

**The experience of the virtual onboarding process for knowledge
workers in South Africa.**

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Abstract

Employee onboarding is a crucial process that has served both the new employee and the organisation in ensuring that there is a seamless integration into a new working environment. The ways of work in the knowledge economy have changed post the COVID-19 pandemic with an increase in full-time remote work as well as hybrid working models. It has become imperative for organisations to be conscious of the techniques to not only attract talent in a competitive environment but also instil and maintain high employee engagement levels. This research aims to explore the emerging themes from the lived experiences of knowledge workers in South Africa who have undergone a virtual onboarding process as well as explore how this has influenced their level of engagement.

The study was conducted through a qualitative methodology through phenomenology to allow for in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of the employees who have undergone virtual onboarding and consequently understanding their corresponding levels of engagement. Twelve participants were purposively sampled from the Financial Services, Engineering, Mining, Insurance, and Health sectors to participate in semi-structured interviews. The different sectors allowed for diverse experiences drawn from a wide range of knowledge workers which resulted in the collation of rich information. The thematic data analysis and the results thereof revealed that knowledge workers have a positive experience of the virtual onboarding process and this in turn increases employee engagement.

Key Words – Employee onboarding, Virtual onboarding, Knowledge workers, Employee engagement

Declaration

I declare that this research project is my work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

Fiona Katerere

1 November 2022

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Chapter 1. Definition of problem and purpose

1.1. Introduction and Background to the Research problem

The research is based on the experience of the virtual onboarding of new knowledge workers into the organisation and their corresponding level of engagement as reported by themselves and their line managers. The COVID -19 pandemic crisis compelled companies to change their ways of work, and the lockdown regulations in 2020 had employees working from home for a mandatory period (Alert Level 5) effective from the 26th March 2022, for an anticipated period of 21 days, however, this was only moved to alert level 4 effective from the 1st of May, five weeks later (South African Government, 2022). These lockdown stages restricted non-essential worker movement: only essential service workers were allowed to travel to and from work, this transpired for a discretionary period of 20 months. As a result, some organisations introduced hybrid flexible working policies that allowed for remote working. Companies had to rethink ways of work to accommodate remote working which led to the use of virtual platforms in most instances as a way of adapting to the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Asatiani et al., 2021 & Zhang-Zhang et al., 2022).

Virtual onboarding has been done under different circumstances due to the COVID-19 conditions therefore, it is important to investigate the current onboarding process to understand and establish how this has influenced the employee experience (Srimannarayana et al., 2015). This will allow organisations to improve their employee onboarding process to establish employee engagement from the employee's first day. A remote-work survey done by PWC in the Financial Services sector indicated that only 20% of employees want to be in the office at least three times a week after the pandemic (PWC US, 2020). This is an indication that the remote working phenomenon has become a change factor that organisations need to prepare for, and it has exacerbated the need for organisations to evaluate how best to virtually onboard employees into the organisation leveraging technology to build engagement as well as sustained productivity (Amis & Greenwood, 2021). It is therefore important to ensure that all new employees are fully engaged in the organisation notwithstanding the virtual onboarding process.

Virtual onboarding involves the remote transitioning of new employees from outsiders to insiders in an organisation (Jeske & Olson, 2022). A new employee is remotely socialised into the new organisation and introduced to the team and the reporting manager all through virtual platforms. According to Jeske and Olson (2022), onboarding is made up of two parts, traditional induction, and new employee orientation. The induction session on average runs for a week and is conducted by a human resources facilitator who takes the new employee through company policies and processes for the duration of the sessions.

The new employee orientation starts when the employee completes the induction process and starts interacting with the team and doing the work that they were hired to do (Srimannarayana, 2016). New employees experiencing virtual onboarding do not get the opportunity to experience the feeling of walking through reception on their first day, experience the face-to-face induction process, and observe the non-verbal cues that managers or team members display in the office. In addition, asking questions can become challenging for new employees who have been virtually onboarded as it is not always obvious who they can approach to ask questions.

1.2 Purpose Statement

The research aims to investigate how the virtual onboarding process affected the socialisation of knowledge workers and how this influenced their engagement level in the organisation (Asatiani et al., 2021). Being a new employee in any organisation can be stressful and impact performance and confidence levels and being new in a virtual environment only aggravates anxiety (Bauer et al., 2007). Therefore, it is important to understand the influence of virtual distance on employees' ability to be fully immersed in the culture of the organisation. This will add new insights into how to run virtual onboarding processes that lead to effective teamwork and collaboration among new employees (Schmidtke & Cummings, 2017).

Conducting this study will assist in providing clarity through employee lived experiences of the extent to which virtual onboarding has on employee engagement levels. Kahn (1990) posits that employee disengagement is considered one of the most debilitating factors for organisational performance due to the negative impact that it has on collaboration between employees. Disengagement erodes team effectiveness as employees become selfish toward each other and are not willing to

go the extra mile in their work (Govender & Bussin, 2020). Thus, it is important to ensure that new employees are properly onboarded so that they start positively impacting the organisation from day one of onboarding through positive engagement (Caldwell & Peters, 2018). The results of this study will give insights to organisations that can contribute to a better understanding of virtual onboarding. This will in turn guide organisations to create conducive environments for employees to start contributing to organisational performance.

1.3 The business need to study

There is abundant research conducted by Bauer et al., (2007) and Howard et al., (2015) on the concept of employee onboarding, however, this topic in question is relevant for study because there is insufficient research on the experiences of the virtual employee onboarding process compared to the face-to-face onboarding knowledge workers. The national lockdown restrictions brought about by COVID saw organisations respond with remote work as well as hybrid work scenarios. The influence of the gig economy brought about by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) had already started to introduce the need for more flexible work options and the lockdown allowed companies and employees to action this (Deloitte, 2022). According to a survey conducted by Robert Walters, a global recruitment consultancy approximately 40% of South Africa's senior officials in the operations, financial and legal services would like to work from home permanently. This means that organisations must be equipped to keep these employees engaged from the day they start working in an organisation until they exit (Michael Page, 2022).

Knowledge workers are "high-level workers who apply theoretical and analytical knowledge, acquired through formal training, to develop products and services" (Drucker, 1994, p. 60). Furthermore, Drucker (1999) postulates that in the 21st century, knowledge workers will become an organisation's most valued asset because of their ability to leverage their high levels of productivity, creativity, and knowledge. Knowledge workers utilise their ability to critically think and solve complex problems in their area of expertise and they contribute to the competitive advantage of the organisation (Corporate Finance Institute, 2021), therefore it is essential to ensure that they are fully engaged in the organisation. Knowledge workers make up the knowledge economy which creates more opportunities for those with a high

intellectual capacity to venture into flexible working opportunities that allow for working virtually or working from home full-time.

There is limited information to support the holistic view of the concept of knowledge workers in research. According to Lonngvist and Laihonen (2017) the concept of knowledge workers is fragmented because researchers tend to focus on their specific perspectives, such as human resources and/or strategic management, which leads to saturated information in these areas. Therefore, this study can add to the holistic view of how knowledge workers across different sectors experience virtual onboarding and how it influences their engagement level in the organisation. This is because virtual onboarding enhances the aspect of new ways of hybrid working which encourages new work practices which are more flexible and give autonomy to the employee.

Various organisations in South Africa have been at the forefront of embracing remote working for their employees as evident in the financial services, information, and technology sectors as well as the healthcare industry to name a few. According to Michael Page (2022), organisations adapted to the forced remote working during the national lockdown in 2020 which resulted in new policy formulation to cater to the scenario in the future. According to The World Bank (2022), the financial industry is the primary driver of the economy as it encompasses all the financial transactions of the country's population. This sector holds a diverse range of organisations, and the strength and stability of this sector lead to more earn and spending from consumers (The World Bank, 2022). Therefore, the study will focus on knowledge workers in South African organisations which have implemented the remote working policy and are already on the journey to remote and or hybrid working models.

1.4 The theoretical need for the study

As we continue to battle the COVID pandemic, as well as deal with the technological influences of the fourth industrial revolution more organisations, are implementing virtual onboarding (Varshney, 2022). The financial services industry in South Africa has been at the forefront of embracing remote working for its employees, the banking and insurance sector organisations, such as Investec, Nedbank, and Standard Bank as well as insurance companies such as OUTsurance, Rand Mutual Assurance have also joined the list of organisations that are introducing hybrid ways of work (Michael

Page, 2022). In addition, a survey conducted by Robert Walters a global recruitment consultancy stated that approximately 40% of South Africa's senior officials in the operations, financial and legal services would like to work from home permanently (Michael Page, 2022). This shows that introduction of the virtual onboarding process will enable business continuity as it allows new employees to access all the information about the organisation, their role, and about the organisational culture from the comfort of their geographical setting.

Therefore, this study will contribute to the body of knowledge that will guide organisations in all industries on how to leverage technology to socialise new employees through the virtual onboarding process and assure elevated levels of engagement (Varshney, 2022). Lonngvist and Laihonen (2017) postulate that knowledge workers are value creators in organisations therefore ensuring that they are fully engaged adds to the competitive advantage of the organisation. In addition, the resource-based theory of the firm confirms the importance of internal resources' contribution to the organisation's sustainability, thereby supporting the importance of having highly engaged workers (Gerhart, 2021).

1.5 Outline of the document

The next section of the document focuses on the literature review, which provides the foundation of past research conducted on onboarding and employee engagement. This will improve our knowledge and understanding of both concepts as well as the gaps that have been identified. Chapter three will focus on the chosen research methodology that will be utilised for the study and detail the validity of the methodology for the study.

Chapter 2. Theory and Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Employee onboarding is an integral process in the employee's journey which has a big impact on shaping the initial experience of the employee as well as determining their continued stay with the organisation. The first few days of a new employee can be daunting, meeting the line manager and team members, learning the company policies and procedures as well as the organisational culture (Schmidtke & Cummings, 2017). An effective onboarding process, therefore, becomes a vital step which process in setting up the new employee for success in the organisation.

2.2 Knowledge workers in South Africa

Drucker (1999) first coined the term "knowledge workers" in the early 1960s evidenced by the growth of industrialisation which leveraged workers' dependency on information as their means of income. This resulted in the rise of information workers and a decline in the number of manual workers. Drucker's definition of a knowledge worker entails employees who possess specialist knowledge, available for consultancy as well as research and development capabilities for new products, services, or processes (Drucker, 1999). Knowledge-intensive organisations and economies rely on knowledge workers' ability to utilise their knowledge in solving complex problems as the main solution driver in contrast to capital or labour. Knowledge workers leverage their gained knowledge and understanding to contribute to the success and sustainability of an organisation hence they prefer a different way of management within the organisation (Lonngvist & Laihonen, 2017).

