, 2021). An interview conducted by Prince (2021) suggested some ways to overcome these difficulties, which is discussed further below.

2.3 Virtual Onboarding

According to Prince (2021), the purpose of onboarding is to connect new employees to the people and goals of the company. As aforementioned, helping new employees understand the organisational culture and connect with their colleagues virtually is challenging but extremely important. Research conducted by Meyer & Bartels (2017, p. 21) found that "employees who are given an opportunity to build connections and an internal network during their onboarding program find the program more valuable, as they are not only introduced to their duties, company policy, and norms, but also to their peers and colleagues who may serve as sources of information and social support". Employees who were given these opportunities also “perceived the organisation as being more supportive of them as an employee” (Meyer & Bartels, 2017, p. 21). The process of socialisation is a critical component of the virtual induction process as it helps the individual to acquire the attitudes, behaviours, and knowledge required to successfully participate and contribute to their organisation (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Prince (2021) suggested ways to help employees connect with company culture and their peers while working remotely:

- Make employees feel empowered from their first day
- Help them feel part of the team
- Assist them in understanding the organisation’s culture
 - Pair them with a “buddy” in the organisation
 - Transfer traditional onboarding activities to a remote setting e.g., virtual new hire lunches
- Add activities to encourage casual conversations where possible e.g., virtual networking parties
- Weekly 1:1 meeting with their managers. This helps with role clarification and expectations
- Have the leadership team involved in the induction process as they embody company values

Another essential part of onboarding a new hire is providing them with the fundamental knowledge required for them to effectively carry out their key responsibilities (Czopek & Kazusek, 2021). Online libraries containing information, resources, and training for new hires are an effective way of offering this knowledge (Merson, 2021). Technologies such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams have also proved beneficial for communicating with and training new staff members. The “screen sharing” function in particular is especially useful (Morrison, 2021). Elembilassery, Chakrabarty & Rangaswamy (2021) proposed an onboarding framework for a remote work setting (see appendix C). This research gives an insight into helping employees onboard remotely, connect virtually and understand the organisation’s culture. As these employees will more than likely be working from home, it is important that we understand the concept of remote working, which is discussed below.

2.4 Remote Working

The COVID-19 pandemic has “acted as a powerful accelerator in the change of work and organisational processes and practices, pushing towards a rapid reconfiguration of the usual working objects, and the overcoming of traditional work-life boundaries” (Barbieri, et al., 2021, p. 1). The term remote working “refers to the broad concept of an arrangement where work is fully or partly carried out at an alternative worksite other than the default place of work” (DETE, 2021, p. 6). Employees were forced to work remotely during the pandemic out of necessity, but many will continue to do so in the future as they have realised the benefits it

brings. Research conducted in October 2020 found that 94% of respondents would like to work from home after the crisis (McCarthy, et al., 2020). According to the National Remote Work Strategy, remote working will soon be “a permanent feature in Irish workplaces” (DETE, 2021, p. 2).

To fully understand remote working, we must examine the benefits and challenges it brings. “Working remotely is mutually beneficial to both the employers and employees since it invariably helps reduce facility costs for the employer, maintain work-life balance for the employee, improve overall work output productivity whilst achieving organisational as well as personal goals” (Anand & Acharya, 2021, p. 120). It gives employees greater flexibility to manage their workday and enables them to take advantage of the reduced costs of going to work (McCarthy, et al., 2020). Palumbo (2020, p. 771) argues that working from home, as a result of its flexibility, “increases the employees’ control over the spatio-temporal context of work, enhancing the quality of organisational activities”. Other benefits include “increasing participation in the labour market, attracting and retaining talent, enabling balanced regional development, alleviating accommodation pressures, improving child and family wellbeing, reducing commuting times and reducing transport-related carbon emissions and air pollution” (DETE, 2021, p. 2). Despite all the benefits associated with remote working, de Vries et al. (2019) claim that these advantages are undermined by isolation and poor organisational commitment.

While remote working brings benefits to both the employer and employee, there are various challenges associated with it. For employees, the more prominent challenges include feelings of isolation and loneliness, struggles with staying motivated, and not having an adequate workspace at home (McCarthy, et al., 2020). Employees can also experience difficulties in switching off when working from home, with many working additional hours and responding to queries outside of their normal working hours (DETE, 2021). The boundaries between work and home life have become blurred (Fan & Moen, 2022; Stanca & Tarbujary, 2021). Challenges employers face with remote working include difficulties in collaboration, which can lead to decreased creativity and innovation (DETE, 2021; Wu & Chen, 2020). Team meetings, brainstorming sessions, conferences, workshops etc. can be hard to replicate in a remote setting, and therefore opportunities to collaborate decrease. Advances in technology have assisted organisations in overcoming these difficulties and have “helped to successfully bridge the gap between the physical and digital world” (Anand & Acharya, 2021, p. 120), although, this could also lead to possible data security issues (Wu & Chen, 2020). In a study

conducted by Wu and Chen (2020), it was found that working from home increases a person's workload, which can then cause a decrease in productivity due to pressure and stress. Recent studies have also found that employees working from home tend to work longer and harder (Felstead & Henseke, 2017). In turn, these factors can lead to work-related fatigue (Palumbo, 2020). Additional organisational support should be provided to employees while working from home to help them adjust to the change in work practices and cope with any stress that comes with it (Barbieri, et al., 2021). For many employers, the main challenge is keeping employees engaged while they work remotely, which is discussed further below.

2.5 Employee Engagement

According to Anand & Acharya (2021, p.120), "employee engagement is the mental and emotional connection the employees feel toward their place of work". It is "an individual employee's cognitive, emotional and behavioural state directed toward desired organisational outcomes" (Shuck & Wollard, 2010, p. 1) with engaged employees displaying a deep emotional connection to their organisation (Kahn, 1990). Employee engagement can be a source of competitive advantage (Shuck, et al., 2011) as it can affect the employee's performance (Bailey, et al., 2017). "Engaged employees see the entire of organisation and comprehend their objective, where, and how they fit in" (Adhitama & Riyanto, 2020, p. 8). It can also lead to a reduction in employee turnover and absenteeism (Dixit & Singh, 2020). It is key to ensuring the success of remote working (Anand & Acharya, 2021).

Interestingly, research carried out by Palumbo (2020, p. 779) found that remote working "positively and significantly affected the work engagement of respondents". Engaging employees in a virtual environment is a challenge though, as the employees miss the social aspect of work – interactions with colleagues and team gatherings, and there are reduced employee development opportunities (Anand & Acharya, 2021). Their work has become more repetitive, mundane, and uninspired (Yadav, et al., 2020). As mentioned in the previous section, employees struggle with motivation and feelings of loneliness when working from home. This can cause them to become disengaged with their work which can be harmful for an organisation as it not only affects the employees' performance, but also affects their commitment to the organisation (Sharma & Goyal, 2022). According to Shuck, Rocco, and Albornoz (2011), the main drivers that keep employees engaged at work are interpersonal relationships with colleagues, workplace environment, leadership behaviour, and opportunities

for learning and growth. Employers must do their best to replicate these key factors in a home working environment as “employee engagement plays a vital role in boosting the morale of the employees through effective communication and constant support for the wellbeing of the employee, employer, and organisation” (Anand & Acharya, 2021, p. 120).

Research conducted by Ployhart, Shepherd, and Strizver (2021) examines the relationship between the pandemic and new hire engagement. By surveying 12,577 new staff within the restaurant industry, they found that engagement levels of new staff have decreased since the pandemic relative to pre-pandemic. Newly hired employees “might not be as psychologically present or energised because of concerns about health and safety” (Ployhart, et al., 2021, p. 519). The uncertainty of the pandemic is causing them to become less engaged with their work. Bauer et al. (2020, p. 4) note that “individuals who have access to resources that fit the demands of the situation will be better positioned to deal with adversity and stressful circumstances”. Onboarding programs should be designed to provide new hires with all the necessary resources to help them deal with the uncertainty of the pandemic, thus preventing them from becoming disengaged.

Another interesting finding from Ployhart et al.'s (2021) research is that engagement scores increase when governments have stronger COVID-19 restrictions. The stress caused by the pandemic could generate new hire strain and insecurity, causing new employees to conserve their energy and become less engaged (Bauer, et al., 2020). According to Ployhart et al. (2021, p. 520), “states that adopt more restrictive COVID-19 safety measures should reduce new hire strain because there is greater certainty and thus job security. Therefore, new hires in states with more restrictive COVID-19 responses should manifest greater engagement because there is less uncertainty and strain relating to health and economic activity”. The findings of this research give us great insight into how the pandemic has affected the onboarding process of new hires. Below another factor that can increase the engagement levels of an organisation is discussed, its culture.

