

Digital onboarding and employee outcomes: empirical evidence from the UK

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Citation:

SANI, Kareem, ADISA, Toyin, ADEKOYA, Olatunji and ORUH, Emeka (2022). Digital onboarding and employee outcomes: empirical evidence from the UK. Management Decision. [Article]

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Digital Onboarding and Employee Outcomes: Empirical Evidence from the UK

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|------------------|---|
| Journal: | <i>Management Decision</i> |
| Manuscript ID | MD-11-2021-1528.R3 |
| Manuscript Type: | Original Article |
| Keywords: | Digital onboarding, New hires, Covid-19, Organisational socialisation |
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ABSTRACT:

Given the sharp rise in the adoption of digital onboarding in employment relations and human resource management practices, largely caused by the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, this study explores the impact of digital onboarding on employees’ wellbeing, engagement level, performance, and overall outcomes.

This study uses an interpretive qualitative research methodology, undertaking semi-structured interviews with 28 participants working in the UK services industry.

The study finds that digital onboarding has a significant impact on employee outcomes, following the perceptions of “dwindling social connectedness and personal wellbeing”, “meaningful and meaningless work”, and “poor employee relations” among employees and their employers in the workplace.

CUST_RESEARCH_LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS__(LIMIT_100_WORDS) :No data available.

Due to the increased adoption of digital onboarding, human resource teams must focus on having considerable human interaction with new hires, even if it means adopting a hybrid approach to onboarding. Human resource teams must ensure that they work together with line managers to promote a welcoming culture for new hires and facilitate organisation-driven socialisation tactics and “quality” information necessary for supporting new employees. For new employees, besides acquiring the essential digital skills for the workplace, they must accept the changing digital landscape in order to practice effective communication and align with their organisation’s goals and values.

CUST_SOCIAL_IMPLICATIONS_(LIMIT_100_WORDS) :No data available.

Qualitative research on the influence of digital onboarding on employee outcomes is limited, with much of the research yet to substantially consider the impact of digitalisation on the human resource function of onboarding employees as full members of an organisation.

Digital onboarding and employee outcomes: Empirical evidence from the UK

Abstract

Purpose – Given the sharp rise in the adoption of digital onboarding in employment relations and human resource management practices, largely caused by the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, this study explores the impact of digital onboarding on employees' wellbeing, engagement level, performance, and overall outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – This study uses an interpretive qualitative research methodology, undertaking semi-structured interviews with 28 participants working in the UK services industry.

Findings – The study finds that digital onboarding has a significant impact on employee outcomes, following the perceptions of 'dwindling social connectedness and personal wellbeing', 'meaningful and meaningless work', and 'poor employee relations' among employees and their employers in the workplace.

Practical implications – Due to the increased adoption of digital onboarding, human resources teams must focus on having considerable human interaction with new hires, even if this means adopting a hybrid approach to onboarding. Human resources teams must ensure that they work together with line managers to promote a welcoming culture for new hires and facilitate organisation-driven socialisation tactics and the 'quality' information necessary for supporting new employees. For new employees, besides acquiring the digital skills that are essential in the workplace, they must accept the changing digital landscape in order to practice effective communication and align their goals and values with those of their organisation.

Originality/value – Qualitative research on the influence of digital onboarding on employee outcomes is limited, with much of the research yet to substantially consider the impact of digitalisation on the human resources function of onboarding employees as full members of an organisation.

Keywords: COVID-19, digital onboarding, new hires, organisational socialisation

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Introduction

The discourse on employee outcomes has always generated contentious debate among stakeholders, specifically scholars and practitioners. This contentiousness has only intensified during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has triggered an unprecedented rise (among organisations) in digital onboarding (among other technological adaptations) (Lund et al., 2021). Broadly speaking, digital onboarding entails the digitalisation of the human resources management (HRM) practice of onboarding by leveraging digital technology to help new hires to adjust and integrate into an organisation (Maurer, 2020). It is therefore important to establish the possible implications of this rise in digital onboarding on employee wellbeing, engagement, performance, and overall outcomes.

Consequently, the rise in digital onboarding is considered to have significant implications for new job starters and those changing jobs (Lund et al., 2021). This is due to the digitalisation of HRM practices, which allows organisations to use digital technology to recruit and onboard new employees into organisations. Thus, using digital technologies, organisations can effectively integrate new employees and familiarise them with their organisational culture, processes, and job roles (Chillakuri, 2020). Digital onboarding is not an entirely new human resources (HR) practice that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic – organisations have previously exploited the approach to manage new hires, especially geographically dispersed ones. However, its adoption has increased significantly during the pandemic (Goodermote, 2020).

It is against this backdrop that this article explores the impact of the increased adoption of digital onboarding on employee outcomes in the UK. This increase is due to the changing structures perceived to have been built to onboard new hires and bolster positive employee experiences for most employees who undergo digital onboarding. Furthermore, we focus on employees in the UK services industry, since the rising adoption of digital communication

technologies not only increase client engagement but also foster quicker work processes within organisations in this industry. The study aims to address a fundamental question: How has the increased adoption of digital onboarding affected employee outcomes in the UK? This study therefore contributes to the field by providing qualitative evidence (the participants' lived experiences) that advances knowledge on whether digital onboarding affects employee outcomes (positively or negatively).

Furthermore, it is important to note that because this study was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, the study findings account for the experiences of the study participants who, as a result of the social-distancing rules during the pandemic, were largely subjected to a virtual (digital) onboarding experience. Therefore, it is not the aim of this study to focus on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on digital onboarding in depth. Rather, its aim is to observe the pandemic as a reagent leading to the increased adoption of digital onboarding. As a result, it also has research-related implications on the adoption of digital onboarding in the case of the increasing regularity of remote working post-COVID-19.