The concept of knowledge workers evolved quickly in developing countries since the arrival of the internet and the improvement in accessibility to technology, which has influenced the shift from high manufacturing and industrial-dominated economies to more service-oriented and knowledge-based industries (Lonngvist & Laihonen, 2017). The growth of the intelligent use of data, consulting, and knowledge creation in South Africa has created a competitive advantage for local organisations. Blankley & Booyens (2010) report that knowledge and innovation are the main elements that are the driving force for the transition into the knowledge economy and subsequently South Africa's competitiveness. Therefore, science and technology policies have been implemented to ensure a quick transition to the knowledge economy. This has led to an increase in the demand for knowledge workers who require a different way

of treatment compared to their counterparts in the manufacturing industry (Lonngvist & Laihonen, 2017).

According to Drucker (1999), knowledge workers possess a high level of skills and education and require a work setting where they have autonomy and motivation to carry out their work without interference. Therefore, it is vital to ensure that knowledge workers are highly engaged within the work environment. Constantly aligning work practices to the work context becomes an important aspect of the organisation as better and smarter ways of working must be introduced to keep up with changes. The knowledge worker's contribution to organisations is important to ensure success and sustainability, especially in times of uncertainty (Zhang-Zhang et al., 2022).

2.3 Employee Onboarding

Employee onboarding is a common concept in the human resources field, with research conducted over decades, albeit under the term employee orientation (Chillakuri 2020). However, research shows that there is no universal way of onboarding new hires into an organisation as indicated by the different definitions of the concept of onboarding. Chillakuri (2020, p. 3) defines “onboarding as a process of introducing new hires into the new job, acquainting them with the organization's goals, values, rules, responsibilities, procedures, and socializing the new employee into organizational culture”. Alternatively, Jeske and Olson (2022) define onboarding as the period during which new employees acclimatize to the new working environment as well as their work responsibilities. As much as these definitions are grounded on the idea of socialising an employee to the organisation, they are different in that they emphasise the diverse aspects of the onboarding process, similarly to the organisations that practice onboarding. However, they all have a common understanding of the fact that the quicker new employees are integrated into the roles and the organisation the quicker they will add value to the organisation.

Organisations use their discretion to implement onboarding practices in different ways and they focus on selected aspects that are relevant to their needs. It is important to also define the other concept that is sometimes used interchangeably with onboarding in this field, which is socialisation. Socialisation is defined by Howard et al. (2015, p. 263) as “the learning and adjustment process by which individuals assume an organizational role that fits the needs of both the individual and the organization”. Socialisation is therefore an ongoing process that applies to all

employees in the organisation, including both old and new employees. Whereas onboarding applies specifically to new employees. Howard et al., (2015) argue that even though these two concepts are sometimes used interchangeably, they are separate concepts with onboarding being viewed as a catalyst to socialisation in organisations. Both terms will be utilised in the research document to explain the virtual onboarding process.

Bauer et al., (2007) go further to differentiate the employee onboarding process into formal and informal processes. Formal onboarding relates to the prescribed documented values, policies, and procedures, for instance, ensuring all new employees are required to attend and complete documentation of attendance. Whereas informal onboarding refers to incidental learning that an employee experiences during onboarding, this could include being paired up with another employee to learn as they conduct their work (Bauer et al., 2007). Both processes are considered onboarding and are used to serve different purposes in different organisational settings.

2.4 Four models of onboarding

Bauer and Erdogan (2010) further distinguish the onboarding process into four ranked categories that assist with both short- and long-term benefits to both new employees and organisations. These four C's (Compliance, Clarification, Culture, and Connection) assist in establishing a successful introductory process for a new employee in the organisation. These benefits include elements such as improved employee performance, which in turn leads to company performance, reduced employee turnover as employees are aligned to the organisation, and job satisfaction, which is awareness and clarity of expectations (Caldwell & Peters, 2018). The four Cs are ranked according to their complexity and scope within the onboarding strategy (Bauer & Erdogan, 2010; Chillakuri, 2020).

Firstly, compliance is the underpinning pillar focused on assimilating new employees into the policy and process frameworks as well as the legislation associated with a new working environment. This is the lowest ranking category on the model and has the smallest scope of information which includes sharing the policies and procedures as well as rules of conduct of the organisation. Albeit being a low-ranking category, this level sets the tone for the onboarding process from the perspective of

engendering the assimilation of organisational culture and values alignment (Bauer & Erdogan, 2010)

Secondly, clarification is a function that focuses on ensuring that the employees are certain and understand their deliverables and job function as articulated in the job profile and performance contract (Bauer & Erdogan, 2010). This element is important for the onboarding process because it defines the employee's purpose in the organisation through their performance outcomes as well as being clear on how they add value. Caldwell and Peters (2018), highlight the fact that this category is often poorly handled due to a lack of clarity from the employer relating to what they expect from the employee in the job profile as well as a lack of structural alignment.

Thirdly, culture is an important category because it encapsulates the new employees' learning and integration into the organisation's way of doing things (Chillakuri 2020). Culture is the broadest category that encompasses the organisation's values, norms, and behaviours. Schein (1990) in his Theory of Organisational Cultures details three different levels of culture that impact an organisation; artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions, and these levels explain why employees behave the way they do in an organisation (Asatiani et al., 2021). Alignment to the organisational culture is therefore important as it impacts, the cognitive, physical, and emotional integration of the employee into the organisation. Hence it is important in ensuring that new employees are aligned with the organisational values from the employee onboarding stage.

Lastly, connection focuses on the relationships and networks that new employees will develop with their peers and superiors in the organisation (Bauer & Erdogan, 2010) Developing a healthy network of colleagues assists the new employee with information and guidance, which in turn influences their engagement levels. When correctly done, employee onboarding leads to long-term and short-term benefits (Caldwell & Peters, 2018).

Chillakuri (2020) highlights the importance of onboarding, to cater to the diverse generational levels in the organisational workforce as it helps the new employee socialise into the organisational ways, values, processes, and procedures leading to loyalty and job embeddedness compared to non-onboarded employees. In addition,

(Graybill et al., 2013) also highlight the importance of employee onboarding as an instrument to clarify how the employee will contribute to the organisation's strategy, vision, and mission. The different generational levels that are prevalent in the working environment are an important aspect of tailoring the employee onboarding process. According to Chillakuri (2020), four different generational levels must be catered for: Baby Boomers; Generation X; Millennials; and Generation Z. In as much as the Millennials and Generation Z share similar qualities, they also differ significantly with the most prominent difference being that of Generation Z, growing up with unlimited access to the internet and technology. Therefore, Generation Z employees who are entering the workplace have influenced the introduction of virtual activities with their expectation of autonomy, use of technology as well as social media interaction in the workplace (Chillakuri, 2020). Therefore, it is imperative that virtual onboarding is done correctly to ensure employee engagement across all levels of generational levels.

2.5 Characteristics of an onboarding process

The onboarding process is not without fault, however, there are ways to mitigate the loss of new employees through effective implementation. Effective onboarding practices encompass four aspects, namely, strategic, comprehensive, consistent, and measurement that will enhance employee onboarding if correctly implemented (Krasman, 2015). According to Krasman (2015) and Chillakuri (2020), onboarding must be implemented as a strategic concept in the onboarding practice of the organisation. The inclusion of the strategy perspective ensures that the new employees are aware and informed of the organisational plans from their initial day, thereby allowing for growth focus and engagement from all new employees from the first day in the organisation.

Krasman (2015) advises that onboarding is a process and must not be treated like a one-time event for the new employee. In addition to having a continuous process, the content of the practice must be informative and rich enough to give new employees as much necessary information as possible. Krasman (2015) also suggests that investing in a comprehensive onboarding process guarantees a quicker return on investment for the organisation because new employees become productive quicker and contribute to the success of the organisation.

Delivering consistent good information also guarantees that both the employee and the organisation get the maximum benefit from the onboarding process (Krasman, 2015). The onboarding process for an organisation needs to be standardised and consistent for all new employees, this will ensure that the same measure of information is shared with new employees. Furthermore, the monitoring and evaluation process of the onboarding practice needs to be measured effectively to ensure that the organisation is getting the benefit from the onboarding process. Also monitoring and evaluating the process through feedback from the new employees enables relevant improvements to be implemented which increases the chances of success of the employee onboarding process in the future (Krasman, 2015).

2.6 Key phases of onboarding

An effective employee onboarding process must be documented, and structured and can be repeated with the same intensity to all who are exposed to it. Therefore, it must be well thought-out and well-planned to ensure that both new employees and the organisation get the best out of the process. Bauer et al., (2007); Krasman (2015), and Howard et al., (2015) posit that although the onboarding practice is unique to each organisation, it is usually broken down into phases which include pre-onboarding, first-day activities, and the next 3 months, typically called probation.

The pre-onboarding phase starts when the new employee accepts the offer of employment and the anticipation and anxiety of the first-day kicks in. An effective pre-onboarding process includes an engagement plan with useful information to prepare the employee for their first day with the organisation (Howard et al., 2015). According to Krasman (2015), this may include introduction emails from the hiring manager to prepare the new employee, HR-related documents that need to be completed before the first day as well as frequently asked questions to prepare the new employee on what to expect in the organisation.

On the first day, the new employee must have all their first-day equipment, access cards, and sitting area ready for their arrival. This preparation allows for a smooth transition and socialisation into the organisation. There must be an allocated team member to receive the employee as part of the welcoming act into the organisation (Howard et al., 2015).

The probation phase is an important aspect of the onboarding process as the employee familiarises themselves with their respective work and is also monitored and evaluated on their fit into the organisation from a cultural perspective. According to Krasman (2015), the length of this phase varies depending on the organisation, in some instances, a 90-day plan is developed to ensure that the new employee settles in seamlessly.

2.7 Virtual onboarding

Virtual onboarding relies on the use of technology to ensure that onboarding content is distributed to all new employees. According to Varshney (2022) in as much as virtual onboarding follows the same process as face-to-face onboarding, the difference is in the technological intervention through technological platforms that replicate the feeling of presence. Virtual onboarding has grown in the last decade as the need for virtual teams has surfaced in companies with employees that are spread across different geographical areas in the world. As indicated by Varshney (2022) most organisations were accustomed to the use of virtual interviews in the recruitment process, however, the COVID pandemic accelerated the implementation of the virtual onboarding process. This has allowed organisations to employ employees who are based in different geographical areas and to use technology, allowing them to become an integral part of the organisation.