2.6 Organisational Culture

An organisation’s culture can be defined as “an interlocking set of goals, roles, processes, values, communications practices, attitudes and assumptions” (Denning, 2011). It is reflected in the behaviours and relationships of individuals and groups of employees and is “strongly

and traditionally associated with the national culture of a given country” (Gitling, 2020, p. 196). An organisation’s culture is constantly evolving, while it teaches employees how to behave in the organisation, what to do, and what to prioritise (Gitling, 2020). Organisational culture is vital as it “affects every aspect of how the organisation operates and how work gets done” (CIPD, 2014). If staff members associate themselves with the company’s values, feel they are a good fit with the culture, and are passionate about achieving the purpose, they will feel more engaged and motivated, which in turn benefits organisational performance (CIPD, 2014). A positive culture helps attract talented individuals to the organisation (CIPD, 2014) and increases employee retention (CIPD, 2020).

According to previous studies, there are two elements of organisational culture: symbolic and pragmatic (Giorgi, Lockwood, & Glynn, 2015; Patterson, 2014). Symbolic includes explicitly declared values and practices whereas pragmatic, “which emerges from day-to-day work of individuals within an organisation, brings in practices, patterns of behaviour and pragmatic adaptation of declared values” (Asatiani, et al., 2021, p. 63). Pragmatic consists of the more implicit elements of organisational culture, which “emerges through processes of socialisation among employees” (Asatiani, et al., 2021, p. 63). “The frequent absence of face-to-face socialisation in virtual organisations could undermine some of these processes and weaken the connection between the symbolic and pragmatic side of organisational culture” (Asatiani, et al., 2021, p. 63). As mentioned previously, the process of socialisation is integral to the onboarding of new staff as it aids them in obtaining tacit knowledge regarding the culture and also allows them to alter the existing organisational culture and contribute to its development (Leidner, et al., 2018). An organisation may need to implement substitutes for socialisation during the remote onboarding process (Goodman & Wilson, 2000). This is another challenge organisations must face with remote working and the induction of new staff. Below the relationship between onboarding and organisational culture is examined.

2.7 The Relationship between Onboarding and Organisational Culture

Hillebregt (2019) discusses the importance of creating a cultural onboarding experience. Helping employees to understand the company culture during the induction process helps them to adapt and thrive quickly (Hillebregt, 2019). It is essential, now more than ever, to create a cultural onboarding experience to help “employees understand the unique culture they have become a part of” (Hillebregt, 2019, p. 9).

Gartner (2021) reiterates the importance of this as it is more challenging and crucial to connect new hires to organisational culture in the virtual world (Gartner, 2021). As discussed previously, working from home can be quite isolating for an employee, especially when they have just started in a new company and do not know anyone. According to Gartner's research, "HR leaders indicate that when employees understand and feel connected to the organisation's culture, their performance improves up to 22%", emphasizing the importance of creating a cultural onboarding experience. To help new hires connect to the organisation's culture during their induction, Garter (2021) suggests that HR leaders implement the below steps:

- Redesign onboarding to focus on connection
- Link organisational values to on-the-job decisions
- Support development of a cross-functional network

Remote working can sometimes make employees feel isolated, ensuring culture remains intact and making new hires feel connected is vital (Stone, 2021). This research emphasises how important it is to ensure that new hires understand and embody the culture of the organisation.

2.8 Conclusion

As we can see from this literature review, organisations must ensure they have a robust onboarding program in place to help their new hires adapt seamlessly into the organisation. The pandemic has completely altered the way in which organisations onboard their employees. As little research has been conducted to date on how the pandemic has impacted the induction process, it is difficult to know the impact of these changes. There are many benefits associated with virtual onboarding, but there are equally as many challenges. While research from Ployhart et al (2021), Merson (2021), Elembilassery (2021) and Anand & Acharya (2021) has informed us how remote working has impacted new hire engagement, how to induct employees in a virtual world, what onboarding might look like in a post-pandemic world, and how to engage employees who work remotely, little to no research has been done on how it has impacted the onboarding journey of new hires working remotely. In this literature review, I have examined the literature written on the field of onboarding, virtual onboarding, remote working, employee engagement, organisational culture, and finally, the relationship between onboarding and organisational culture.

3. Research Question

As mentioned in the introduction, this research will focus on the virtual onboarding experience of new hires working remotely. Previous research examines the onboarding process as a whole, but little research has been done on inducting new hires in a remote setting. Beginning employment with a new company can be a very daunting experience for a new employee, especially when they are joining the company from their home. This research is worthy of study because it will give us insights into the virtual onboarding experience of new hires working remotely and will help us identify the challenges they have experienced. Organisations' can use this information to improve their processes, adapt them to a remote setting, assist new hires in overcoming the challenges inducting new hires remotely brings, and enhance their overall candidate experience. A good onboarding experience can lead to increased retention rates, improved engagement levels, greater job satisfaction, and therefore higher productivity (Bauer, 2010) so it is vital that companies put a lot of time and effort into designing their program. With all this in mind, the question my research aims to answer is as below:

“How does onboarding in a remote setting impact on new hires working in a utility organisation?”

This research aims to gain an insight into the virtual onboarding experience of new hires, who began employment during the pandemic. This research aims to explore the virtual onboarding experience of distinct groups of employees and compare their journeys. I aim to answer the below questions in this study:

1. How is onboarding conducted in a remote setting?
2. How did the new hires find the process of being onboarded virtually?
3. Did the new hires feel connected to their manager and team during the process?
4. How have the participants found adapting to the organisational culture while being onboarded and working remotely? Have they gained a good understanding of the organisation's culture?
5. Have the participants been given opportunities to engage in socialisation within the organisation while working from home? If so, what methods have they found the best?

4. Research Methodology

This chapter discusses the steps taken in the data collection process for this dissertation. This is a cross sectional, qualitative study implementing in-depth interviews using non-probabilistic sampling techniques. The research approach is interpretivist in nature, gathering subjective data from interviews with the Onboarding Specialist and new hires within one of Ireland's leading utilities companies, identified herein as Company A. Below the author identifies their research philosophy, discusses their research sample, examines the research instrument used, explains the data analysis method, identifies limitations of this research, and addresses any ethical considerations.

4.1 Research Philosophy

This dissertation uses an inductive approach to research, as it moves from empirical generalisations to a hypothesis. The author adopted this approach as the impact onboarding in a remote setting has on new hires is not currently a heavily researched area of human resource management. This study adopted the ontology and epistemology of relativism and social constructionism, as a means to understand the reasoning behind choosing the qualitative method of interviewing a sample of new hires who were onboarded remotely in Company A. Employing this approach will help the author understand how meaning is created through the social interactions during the interview process and will contribute to the final results of the data collection.

The theory of relativism is an important ontology for the foundation of this study, as interpreting the views of the new hires and understanding that no onboarding experience will be the same, will assist the author in applying that concept to the research results. The epistemological foundation of this dissertation derives from an interpretivist approach, where reality is constructed through the meanings created by individuals. This will approach will help the author understand the thinking and feelings that underpin the new hires behaviours and the subjective ways in which they experience the remote onboarding process. The explorative approach of this research stems from the perspective of social constructionism, where knowledge is viewed as constructed rather than created (Andrews, 2012). According to Andrews (2012, p. 40), "the origins of social constructionism can be traced back to an interpretivist approach to thinking", as both approaches focus on the process where "meanings

are created, negotiated, sustained and modified” (Andrews, 2010, p. 40). It is also described as having a relativist stance, coinciding with the ontology of relativism.

4.2 Research Sample

The research for this study was conducted in a leading utility company. With almost 8000 employees, it is one of Ireland’s largest organisations. As a strong, diversified utility, the company operates across the electricity market. According to their 2021 Annual Report and Financial Statement, the organisation has a regulated asset base of approximately €10.9bn, a 33% share of generation in the all-island market and supply businesses supplying electricity and gas to over 1.9m customers. The organisation is currently establishing new and modern ways of working, embracing technology to combine office and remote working in a post pandemic world. They have implemented a Smart Working Programme to help them adapt to new ways of working. Smart Working aims to empower their people with the autonomy, flexibility, and digital tools to deliver on the organisation’s purpose. Being one of the founding members of The Remote Alliance, a new initiative established by the social enterprise Grow Remote, they are dedicated to ensuring that remote and hybrid working arrangements will become a sustainable of the organisation. They had a total of 521 external new hires during 2021 who all joined remotely.

As a key outcome of this research is to assess the remote onboarding experience, a crucial viewpoint is that of new hires. According to Sandelowski (1995), “there are no computations or power analyses that can be done in qualitative research to determine a priori the minimum number [...] of sampling units required. The objective is to ensure that the sample size is small enough to manage the material and large enough to provide ‘a new and richly textured understanding of experience’” (Sandelowski, 1995). Research conducted by Braun and Clarke (2013) suggests that for small projects, 6–10 participants are recommended for interviews. With this in mind, six new hires were invited to interview based on them having joined the organisation in 2021 and been onboarded remotely. The interviewees were selected from different teams within the organisation, ensuring to keep an equal mix of male / female ratio, as well as a range of experience levels to represent as diverse a population as possible. The participants role within the organisation was another key factor for the selection process, in order to present a representative from different employee categories. Interviewees were questioned on their assessment and perceptions of the virtual onboarding journey, from

accepting the offer of employment with Company A, through to their first number of weeks in the organisation. In order to ensure they fully understood the processes in place within the organisation, the researcher interviewed the Onboarding Specialist. This gave the researcher a deep understanding of the remote onboarding process which aided them in developing the interview questions. It also provided them with some context when conducting the interviews with the new hires.