The article is structured as follows. The first section presents a review of the extant literature and is followed by a description of the interpretivist research methodology used herein. Thereafter, the findings and a discussion thereof are presented. The study concludes by outlining the research implications and acknowledging its limitations, including some suggestions for future research.

Digital onboarding, organisational socialisation, and employee outcomes

Onboarding is an HR routine of introducing new employees into their job roles and familiarising them with an organisation's culture, goals, values, rules, and processes (Cable et al., 2013). Digital onboarding is inspired by digital transformation in the workplace, which reinforces the need for digital organisations by using technology to gain a competitive

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3 advantage, transforming business processes, and creating value that increases business revenue
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5 (Bajer, 2017). The goal of digital onboarding is to create a virtual experience for employees to
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7 quickly become absorbed into the organisation in order to make a contribution to the overall
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9 business objectives. Moreover, using digital technologies for onboarding facilitates different
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11 forms of dynamic capabilities that are suitable for difficult situations (Bharadwaj et al., 2013),
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13 such as the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, digital onboarding during the COVID-19
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15 pandemic has affected organisational dynamics – a continuous process of enhancing resources
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17 and employee performance through organisational learning, particularly with regard to how
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19 employees and employers react and behave towards each other (Turner, 2019; Lund et al.,
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21 2021). Moreover, the rapidly increasing adoption of digital onboarding due to social-distancing
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23 measures (e.g. remote working) means that digital onboarding appears to be the most viable
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25 option for organisations to continue operating and for employees to continue working.
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31 The terms ‘organisational socialisation’ and ‘onboarding’ have been used interchangeably in
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33 many studies (Chao, 2012; Klein and Polin, 2012). However, Chao (2012) argues that the
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35 unclear distinction between the two terms diminishes the uniqueness of the conceptualisations
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37 of each term: socialisation is more individualised and requires individual effort, whereas
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39 onboarding is an organisational effort to facilitate employee socialisation. Therefore, Chao
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41 (2012) defines socialisation as the learning and adjustment process that enables an individual
42
43 to assume an organisational role that fits both organisational and individual needs’ Eberl et al.
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45 (2012) emphasises that the learning process is ‘social’, enabling the acquisition of the social
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47 knowledge and skills needed to understand an organisation’s cultural values and norms; to
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49 undertake a particular job role; and to be accepted as a member of the organisation. In this vein,
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51 the digital onboarding process can help the socialisation of new employees when there are
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53 adequate amounts of organisational, social, and personal resources to help them learn the
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attitudes, skills, and behaviours required to function effectively in their new work environment with the aid of digital technologies (Kowtha, 2018).

Van Maanen and Schein's (1979) typology of socialisation tactics remains one of the most widely used socialisation models, and it is divided into six socialisation tactics. Jones (1986) further categorised these socialisation tactics into two clusters. First, institutionalised socialisation, bordering on the formalised and structured socialisation process, involves collective, formal, sequential, fixed, serial, and investiture tactics. Second, individualised socialisation, which lacks structure, means that new hires experience neglect and are left to determine their success or failure at adjusting to the organisation on their own. This approach involves individual, informal, random, variable, disjunctive, and divestiture tactics. Consequently, Ashforth et al. (2007) argue that the neglect arising from individualised socialisation may motivate innovativeness among new employees but may also engender a feeling of abandonment and role ambiguity, leading to adjustment difficulties. Moreover, organisational socialisation often produces anxiety for new hires, who are likely to experience a 'reality shock', especially those who find the socialisation process challenging (Kodama, 2017). Within the present context, we envisage significant implications for new employees who have had experience with digital onboarding and may find it difficult to establish a 'normal' social interaction with organisational members since onboarding takes place virtually, especially within a difficult situation like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Organisational socialisation has several implications for employee experience and outcomes, particularly with regard to the automated onboarding process (Snell, 2006). In terms of the transformation from a traditional to digital onboarding experience, new hires are expected to encounter a timely and consistent socialisation experience. The extant research has revealed that socialisation yields positive employee outcomes, such as job satisfaction, motivation, reduced turnover intentions, organisational commitment, and improved job performance (Eberl

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et al., 2012; Phillips et al., 2015). In contrast, employee characteristics (e.g. personality and self-identity) may generate negative experiences for new hires. For instance, an introverted individual may find it overwhelming and uncomfortable communicating with a group during the socialisation process. Likewise, new hires may feel that some organisational members do not approve of their self-identity or values, thereby undermining adjustment (Phillips et al., 2015). Therefore, Gruman and Saks (2018) proposed a hybrid approach to onboarding for effective organisational socialisation, requiring a proportionate mixture of in-person and virtual onboarding activities. Moreover, within the present context, we envisage that digital onboarding may trigger several outcomes for new employees. Against this backdrop, it is important to explore the employee outcomes of the digital onboarding experience of new employees.

Methodology

Research approach and data collection

This study adopts a qualitative method in order to explore the participants’ lived experiences and provide rich insights into the researched phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2019). Using the qualitative method allows us to explore the subjective knowledge and choices related to the participants’ lived experiences in depth by asking the participants to give detailed accounts of their digital onboarding experiences and the impacts thereof. Moreover, the qualitative method complements prior research on digital onboarding, most of which has adopted quantitative methods, which lack the ability to investigate the participants’ responses in depth. Furthermore, the study is guided by interpretivism, allowing us to discover rich narratives from individuals’ lived experiences (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Although some studies have used the qualitative method and interpretive approach to explore onboarding (e.g. Chillakuri et al., 2020), there are not many studies that have explored digital onboarding using the interpretative research approach. Although qualitative and interpretive research lacks generalisability

(Saunders et al., 2019), this study's goal is not to clarify reality or a particular truth; instead, the methods help us gather in-depth descriptions and subjective views of the participants with the intention of understanding the impact of digital onboarding on employee outcomes.