2.7.1 Effectiveness of virtual onboarding

Due to the physical distance that is experienced with virtual onboarding, it is necessary to commit both the new employees and employers to make the virtual onboarding work (Alexander, 2021). Varshney (2022) notes the importance of informal communication within virtual onboarding interaction, especially when building relationships between new and old employees. Alexander (2021) suggests one on one meet-and-greet meetings with the team members for the new employee so that they are not overwhelmed by meeting a large group of people. The one-on-one meetings will assist the new employee to build rapport with each member of the team as there is no pressure to remember the faces and names in a large group setting. This will, in turn, ensure an impactful virtual onboarding experience that encourages, relationship building, productivity, and contribution to the company's performance.

In as much as virtual onboarding leverages technology due to the presence of physical distance, new employees must be allowed to meet face-to-face with their

peers and line managers (Varshney, 2022). This allows new employees to form authentic connections and form relationships within the team. Also meeting with peers face-to-face or visiting an office building ensures that the new employee identifies with the physical aspect and not just their own created mental picture.

2.7.2 Diverse activities

For a virtual onboarding process to be effective, it must be well planned with support from all involved participants. Curated and diverse activities must be included in the virtual onboarding process to continuously cater to and stimulate the new employees' minds and interests (Varshney 2022). Employees undergoing virtual onboarding can be prone to fatigue having to sit through long hours of onscreen PowerPoint presentations, therefore different activities would benefit the new employees in getting them to interact in different ways. In addition, a variety of activities accommodates different learning styles that the new employees may have for instance, visual, auditory, and reading to name a few, and enable different ways of engaging.

2.7.3 Ease of communication

According to Alexander (2021), consistent communication is necessary to ensure that new employees continuously feel included and embraced in the organisation. The tools utilised for the virtual onboarding process must be user-friendly and ensure a smooth experience for the user as they play a vital role in ensuring commitment to the process. It is important to create a single source where the relevant information for the new employee can be found on the digital platform and should various platforms be utilised, there must be seamless integration with a single sign-on to allow for a single access point (Alexander, 2021). Intuitive software platforms are preferred as they will lead to ease of adoption from the new employee.

2.7.4 Buddy system

Virtual onboarding lacks informal connections that are built during meeting breaks or in the canteen during a lunch break. Therefore, Alexander (2021) suggests that a new employee be partnered with a buddy, a colleague who acts as a guide to the new employee and assists them with their settling-in period. The buddy will be the go-to person for the new employee to assist with queries, source information, and introduce the new employee to the relevant people in the organisation (Varshney, 2022). The selected buddy must preferably be a highly engaged member of the team who can positively influence the new employee. According to Graybill et al., (2013) it is important to ensure that the nominated buddy employee not only buys into the

onboarding plan but also takes ownership of their role and influence in the process to make it successful. Therefore, there is a need to motivate and in some instances incentivise the buddies' in the organisation so that there is a commitment to share knowledge.

2.7.5 Flexibility

The virtual onboarding process allows for flexibility for employees, in some instances employees are not able to attend a session or may lose connectivity, however with the material being online and the option to record sessions, they can always catch up in their own spare time. This allows new employees to fully understand and be comfortable with working with the new policies and procedures Graybill et al., (2013).

2.8 Employee engagement

Employee engagement has become an important concept in organisations due to the impact it has on organisational productivity, competitive advantage, and customer service (Shrotryia Dhanda, 2020). According to Kwon and Park (2019) employee engagement has become widespread in the knowledge-based economy with many organisations investing in “designing, implementing and evaluating interventions to improve employee engagement” (Kwon & Park, 2019, p. 353). Higher employee engagement is construed as a catalyst to the organisation's competitive advantage as sustainability. However, the lack of conceptual clarity in a single definition or grounded theory of employee engagement leads to differing perspectives and understanding of the concept. Employee engagement is an under-explored concept in human resources development due to limited practical knowledge surrounding the concept (Kwon & Park, 2019).

Consequently, employee engagement impacts factors such as organisational productivity, improvement in service or product quality, customer satisfaction, and a decrease in absenteeism (Costa et al., 2016). This is more evident in organisations with knowledge workers who are dependent on leveraging the influence of engaged employees to increase profits, customer experience, and competitive advantage. Schaufeli et al., (2002, p. 63) define employee engagement as “a mental cognition that is represented by vigour, dedication, and absorption”. It is a positive cognitive state that leads to an employee displaying a high sense of commitment, energy levels, loyalty, and passion for their job, despite any difficulties faced (Costa et al., 2016; Gautam & Kothari, 2021).

Thus, employee engagement is an important process in an organisation as it has a direct impact on employee productivity and performance. Kahn (1990, p. 694) defines employee engagement as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances”. Govender and Bussin (2020) further explain the concepts in the definition, cognitive engagement refers to how the employee views the organisational culture as well as the people. Emotional engagement relates to the employees’ feelings towards the organisation, peers, and management Therefore effective employee engagement is attained through the effective influence of both the cognitive and emotional levels.

According to Shrotryia and Dhanda (2020), there are approximately six theories of employee engagement that are interchangeably used within the literature. These definitions are similar, however, they differ in the inclusion of some fundamental elements. The most common elements in the theories include the capacity to engage through continuous learning and collaboration, a reason to engage founded on respect and appreciation, freedom to engage through job satisfaction, and lastly an alignment between the employee and the organisational mission and vision.

Employee engagement is thus grounded in finding meaning in one’s work as well as safety in the working environment. Kahn (1990) postulated the engagement theory based on an employee’s ability to balance the three elements that define their presence at work as well as how this influences their work performance, these include physical, emotional, and cognitive elements. This theory of engagement is fitting because it is underpinned by the premise that employees decide how much of themselves, they will reveal and express in the workplace. Thus, the onboarding process plays an important role in inviting new employees to be fully present in the workplace.

2.8.1 Levels of employee engagement

There are three different levels of engagement that impact the employees’ contribution to an organisation’s productivity and performance, these usually influence the employees’ behaviour as well, shifting from engaged to disengaged employees. The first level is engaged employees, which is the most preferred level for any organisation where an employee is passionate about their job and organisation (Govender & Bussin, 2020). Engaged employees tend to go the extra mile in all they do, thus positively contributing to the personal, team, and

organisational objectives. This level aligns with the emotional element of Kahn's definition of employee engagement.

The second level has a non-engaged employee who does not have any passion for their job or organisation. These are the employees who are present in the office and only contribute to what is expected of them and nothing more. According to Govender and Bussin (2020), these employees do not have passion, they only focus on getting paid.

The third level of engagement shows an employee who is disengaged and disruptive in their behaviour within the workplace. Managers need to be aware of these employees and address this behaviour before it starts impacting other employees in the organisation (Govender & Bussin, 2020)

2.8.2 Drivers of employee engagement

As indicated by Govender and Bussin (2020), the first level of engagement is the preferred employee engagement level for an organisation. Bedarkar and Pandita (2014) highlight that to ensure that organisations are successful at achieving this level, they need to focus on key drivers that influence employee engagement, which include but are not limited to, the nature of work, work that has purpose or meaning, opportunities for development, reward and recognition, and inspiring leadership. These drivers are not inert as they are often influenced by the actions happening in both the micro and macro environments, therefore their importance and influence vary at any given time (Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014). The organisation needs to ensure that the nature of work that employees are engaged in allows them to utilise their skills and experience as well as stretch them beyond their capabilities so that they remain engaged.

2.8.3 Benefits of employee engagement

According to Govender and Bussin (2020), engaged employees perform at higher levels compared to their counterparts in the organisation and they are prone to job embeddedness and satisfaction. Singh et al., (2018) define job embeddedness as a combination of factors that influence employees to stay within their current roles and organisations. Embeddedness is beneficial to the organisation because it creates "social capital" that the organisation leverages and adds to the perceived success of the organisation. Therefore, increased employee engagement is important in an organisation because it leads to organisational performance through higher productivity, reduction in employee turnover, and overall commitment and loyalty to

the organisation. Employees who are highly engaged in the organisation are inclined to exercise discretionary effort in their work as they tend to be highly invested in the achievement of the organisational objectives (Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014).

Employees who started new jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic have experienced virtual onboarding to the organisational ways of work, for instance, values, policies, and processes. Therefore, the role that technology plays as a communication tool is highlighted with a need to create cooperation with the organisational processes and ensure that the organisational identity does not get lost even when new employees are virtually onboarded.

Schmidtke and Cummings (2017) propose that when employees interact in person, they develop shared mental modes and similar mindsets that connect employees. These shared mental modes help in defining work behaviours and processes which in turn improves engagement, performance, and motivation. Schmidtke and Cummings (2017) also contend that there is limited research on how to develop shared mental modes in virtual team settings as leveraging technology to influence how new employees are onboarded into the organisation, makes it difficult to do due to reduced and or compromised level of interaction, and lack of non-verbal communication.

High employee engagement levels translate to low employee attrition rates, happy employees act as active citizens of the organisation which is beneficial to both parties (Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014). Engaged employees become ambassadors for the company, and they can be utilised in onboarding processes to help influence new employees joining the team to start on a positive note (Govender & Bussin, 2020).

2.9 Relationship between virtual onboarding and employee engagement

According to Varshney (2022), employee engagement is an important outcome of virtual onboarding, however, it is also a very difficult concept to achieve. The recruitment of talent in any organisation is a critical step that ensures the success of the organisation. The current talent landscape is very competitive due to a limited number of critical skills available to employers, therefore it is pertinent for employers to invest in the onboarding process of new employees (Chillakuri, 2020). Employee onboarding sets the tone for new employees and often determines whether an

employee will stay in an organisation. Therefore a lot of effort has to be invested in ensuring that new employees are effectively socialised into the organisation so that they are highly engaged and become active contributors to the organisational goals and performance (Alexander, 2021).

2.10 Conclusion

Through the literature review conducted, it has been identified that there is a clear understanding of the onboarding process and the concept of employee engagement for knowledge workers in South Africa. It is also noted that an effective onboarding process is an important influence in setting up an employee for success, it is a crucial part of the employee's journey in the organisation, and it influences the overall experience during their stay in the organisation. Irrespective of all the emotions and thoughts that employee deals with when they start a new job, it is important to ensure that the onboarding process is impactful enough to ensure that the employee starts being productive as soon as possible.

Chapter 3. Research Questions

3.1 Introduction

The research questions were developed from the literature review to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of knowledge workers who have undergone virtual onboarding in comparison to face-to-face onboarding and how this influenced their engagement levels within the organisation.

The objective of the study is to describe the employee experiences of the virtual onboarding process, examine the meanings that employees attach to these experiences, and well as give recommendations to businesses for future business practice. In addition, this research will give insights into the type of onboarding process which may be adopted to enhance employee engagement for knowledge workers in South Africa.

3.2 Research Question 1: How do knowledge workers describe the experience of virtual onboarding vs. the face-to-face onboarding process?