Figure 1: Onboarding Process in Company A

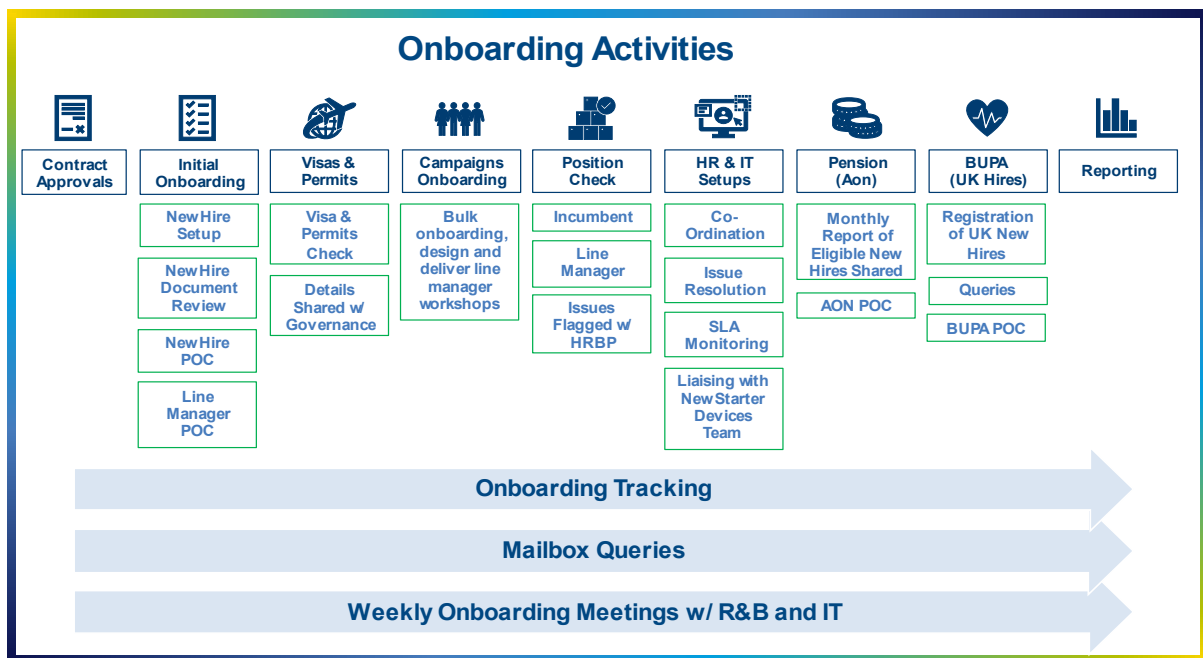


Table 1: Information on New Hires Interviewed

Participant	Area	Start Date	Role
Participant 1	Human Resources	08/11/21	Administrator
Participant 2	Finance	13/12/21	Specialist
Participant 3	Human Resources	20/07/21	Apprentice
Participant 4	Human Resources	02/06/21	Undergraduate
Participant 5	Pricing	06/12/21	Specialist
Participant 6	Human Resources	07/09/21	Graduate

4.3 Research Instrument

Due to the qualitative nature of this empirical research, the field work consisted of personal interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams using an interview questionnaire. Chapter two

examined the literature written on the field of onboarding and discussed the challenges organisations are currently facing in relation to the remote induction of their new hires. The interview questionnaire questions were developed based on the literature review results (see appendix D). As this research is an exploratory study and recent event, little to no research currently exists on remote or virtual onboarding. An interview was therefore identified as the most appropriate data collection method as it provided the researcher with in-depth accounts of people's experiences, opinions, and feelings regarding remote onboarding. Flexible and adaptive in nature, this method enabled the author to investigate emotions and ideas and probe responses. This approach provides informants with the freedom to respond in a unique manner (Walle, 2015). The primary data collection employed in this research was one to one, semi structured interviews with a select number of new hires who joined the company and were onboarded remotely. The author opted for this approach as with this process, "there is a set of pre-defined questions, but in which freedom is given to explore one of the questions in greater depth" (Queirós, et al., 2017, p. 378). This research will take a narrative review approach to the information collected in the interview process.

The research interview provides "a useful way for researchers to learn about the world of others" (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 239) and is widely considered as "one of the most important qualitative data collection methods" (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 238). According to Qu and Dumay (2011), there are three interview types - neopositivist, romantic and localist views. The author reviewed each type and opted for the localist perspective to interviewing, due to the ontological nature of this study. "The localist position is based on understanding interviews in a social context, instead of treating it as a tool for collecting data in isolation" (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 242). While many researchers question the validity of the empirical data obtained from interviews, "a well-planned interview approach can provide a rich set of data" (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 239). Preparation is essential (Walle, 2015). With this in mind, the interview questions were carefully planned, prepared, and piloted in advance with changes made where necessary. The researcher conducted a pilot interview with a work colleague who was onboarded into the organisation remotely during 2021. The interview questions were assessed out and changes were made where necessary. As a result of the pilot interview, the researcher realised some of the terms used within the questions may need to be defined for participants without a HR background. Some definitions and context were added, and the questions were tested out again. The researcher also interviewed the Onboarding Specialist within the organisation to ensure they fully understood the onboarding process, which contributed to the planning of the

interview questions. The interview questions were then discussed with the research supervisor for review and approval.

The researcher began conducting the interviews with the six new hires and Onboarding Specialist once the interview questions were approved by the academic supervisor. Interviews lasted approximately 10-25 minutes depending on the interviewee and what they had to say about their experience. The longer the interview, the more in-dept it was which gave the interviewer the opportunity to ask further questions and delve into issues raised. Each participant consented to the recording of their personal data in the interview in advance, and processing was in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulations. The interviews were recorded on Microsoft Teams and subsequently transcribed. The participants were informed that any information they provided for this study would be treated confidentially in advance of the interview taking place. They were made aware that their identity would remain anonymous in this research and that disguised extracts from their interview may be quoted.

An alternative research instrument the author could have used is a focus group. While a focus group would have enabled the researcher to obtain more information in a shorter amount of time, and would have allowed the researcher to observe how a group collectively made sense of onboarding in a remote setting and study the interaction within the group (O'Connor & Madge, 2003), the author opted to proceed with interviews instead. Their reasoning for this was that the interview would provide the researcher with more in-dept answers from participants (Morgan, 1988) and would enable them to investigate the new hires motives and feelings individually, without people speaking over each other. With focus groups, the researcher has less control over the data generated (Morgan, 1988), which is another reason why the author opted for the individual interview.

4.4 Data Analysis Method

The author adopted Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic approach to analysing the data collected during the interview process. "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2009, p. 79). It provides "accessible and systematic procedures for generating codes and themes from qualitative data" (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297) and can be used for deductive and inductive analysis. The analysis process involves highlighting and defining both implicit and explicit ideas (Guest, et al., 2012). It is a

very flexible method of analysis that can be applied across a variety of theoretical frameworks and research paradigms. It therefore corresponds with the philosophy of this research.

The author opted for the thematic method as it helped them identify and interpret key features and findings of the data relative to the research question and sub questions. The transcripts from the interviews with the new hires were analysed, and themes and sub-themes were discovered. The author did this by exploring similarities and relationships between the different parts of the data. Examining the research and highlighting any sections that correlated to the research question proved beneficial. The themes were identified as the Virtual Onboarding Process, Organisational Culture, Virtual Training, Networking in a Virtual Environment, Communication and Engagement. These themes were selected to reflect the content of the literature review, and to best address the research objectives of this dissertation.

4.5 Limitations

Limitations of this research methodology were examined and identified. Qualitative research can be a time-consuming process and conducting interviews can be labour intensive. The author overcame these limitations by starting the data collection process early to ensure that they had all the data collected in a timely manner. This guaranteed that they had enough time to analyse and discuss the results. The author conducted the interviews over a 2-week period, which allowed them to spread out the workload and avoid becoming overwhelmed by the work.

As the author carried out the interviews during the summer months, the possibility of the interview participants being on leave was identified as another limitation. The author contacted the participants early on to check their availability, scheduled time in their calendars when they were free, and planned around their annual leave in order to avoid this challenge.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

There are some ethical considerations that researchers must be mindful of when conducting research, especially during the process of collecting and presenting data (Saunders, et al., 2019). With this in mind, all interview participants were briefed on the nature of the research, made fully aware of what was required of them, and were given the right to withdraw from the research study at any time. They received a document with information on the study in advance

of being interviewed (see appendix E). This document explained what the study was about, what taking part would involve, why they had been invited to take part, and how the information they provided would be recorded, stored, and protected. They were assured that taking part would be confidential. Willingness to partake was demonstrated by participants by them signing the consent form (see appendix F). The author guarantees that any potential risks to participants will be minimised and confirms that all data collected from the research will be used and managed ethically.