Data collection from employees in the UK services industry occurred between April and July 2021 through cloud-based video conferencing applications (e.g. Zoom and Microsoft Teams). This communication medium was deemed appropriate due to the social-distancing measures in place across the country due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study used semi-structured interviews to obtain information from the participants. This method allowed us to ask some pre-set open-ended questions, allowing the participants to express their views on the subject in a detailed manner (Given, 2008). We applied the snowballing sampling technique to recruit even more participants based on the referrals of the initial participants whom we contacted (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The snowballing method was deemed fit for recruiting the participants due to the difficulty of reaching them (specifically, due to the inclusion and exclusion selection criteria). Supported by Saunders et al. (2019), we depended on the initial research participants to nominate some of their acquaintances that would fit this study's line of inquiry.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were based on two characteristics. First, the participants were required to be new hires, including those who have recently moved jobs within the last year. Second, the participants were required to have recently gone through or be going through a digital onboarding process. This screening process helped us improve the validity and reliability of the research by recruiting participants with first-hand knowledge about the studied phenomenon (Gioia et al., 2013). On average, the participants started their new jobs seven months prior to being interviewed for this research, and on average, their onboarding programmes took 12 weeks to complete. It should be noted that the scope of this study does not include an assessment of the technology used, such as the specific ICT artefact/system that

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sustains the virtual onboarding process. Instead, the study investigates the employee outcomes based on the managerial practice of onboarding new hires virtually without the requirement to be physically present at the company’s premises. Furthermore, we have obtained, through the data, a ‘snapshot’ of the impacts of digital onboarding on employees’ wellbeing, engagement levels, performance, and overall outcomes. It is therefore important to note that generalisability is not a relevant criterion for qualitative research. According to Carminati (2018), the purpose of qualitative research is to provide in-depth explanations and meaning rather than to generalise findings. Future research may consider using a quantitative research method that has the capacity to cover the wider services industry.

Insert Table 1 about here

The semi-structured interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes, and pseudonyms have been used to conceal the participants’ real identities (Saunders et al., 2019), as we assured the participants in the consent/participation form. The interviewing continued until data saturation was achieved – the point at which no new information, themes, or experiences were being discovered (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). A total of twenty-eight semi-structured interviews (17 males, 11 females) aged between 20 and 45 years old were conducted (see Table 1 for detailed demographic information). The interviews began with open-ended questions. For instance, the participants were asked: How did you feel going through a digital onboarding process? Considering your digital onboarding experience, how quickly were you able to adjust to and understand the new work environment and organisational culture? Then, the interviews progressed into more specific questions relating to the participants’ experiences of digital onboarding. Some of the specific questions included: What were the outcomes of your digital onboarding experience on your learning and development? How do you think your virtual interaction experiences helped in developing a social understanding of your organisation? What are the effects (positive and negative) of socialising online compared to in-person interaction?

These questions enabled us to investigate, interpret, and understand the participants' digital onboarding experiences. Ultimately, this approach provided insights regarding the employee outcomes associated with digital onboarding experiences.

Data analysis

Following the data collection, the interviews were transcribed and analysed using the thematic analysis procedure (TAP), a qualitative analysis tool used for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within datasets (Braun et al., 2014). We adopted the three stages of TAP used by Pratt et al. (2006). In the first stage, all the information that was transcribed was compiled into one set. Next, the initial concepts were highlighted, using the language that was initially used by the participants. Then, in deriving first-order codes, we used an open-coding system by separating and fragmenting the data into meaningful expressions by creating two-letter words or simple descriptive phrases that captured the interview extracts, all of which related to the key research objective. For instance, there are provisional descriptions from the data excerpts (such as individual personality; isolation; first impression; comfort and wellness; workplace hostility; and intimidation and bullying). The process continued to the second stage of the analysis (see Table 2).

After consolidating the first-order codes that emerged from the datasets, we began the process of creating theoretical categories (see Table 2), which is the second stage of the TAP (Pratt et al., 2006). Then, we combined the related patterns and concepts to ensure they were truly representative of the participants' viewpoints by repeatedly reviewing the data. In the final stage, all the conceptual categories were combined to generate theoretical explanations of the studied phenomenon. Then, all the authors' results were compared for the purpose of investigator triangulation (Saunders et al., 2019). We then developed the themes by jointly reviewing and merging the overlapping themes. The themes were re-confirmed, and existing themes were modified; thus, the final themes were established (see Table 2).

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We followed the validity procedure suggested by Hayashi et al. (2019) during the data analysis process. First, descriptive validity was ascertained by avoiding any distortion to the data that was collected and by ensuring that data was transcribed verbatim. Second, interpretive validity took place by conducting member checks. For instance, we contacted the participants to clarify any discrepancies in the interpretations of their responses and to enable the participants to determine the extent to which they felt that the interpretations reflected their lived experiences. The feedback revealed that all the participants were satisfied with the interpretations. Lastly, in order to ensure theoretical validity, the authors iteratively moved back and forth across data and theory. This allowed us to provide a theoretical explanation that would be consistent with the data that was obtained (Hayashi et al., 2019).

Insert Table 2 about here

Findings and discussion

As shown in Table 2, the findings of the study are based on three key themes: dwindling social connectedness and personal wellbeing; meaningful and meaningless work; and poor employee relations, as demonstrated in the following sections.