The objective of the first research question seeks to understand the experience of virtual vs face-to-face onboarding experience of workers in the knowledge economy. The phenomenological study will assist managers to gain insights into the lived experiences of employees who have undergone virtual onboarding in comparison to when they were onboarded face-to-face.

3.3 Research Question 2: How do employees perceive employee engagement after a virtual onboarding process?

The second research question seeks to understand how employees who have undergone virtual onboarding feel toward engagement within the organisation. It is important to understand the employees' experiences with the virtual onboarding process as these will provide insights into their engagement levels within the workplace and how managers can leverage this to achieve higher employee productivity and job satisfaction.

Chapter 4. Research Methodology and Design

4.1 Introduction

The research methodology chapter describes the selected design used to explore the research questions documented in chapter 3. This chapter explains the logic behind the selected methodology and the process taken by the researcher to ensure a successful research process with credible results that can be applied in practice as well as contribute to the body of knowledge. (Pather & Remenyi, 2019). The research design implemented followed the research onion as explained in Saunders and Lewis (2018), which builds on research credibility through a detailed explanation of each step of the research process.

4.2 Research design

The research study was guided by two objectives, which are exploring the participants' experience of the virtual onboarding compared to the face-to-face onboarding process as well as an examination of this experience on employees' engagement. This study matters because it will provide insights to managers on what new employees consider as suitable environments for high engagement, which may enable high productivity and performance. Therefore, the research design consists of an exploratory ground-up approach to determine the experiences of virtually onboarded new employees and the subsequent level of employee engagement (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). According to Park and Park (2016), a qualitative method is suitable for data collection in natural settings through observation and interpretation of the responses given. This will allow the researcher to investigate the phenomenon as explained and interpreted by the participants. Therefore, the research was done through qualitative research to allow for a better understanding of how the lived experiences of the participants employee engagement are affected or not by a virtual onboarding experience.

The concepts of employee onboarding and employee engagement have been explored in research as independent studies; however, the inclusion of virtual onboarding elements introduces a new dynamic that requires further investigation. As the Covid-19 pandemic hit in early 2022 and most companies were forced to lock down to ensure employee safety, most knowledge organisations in South Africa started to conduct business remotely. In some instances, new employees started work having not physically met any of their colleagues or even knowing what their office spaces look like. This meant that all new employees who were joining

companies had to undergo onboarding activities facilitated through video interviews, virtual assessments, as well as induction, and their only understanding of their work environment, was virtual (Varshney, 2022).

Virtual onboarding impacts social relationships in the organisation as it reduces the informal communication that happens when people interact face-to-face as well as the small talk that people get into at the coffee station or while waiting for a meeting to start (Alexander, 2021). This often leads to disruptions in the onboarding process for instance in virtual meetings employees must reintroduce themselves because there is limited familiarity created by the virtual distance (Varshney, 2022). There is also a limited opportunity for a natural progression of conversations, incidental learning, and collaboration opportunities.

According to Shrotryia and Dhanda (2020), high engagement levels in employees are considered a means to high productivity and better task performance which leads to business sustainability. Therefore, it is important to further study how the virtual onboarding process will affect new employee engagement levels in the organisation. Shrotryia and Dhanda (2020) argue that it is limited and fragmented information about the concept of employee engagement based on the view followed and how it can be effectively measured. The academic view looks at employee engagement from a psychological state perspective and the industrial view focuses on outcomes from the psychological state such as commitment and discretionary efforts (Shrotryia & Dhanda, 2020). The exploratory study design will assist in exploring the research problem through the integration of primary data collected through interviews (Park & Park, 2016).

4.2.1 Philosophy

The research philosophy is about adding to the field of knowledge where the study is being conducted, for this research the interpretivist approach was selected as it allows the researcher to immerse themselves in the phenomenon (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Qualitative research can be conducted in many ways of which an interpretivist paradigm intends to understand the research problem rather than predict outcomes as in the positivist philosophy (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Creswell (2007) and Tomaszewski et al., (2020) posit that qualitative research is aimed at expounding on a particular phenomenon, in this case, the experience of virtual onboarding for knowledge workers in South African organisations. This is guided by the participants' perceptions and their reality which is constructed by their background as well as their

lived experiences as social actors. As a result, interaction and dialogue are the preferred way of collecting data from respondents as it permits a fuller description of the employee's lived experiences. This allows the researcher to build theoretical knowledge of the concepts of virtual employee onboarding and employee engagement by understanding the respondent's viewpoints as well as the meaning attached to their experiences (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The interpretivist approach is suitable for this study as it is a complex and unique research based in the field of human resources management.

Interpretivism is subjective and sensitive to the bias of both researcher and participant as it is based on lived experiences (Tomaszewski et al., 2020) therefore, the researcher had to ensure that they do not influence the participant during the interview process. According to Tomaszewski et al., (2020) having a good understanding of the bias that can cloud judgment in both the information collection process as well as analysis will assist in ensuring minimum effect. Thus, the researcher had to note her own biases as and address them as they came up during the interview process.

4.2.2 Approach selected

The approach for research was inductive reasoning which added to generating theory based on the collected data. The analysis of the data in the research allowed for the understanding of the participants' experiences on how the virtual aspects influence onboarding as well as employee engagement with the organisation (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The inductive approach also allows flexibility in the research process based on the information collected and the themes that are gathered, leading to diverse perspectives of the research results.

4.2.3 Methodological choices

The selected methodological choice for the research was a mono method utilising a qualitative approach, the research was based on a theoretical study from theorists such as Kahn (1990) who postulated the engagement theory based on three factors that are aligned to the physical, cognitive, and emotional energies that link an employee's full self in their work performances. In addition, discoveries from research findings from the field study such as past engagement surveys conducted by professional consultants such as Gallup, Deloitte, and Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) will assist in developing questions for the semi-structured interviews. According to Saunders and Lewis (2018), unstructured interviews are focused on the

participant and rely on the interpretation of their actions, behaviours, and emotions while responding to the questions. This gives the researcher multiple sources to immerse themselves in gathering rich information to answer the question of why. Thus, semi-structured interviews with participants will be included as a methodological choice for the research (Park & Park, 2016).

4.2.4 Strategy

The strategy method to be employed for the research is a phenomenological study focusing on knowledge workers in South African organisations who have undergone virtual or face-to-face onboarding in the past twelve months and exploring their engagement level in the organisation. According to Tomaszewski (2020), phenomenology seeks to analyse the views of people through their lived experiences of the construct being researched. This strategy assisted with an in-depth analysis of research questions from the various perspectives of the participants (Park and Park, 2016) and across more than just one context. This allowed the researcher to gain insights into the richness of many feelings and experiences of the phenomenon experienced by respondents. This, in turn, provided an in-depth description of the human experience of employees from various industries in the South African context who underwent virtual onboarding and how this in turn influenced their level of engagement in the organisation. Phenomenological analysis was the preferred choice of strategy as it gave the participants a voice and allowed them to share their experiences of the virtual onboarding process in comparison to the face-to-face onboarding process.

4.2.5 Time horizon

The research study was conducted through a cross-sectional study, which is data collection at a single point in time (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Participants were selected to share their views through an interview process about specific concepts which are virtual onboarding and employee engagement, and no follow-up data collection was required to edify the research study. In addition, due to the time constraints of the research study, which was limited to approximately a cross-sectional study was relevant to enable timeous completion. Therefore, a cross-sectional study was appropriate to allow for the time constraints of the project.

4.3 Population

The complete set of participants in the research study makes up the population (Saunders and Lewis 2018). The research was conducted on employees who have

a maximum of twelve months of employment in their current role, employed between July 2021 to July 2022, who has undergone a virtual onboarding process as part of their assimilation into the new organisation. In this research, the population is knowledge workers in the South African economy as defined by (Drucker, 1994, p. 60). “Knowledge workers are high-level workers who apply theoretical and analytical knowledge, acquired through formal training, to develop products and services”. Many knowledge workers across various industries had the opportunity to start new employment in the past twelve months and experienced the virtual onboarding process as part of their socialization into the organisation. Remote workers are employees that are employed by an organisation to conduct their work outside of the traditional office setting, they are often geographically dispersed from the company site (Alexander, 2021). Remote work allows employers to acquire services from employees based in diverse geographical locations without the expense of moving them into a single office space.

Career Junction (2022) reported that remote job opportunities have continued to grow exponentially since the beginning of the covid pandemic and despite the easing of the lockdown restrictions, a lot of organisations have already invested in remote working technology to attract knowledgeable workers. There are two types of remote work: hybrid work, which allows an employee to split working from the office as well as working from home or any other preferred location, and full-time remote work, which is when an employee works outside of the traditional office setting. The changes in the ways of working for knowledge workers have led to employees transitioning to hybrid and full-time working from home, for instance, Nedbank has transitioned to full-time remote working, and Standard Bank has introduced hybrid working opportunities (Michael Page, 2022).

4.4 Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis is both onboarded knowledge workers and hiring managers as they were the individuals that underwent and experienced the virtual onboarding process. The purpose of selecting this unit of analysis was to build evidence to show the virtual onboarding and explore the engagement level through interrogating their lived experiences as well as to confirm respondent triangulation of relevant information.

The hiring managers were also part of the research and their relevance in the interviews was used to not only verify but to understand the differences in the findings

from the employee interviews on whether virtual onboarding influences employee engagement (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Introducing their experiences into the research edified the data because they would speak from a different perspective as managers who are overseeing the process through their interpretation of the phenomenon being studied. The hiring manager's interaction directly with both employees and the hiring managers assisted in affirming the information gathered from the primary and expert voice interviews.

4.5 Sampling method and size

Saunders and Lewis (2018) recommended using a sample that is a subgroup rather than the whole population, which is the complete data set for data collection. Selecting a sample allows for the constraints such as time and financial constraints posed by the research study timelines as well as costs that may be involved in the data collection process such as traveling to interviews. Purposive sampling was the selected method of sampling based on criteria of new knowledge workers, employed not more than a year with the organisation and have had experience with both face-to-face and virtual onboarding (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

As defined by Saunders and Lewis (2018), the sample consisted of the respondents who took part in the research interview process and were selected through purposive sampling, based on a homogenous sample (Saunders & Townsend, 2016). The purposive sampling was done according to industry, generation, and occupational level as reflected in the sample (Table 1). The one unit of analysis that was identified as knowledge workers in the South African economy, who had undergone virtual onboarding in the last twelve months. The sample included employees and hiring line managers who had been involved in the virtual onboarding process.