5. Analysis and Findings

As discussed above, the interview transcripts were analysed using Braun & Clarke’s (2006) thematic approach to analysing data. The transcripts were read thoroughly to identify pieces of texts relevant to the research topic and questions. The pieces of texts were then grouped together into themes and analysed. The findings from the interviews with the new hires varied depending on the area in which they worked in, their team and their manager. As a result of the in-depth interviews conducted, the key themes that were identified, relevant to the context of this dissertation, are the Virtual Onboarding Process, Organisational Culture, Virtual Training, Networking in a Virtual Environment, Communication and Engagement. Table 2 below outlines the summary of the interviews, listing the main findings.

Table 2: Summary of Interview Results

Summary of Interview Results	
Theme	Summary of Major Responses
Virtual Onboarding Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured and efficient process • Lots of communication from organisation • New hires knew what was happening during each stage of the process • Introduced to their team via Microsoft Teams call • All new hires felt supported by their colleagues during the virtual onboarding process
Organisational Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New hires knew what the organisational culture was but did not understand it fully until going into the office • Some understood better than others as their managers/colleagues explained the organisational culture to them • Mainly introduced to culture through interactions with team, reading material about the organisation and through training courses
Virtual Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some preferred the virtual training; most would have preferred to be in the office • Training virtually was difficult but doable • Opportunities to do training courses virtually • Training mainly done through screen-sharing on Microsoft Teams • Training plans would be beneficial for new hires • Information booklet on organisation would aid virtual training

Networking in a Virtual Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Networking within teams worked well virtually • Networking virtually was mainly done through calls on Microsoft Teams • Harder to get a read on people and build relationships when networking virtually • Networking with other teams consisted of work-based calls, no informal "get to know each other" calls • Microsoft Team calls were best method of socialisation • Easier to get to know people when you are in the office • Some new hires were able to network with wider business whilst doing training courses • Not many opportunities to network with wider department virtually • Virtual networking events with other new hires would be beneficial
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most new hires received a call from their manager/colleagues prior to their start date which helped ease nerves and gave them an opportunity to ask questions • Individual calls with team members in first few weeks to get to know them • Constant communication ensured the new hire knew exactly what was happening & enabled them to maintain connection with their team
Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most new hires were engaged with their work straight away • Some experienced disengagement due to working from home, not because of the virtual onboarding process itself

5.1 Virtual Onboarding Process

According to the Onboarding Specialist in Company A, their virtual induction process consists of making sure they get all the information that they need from a new starter joining the company, ensuring that the HR and IT setups are done accurately and on time, and that devices are sent to the new hire before their start date. They would also be the new hires point of contact up until they start their role, answering any queries they may have. The process begins when a new hire receives their contract and ends on their first day. The hiring manager would take over the process from there. The Onboarding Specialist explains the strengths and weaknesses of the virtual process in Company A as

“I think the strength of the process is that it is a very structured onboarding process compared to what was there before in the organisation. I think it is very clear the different steps that are involved when a person is joining the company and how much time is required for each step. It means people are fully set up on time for

their first day.” “One of the weaknesses of the onboarding process, I think is probably the personal interaction and the kind of wow factor.”

All participants agreed with the strengths of the process. Participant 2 confirmed that “everything was very easy, very efficient” and they “knew exactly what was happening”. Participant 3 compliments this, as they “found the virtual experience seamless” and adds that the “candidate experience on the system was really good”. Participant 6 adds that “you were kept in the loop from the start” and “accesses and everything like that were set up really quickly”, they had them from the beginning.

In terms of the weaknesses of the virtual process as identified by the Onboarding Specialist, most new hires would disagree with it lacking “personal interaction.” Participant 1 was the only new hire interviewed who did not receive a call from their manager prior to their start date but did receive lots of communication from the recruiter who hired them. All other Participants received an introductory call from their managers approximately a week before they started, with Participants 4 and 5 receiving calls from their colleagues too. Participant 5 said there was a “lot of interaction” which they found “really good” and helped ease their nerves. Participant 4 agrees with this statement

“You are not coming in cold. My manager introduced herself and told me a bit about her background. My colleague did the same. It made a real difference and made it a little bit easier on my first day.”

Another flaw within the process in Company A as identified by the Onboarding Specialist is that it lacks “wow factor”. They believe the process in Company A is “adequate”, but improvements could be made such as sending out welcome packs to new hires which is “industry best practice”. This correlates with the findings of Elembilassery et al.’s (2021) research, as they discovered that welcome packs “help create a better emotional connect with the recruit.” On a positive note, all Participants (1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6) appreciated the communication and interaction received from the organisation and felt supported by their team throughout the onboarding process.

5.2 Organisational Culture

In terms of learning the culture of the organisation, all Participants (1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6) seemed to have different learning experiences with varying levels of knowledge of the culture. The

inconsistency in the findings is due to the fact that the new hires were onboarded onto different teams within the organisation, and therefore learned about the culture from different people. Participant 1 was introduced to the organisational culture through observing colleagues, reading material on the organisation, and participating in team calls, whereas Participants 5 and 6 learned about the culture through conversations with their managers. Participant 4 adds that they learned about the culture from interactions with colleagues and partaking in training courses. Not surprisingly, participants whose managers and colleagues explained the culture to them seemed to have a deeper knowledge of the organisational culture, as the parts of the culture that were not as visible to the new hire working remotely were discussed. Participant 6 explains

“There are certain things that you would pick up on in an office. I am trying to think of an example, but I cannot. But, you know, just the way the office in general works and the way things are done, my manager would have been very good to say, “when you go back to the office, this is how this is done.” It was not any big formal thing; it was just through general conversation.”

Participant 2 adds

“Through interactions with them, you would know they are hardworking and professional. You would pick up on that even through emails and messages. I suppose on the safety part, my manager had mentioned that, but then when you are working from home, it is not that much of a focus. When you go into the office, you realise everything is very safety and energy efficient focused and you would not have picked up on that really when working from home.”

Interestingly, although the new hires gained an understanding of the organisational culture while working from home, it was not until they had the opportunity to return to their workplace that they were introduced to the culture fully. Participant 2 notes

“I gained an understanding of what the organisation was like through interacting with people more so than actually being in the office and seeing exactly what the culture is like.”

When asked if they were learning more about the organisational culture since they returned to office, Participant 4 says

“Absolutely. It feels like my work placement year here has only started in the last month or so, being in the office and interacting with not only the team but other people within HR and the organisation. It makes it a huge difference really, because you are not getting that virtually. That experience of conducting yourself in an office environment in the professional way. You are not going to be able to do that through Microsoft Teams calls.”

This correlates with Asatiani et al.’s (2021) findings, where the pragmatic elements of organisational culture emerge through processes of socialisation among employees. With more opportunities to socialise in the office, the new hires who were onboarded remotely are learning more about the culture now that they are immersed in it. While some of the new hires struggled with understanding the organisational culture fully while being onboarded virtually, all Participants (1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6) felt like they have adapted well to the culture.

5.3 Virtual Training

As a result of starting their roles remotely, Participants (1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6) were trained virtually. Microsoft Teams screen-sharing function was used to facilitate their training. The 6 Participants all had varying opinions on virtual training, ranging from “difficult” to “not too bad” to one even preferring virtual to in-person training. The contrast within the opinions is more than likely due to personal preference. The general consensus was that it was challenging but doable.

Participant 3 found virtual training “really difficult” and “would have preferred if it was in person”. Participant 4 agrees with this as “you are not getting that in person sense” and their colleague could not take in how much they were engaging with the material and how much understanding they had. Participant 5 adds that if they were “in the office it would have probably been a bit easier, but it is easily doable training virtually online”. Interestingly, Participant 2 found that the virtual training worked really well for them and actually preferred it over in-person training, saying

“I actually think sitting at home in my own room, like being able to think through what I needed to ask, and with screen-sharing, it actually worked well, I think. I think I would rather that than actually sitting next to the person and being in an office with loads of people, it was just easier for me.” “I felt more comfortable

asking the questions when I was like the only person in the room rather than if you were sitting with loads of people around you, you could ask the sillier questions a bit more comfortably. I think that worked well for me.”

Participant 2 adds that virtual training could be improved if there was some “more structure to it”. They felt like they could have benefited from a training plan that outlined some information on the industry, what they needed to know for the role, what the team did and how it fitted into the finance department and overall organisation. They also said they would have appreciated an information booklet or “cheat sheet” to help them “understand what the organisation does, information on the different business units, what each team does and how they all fit together.” This would help avoid “information overload.” Participant 4’s colleague had created a training plan for them which they “really appreciated and found it worked really well” and would recommend creating one for new hires in the future.