Dwindling social connections and personal wellbeing

When discussing the digital onboarding experiences of the participants concerning their adjustment to and understanding of the new work environment, a dominant theme was the level of social connectedness within the organisation. Many new hires often have an understandably nerve-racking experience in their first few weeks of starting a new job. Since the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an increase in the adoption of digital onboarding in most organisations, new hires are likely to experience increased anxiety and stress while trying to acclimatise to their new working environment, especially those who attempt to ‘shoehorn’ their existing experience into the virtual work setting (Faragher, 2020). Since in-person interaction

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3 during the onboarding process has been replaced by digital onboarding, social connectedness
4 remains a profound concern for most participants in this study. Social connectedness refers to
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8 ‘the ways in which one can connect to others physically, behaviourally, cognitively, and
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10 emotionally’ (Holt-Lunstad, 2018, p. 1308). Our data shows that the participants demonstrated
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12 mixed emotions regarding their digital onboarding experiences and the associated level of
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14 social connectedness. For example, as one participant mentioned:

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17 I found it quite easy to adjust to the new work environment and new culture despite
18 the pandemic, because I felt the organisation suited my personality. We had an
19 online social activity in my second week on the job, and it was pretty good, because
20 I found it interactive, and it was just one way of showing people’s characters and
21 personalities. For instance, we had a painting activity, and from there, I could see
22 people’s competitive sides coming out...so, I learned a bit about my colleagues’
23 personalities (Participant 1, project manager).
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30 In contrast, most participants commented on the negative impacts of digital onboarding on
31 achieving social connectedness. The quote below is typical of their shared experiences:
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35 I had mixed feelings about my digital onboarding experience during COVID-19. I
36 didn’t feel like it allowed me to have a social understanding of my new workplace,
37 because the whole experience felt like an interaction with a computer – with
38 minimal human connection. In fact, I felt isolated in the first few weeks, and it was
39 mainly my line manager who really kept checking in with me, so I wouldn’t say it
40 was a pleasant experience for the first few weeks, but having spent six months there
41 now, I think there’s been much improvement in social interaction (Participant 4,
42 administrative officer).
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50 Most participants believe that digital onboarding engenders social disconnection compared to
51 traditional in-person onboarding. Employees often want to feel supported by their employers,
52 managers, and colleagues, and their perceived level of support often determines their
53 performance and other employee outcomes (Philips et al., 2015). This is especially true for new
54 hires, particularly in their first few weeks on the job. For example, an understanding of ‘how
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things are done around here' and 'what to do and what not to do' are common concerns about the effects of social disconnections due to the digitalised process of onboarding, as expressed by most participants.

However, due to the restrictions on close contact (social distancing) with people outside one's household, many organisations were left with no choice but to facilitate digital onboarding while working remotely. Most participants felt that given the restrictions they faced due to the pandemic, face-to-face social interactions would have been more helpful to facilitate organisational integration and enable them to clearly understand the organisation's culture. Their shared experience reveals that digital onboarding engenders weak relationships and results in language loss due to the absence of body language, facial expressions, and hand gestures over emails and text messages or the misinterpretation of these elements over video calls. For instance, Participant 16, a data analyst, remarked that 'The first impression matters... People like me, whose love language is physical touch, prefer in-person interaction, with handshaking and hugs being part of the welcoming process'.

Moreover, this finding aligns with those studies that suggest that employees' personality traits (especially proactive personalities) influence how quickly they adjust to a new organisation (Gruman et al., 2006; Philips et al., 2015), facilitated by effective socialisation. Like these studies, the present study finds that personality types (such as introversion and extroversion) are determinants of the effectiveness of socialisation. For example, some participants who appear to be introverts (e.g. Participants 6, 10, 14, and 18) reported a preference for digital onboarding, as they were able to avoid pressures of group social interactions, while the extraverted participants (e.g. Participants 2, 8, 15, 19, 22, and 28) preferred social interactions. Consequently, for most participants, digital onboarding felt more transactional than social, and efficiency, standardisation, and continuity seemed more important to their organisations than

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3 social connectedness. Faragher (2020) suggests that technology is helpful for HR to automate
4 and facilitate the transactional parts of employees' onboarding experiences (e.g. processing
5 final documentation), but organisations owe it to their employees to be creative in replicating
6 the human aspects of the experience. Therefore, organisational socialisation remains crucial
7 for considering how employees feel socially connected to each other and how these interactions
8 affect their engagement, commitment, and performance even when the process is digitalised.
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10 Prior studies have advocated the importance of encouraging social connections in the
11 workplace, such that employees can interact freely with each other (Holt-Lunstad, 2018;
12 Moldavanova and Goerdel, 2018), and as a result, the digitalised process of onboarding new
13 employees should be made to foster stronger social relationships rather than weaken them.
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17 In addition, when discussing the impact of digital onboarding on their socialisation
18 experiences, the participants had mixed perspectives about the influence of digital onboarding
19 on their personal wellbeing. Overall, the consensus strongly upheld by the participants is that
20 social connectedness is also linked to personal wellbeing, thus corroborating previous studies
21 that find that social connectedness in the workplace is critical to employees' psychological
22 wellbeing, physical health (including reducing premature mortality), and cognitive functioning
23 (Holt-Lunstad, 2018). The following quotes exemplify the participants' experiences:
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27 I feel that digital onboarding has its positives and its negatives... In my experience
28 of both in-person and digital onboarding, digital onboarding reduces workplace
29 intimidation and bullying. For example, when I started my current job, being
30 behind the camera, you don't really know what people are like, especially in terms
31 of their height. I remember thinking that my line manager would be taller than me
32 [laughs]... The currently discussed return to the office is a no for me, and I'm not
33 bothered about the in-person interaction because it [virtual interaction] preserves
34 my personal wellness (Participant 1, project manager).
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38 I am not really convinced by the need for in-person onboarding, because when
39 everyone is in their own space or house, they feel a lot more comfortable and
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3 relaxed than when they are all 'suited and booted' in the office... I feel a lot freer
4 at home and can speak my mind because I don't need to be too mindful of who's
5 listening or of being judged by someone who has not had the time to meet me and
6 understand my personality, because that can affect my emotional stability.
7 Moreover, observing the onboarding remotely means that I can be free of the stress
8 of commuting (Participant 12, social worker).
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11 Like Participant 1, three other participants (Participants 15, 19, and 27) raised concerns
12 regarding the negative impacts of in-person onboarding due to the risk of workplace
13 intimidation and bullying. This finding aligns with that of Holt-Lunstad (2018): workplace
14 relationships can be rife with hostility, such as interpersonal mistreatment; a disregard for other
15 people's feelings, or rude or condescending comments, all of which are indicators of a toxic
16 workplace or hostile working environment. These participants raised issues concerning how
17 colleagues' physical appearance (e.g. their manner of dress, body/facial features, and stature)
18 affects their personal wellbeing and expectations, especially when meeting them for the first
19 time. Interestingly, the aforementioned participants were all females. This finding corroborates
20 existing research findings that women (more so than men) are targets of workplace bullying
21 and are particularly vulnerable to workplace intimidation (McCormack et al., 2018). However,
22 their affirmation that with digital onboarding, these challenging experiences have been lowered
23 (but not necessarily eliminated) aligns with the findings of previous studies that suggest that
24 bullying, harassment, and intimidation have extended into the digital work environment (see
25 Sobieraj, 2018).
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29 On the other hand, for those who are against or who had an unpleasant digital onboarding
30 experience, the socialisation aspect of onboarding is a grave concern. These participants felt
31 that a simple check-up on new employees by their colleagues (not only line managers) was
32 critical for their social connectedness. Some participants opined, 'It is easier to check up on
33 people in the physical office and ask after their wellbeing than to call them on the phone or
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connect virtually' (Participant 2, social worker). These concerns are perceived to be triggered by the perception that while modern digital communication technology (e.g. video conferencing) saves time and costs, it also leads to a phenomenon known as 'video call fatigue' (Ames, 2020), especially for workers in the services industry, who require such technologies to connect to geographically dispersed clients.