Table 1: Sample

Participant	Industry	Generational Level	Occupational Level
Employee 1	Insurance	Millennial	Junior Management
Employee 2	Pharmaceutical	Millennial	Professional
Employee 3	Engineering	Generation X	Middle Management
Employee 4	Mining	Millennial	Professional
Employee 5	Financial Regulatory	Millennial	Skilled
Employee 6	Financial	Generation X	Professional
Employee 7	Insurance	Millennial	Junior Management
Employee 8	Financial Banking	Millennial	Professional
Manager 1	Insurance		
Manager 2	Finance		
Manager 3	Logistics		
Manager 4	Finance - Banking		

4.5.1 Industry

The selected sample of employees had factual and theoretical knowledge as well as worked with information on a day-to-day basis in the following sectors: Financial Services, Engineering, Mining, Insurance, and Health sectors (Lonngvist & Laihonon, 2017). The available sample population for this study consisted of a homogenous sample of knowledge workers who ranged in age and occupational level.

4.5.2 Generational level

Stewart et al., (2017) define generational levels as a group of people born within a specific timeframe. The generational levels in the current work environment span four different generations, Baby Boomers (1944 – 1964) Generation X (1965 – 1980), Millennials (1981 – 1995), and Generation Z (1997 – 2012). These different levels have different characteristics which they bring to the workplace and require different strategies to meet their expectations (Stewart et al., 2017). Including generational levels in the research was a significant factor as the workforce structure in many organisations has varied generational levels, going through different experiences of the same virtual onboarding process because of their nature (Chillakuri, 2020). Therefore, due to the different characteristics that these levels present, the

participants would report on diverse experiences of the virtual onboarding process due to the diverse roles that they hold in the organisation.

4.5.3 Occupational level

The occupational level reflects the different levels of work differentiated by complexity and period of decision-making as defined in the stratified systems theory (Jacques, 1986). The occupational levels differ depending on the size of the organisation as well as the hierarchical structure of an organisation. Including the occupational level in the research assisted in clarifying the experiences that employees at different levels go through as they are virtually onboarded.

4.5.4 Interview process

The interviews were conducted with 12 participants, and they ran for an average of 36.56 minutes, this was enough time to obtain in-depth information from both the employees as well as hiring managers in the organisations (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). According to Saunders and Townsend (2016) saturation is not easy to achieve with qualitative research due to the open-ended nature of questions, thus researchers are encouraged to collect sufficient data to enable a satisfactory narrative for research purposes. For this study, saturation was achieved in 12 interviews for a relatively homogenous sample (Saunders & Townsend, 2016).

The selected interview approach enabled a dialogue that led to the gathering of rich information, which was categorised into themes through which the research questions could be interrogated (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The inclusion of the hiring managers to provide information relating to the changes in behaviour exhibited by the employees will ensure the trustworthiness of the information deduced from the interviews with employees. The hiring managers sample consisted of employees from similar occupational backgrounds and sectors who have appointed employees who have undergone virtual onboarding during the same period July 2021 to July 2022.

Using the abovementioned criteria, all interview participants that were interviewed for the research matched the most important criteria which were having been virtually onboarded from July 2021 till July 2022. The employees that matched the criteria were sourced from social media such as LinkedIn and through work and study contacts who were referred to suitable employees who met the criteria and consented to the interview process.

4.6 Measurement instrument

A semi-structured interview was utilised as a tool to collect data from the interview participants, however, due to the embracing of technological freedom by employees, all interviews were conducted on a virtual platform, MS Teams. This served as a limitation as the interviewer misconstrued the body language, which would have been easily detectable in face-to-face interviews (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to obtain enough information to build themes that answered the research questions as well as addressed the problem statement. The interview guide was utilised to gather information from the interview participants based on the questions developed from the formulated research questions (Park & Park, 2016). Park and Park (2016) also suggest that using an interview guide will ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information collated as it allows for verification. An interview guide is attached as Appendix A, encompassing questions that were posed to employees and hiring managers.

4.7 Data collection process

The data collection method when conducting a phenomenological study method encourages the development of a narrative of the experience that an individual has undergone thereby allowing for the conceptualisation of abstract concepts. This method was appropriate as it is based on understanding the complexity of a particular experience within the natural bounded context (Creswell et al., 2007). Park and Park (2016) notes that phenomenology is aimed at understanding the uniqueness of each experience in comparison with the others through gathering information from respondents. Therefore, it is the most applicable strategy for this research. The desktop research assisted in building the literature review as well as formulating the research questions. A review of human resource databases, such as journal articles on the Emerald Insight database, Gallup insights, and Deloitte reports on past engagement surveys and trends (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). This data was aggregated to add value to the formulation of the research and will be stored electronically without identifiers for confidentiality purposes.

The phenomenology strategy that was followed allowed for data triangulation collected through in-depth interviews with the participant as well as (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The advantage of this triangulation was that it created assurance of trustworthiness, credibility, transparency, and transferability, as diverse types of information were utilized to give a deeper understanding as well as verify the reliability

of the information gathered, which led to improved quality of findings (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

According to Park and Park (2016), primary data is collected in the natural context of the situation through semi-structured interviews conducted, observations, use of journals, photovoice, documents, artifacts, and more. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using video conferencing through Microsoft teams as this was convenient for the interviewees as most of the interview participants were working from home or on hybrid models. All interviews were recorded digitally and manually so that all information was collated accurately and objectively. An interview guide was utilised to capture the responses of the respondents for further analysis (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Two interview guides were utilised to extract information from employees and hiring managers and all collected data was transcribed.

Most of the interviews took place during working hours, with a few scheduled after hours to accommodate the interviewee's diaries. The interview process started by welcoming the interview participant and thanking them for their willingness to participate in the research process. Also, the interviewer gave acknowledgment of their consent as indicated by the signed voluntary consent form (Appendix 3). An overview of the research topic was explained to each participant to give context and background to the research study. This also allowed for clarification of any unfamiliar terms with the participant. All participant responses were recorded digitally on the MS Teams platform as well as notes taken by the researcher on the interview guide. All recorded interviews were transcribed by the interviewer and were coded through Atlas. ti system.

4.8 Data analysis approach

Having conducted 12 interviews with the participants, no new insights and experiences were reported in the data, similar discussion points were being reported, thus the researcher was satisfied that saturation was reached (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The data analysis was done by, identifying words and phrases in the collated interview data that provided meaning to edify the research questions, the words and phrases collated are called codes (Linnenberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The primary data collected through the interviews were transcribed from digital to text for ease of review. All the interviews were loaded onto the analysis system Atlas ti. for further analysis.

The thematic analysis aimed to explain the patterns of meaning that were recorded that adequately express the phenomenon being researched through the two main research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), six stages can be applied to analyse data and extract themes from it. An illustration in Table 2 shows the different stages that were undertaken to analyse the collected data.

Table 2. Six stages of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

Stage	Description
1. Adaptation with collected data	Transcribing the voice recording from the interviews and highlighting the main ideas
2. Generate initial codes	Creating codes from the data collected
3. Determine themes	Developing themes from the categories codes collated
4. Analysis selected themes	Develop a theme map analysis
5. Define and name themes	Further analysis of themes to develop clear definitions of themes
6. Report generation	Selection of coded themes that relate to research questions and literature review to produce the report.

To ensure a good understanding and closeness with the data, the researcher conducted all the interviews and transcribed all interviews from voice recording to verbatim minutes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcribed minutes were loaded onto Atlas ti. for code creation of recurring words and phrases extracted from the interviews (Linnenberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Each interview was analysed individually to extract codes that highlighted relevant and important information collated from the interviews. This form of coding is referred to as inductive coding as the codes are extracted directly from the data, thereby giving a voice to the participant (Linnenberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The researcher utilised the coding method of highlighting phrases and words that relate to the research questions based on the information collated from the interviews, categories of similar codes created were formulated by grouping codes related to each other. A total of 33 codes were created from the

interview data collected and categorised into groups of codes that were relating to the same idea.

Thereafter, the categories formulated were further analysed to create themes, which are defined as important phrases that relate to the research questions as well as recurring patterns within the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A comparison was done on similarities and differences between the interviews conducted and these were analysed to offer information regarding the richness of the data set (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Once all the codes were collated and similar or related codes from the transcriptions were categorised, themes were extracted from the code categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were created based on the important phrases and words that were recorded relative to the research questions, this is because literature is not prescriptive on what determines a theme but rather focuses on the level of importance concerning the research questions (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

4.9 Quality controls

Park and Park (2016) state that it is important to ensure the validity of the qualitative method utilised so that the data are representative of a true and full picture of the concepts under investigation.

For the study, a semi-structured interview guide was used to assist in allowing the researcher to ask open-ended questions that enabled information to be collated from the respondents (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). After ethical clearance was granted for data collection to commence, the first interview was scheduled and conducted. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to have a flowing conversation with the interview participant which added to the rich data that was collected. The interviews were done virtually by the researcher, and this allowed for further probing on points of interest that the participants spoke about, despite not being able to leverage the non-verbal cues that the respondents may display during a face-to-face interview session. However, the researcher had to be aware of biases that came up and made efforts to always ensure objectivity and partiality (Park & Park, 2016).

According to Miles and Huberman (1994) ensuring data quality control is complex due to the interpretive nature of a qualitative study, the researcher must be cognisant of checking for representativeness in the data collected, checking researcher effects,

and triangulating to get some objectivity. The researcher had to be conscious of the five control measures as indicated by Miles and Huberman (1994) were enlisted to assist in the quality control process. Firstly, objectivity/ confirmability of the quality of work relates to the impartiality of the research process by the researcher ensuring that they do not influence the data and can provide an audit trail that can be evaluated by other researchers.

Secondly, reliability/dependability and audibility relate to the consistency of the study and the credibility of the responses given by the interview participants. Ensuring that the line of questioning was not leading the interviewee. Thirdly, internal validity/credibility/authenticity which relates to the plausibility of the data collected, is comprehensive and coherent, ensuring that the interviewee is honest and authentic in their responses (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Fourthly, external validity/transferability/fittingness is the usability of the conclusions from the data in different contexts. Lastly, utilization/application/action orientation which is the implications for management and stakeholders who are faced with this phenomenon. The researcher had to ensure that the data collection process addressed the pertinent questions posed under each control measure to reach some level of good data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

4.10 Limitations

Limitations that the researcher encountered through utilizing qualitative methodology ranged from researcher bias, time constraints, and to some extent response bias from the interviewees. The researcher showed bias because of inexperience which is identified as a limitation factor, according to Saunders and Lewis (2018), as a novice researcher conducting an exploratory study, there must be caution against subjective biases that appear during the analysis process. For instance, using the selected measurement instrument of a semi-structured interview guide for the first time led to fluidity issues where respondents responded to questions that had not been asked. The researcher had to mitigate this bias by ensuring that the conversation was steered back to the line of questions by repeating as well as offering clarity in the questions asked. In addition, the researcher had to ensure that there were minimal repetitive responses by probing for more information and different examples from the respondents (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Time constraint from the interview participant was a limitation that the researcher had to deal with. Although the time allocation for the interview was communicated as approximately an hour, this became a limitation as interview participants could not commit to the full hour for the interview. Therefore, to mitigate this, the researcher ensured that for participants that were pressed for time, follow-up questions were asked after all the main questions had been asked to ensure that all the main questions were asked and answered in the interview. Despite time being a constraint, no follow-up interviews were conducted as enough content was collected from the respondents in the scheduled interview.