5.4 Networking in a Virtual Environment

Networking within their core team seemed to work well virtually according to all Participants (1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6) interviewed, with Microsoft Teams calls being the most common method of socialisation used. They were all introduced to their team on a call during their first few days, and then had individual calls with different team members after to get to know them. While networking within teams worked well, Participant 5 found it “harder to get on with people” virtually, which is not surprising. As expected, in terms of networking with people outside of their teams within the wider organisation, this proved more difficult with some Participants having more opportunities to network than others.

Participants 1 and 4 were able to network with the wider organisation through partaking in training courses and workshops. They also got the opportunity to help other teams in their areas which allowed them to develop their relationships with the wider team. Participant 6 networked with other teams through the work that they did and having regular calls. They also were able to network with other graduates through training programs and workshops which they found “great”. Participant 3’s team had weekly informal “coffee roulette” calls with different team members where they could network and get to know their colleagues. They explain

“That involved a group call on teams where you did not know who you were meeting with. I thought that was really good because it was an opportunity to talk to different team members and while some of it may have been about work, you still found out a lot about people through that.”

Participants 2 and 5 did not have many opportunities to network with their wider team while working remotely apart from a few work-based calls. Participant 2 explains

“It was not until I went into the office that I was introduced to people on the other teams within finance. I had met them on our monthly calls, but it was not until I went into the office and went for breakfast with them or something that I really got to know them. I did not get to network with the wider group really until we met in person, which is what I expected because it is such a big group.”

Participant 5 agrees with this, saying “coming into the office was probably the best way of mingling with people and networking”. Participant 1 echoes this, saying “you cannot really beat meeting people in person”. Participant 2 adds that an organised event for new hires to meet up and network would have been beneficial, so they could go to one another with questions or share experiences. As discussed by Prince (2021), virtual networking parties help encourage casual conversation that would occur in the office and help the new hires socialise and discover a sense of community.

5.5 Communication

The level of communication all Participants (1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6) received during the virtual onboarding process has been exceptional. As mentioned previously, Participants (2, 3, 4, 5 & 6) received calls from their managers prior to their start date, with Participants 4 and 5 receiving calls from colleagues too. Any questions or queries they had were answered by either the recruiter, Onboarding Specialist or their manager/colleagues. Constant communication ensured the new hire knew what was happening at each stage of the process and any nerves they had were eased. Participant 6 adds that their manager called them a lot during their initial few weeks which they found really “helpful”.

“My manager would have called me on MS Teams a lot, and I think that was really helpful because when you are new to the organisation, it can be daunting to pick up the phone and ring someone for what you would count as a stupid question.

Whereas if they are ringing you frequently anyway, you could just run it by them, and it does not seem as big of a deal. I think that worked really well. I think if someone was being onboarded remotely now, that would be something I would be conscious to do.”

All Participants (1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6) received individual calls from their colleagues via Microsoft Teams during their first week to get to know them and build connections. Again, this provided the new hires with an opportunity to ask any questions they had and gain a better understanding of their team and role. The degree of formality of these calls varied among the Participants. Participant 2 had very formal calls with their colleagues, saying “there was not anything informal”. The calls were mostly work-based and provided little opportunity for them to build connections with their colleagues. Contrasting to this, Participant 3 had informal calls with their colleagues every week through their teams “coffee roulette” initiative, which was discussed previously. Participant 4 says they were in “constant communication” with their team and that there was a “good balance” between formal and informal conversation, which helped them “develop relationships” with their team. The Participants maintained connections with their colleagues through regular communication, either daily or weekly calls, and all felt very supported by them throughout their virtual onboarding experience.

5.6 Engagement

All new hires interviewed felt like they were engaged with their work from the beginning. Participant 4 said they were “engaged straight away from their first week”. Participants 1, 2, 4 and 5 explained their reasonings for feeling engaged were as a result of being busy and because the work needed to be done. Participant 5 adds

“Because of the calls I had with my colleague before I started, I actually did some reading up on everything and I looked at all the forms online and other documents that I could read to get me as up to date as possible with the job. So, I felt like I was able to hit the ground running then because of those calls.”

Participants 3 and 6 expressed that they felt disengaged with their work occasionally due to working from home, with Participant 3 finding themselves becoming “bogged down being at home constantly” and Participant 6 struggling with focus. Both expressed that if they made any

mistakes in their first few weeks, they found it a lot harder to deal with via Microsoft Teams. No participants interviewed felt disengaged as a result of the virtual onboarding process itself.

6. Discussion

The aim of this research was to investigate how onboarding in a remote setting impacted new hires within a utility organisation. Five key objectives were highlighted to help identify the impact it has had on new hires: how onboarding in a remote setting is conducted, how the new hires found the process of being inducted virtually, did they feel connected to their managers and team throughout the process, how they found adapting to the organisational culture while working remotely, and finally, their experience with networking virtually. The previous chapter presented and analysed the findings from the interviews conducted with the Onboarding Specialist and six new hires in Company A. This chapter will provide a critical evaluation and discussion of the research findings in attempt to answer the aforementioned research question and sub questions. Practical implications and limitations of this dissertation are identified, and suggestions are made for further research.

6.1 Interpretation

From this research, it is evident that onboarding employees in-person and inducting new hires remotely are essentially the same processes, they are just delivered in different settings. The process followed is still the same. The process within Company A seems to be a mix of informal and formal onboarding as defined by Bauer (2010). The activities conducted by the Onboarding Specialist, i.e., the compliance and clarification levels, seem to be quite formal but the levels that the hiring manager looks after, culture and compliance, are less structured depending on the new hire's manager. The latter two levels are the most difficult to implement in a remote setting, with the new hires interviewed all having different experiences. Based on this, the onboarding strategy within Company A correlates with level 2 of Bauer's "Onboarding Strategy Levels", High Potential Onboarding. Compliance and clarification are covered by the organisation's formal induction practices but only some culture and connection procedures are in place (Bauer, 2010). Company A should work towards ensuring all levels are formal as "research shows that organisations that engage in formal onboarding by implementing step-by-step programs for new employees to teach them what their roles are, what the norms of the company are and how they are to behave are more effective than those that do not" (Bauer, 2010, p. 2). This would ensure that they reach the Proactive "Onboarding Strategy Level".

Interestingly, while each of the new hires interviewed as part of this research went through the same process, each had a different onboarding experience. As aforementioned, the new hires interviewed all had similar experiences with the compliance and clarification levels of the process, but their journeys differed during the culture and connection levels. This is more than likely due to them having different managers and being in different teams/areas of the business. Some new hires were offered more support, knew more about the organisational culture, and had more opportunities to network than others. As discussed by Van Maanen and Schein (1979), the process of socialisation is an important component of the virtual onboarding process as it helps the individual to acquire the attitudes, behaviours, and knowledge needed to successfully participate and contribute to their organisation. It is clear from the findings of the interviews that each of the new hires had different experiences with socialising with their colleagues. Some had many opportunities to network, but others had none or very little. The inconsistencies within the findings suggest there is no formal process in place for new hires to socialise within Company A. As noted by Meyer and Bartels (2017), new employees who are provided with opportunities to network during the onboarding program find the program more valuable and perceive the organisation as being more supportive of them. Therefore, a formal process should be put in place to aid the socialisation process of new hires during their initial weeks with the company. The findings from the interviews suggest that the new hires all had a positive experience with being inducted virtually though, despite the challenges that it brings.

Just as onboarding in a remote setting has had an impact on new hires socialising within their new organisation, it has also had an impact on them adapting to organisational culture. As predicted, the new hires interviewed for this research faced challenges with learning the culture of the organisation. While they were able to embody most aspects of the culture while working remotely, it was not until they returned to the office until they understood it fully. The symbolic components of the organisational culture were easier to learn and adapt to than the pragmatic elements. This is not surprising as the pragmatic elements usually emerge through socialisation, which the new hires have not had many opportunities to do as discussed above. The findings of this research correlate with Asatiani et al's theory that "the frequent absence of face-to-face socialisation in virtual organisations could undermine some of these processes and weaken the connection between the symbolic and pragmatic side of organisational culture" (Asatiani, et al., 2021, p. 63). As noted by Leidner et al (2018), the process of socialisation is integral to the onboarding of new staff as it not only helps individuals acquire tacit knowledge related to the organisational culture, but it also allows them to alter the existing organisational culture and

contribute to its development. Pairing new hires with a “buddy” who could teach them about the organisational culture would also be beneficial, so they could learn the aspects of the culture that is not as visible when working remotely. Interestingly, the new hires all felt like they adapted to the culture well, despite these challenges.

6.2 Practical Implications

The findings in this study are in line with Chillakuri (2020). In their research in understanding Generation Z expectations for effective onboarding, they found that with remote working, “technology often overshadows the personal experience that the new hire can have through in-person discussions with the colleagues and the leaders” (Chillakuri, 2020, p. 1287). Similar to the findings of this study, they too discovered that socialisation is an integral part of the induction process so new hires can understand the culture, organisation, and work. New hires prefer in-person connection over virtual connection. This study also builds on the work of Elembilassery et al. (2021). While their research focused on analysing onboarding practices and proposing best practices for onboarding in a remote environment, this study delved into the implications joining a new organisation virtually has had on new hires. However, the findings correlate with each other. For example, both studies found that formal processes need to be in place to ensure all components of Bauer’s (2010) onboarding model are covered in the program.