In sum, our findings suggest that organisational support through direct physical interactions during the onboarding process is important for effective socialisation. It enhances positive employee outcomes, such as increased self-efficacy; job motivation and satisfaction; reduced turnover intentions; and improved personal wellbeing.

Perceptions of meaningful and meaningless work

The discourse typically used by the participants regarding the impact of their digital onboarding experiences on their learning and development was related to the extent to which they found meaning and purpose in their new roles and new work environment. Employees want to know if their work is meaningful and exciting from the beginning, and they often get a snapshot of their work during the onboarding process. Despite the relevant roles, duties, and responsibilities being detailed in the job description, the onboarding process is expected to provide a much clearer understanding of the job. Therefore, when employees perceive their job as boring, mundane, and repetitive, they often become demotivated and find it challenging to understand how their work is significant in their organisation's success (Chillakuri et al., 2020). In addition, organisational socialisation through effective onboarding is facilitated by meaningful interactions with managers, co-workers, and customers, thereby enhancing innovativeness and creativity among new hires (Cesário and Chambel, 2019). Our findings show how the participants perceive meaningful work during their digital onboarding process:

When I started my new job – in the heat of the pandemic – I watched some videos provided by my company of what they expect and how my role fills the gap and

would add value to the organisation... I liked the experience because I can play the videos repeatedly to boost my morale and remind me of how important my job is to the company (Participant 19, client service officer).

Adjusting to the new work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic was fine for me, especially because I'm an advocate of working from home... For me, it was the excitement of something new that helped me, as I was very keen and eager to fully understand what my job role is and how I can help my team and the organisation. For instance, during the first few weeks, I would happily jump up when receiving new office emails to see what would be next and what else they had in store for me (Participant 5, accountant).

Most participants, at the start of their new job, felt very excited and eager to know their organisation and what their job entails, sometimes leading to positive tension; for example, Participant 5 expressed his eagerness to check new official emails and new tasks. Although others may perceive this as one of the dangers of digital onboarding for employees, as Bailey and Madden (2016) suggest, meaningful work is often based on individuals' subjective experiences and could mean different things to different people. In contrast, Michaelson's (2021) normative perspective argues that meaningful work should be meaningful to the individual and others (e.g. organisations) as well as be independent of them. It is generally agreed that meaningful work leads to job satisfaction and increased employee wellbeing (Smids et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important for managers to ensure that (new) employees, through institutionalised socialisation (Jones, 1986), find meaning in their work, such that their work is worthwhile for themselves and their organisation.

However, after several days and weeks into their digital onboarding experience, only a few participants acknowledged sustained excitement – as they progressed through the onboarding activities, the lack of adequate social interaction extinguished their excitement. Thus, for many, the human-digital interaction reduced their responsiveness and connectivity to their job roles and often resulted in negative tension. The following quotes exemplify their experiences:

Despite the adverse effects of COVID-19, I started my new job in high spirits because I felt this was something new. I was ‘on cloud nine’, and my friends saw my excitement as a ‘fizzy soda’. But the whole digital process killed that spirit because it took me a long time to figure out my role. I hated that feeling because I lost that satisfaction, thirst, and enthusiasm for work... Imagine just interacting with a computer with lots of information, yet it doesn’t answer all your questions (Participant 28, content producer).

Three weeks into my new job was a ‘hell of tension’ because the pressure was enormous, especially with the pandemic causing increased work demands... Because I started teaching from week two after joining the university, I couldn’t complete the online induction and onboarding activities, and HR kept sending me emails to ensure their completion. I needed to convince myself to find meaning in what I was doing, so I took some nights to do the tasks and watch videos that were sometimes so boring that I skipped many [laughing]. I wouldn’t have had to do this online thing [in usual circumstances], but in the ‘new normal’, everything is online (Participant 8, lecturer).