Another identified limitation was picked up from the participants regarding memory bias. Although the phenomenological approach allows respondents to share their lived experiences (Creswell et al., 2007) some participants were prone to memory bias based on the time elapsed from when they went through the virtual onboarding process to where they are now. This influenced the data in that some questions did not have as much detail from the responses and the researcher had to rely on the information from the participants that remembered how they went through their experiences.

In addition, a possible limitation was due to interview participants being protective of their companies and did not want to divulge information regarding the engagement levels within their organisation in interviews. To mitigate this the researcher had to rely on probing for example interviewing participants to get richer supporting information.

The overlap of generations in organisations influenced the results as the younger generations such as Millennials and Generation Z who were born during the advent of the internet found it easier to adopt virtual platforms compared to the older generations born before the advent of the internet. The ease and comfortability of the use of virtual platforms between the generations skewed the data as participants responded from their place of comfort (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

4.11 Conclusion

Qualitative methodology is the selected method for research for the study as it allows for the researcher to collate information from the various respondents to ensure objectivity in the information collated. The use of non-statistical data analysis for the thematic coding will assist in ensuring that the large amount of data collated is

reduced to easily usable information in the business context. According to Park and Park (2016) and Tomaszewski et al., (2020) a phenomenological approach to research leads to immersion into the participants' lived experiences which gives rich data to the research study and is easily transferrable into the business environment. For this research, the selected methodology will enhance both theory and business contexts.

Chapter 5. Data Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings from the 12 interviews conducted with interviewees from eight different organisations that are based in Financial Services, Engineering, Mining, Insurance, and Health sectors in South Africa. The analysis is based on the information collated from research questions as discussed in Chapter 3. As indicated earlier, Research Question 1 focuses on, how do knowledge workers describe the experience of virtual onboarding vs. the face-to-face onboarding process? Research Question 2 probes on, how do employees perceive employee engagement after a virtual onboarding process? All interviews with participants were conducted virtually utilizing the Microsoft Teams facility for recording purposes. To ensure consistency in the process the respective interview guide for employees and hiring managers were consistently utilised for the interviews. Although the semi-structured questions were utilised during the interviews, due to the fluid nature of the semi-structured interviews it was noted that some participants responded to planned questions before they were asked.

5.2 Participant details

Description	Details
Employees	8
Managers	4
Total Participants	12
The total duration of interviews (minutes)	438.82
Shortest interview	16.08
Longest interview	40.01
Average interview	36.56

5.3 Research results for Research Question 1

How do knowledge workers describe the experience of virtual onboarding vs. the face-to-face onboarding process?

This question seeks to understand the effect of virtual vs face-to-face onboarding experience of workers in the knowledge economy. The research aims to understand the dynamic that the virtual intervention has on how employees experience onboarding in a new organisation. The research will assist in providing awareness to managers of the different ways that employees perceive virtual onboarding. Six main themes emerged from research question 1 as illustrated in Figure 1.

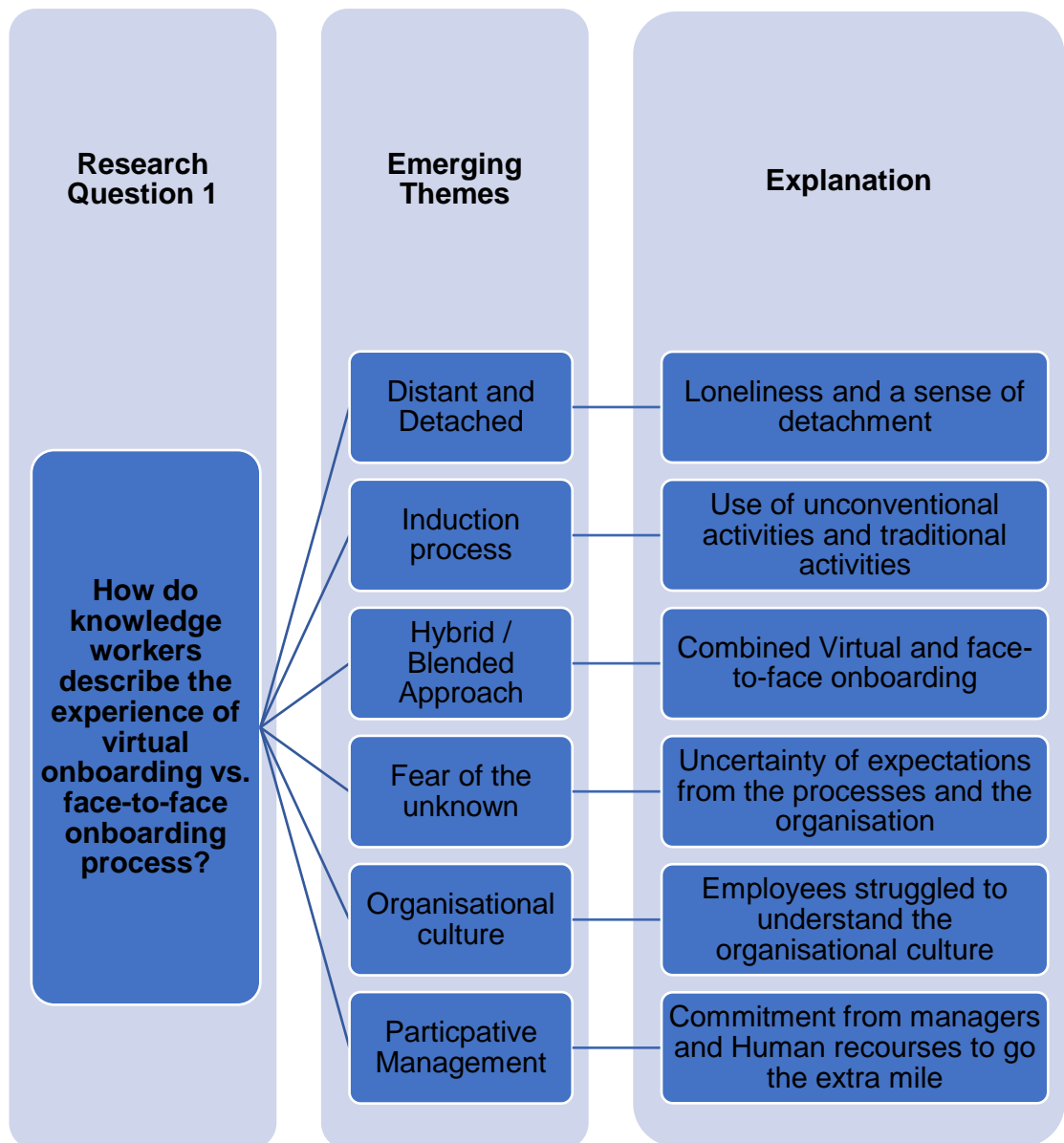


Figure 1: Research Question 1: Themes

The emerging themes were selected from the recurring codes that employees kept referring to in the interviews. The emerging themes are individually discussed in detail below.

5.3.1 Distant and Detached

Most of the employees interviewed, and half of the managers alluded to the point that the virtual onboarding process created distance between the employees and the organisation. The lack of face-to-face interaction in physical space created a perception of distance and created a sense of loneliness, especially for the new employees. The new employees felt that they could not identify with the activities that were being done and struggled to connect with peers as they were unsure of how to behave and react online. A feeling of isolation was mentioned in the interviews as

there was no familiarity with the people, the organisation, and the content that was being shared.

The employees indicated that the virtual onboarding process created distance between themselves and the organisation as well as their team members. The new employees felt secluded from everyone else because of the virtual platform. In some instances, the new employees found it challenging to reach out to their colleagues as they could not anticipate a positive outcome from reaching out.

Manager 1 highlighted an important aspect that is overlooked in the virtual space, which is the impact of nonverbal communication. The disregard for nonverbal cues in virtual onboarding makes it difficult to judge how a new employee is feeling or thinking as only the spoken word is considered. Therefore, managers fail to identify when there is a problem with new employees because they cannot read the emotional cues.

Employee 1: "The virtual onboarding process was a bit isolated because I had to do things on my own"

Employee 3: "I think its human nature, you feel like you are not getting all the attention and sometimes we feel like we want personal attention"

Employee 6: "The downside is that we miss that connection, and it takes longer to make friends or build relationships. A lot of nonverbal cues are missed online."

Manager 1: "... it tends to be a bit difficult getting the true emotions of somebody because everything is virtual"

Employee 1 also noted that during the induction session some new employees kept to themselves and did not try to contribute to the discussion, despite participation being encouraged by the facilitator. In addition, some employees faced technical issues due to internet connectivity and electricity load-shedding which made it difficult to be fully present throughout the process. This led to disengagement from the early stage of the virtual onboarding process and impacted the employee's level of engagement.

Employee 1: "They encouraged participation, but some people kept to themselves."

“Yes, it affected it negatively, had I started in person I would have felt more at home and embraced in the organisation. I did give feedback to the HR team on how they can improve the virtual onboarding because I felt misplaced, and they could not have done better to make the experience better for me.”

“When I initially joined, I struggled to fit in and was in the market looking for a new job, but after a couple of interviews, I changed my perspective and decided to take ownership of my happiness and engagement in the organisation.”

5.3.2 Induction Process

The interview participants noted that the virtual onboarding process allowed for additional unconventional activities to be included in the process compared to the face-to-face onboarding process where traditional activities are done. This allowed employees to relax and be entertained and gave them a sense of belonging as they interacted in different settings. Also, this meant that the induction process was not monotonous with only PowerPoint presentations done throughout the session as in the traditional induction process.

Employee 1: “We had a celebrity chef as the last activity at the end of the induction process, hosted by J. Something and we had our cameras on and was like a live Instagram.”

Employee 3: “Some games, we also had some breathing techniques, relaxation exercises included.”

The introduction of unconventional activities meant that new employees could interact with each other in different settings which enabled networking with colleagues they may not have been comfortable reaching out to. In some organisations, the activities overlap outside of the onboarding process, where the employees are continuously encouraged to keep engaging with their peers and colleagues through activities. The continuous informal interaction leads to an improvement in sustainable relationships which helps in improving employee engagement levels.