Contrary to research conducted by Ployhart, Shepherd, and Strizver (2021), none of the new hires reported feelings of disengagement when they first started their role. This could be because COVID-19 restrictions within Ireland at the time were quite strong, giving the new hires greater certainty and job security. Ireland having strong restrictions correlates with Ployhart et al.’s (2021, p. 520) theory that “new hires in states with more restrictive COVID-19 responses should manifest greater engagement because there is less uncertainty and strain relating to health and economic activity”. Bauer et al. (2020, p. 4) also noted that “individuals who have access to resources that fit the demands of the situation will be better positioned to deal with adversity and stressful circumstances”. New hires interviewed within Company A were all provided with the necessary resources required to do their roles, which helped them deal with circumstances and therefore prevented them from becoming disengaged.

6.3 Limitations

While the findings from this research are very valuable, some limitations were identified. Although a thorough literature review was conducted, with the time constraints and scope of this study, further literature research could be completed to investigate the function of onboarding in more depth. As onboarding in a remote setting is a recent phenomenon, with little research conducted on the topic to date, the author was limited with the research they could study.

Despite the findings from the interviews with new hires in Company A providing useful and valuable data, they may not represent every organisation due to differing industries, onboarding practices, views on remote working, cultures, and other factors. The quality of this qualitative research is found in its rigour and several new hires who would have added great insight to this research were unavailable for interview, due to it being the summer period when the interviews were conducted and many people on annual leave. While the researcher tried to include a good mix of employees (i.e., levels, business areas, stages of career) within the sample, a broader mix of new hires could have been beneficial to this study.

6.4 Recommendations for further studies

Future research into the impact onboarding in a remote setting has had on new hires is required as there is limited research available on this area currently. If this research were to be replicated, the author would recommend including several companies from different industries in the study, as most organisations have distinct induction processes and systems as well as a unique organisational culture. It would be beneficial to use a broader mix of interview participants to ensure a more accurate set of results. Further academic and industry research should work to continue investigating the impact onboarding in a remote setting is having on new hires to find ways to improve organisations' virtual onboarding processes and therefore their candidate experience.

7. Conclusion & Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

In an article discussing the “new normal”, Peter Cheese, CEO of the CIPD, said “the new normal is one of unpredictability and uncertainty – one that requires us to think differently, have the courage to experiment and try new things, to empower and trust people more to innovate and adapt” (Cheese, 2022, p. 5). The pandemic has ultimately changed the way companies operate. Albeit challenging, it has given organisations an opportunity to create something better. To improve their operating models, processes and systems and make them more flexible, fair, and sustainable. This study contributes to the field of research conducted on the function of onboarding but provides a greater focus on inducting new hires in a remote setting than other authors. The findings show that while organisations have already made great strides in modernising and adapting their processes to a remote setting, there is still a lot of work to be done. As organisations transition to new ways of working, this will result in many more challenges as both new hires and organisation personnel will have to adjust to a blend of in-person and online interactions throughout the pre-onboarding and onboarding phases.

From interviewing the Onboarding Specialist and six new hires within Company A and through completing a thorough analysis of the findings, it is evident that remote onboarding has impacted the way in which employees are inducted into an organisation, how they learn and adapt to the organisational culture, their training and how they network and communicate within their teams and the wider business. The findings suggest that it has had minor impact on the engagement levels of new hires. As a result, it can be concluded that onboarding in a remote setting has had an impact on new hires working in a utility organisation. It has completely altered the way in which the onboarding program within Company A is delivered, has impacted how new hires have adapted to the organisational culture, and it has affected the socialisation of employees. While the new hires found the remote induction experience challenging, they have adjusted to their new roles and organisation seamlessly due to the structured program in Company A and communication and support received from their team. These findings are significant as organisations’ can use them to improve their onboarding processes, adapt them to a remote setting, and enhance their overall candidate experience.

7.2 Recommendations

As a result of the research presented in this dissertation, the author has identified several recommendations organisations can implement to improve their virtual onboarding process for candidates joining the organisation remotely. This section will provide the recommendations to organisations and consider the cost and time implications of implementing them.

Based on the findings from this research, it is clear that no virtual onboarding experience is the same for each new hire. Creating an onboarding guide for hiring managers outlining the process step-by-step would ensure that all new hires have the same experience and would standardise the processes. This guide would advise on the scope and order of activities, tasks to conduct, and the nature and importance of the cultural expectations to adopt when welcoming and socialising a new hire. The guide would be a one-stop-shop on how the organisation completes onboarding and would include links to relevant internal websites, videos, and training material. As shown in this research, new hires greatly benefited from a call from their managers prior to their start date. Including this as an essential step in the virtual process for line managers ensures all new hires receive this communication. This is relatively cost-effective and would take approximately 1-3 months to implement. The main cost incurred would be the time it would take to create the guide that could be spent on other work.

As identified by the Onboarding Specialist in Company A, a weakness of their virtual onboarding experience is the absence of a welcoming pack for new hires. Sending a welcome pack to new hires provides a way to initiate communication with the new hire straight away and gives them a great first impression of the organisation. It can set the tone for the working relationship, introduce the new hire to the organisational culture, boost engagement and shows the company's appreciation of their employees. It should include a welcome letter, an information guide on the organisation, a visual of the organisation/team structure, instructions on how to set up equipment, materials required to do the job, and company merchandise. The cost of a welcome pack ranges from €20 - €50 depending on the materials included.

Finally, the results of this research suggest that new hires starting their roles remotely do not have many opportunities to network. Providing new hires with a list of useful contacts, organising regular informal calls within teams to mimic "watercooler chats", and facilitating a virtual networking event for new hires to mix with each other would allow them opportunities to network and build relationships within their team and wider organisation. Again, these are inexpensive measures to implement as these networking events would be taking place through

a virtual platform, meaning the organisation would avoid the expense of hiring an event space. The main cost incurred here would be loss of working time for participants.

8. Personal Learning Statement

While completing this dissertation, I gained and developed considerable skills and knowledge. I got the opportunity to exercise my creative, questioning, analytic, and writing skills in a focused and practical manner. My organisation and planning skills significantly improved throughout the planning stage of my dissertation; through creating a timeline, a project plan and outlining the approach I would take. I increased my knowledge of human resource management by reading existing literature. My ability to disseminate and synthesise the research papers was improved during the process of writing my literature review. I learnt how to conduct interviews, analyse the data through thematic analysis, summarise and present the results, and establish conclusions from the findings. Through conducting interviews, I developed my interpersonal and communication skills. I also acquired the ability to assimilate large amounts of raw data by coding the interview data thematically.

In the process of writing this dissertation, I got the chance to develop an in-depth understanding of some specific topics related to my chosen discipline, human resource management. I was able to gain a deeper understanding of onboarding and remote working, both of which I have a keen interest in and are applicable to my current role. I gained an insight into how onboarding is conducted in an organisation, Company A, and got the opportunity to make recommendations on how to improve their processes. Overall, I learned the importance of planning and giving myself an adequate amount of time to complete a project. I learned to be flexible, adaptive, and open minded when faced with obstacles. All of the learning outcomes from this dissertation are applicable to my career, and this experience has proved to be a valuable learning tool for me.

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Appendix A: The Four Cs

Compliance is the lowest level and includes teaching employees basic legal and policy-related rules and regulations.

Clarification refers to ensuring that employees understand their new jobs and all related expectations.

Culture is a broad category that includes providing employees with a sense of organizational norms—both formal and informal.

Connection refers to the vital interpersonal relationships and information networks that new employees must establish.

Source taken from Bauer, T., 2010. *Onboarding New Employees: Maximizing Success*, s.l.: SHRM Foundation's Effective Practice Guidelines Series.

Appendix B: Onboarding Strategy Level

Onboarding Strategy Level	Compliance	Clarification	Culture	Connection
1 Passive	YES	SOME	LITTLE/ NONE	LITTLE/ NONE
2 High Potential	YES	YES	SOME	SOME
3 Proactive	YES	YES	YES	YES

Source taken from Bauer, T., 2010. *Onboarding New Employees: Maximizing Success*, s.l.: SHRM Foundation's Effective Practice Guidelines Series.