A significant number of the participants indicated that digital onboarding increases negative tension due to work-related factors (e.g. role overload and work pressure), especially with the pandemic exacerbating this pressure. Although most participants acknowledged receiving adequate remote work facilities and equipment (e.g. a computer, work chairs, and desks), there were several reports of a lack of role clarity due to the limited social interaction with their managers and team members. While certain organisation-related factors (e.g. firm size and the nature of the business) could necessitate the use of digital onboarding to quicken the onboarding process, creating a positive onboarding experience is crucial to enable new employees to adapt to the existing dynamics in the new work environment. Moreover, the majority of the participants seemed to have experienced individualised socialisation due to perceived organisational neglect, such as being made to figure out how to solve problems on their own and adjust to the organisation themselves. For example, as Participants 4, 11, and 22 reported, they were mainly able to view frequently asked questions but often failed to get quick

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3 responses to specific questions that would facilitate an understanding of their roles. This
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5 situation was particularly dominant among the inexperienced younger participants and those
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7 without prior work experience who unfortunately found themselves working in the unusual
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9 environment engendered by the pandemic.
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13 This study's findings support the arguments of prior studies that workplace digitalisation (e.g.,
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15 digital onboarding) could potentially lead to a decline in meaningful work (Smids et al., 2019;
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17 Symon and Whiting, 2019). From a socialisation perspective, it may be assumed that digital
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19 onboarding significantly changes the social dynamics at work and affects work meaningfulness
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21 due to limited social interaction, fewer human consultations, less dependency on others, and a
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23 diminished sense of purpose. Thus, as our findings suggest, employees who feel isolated may
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25 find work meaningless, which in turn leads to underperformance, job dissatisfaction, poor
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27 engagement, and demotivation. The tension (positive or negative) experienced during the
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29 digital onboarding process also influence employee outcomes (positive or negative) and work
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31 meaningfulness depending on the content of the work and the design of the digital technologies
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33 used to facilitate the work (Symon and Whiting, 2019). However, Bailey and Madden (2016)
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35 argue that the greatest meaningfulness may sometimes be experienced through negative
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37 experiences and struggles. Conversely, if individuals can bear this tension, they may accept
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39 negative work conditions (stress, over-working, long working hours) as temporary or inevitable
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41 outcomes of undertaking meaningful work (Symon and Whiting, 2019) at the expense of their
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43 wellbeing.
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49 50 ***Poor employee relations***

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52 When discussing the impact of the virtual interaction experiences (through digital onboarding)
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54 in developing a social understanding of the organisation, poor employee relations was another
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56 dominant theme that emerged from our discussions with the participants. The most pronounced
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58 concern was the lack of transparency and trust in the workplace engendered by digital
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onboarding. Transparency and trust in the workplace are part of the organisational culture and identity that define the employee-employer relationship (Pirson and Malhotra, 2011). Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2016, p.1788) define transparency as ‘the perceived quality of intentionally shared information from a sender’. This conception of transparency denotes the significance of sharing ‘quality information’ or knowledge in a ‘timely’ manner to promote trust, awareness, and coherence. Our findings reveal that digital onboarding, especially during the pandemic, leads to lower transparency among some organisations, as some participants raised significant concerns regarding the trustworthiness of their organisations:

I have moved jobs twice during the pandemic, and with my first job, it looked like digital onboarding helped the organisation sweep some relevant information under the carpet, which to me showed a lack of transparency. For instance, my contract states I would have a four-month probation period, but that was extended by another three months... Due to the limited physical interaction in the first few months, understanding my new role was like having a ‘mountain to climb’, leading to some lapses in performance. It was demoralising because it felt like I had no job security, and my trust in the organisation diminished, so I resigned (Participant 23, customer representation officer).

Although three participants reported having to undergo an extended probation period due to poor performance, which they blamed on lack of managerial and co-worker support as well as social disconnection, only one (Participant 23) resigned from work. Nevertheless, all three participants had something in common: They felt that their organisations were not transparent with them. Even though the pandemic might have made a typically bad experience much worse, the participants still expected a transparent relationship with their employers. Like Participant 3, a social worker, remarked, ‘We all understand the circumstances of COVID-19, but managers cannot keep throwing us under the bus for every little mistake if we do not have the means of connecting to them to clarify work issues and share our feelings’. Therefore, providing employees (especially new hires) with quality information about organisational

conduct and culture helps facilitate the effective adjustment of new recruits to their new environment (Bennett and McWhorter, 2021). Moreover, although some researchers feel transparency is a perception of received information (Zhou et al., 2018), employees often prefer that their employers endeavour to ‘intentionally’ divulge or share ‘relevant’ information to boost their trust and organisational commitment (Schnackenberg and Tomlinson, 2016). Our finding supports the assertion of Jiang and Luo (2018) that transparent communication from an organisation impacts employee trust, engagement, performance, and intention to remain. It also aligns with Schnackenberg et al.’s (2020) three-dimensional construct of transparency: perceived information disclosure, clarity, and accuracy. Therefore, when employers fail to disclose relevant, quality, clear, and accurate information to their employees, mistrust results, leading to adverse employee outcomes. This is even more true when considering the limitations of digital onboarding concerning social interactions (especially during the COVID-19 pandemic). Employees may find it difficult to raise issues that are both personal and relevant to their work. For most participants, digital onboarding resulted in individualised socialisation tactics, resulting from an ambiguous sequence in the order of the activities or experiences that employees undergo during onboarding (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979; Jones, 1986), leading to adjustment difficulties.