Employee 1: "Every Friday we have a virtual Friday activity with prizes and money giveaways."

Employees 5 and 8 indicated that due to the bureaucratic nature of the organisations that they work for, there were no additional activities included in the onboarding process. The induction process was monotonous and one-way facilitation by the facilitator. This was due to the nature of the industry that they work in which has a lot of bureaucratic processes and policies that guide the work they do. Employee 5 also indicated that they expected this when they joined the organisation therefore this was not a surprise for them.

Employee 8: "No activities involved"

Employee 5: "You will just have to introduce yourself, who you are, where you are from and which team you are joining. And I think we also had to have something interesting about ourselves just as an ice breaker."

5.3.3 Hybrid / Blended Approach

The study was conducted at the end of the Covid 19 lockdown period, and some organisations were implementing the hybrid working model. As the new employees started coming back to the office and meeting their colleagues for the first time, they highlighted a preference for a hybrid approach to the onboarding process. Having the opportunity to be able to meet face-to-face with the team enriched the conversations they were having on the virtual platform.

With the blended approach, employees were comfortable working through study material at their own pace but preferred to have face-to-face knowledge-sharing sessions which allowed for better interpretation of messages being conveyed.

Employee 6: "A blended/hybrid approach would work well. New employees have a very important role to play, and the organisation must recognize that aspect that the human interaction aspect is appreciated. The idea is not to eliminate the face-to-face interaction but to take aspects of both face-to-face and virtual aspects so that there is harmony and synchronization in how information is shared."

One employee indicated that they preferred the virtual onboarding of working as it gave them the freedom to work at their own pace without fear of being judged in the

office setting. They indicated that as an employee they feel confident enough to openly contribute to discussions as there is no fear of judgment from colleagues should one behave or speak out of turn. Virtual onboarding provides introverted employees with the safety of not having to speak in front of large groups of people, therefore it does not feel intimidating to them.

Employee 4: "Virtual onboarding is very relaxed and even the type of dressing is relaxed, as in an individual I am in my comfort zone and there is no pressure to show up in a different way. I can communicate openly and confidently because there are no judging eyes."

In some instances, employees are just comfortable with the idea that they do not have to dress up in formal wear and drive to the office to get the work done. The flexibility of being able to be free in one's environment whilst working is enough to lead to a higher level of engagement among new employees.

5.3.4 Fear of the unknown

Newly virtually onboarded employees experienced a sense of anxiety, as they did not know what to expect of how the virtual onboarding process will be conducted as well as what their new place of employment looked like. The uncertainty of not knowing what the first day will feel like as the employees do not experience the feeling of being welcomed into the office and getting a cup of coffee to get them settled in. Coupled with the fear of starting a new role in a new organisation and not having the opportunity to meet anyone face-to-face was a bit overwhelming for some employees. The mindset shifts of driving to the office and being welcomed at the reception desk are not included in the virtual process as employees join from the comfort of their houses.

Manager 1: "You are not interacting immediately with your co-workers, your line manager, and staff everything it's virtually and it feels very cold, so the integration took longer than somebody that is face-to-face we take out to the induction, and now we will show you where you are sitting, where your desk is, where you line manager and then what human connection work you acquire it."

Manager 3: "... there is a fear of not knowing who one is going to be working with..."

Employees mentioned that they felt uncertain of the environment they were coming into as they had not walked the office passages or seen face-to-face their colleagues. It all felt unreal starting a new job without meeting anyone and believing in virtual interaction. Also, being introduced to new people virtually is difficult because you cannot attach behaviour or characteristics to a person, only the voice to go by.

Employee 3: "I felt it's going to be a bit extremely overwhelming firstly because everything was virtual and secondly, I was working remotely exclusively because of COVID-19, and the organisation had not returned to the office yet."

Employee 8: "Challenging in that meeting people face-to-face is easy because you can put a face to a name, unlike virtual where you are not sure whether you have met the person or not."

5.3.5 Organisational culture

Employees experienced difficulties in understanding the organisational culture as it did not come through clearly during the virtual onboarding process. In as much as the induction facilitators articulated the culture virtually and shared examples of what the different values meant; the employees could not sense the smell of the place. In addition, the absence of non-verbal cues, experiencing walking down the passage and mingling with other colleagues meant that new employees did not get the full experience of the culture to understand it clearly.

Employee 1: "The culture did not come through nicely through the virtual onboarding process."

Employee 7: "It is so crazy because I have gotten a better understanding of the organisational culture as we've come back to the office. So, I see the values in the emails and there is constant communication from HR, but it's translated to me mostly as I have come back to the office as I have seen the activities, as I have seen people, as I have interacted that for me has translated better than the full virtual onboarding that we had..."

Employee 1 alluded to the fact that cultural assimilation is a journey and not a lesson that is given in one sitting and understood now. Therefore, it was unreasonable to expect new employees to learn and assimilate the organisational culture in a short period. The employee added that cultural assimilation is a journey that a new employee must undergo for a period and must be articulated in diverse activities that form part of the onboarding process.

Employee 1: "Culture can only be experienced and the idea of understanding culture through induction is academic. Culture is experienced through time and experiences in the organisation."

5.3.6 Participative management

Managers tend to distance themselves from the induction process as they leave it to human resources to ensure the employee is well-inducted. However, the experiences noted by both employees and managers during the interviews indicate that with virtual onboarding managers have taken a more hands-on approach. The inclusion of subject matter experts who share their knowledge of their work and experiences of the organisation is also invaluable for the new employees.

Employees also alluded to the fact that managers are more accessible during the virtual onboarding process. They try to reach out to the new employee and are constantly planning work for them which helps in socializing the new employee.

Manager 1: "Have a strong dedicated HR team and a manager that understands the virtual onboarding process and can close the gap where HR is not available to spend time with the employee so that they are not found wanting."

"The virtual onboarding holds everyone accountable for their processes and no one wants to be the weak link in the value chain."

Employee 4: "I prefer the virtual onboarding because my manager is readily available, and he can respond even during meetings because he does not need to come to me physically."

An employee also noted that the facilitation of the virtual onboarding was done with care and precision by the facilitator, this was to ensure that all new employees feel welcomed and included in the activities. The authenticity and the commitment that

the facilitator shows during the onboarding process play an important role in setting up the right conditions for engagement levels.

Employee 3: "... his first impression was just very warm, very fatherly and he showed that he cared you know, these new employees coming onboard, and it was not just another day of onboarding for him, but he took it very seriously in the sense that he was there to guide."

An interesting point to note that was introduced by one manager from the participant interviews but was not mentioned by anyone else in the group relates to security issues that the virtual onboarding process had to deal with. In as much as employees are given passwords to protect their information, employees share homes with people from competitive companies which could be a risk factor should sensitive information land in the wrong hands.

Manager 3: "Also course on email etiquette, how to safeguard data, should they be in an environment with a competitor."

Although the aspect of safeguarding data was not a recurring point in all the participant interviews, it is an important aspect to note whether employees are working virtually or face-to-face. Protection of organisational intellectual property is a vital characteristic that all employees must be vigilant about irrespective of face-to-face or virtual onboarding. It is more prominent to safeguard privacy with virtual onboarding as new employees need to guard against competitors accessing company information.

5.3.7 Conclusion

The participants' results evidenced a trend of both positive and negative experiences with the virtual onboarding process, with the common theme of distance and detachment being the most common theme that emerged from employees. Employees reported that they felt lonely, and they were not always sure of what to do and who to contact for assistance. As much as they appreciated the autonomy that working remotely has, it would have been appreciated more had it been in a familiar environment. Therefore, this highlights the theme regarding the implementation of a hybrid / blended approach.

5.4 Research results for Research Question 2

How do employees perceive employee engagement after a virtual onboarding process?

This question seeks to explore and understand how employee engagement after virtual onboarding. The second research question seeks to understand how employee engagement is influenced reported for employees who have undergone virtual onboarding. As well as assist in understanding the themes where the virtual onboarding experience influences the level of engagement. Research question 2 themes are reflected in figure 2.

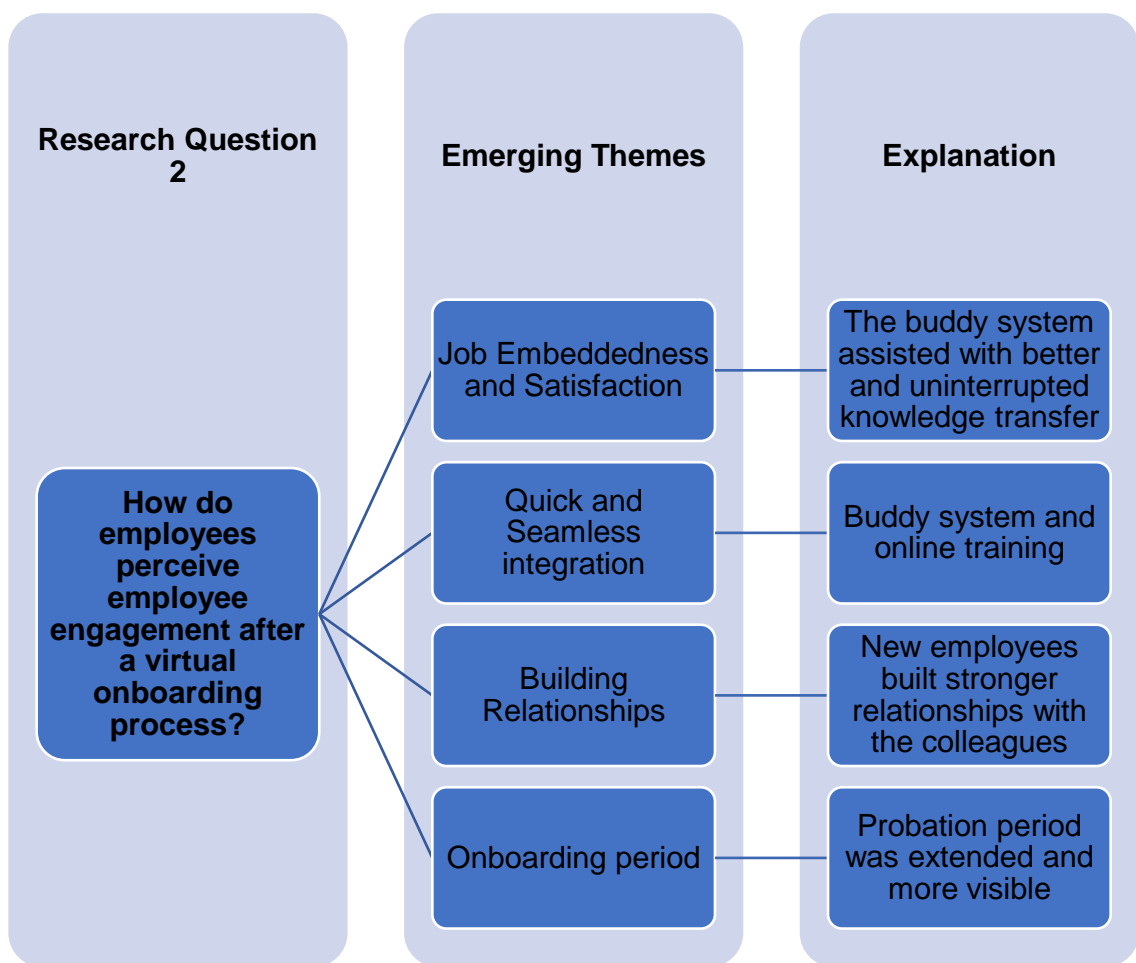


Figure 2: Research Question 2: Themes

5.4.1 Job embeddedness and Satisfaction

Most of the employees interviewed indicated that they are engaged and satisfied with their work. The virtual onboarding experience did seem to positively impact their level of engagement with the organisation. Some employees are currently still working

virtually or are in a hybrid mode and are appreciative of the opportunity to have flexibility in their ways of working. In addition, the employees that reported that they were engaged after the onboarding process also advised that they had a good understanding and were aligned with the organisational values and strategic objectives therefore they did not need additional conviction.