Appendix C: Proposed Onboarding Framework for a Virtual Work Scenario

Phase	Activity	Details
Pre-Joining	Welcome e-mail and follow-up emails	Offer details and periodic information about the firm.
	Online delivery of welcome kit	Stationery to set up home-office, employee guideline book, T-shirt, mugs, etc.
	Information Request	Individual details collected to initiate online background verification
	Knowledge building	Online courses to be completed before joining.
Joining Day	Joining documentation	Issue ID cards, bank account application forms etc. To be done on campus.
	Virtual Introduction	Video call from HR followed by call(s) with the future Manager / Team.
First Week	Mandatory training	Online training programs to be completed.
	Video call with buddy	Employees are also assigned to a peer mentor for informal discussion and emotional support
	Video call with senior management	Ice-breaking session with the Business Unit / Division head to welcome the new joiner(s)
	Video call with support groups	Meeting with support groups to know who they should contact for any needs in the organization.
First Month	Job / Project Specific Training	This can be done in a mix of virtual and on campus mode.
	Virtual exposure to Daily operations	Employee assisted by mentor / manager to have video calls with stakeholders and virtual tour of facilities
	Virtual interaction with customer	Employee introduced to customer(s) by the manager or any team member.
	Virtual goal setting exercise	HR to work with manager and employee to set goals for the whole year.

Source taken from Elembilassery, V., Chakrabarty, S. & Rangaswamy, U. S., (2021). Analysis of Onboarding Practices in India: A Proposal for Post Pandemic Scenario. *The Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*

Appendix D: Interview Questions

Questions for New Hires

1. How did you find the virtual onboarding experience/how would you describe it?
2. After accepting the job offer, what was your assessment of the activity & interaction before your first day?
3. How was your first week in the organisation? What went well? What could have gone better?
4. Were you introduced to the culture of the organisation? How?
5. Do you feel like you have adapted well to the organisational culture?
6. What training was provided? How did you find the training virtually?
7. How were you introduced to your team/ manager? How do you maintain the connection to them? Did you feel supported by them?
8. What kind of opportunities were you given to network with your team/wider business unit?
9. What methods of socialisation did you find best?
10. Did you feel engaged with your work? If not, what do you think were the reasons for feeling disengaged?
11. Do you have any recommendations on how to improve the virtual onboarding experience?
12. Do you have any other thoughts or feelings on the virtual onboarding process that you would like to add?

Questions for Onboarding Specialist:

1. Can you describe your role within the organisation?
2. Can you talk me through the current onboarding process?
3. In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the process?
4. What are the most common issues that arise when onboarding new hires?
5. What changes, if any, would you make to the remote onboarding process to improve the candidate's experience?

Appendix E: Information on Research Provided to Participants

An investigation into the impact onboarding in a remote setting has had on new hires working in a utility organisation

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part.

WHO I AM AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT?

My name is Amy Porter-Lynam and I am working as a Talent Acquisition Specialist. I am currently doing a Masters degree in Human Resource Management with NCI college. As part of this degree, I am required to complete a dissertation. I have chosen to do my dissertation on how remote working has affected the onboarding process of new hires working in Ireland. The new hire experience has drastically changed in the past 2 years due to the acceleration of remote working. As this is a relatively recent phenomenon, very little research has been done to date on how remote working has affected the onboarding process of new hires. This research aims to gain insights into the virtual onboarding journey of new hires, to guide businesses and HR professionals in designing their onboarding program and adapting it to a remote setting.

WHAT WILL TAKING PART INVOLVE?

Participation in this research will involve being interviewed on your experience with remote onboarding. It will take place via Microsoft Teams and will last approximately 30 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded. The interview transcript and audio recordings will be retained in a secure folder on the researcher's laptop and will only be accessed by the researcher until the exam board confirms the results of their dissertation.

WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

I have invited you to take part in this study so I can gain an understanding of your experience with remote onboarding – what challenges you faced, what you think worked well and any recommendations you might have to improve the virtual onboarding process.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART?

Participation in this research is completely voluntary and you have the right to refuse participation, refuse any question and withdraw at any time without any consequence whatsoever.

WILL TAKING PART BE CONFIDENTIAL?

All information you provide for this study will be treated confidentially. In any report done on the results of this research, your identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing your name and disguising any details of your interview which may reveal your identity or the identity of people I speak about. Disguised extracts from your interview may be quoted in dissertation papers. Non-anonymised data in the form of signed consent forms and audio recordings are collected and retained as part of the research process.

HOW WILL INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE BE RECORDED, STORED AND PROTECTED?

The interview will be recorded and will be stored in a secure folder on the researcher's laptop and will only be accessed by the researcher. Signed consent forms and original audio recordings will also be retained in a secure folder on the researcher's laptop and will only be accessed by the researcher until the exam board confirms the results of their dissertation. A transcript of interviews in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for a further two years after this. Under freedom of information legalisation, you are entitled to access the information you have provided at any time.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

The results of this study will be used in the researcher's dissertation.

WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

Researcher: Amy Porter-Lynam | BBA Business and Management | **Mob:** 086 307 6103 | **Email:** amy.lynam1@yahoo.co.uk

Academic Supervisor: Karen Murray | BA (Law) (NUIG), LL.B (NUIG), LL.M (QUB), Barrister-at-Law (King's Inns) | **Email:** karen.murray@ncirl.ie

Appendix F: Copy of Consent form sent to Interview Participants

An investigation into the impact onboarding in a remote setting has had on new hires working in a utility organisation

Consent to take part in research

- I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves being interviewed via Microsoft Teams.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in dissertation papers.
- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in a secure folder on the researcher's laptop and will only be accessed by the researcher until the exam board confirms the results of their dissertation.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years from the date of the exam board.

- I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Researcher: Amy Porter-Lynam | BBA Business and Management | **Mob:** 086 307 6103 | **Email:** amy.lynam1@yahoo.co.uk

Academic Supervisor: Karen Murray | BA (Law) (NUIG), LL.B (NUIG), LL.M (QUB), Barrister-at-Law (King's Inns) | **Email:** karen.murray@ncirl.ie

Signature of research participant

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix G: Information on Interviews

Interview Participant	Interview Date	Location	Duration
Onboarding Specialist	27/06/2022	Recorded MS Teams Call	14 mins, 55 seconds
Participant 1	21/07/2022	Recorded MS Teams Call	13 mins, 54 seconds
Participant 2	21/07/2022	Recorded MS Teams Call	23 mins, 34 seconds
Participant 3	04/07/2022	Recorded MS Teams Call	13 mins, 0 seconds
Participant 4	05/07/2022	Recorded MS Teams Call	12 mins, 44 seconds
Participant 5	19/07/2022	Recorded MS Teams Call	09 mins, 53 seconds
Participant 6	04/07/2022	Recorded MS Teams Call	15 mins, 18 seconds

Appendix H: Samples from Interview Transcripts

Sample from Interview with Onboarding Specialist

Interviewer:

Can you describe your role within the organisation, like what does an onboarding specialist do?

Participant:

I am the onboarding specialist for the organisation. My job is to ensure that all new starters coming into the company externally are fully set up for their first day. Onboarding as an academic term I guess is more the 1st 6-8 months of somebody's time in the company. For myself in particular with my job, it is from the point where we offer a person a contract up until their first day, that is the area that I would be looking after. So it is, you know, things like making sure we get all the information that we need from a new starter joining the company, making sure the HR and IT setups are done accurately and on time that we get out any devices that we have to get out to a new starter before they join the company. I would also be the point of contact for them before their first day. I would look after all the qualms, I guess from the point when a person's been offered a job up until the first day.

Interviewer:

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the process in your opinion?

Participant:

I think the strengths of the process is that it is a very structured onboarding process compared to what was there before in the organisation. I think it is very clear the different steps that are involved when a person is joining the company and how much time is required for each step also. It means people are fully set up on time for their first day. I think around 95% of new starters are fully set up for their first day. And for the 5% who are not, we are generally pushing them through without enough time for onboarding if that makes sense. We kind of expedite those ones if we are asked to. And so that is why they would not be done on time.

One of the weaknesses of the onboarding process, I think is probably the personal interaction and the kind of wow factor. I think what we do is adequate. We make sure people are able to do their job from the first day, but I do not know if the welcome to the company is as strong as it should be, and we could definitely be doing more. I think there is probably scope

there for a more personal interface when people are coming through the onboarding process, whether it is just 1 phone call with the onboarding specialist before the person joins to welcome them to the company and ask them if there is anything that they need from us before the first day. We do not do welcome packs either, which would be industry best practice. Again, it is something that we do not do and have not ever really looked at, but we are looking at it now.

Interviewer:

What changes, if any, would you make to the virtual onboarding process to improve the candidates experience?

Participant:

I think it can be quite impersonal and that is something that I have picked up on from doing this role for last 12 months. I think we can certainly be doing more to be more personal and can have that face-to-face interaction even if it is virtually. Like I said previously, we are looking to bring in welcome packs. We are currently looking into what other companies are doing, what vendors are out there, how much it would cost, what it would entail, what would go in the pack and why would we do this? What's the benefit?

In addition to that, I would like to increase the amount of personal interaction in the onboarding process and make it more structured. We are potentially looking at including a 15-minute call with an onboarding specialist as a part of the process to welcome the new hire to the company and answer any questions they have and just give them a soft introduction before their first day.