In addition, most participants raised significant concerns regarding how being micromanaged and unable to bring their whole self to work affected them in developing a social understanding of their organisation. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have increased the level of managerial control and monitoring, which is a problem relating to organisational trust (Hodder, 2020). With managers’ jobs on the line, particularly during the pandemic, ensuring productivity became even more of a priority to them than it was before the outbreak of the pandemic, as they want to keep their jobs; hence, they increased their control and surveillance of employees

– even while they were all working from home (Hodder, 2020). The following quotes exemplify the participants' experiences:

I think the virtual environment exposed me to the feeling that my manager bullies me... I consider being micromanaged as a form of bullying and a lack of trust because my manager is overly involved in my work even while I am working remotely... I understand that as a new employee, I would need more supervision than experienced employees, but when it becomes a case of controlling my whole work structure and undermining my performance, I had to draw the line and express how I felt at the time, because he [manager] was choking me as a result of his insecurities (Participant 12, social worker).

In my experience, interacting online with colleagues during the pandemic has not allowed me to bring out the best parts of myself, because, unlike the physical office, I'm not driven to talk about myself. If I was face to face with people in the physical office, I would have been able to bring my whole self to work, and you'd see a bit more of my personality, because that's where people ask you about what kind of music you listen to, or the food you like, or what you did at the weekend... That kind of talk hardly happens online (Participant 25, marketing executive).

The participants extended their perceptions of micromanagement to mean workplace intimidation and bullying, evidencing poor employee relations. Some participants (Participants 2, 7, 13, and 26) used descriptions such as, 'discouraging independent thinking and decision making', 'requesting overly detailed reports', 'wanting to be cc'ed into every email', 'excessive supervision', and 'wanting perfection' as evidence of micromanagement by their managers. Consequently, the participants perceived that their managers have been undermining their performance and controlling their work processes, resulting in workplace intimidation, anxiety, bullying, distrust, demotivation, and a hesitation to make independent decisions due to a fear of making mistakes. In addition, besides organisational transparency, the participants felt that working remotely and socialising virtually restricts them from being transparent about themselves (e.g. bringing the 'whole self' to work), making it difficult for others to understand

their personalities. This finding aligns with that of a Deloitte (2016) study: 61% of employees hide their identities at work to a certain extent. They trivialise parts of themselves to avoid being discriminated against or considered as not taking work seriously. Thus, employers need to rethink how employees are valued (socially and financially) to ensure that they bring out employees' best performance and enhance employee wellbeing (Hodder, 2020).

Overall, this study suggests that digital onboarding significantly impacts employee outcomes (positively and negatively). This is shown in the above discussions of how digital onboarding is perceived to lead to dwindling social connectedness and personal wellbeing, such that many new hires find it challenging to build effective social connections and relations with their employers, managers, and colleagues, and all this inadvertently affects their wellbeing. Additionally, digital onboarding can lead to both meaningful and meaningless work, depending on the subjective experiences of new hires and how they find meaning in their work while undergoing digital onboarding. Finally, a lack of trust and transparency, excessive managerial control, intimidation, and bullying all result in poor employee relations among employees and employers in the workplace.

Conclusion and implications

This study set out to explore the impacts of the increased adoption of digital onboarding on employee outcomes in the UK. There has been limited qualitative research on the influence of digital onboarding on employee outcomes, with much of the research yet to substantially consider the impact of digitalisation on the HR function of onboarding employees to become full members of an organisation. In addition, most of these studies were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic. The current study presented empirical evidence of employees' digital onboarding experiences during the pandemic, even though, as was previously stated, its aim was not to focus on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on digital onboarding in depth. Rather, it aimed to observe the pandemic as a reagent leading to the increased adoption of

digital onboarding. Thus, our findings corroborate those of previous studies undertaken before the outbreak of the pandemic and further contribute to the existing literature on digital onboarding.

In particular, as an empirical contribution, this study reveals three key themes: dwindling social connectedness and personal wellbeing; perceptions of meaningful and meaningless work; and poor employee relations. Therefore, this is a case study of how digital onboarding, even during a turbulent time (in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic), changes the social dynamics at work and affects employee outcomes. Most importantly, our findings suggest that employees are exposed to both the positive and negative impacts of digital onboarding. On a positive note, our findings also show that digital onboarding relatively reduces hostility in the workplace, including bullying, harassment, and intimidation, particularly in the views of employees who perceive that digital onboarding accommodates introverted personalities – the ‘lone-wolf’ employees – more than extraverted ones. In terms of the negative impacts of digital onboarding, our study found that digital onboarding results in social disconnection at work, diminishes meaningful work, decreases transparency, and increases mistrust issues at work.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the scarce literature that reveals the importance of digitalisation within the theoretical concept of socialisation. Given that the future of work requires digital transformation to ensure value creation and strengthen competitiveness (Bajer, 2017), our study emphasises the influence of digital onboarding on providing new hires with a social understanding of the workplace. It confirms that for effective socialisation to take place, organisations must depend primarily on institutionalised socialisation tactics, whereby socialisation is driven by the organisation rather than individual employees (Jones, 1986; Eberl et al., 2012). The study demonstrates that although successful socialisation is a function of employees’ individual differences (Gruman et al., 2006), employees cannot be left isolated to adjust to their organisations solely by means of individual tactics. Such a situation can result

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3 in significant negative experiences that may lead to negative employee outcomes. As this study
4 shows, employees who feel abandoned in the socialisation process may face the challenges of
5 role ambiguity, trust issues, and meaningless work due to social disconnection from the
6 workplace. Therefore, redesigning the onboarding process to ensure that it is 'fit for purpose'
7 can result in more positive employee outcomes, such as increased engagement and commitment
8 as well as reduced turnover intentions (Cable et al., 2013).
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11 This study has two important practical implications. First, there are implications for HR
12 professionals regarding onboarding new hires and socialising them to align with the relevant
13 organisational culture, values, and processes. HR must focus on strengthening the onboarding
14 process, especially by recognising the importance of first (and lasting) impressions as crucial
15 factors in the long-term performance and retention of new employees. Therefore, HR must
16 ensure that it works together with line managers to promote a welcoming culture for new hires,
17 facilitate organisation-driven socialisation tactics, and provide 'quality' information necessary
18 for supporting new employees rather than leaving them to figure out things on their own.
19 Furthermore, with the increased adoption of digital onboarding, HR must foster considerable
20 human interactions with new hires, even if it means adopting a hybrid approach to onboarding
21 by mixing in-person and virtual onboarding activities (Gruman and Saks, 2018).
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25 Second, there are implications for new hires regarding their digital onboarding experiences and
26 socialisation. Despite the importance of individual differences in successful socialisation, new
27 employees need to recognise the growing trends in workplace digitalisation and prepare
28 themselves, by acquiring digital skills, for increased digital social interactions – now during
29 the pandemic more than ever before. Therefore, new employees are encouraged to brace
30 themselves for the changing digital landscape in order to foster effective communication and
31 align themselves with organisational goals and values.
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Limitations and suggestions for future research

One limitation of the study is that it used an interpretive and qualitative research approach, making statistical generalisation difficult or impossible. Instead, it provides in-depth meanings and interpretations of the studied phenomenon. Furthermore, given the subjective nature of the views of the participants and the researchers, this study may be subject to potential bias. The study is also limited to a single country and a single industry context, which may not necessarily be generalisable to other countries. Future research therefore may consider a cross-cultural study that extends the findings of this research to other contexts. Studies undertaken on this topic in the future could also consider using quantitative research instruments to perform a large-scale study that further probes the phenomenon under study. In addition, given the limited scope of this study, such that we did not assess the technology used, including the specific ICT artefact/system that sustains the virtual onboarding process, future research could explore this area, as the different digital onboarding technologies used may result in different outcomes for employees. For instance, the workplace is rapidly changing due to technological advancement and the role of artificial intelligence and augmented reality, as organisations are beginning to shift to using these advanced digital systems and platforms in the workplace to boost employee experiences and develop soft skills, even during onboarding (Fowler, 2019; Meister, 2021). Therefore, future research could investigate the similarities and differences among the ICT artefacts/systems used for digital onboarding and the common role these technologies play as well as the outcomes thereof.

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Appendix

Interview Questionnaire

General Questions

1. How did you feel going through a digital onboarding process?
2. Considering your digital onboarding experience, how quickly were you able to adjust to and understand the new work environment and organisational culture?

Specific Questions

1. What were the outcomes of your digital onboarding experience on your learning and development?
2. Did you feel that you had the necessary support from your organisation (e.g. managers and colleagues) during your onboarding?
3. How do you think your virtual interaction experiences helped in developing a social understanding of your organisation?
4. What are the effects (positive and negative) of socialising online against in-person interaction?
5. Was there any impact of the digital onboarding experience on your wellbeing?

Table 1: Participants’ Demographic Information

| Characteristics | Range/Categories | Frequencies |
|--|--|-------------|
| Age | 18 – 25 | 5 |
| | 26 – 35 | 14 |
| | 36 – 45 | 9 |
| Gender | Male | 17 |
| | Female | 11 |
| Occupation | IT | 4 |
| | Transport | 2 |
| | Health and Social Services | 7 |
| | Education | 4 |
| | Banking and Finance | 5 |
| | Hospitality | 4 |
| | Communication, Media and Entertainment | 2 |
| Type of business | Sole Proprietorship | 3 |
| | Partnership | 2 |
| | Corporation/Limited Liability company | 5 |
| | Not-for-profit | 6 |
| Company revenue (Turnover) | Less than EUR 2 million | 2 |
| | Less than EUR 10 million | 2 |
| | Less than EUR 50 million | 5 |
| | More than EUR 50 million | 3 |
| New job duration | 0 – 5 months | 7 |
| | 6 – 10 months | 18 |
| | 11 – 15 months | 3 |
| Duration of digital onboarding program | 0 – 5 weeks | 5 |
| | 6 – 10 weeks | 8 |
| | 11 – 15 weeks | 13 |
| | 16 – 20 weeks | 2 |

Table 2: Emerging Themes with Indicative Quotations

| Research inquiry | Illustrative quotes | First-order codes | Consolidation of codes and conceptual categories | Main themes |
|--|--|---|---|--|
| Digital onboarding and impact on its employee outcomes | Working from home feels good and suits my personality because I don't really like being around many people...so, I enjoyed my online onboarding experience – despite the reduced social interaction (Participant 10, Cybersecurity analyst). | Individual personality, isolation, first impression, comfort and wellness, social disconnection, workplace hostility, intimidation and bullying | Social interaction, physical, psychological and cognitive wellbeing | Dwindling social connections and personal wellbeing |
| | The social connection is gone...I miss the physical office, because talking to people and sharing one's daily experience is good for mental wellbeing because it's therapeutic... (Participant 17, Sales executive). | | | |
| | There was excitement and less pressure when I started my job. I feel that I have a purpose in the organisation, and I can contribute my quota (Participant 13, Social worker). | New job excitement, positive and negative tensions, role clarity, information overload, work pressure | Workplace responsiveness and connectivity, work-induced stress, organisational learning and development | Perceptions of meaningful and meaningless work |
| | There's too much to assimilate in one go, and it's difficult to understand what the job entails when all that you have is a computer in front of you at all time (Participant 15, Marketing executive). | | | |
| | ...because getting the right information is important for me so that I can trust my employer, and if that is missing from the start due to limited face-to-face interactions, then it will affect my commitment and performance (Participant 18, Project development officer). | Information sharing, disclosure, awareness/ambiguity, trustworthiness, bringing one's whole self, micromanagement | Lack of transparency and trust, managerial control, self-identity | Poor employee relations |
| | I want to be able to show my real self and not hide behind the camera. When people see you physically, they can assess you better than when you're online... I also don't like it when my work is undermined, as if it's my fault that I don't get the needed help on time (Participant 2, Social worker). | | | |