Sample from Interview with Participant 1

Interviewer:

How were you introduced to your team/manager? How did you maintain a connection with them?

Participant:

I think I met the undergrad on my team first. Then, once my laptop was up and running, I had a call with my manager. She introduced herself and welcomed me etc. I think we had a virtual team call that afternoon; I met all my other colleagues on that call. Then I met the rest of the Talent Acquisition teams after that. I joined all their individual team calls over the first week

to meet everyone and familiarise myself with who is who and who is where, and so it was good that way.

Interviewer:

Do you think in hindsight that it would have been better to have had a call with your manager before you started? Like would that have made things easier on your first day?

Participant:

Maybe, I did not find it bad or anything meeting everyone the way I did. Maybe it would have helped if I had a call with my manager or someone the week before, but I was not too stressed anyways. It kind of worked out fine the way it was.

Interviewer:

How were you introduced to the culture of the organisation?

Participant:

I suppose just from observing everything and reading the different brochures and campaign briefs and stuff, just kind of seeing what the organisation is like from that side. Then I suppose just joining in on all the different team calls for the week. That kind of give me an idea of what everyone was like on the team, how they work and what it is like in the organisation. So I suppose just from meeting and talking to everyone.

Sample from Interview with Participant 2

Interviewer:

How did you find the virtual onboarding experience? Like how would you describe it?

Participant:

I was not sure what it was going to be like, but everyone was so welcoming, so in that sense it was fine. I had calls with, I would say most members of the team. I got to chat to them that way. It worked well, I think. What kind of happened for me anyway, it was my first month end. I walked through all my journals with another person on the call with me and I actually think like sitting at home in my own room, like being able to think through what I needed to ask, and with the screen sharing, it actually worked well, I think. I think I would rather that than actually sitting next to the person and like being in an office with loads of people, it was just easier for me to be, like, jotting down my notes. I suppose that was the main training I had like, you

know, someone essentially sitting there with me and going through it. And I do think that worked really well. And so, like, even going forward I think I would rather be trained like that because I know for me it worked better. I do not know it would have worked the same for everyone else.

Interviewer:

How was your first week in the organisation? What went well or what could have gone better for you?

Participant:

The first week was getting to grips with exactly what the team does. It was a new industry for me, I had never worked in the utilities industry before, so I spent some time getting my head around everything. Then I did go through some journals that I would be taking over. It was a nice week to settle in and get your head around things, but it might have worked a bit better if there was more structure to it and if I was given like a training pack or something. I was told like “you could look up this on the hub” and “read through it and get an understanding here” but like you were still a bit uncertain as to what you were trying to get an understanding of. Whereas if you had something that set out like “you need to do ABC and D”, it might just be a bit more structured and easier to know what you should be looking at exactly.

Interviewer:

Do have any recommendations on how to improve the virtual onboarding experience?

Participant:

I think more structured training would be good. Like I said earlier, a training plan would be helpful. It does not necessarily have to be focused on the role, even something to help you understand what the organisation does, information about the different business units, what each team does and how they all fit together. I think that would be very helpful.

Sample from Interview with Participant 3

Interviewer:

How did you find the virtual onboarding experience, like how would you describe it?

Participant:

I found the virtual experience seamless, from when I first accepted the offer to when I actually

started. There was a wide gap in between two dates but like the team that I was dealing with kept me warm, there was not anything outstanding when I started. If I had any questions that I needed an answer to it was always answered straight away. The candidate experience on the system was really good.

Interviewer:

In terms of socialising virtually, what methods of socialisation did you find best?

Participant:

One of the people on the team came up with the initiative of the coffee roulette. So we had that every week. That involved a group call on teams where you did not know who you were meeting with. I thought that was really good because it was an opportunity to talk to different team members and while some of it may have been about work, you still found out a lot about people through that.

Interviewer:

Did you feel engaged with your work when you first started and during the initial few weeks?

Participant:

I did, like I think it was more the novelty of having a new job and then it kind of wore off. I was getting bogged down being at home constantly. But that was just the circumstances and there were times where I was disengaged. If mistakes were made, it was a lot harder to deal with over MS Teams, whereas when mistakes are made in person, you can see the body language, you can read people in person, you cannot do that over teams. I found there was an expectation on me that I put on myself not to make mistakes with the systems.

Sample from Interview with Participant 4

Interviewer:

After accepting the job offer, what was your assessment of the activity and interaction before your first day?

Participant:

So firstly it was signing the contract and filling out the onboarding documents and personal details - health details etc and return those documents to onboarding which was fine. After returning my onboarding documents and going through the onboarding process, I would have

then received information from my manager at the time in terms of like a home office, details on getting my laptop through, details on getting a work phone set up and obviously my IT details as well, username, password, etc to get myself set up on the first day. The laptop arrived on time in advance of my first day, two days before it, which was great. So yeah, it ran smoothly ultimately.

Interviewer:

Did you have a call with your manager before you started?

Participant:

My manager gave me a call; I would say about a week before my first day. My colleague gave me a call as well, I think one or two days before I started. The call with my manager was very informal, she told me a bit about herself, and we discussed what experience I had to date from college in terms of recruitment and HR. She did not really go into too much detail on what my role would be about, she just explained the structure of the team. The call with my colleague, was a lot more about what the role involved and what kind of work I would be doing. He explained the plan he had for me in terms of training me in.

Interviewer:

I am sure it was nice to meet them virtually before your first day.

Participant:

100%. You are not coming in cold. My manager introduced herself and told me a bit about her background. My colleague did the same. It made a real difference and made it a little bit easier on my first day.

Interviewer:

How were you introduced to the culture of the organisation?

Participant:

I suppose I was introduced to the wider team during my first week. Each team member introduced themselves and I got a gauge of what other teams were doing and how many roles they had in the process, what kind of roles they were recruiting for and so forth. That gave me a sense of the wider recruitment community. Then how I gauged, you know, outside of recruitment and everything else would have been through my colleagues telling me really what it was like. I got to do a few training courses with people from outside of recruitment. When I was talking to them, they gave me a background to themselves of how they progressed

throughout their careers within the organisation and that gave me more sense of the organisations culture.

Interviewer:

Do you feel like you have adapted well to the culture?

Participant:

I would like to think so.

Interviewer:

And do you think you are learning more about it now that you are in the office?

Participant:

Absolutely. It feels like my work placement year here has only started in the last month or so, being in the office and interacting with not only the team but other people within HR and the organisation. It makes it a huge difference really, because you are not getting that virtually. That experience of conducting yourself in an office environment in the professional way. You are not going to be able to do that through Microsoft Teams calls.

Sample from Interview with Participant 5

Interviewer:

Did you get to network with the wider team when you were working from home?

Participant:

Not really. I think one or two of them emailed me when I started, wishing me luck and hope you are happy in the role and stuff like that. And I was emailing a few of them that way. But that was really the only way. So I suppose coming into the office was probably the best way of mingling with people and networking.

Interviewer:

Did you feel engaged with your work when you first started?

Participant:

Yeah, absolutely. Because of the calls I had with my colleague before I started, I actually did some reading up on everything and I looked at all the forms online and other documents that I

could read to get me as up to date as possible with the job. So I felt like I was able to hit the ground running then because of those calls.

Interviewer:

Do you have any recommendations on how to improve the virtual onboarding process?

Participant:

I suppose more calls just before you start. I think as much communication as possible would help to ease starting in a new workplace, especially in a virtual environment. The more communication the better. Even before you start working. I know you are not really getting paid before you start working, but it is actually good to have these calls with your team members to know them a bit more. On my first day I was actually able to have good chats with my colleague and have a laugh with him as well while we were doing the work because we had the phone calls before we started, whereas if we started on the day, it would be more nerve wracking.

Sample from Interview with Participant 6

Interviewer:

How did you find the virtual onboarding experience? Like, how would you describe it?

Participant:

I found it really good. You were kept in the loop from the start. The Talent Acquisition Team made sure that you had everything, and they gave plenty of contacts of who to call if there were issues. Things like accesses and everything were set up really quickly. I had them from the beginning. So from that point of view, it was great because at least you were not hanging around waiting.

I joined CD and R for my first rotation, and they were brilliant, we had team calls every week. That just a social thing to kind of get to know the team. When I started, my manager at the time, got me to put in half an hour meeting with everyone on the team individually and so that I met them on a one-to-one basis which was really good.

Interviewer:

What training was provided to you, and how did you find doing it virtually?

Participant:

So from an actual role specific point of view, it was a lot of shadowing. My manager spent a lot of time running through things with me because I suppose in CD and R it was different. It involves speaking to people and investigating things. There is a lot of research, forecasting on excel, working with numbers etc.

To help with the role, I did a lot of training programs. I did an excel training program, power BI, presentation skills, lots of different types of training programs. They have been massively helpful. They ran really well too, even though they were virtual. It kind of felt like you were in the room for a lot of them. I found that really helpful. I suppose that really helped with the role as well.

*Only extracts from the interview transcripts have been included due to limit on word count.
Full transcripts available on request.*