Employee 4: "Yes I am currently very engaged and happy with the virtual process"

Employee 6: "I am engaged, as part of my job and because I am sold to the idea of what the organisation does, especially looking at the strategy for the next eight years"

Employee 7: "Yes, I could consider myself engaged, I am attuned to what is happening in the organisation and I am an active citizen, I actively engage with my colleagues."

Manager 8: "Yes currently I am very engaged, and I do my work, I volunteer in activities and am ready to meet people from other teams."

However, there are a few employees who indicated that they have noted disengagement from their colleagues caused by other factors other than the virtual onboarding process. This disengagement is noted in employees who are already in the organisation and because of internal factors within the organisation, they struggle to find alignment. Therefore, poor engagement, in this case, must not be mistaken as an influence of a poor virtual onboarding process but rather a function of what is happening in their workplace.

Employee 6: "Employees in the organisation want to work for the company and are willing to go the extra mile for the organisation, however, there are inherent problems that people are going through"

Employee 7: "Yes, I could consider myself engaged, I am attuned to what is happening in the organisation and I am an active citizen, I actively engage with my colleagues."

Manager 8: “Yes currently I am very engaged, and I do my work, I volunteer in activities and am ready to meet people from other teams.”

5.4.2 Quick and Seamless integration

A key insight from the employee responses referred to the ease of integration that virtual onboarding has on employee engagement. Virtual onboarding has had a positive impact on the speed at which decisions are made, documentation and requests are approved by a click of a button and approvals are work flowed through a system that reduces the time taken to approve. There is also increased system usage in the organisation, which leads to better audit trails and controls. Virtual platforms seem to encourage engagement as employees work at their own pace to gain a full understanding of what is required from them. New employees can revert to reading materials and presentations for an in-depth understanding of concepts they may have missed.

Employee 2: “Onboarding started before I joined the company, so from when I accepted the offer, I started getting links that gave me access to company information as well as access to the onboarding pack of documents that needed to be completed. Everything is done online and when I started on the first day all the documents were completed and submitted”

Virtual onboarding has led to improvement in technology which has assisted in the quicker assimilation to organisational systems. New employees are seeing the benefit of leveraging technology in making their work lives easier, for instance sharing knowledge or teaching a skill virtually as well as building relationships with other team members. There is evidence of upskilling and cross-skilling with employees taking the initiative to access online learning platforms as well as share knowledge amongst themselves.

Employee 2: “My impression of people has improved as I position myself as a go-to person for new team members. It is easier to interact on MS Teams than to walk to someone and get something done. Also, the ability to share and help each other on problems is much better done on virtual platforms.”

One manager noted that virtual onboarding has enabled a faster adoption of technology as well as improved technology add-ons aimed at making accessibility

and use thereof easy for employees. This improvement in technology has in turn positively influenced the levels of engagement in organisations as there are dashboards that make reporting easier and the audit process seamless.

Manager 3: "User-friendly systems are very important to ensure that there is integration. Have single sign-on login details to ensure that an employee does not have to remember too many passwords. Also, pop-up reminders are important for the follow through on the onboarding."

Another employee indicated that they are highly engaged because they had the opportunity to learn at their own pace as they could go back to the online portal and or recordings of the sessions.

Employee 7: "I wasn't very clued up about the company so that virtual platform allowed me to apply myself and sit down and understand what I was doing."

5.4.3 Building relationships

Building sustainable relationships is an important element for new employees in an organisation. During the virtual onboarding process, the new employees felt that they could easily build relationships with the peers that they were in the sessions with.

Employee 8: "Yes, I interacted with a lot of the colleagues that were in the group..."

Employee 4: "Most of the interaction was with the newcomers in the session so it was all of us being onboarded at the same time and we interacted with each other mostly."

Managers from the different departments were invited to present at the induction session which gave insight into the important people that the new employees could reach out should they ever need assistance from a certain team.

Manager 3: "A good onboarding structure with committed and knowledgeable people... Subject matter experts to share information about the organisation and the interlink with the roles."

In addition, to enable ease of access to relevant information or people in the organisation, the management team assigned someone to be a point of contact for the new employee. To some extent, these allocated individuals would contribute to the performance evaluation of the new employee.

Employee 1: "Enjoyed the probation and buddy process because it allows the buddy to still work and teach at the same time. Also, it gave an opportunity to follow and mirror what the buddy was doing which made the learning process easy."

Employee 8: "I had sessions with my manager and the buddy allocated to me giving feedback on how I was progressing through my work."

5.4.4 Onboarding period

One of the managers indicated that their onboarding process runs for a full year with well-detailed specifications of the activities that are supposed to be completed for every milestone. In this organisation efforts are made to ensure that constant communication and engagement with the employee is maintained at every step of the way. This prolonged onboarding process also helps in ensuring that any issues or concerns that come up during the first few weeks or months of employment are dealt with before they negatively impact the employee.

The feedback that is collated during this period is also beneficial to the employee onboarding planning team as it gives insights into what is working and what is not. The catch-up meetings with individuals and teams also help in encouraging constant communication which encourages feedback all around.

Manager 3: "First day of virtual onboarding is done for all employees via MS Teams with the HR induction... After three months period, there will be a face-to-face meet and greet to check up on what the progress is like and if all expectations have been met... A six-month follow-up is done with the employee to ensure that they are still aligned with their deliverables as well as the organisation... At the first anniversary another meeting I scheduled to find out how they have progressed throughout the year"

Another manager also indicated that the probation period was held for three months in their organisation, however, they have noted that in most instances this period has had to be extended for employees that were virtually onboarded as they struggled to work on their own and settle into the organisation.

Manager 1: “the individual is taking longer than 3 months to do the probation, these individuals are taking extra two months or so to grasp it and get it because they don’t have that ability to just ask somebody, you know, or that buddy system or just walk up to your manager say I still don’t understand because you have to phone somebody to say okay get on the call please help me and sometimes that you feel the individuals feel that they disturbing.”

Three employees indicated that their onboarding process varied in the period that was allocated for it to be completed, ranging between three months to six months. One employee shared details of the type of information that is shared during the probation period as well as indicated the people who are involved in the process.

Manager 1: “6 months...sessions with the HR person, I think two sessions, and on that document that you need to complete in terms of have you been assigned a buddy, are you still enjoying, do you feel you have made a wrong decision or are you still happy with the decision that you have made...”

5.4.5 Conclusion

In summary, ten themes emerged from the in-depth interviews with the population sample of 12 interviewees participating. In response to research question 2, the interview participants were positive about their perception of the virtual onboarding process and its influence on employee engagement. They perceived that the employees tend to be highly engaged after having undergone the virtual onboarding process as it allows for flexibility to focus on the important aspect of the process. The next Chapter 6 will discuss the results discussed in this chapter, in comparison to the data collected in the literature review in Chapter 2.

Chapter 6. Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings from the data analysis done in Chapter 5 regarding the literature review discussed in Chapter 2 of this research paper, a relationship with Chapters 1, 3, and 5 will be drawn to build on the findings from the participant responses. The feedback from the interviews conducted which was based on the research questions as well as the literature review done with researchers who have also written on the concepts is merged to formulate insights into the experience of virtual onboarding on knowledge workers in South Africa and how this influences employee engagement.

6.2 Research Question 1

How do knowledge workers describe the experience of virtual onboarding vs. the face-to-face onboarding process?

The objective of this research question was to identify the experiences of virtual onboarding and how it influences employee engagement in knowledge workers. The reported experiences from the research questions provided insights to employers on how different employees perceive virtual onboarding as well as provided awareness of the preference that employees have. Research question 1 had six emerging themes that were collated from the interviews conducted, namely: Distant and detached, interactive induction process, hybrid / blended approach, fear of the unknown, organisational culture misalignment, and participative management.

6.2.1 Distant and detached

The main aim of employee onboarding is to shape the initial experience of new employees in the organisation. Schmidtke and Cummings (2017) confirm that the onboarding process sets up an employee for success in the organisation and determines their continued stay. However, the responses from the participant interviews propose that the virtual onboarding process leads to a feeling of distance between employees and their organisations. The absence of physical interaction and the reliance on technology to close this gap still gives employees a feeling of detachment from their peers as well as the organisation. This leads to extended settling times as the getting to know and understand each other period is longer due to limited exposure to each other. Schmidtke and Cummings (2017) assert that shared mental modes are difficult to create in the virtual space due to limited

interaction based on the lack of non-verbal communication that is present in face-to-face interactions. Jeske and Olson (2022) infer that employee onboarding has to involve employees acclimatising to the new environment, which would include walking the office corridors and physically meeting their peers, and seeing the organisational culture in the artefacts in the office. This may assist in creating moments where new employees find artifacts that they identify with from the office setting.

The detachment feeling was also experienced and confirmed by responses from employee 1 who indicated that some employees kept to themselves and did not make an effort to contribute to the discussions during the virtual onboarding. Employees 3 and 6 also confirmed that they longed for a physical connection with their peers and felt like they were not getting the personalised attention they would get if they were in the office. This supports Schmidtke and Cummings (2017) notion that if not done correctly, employee onboarding could lead to disengagement from the onset of an employee's employment process. In as much as technology is bridging the gap between employees and the organisation, some individuals are finding it difficult to engage virtually. The feeling of detachment is evident in new employees as they struggle to build connections with other employees in the organisation due to being physically displaced.

Distance and detachment was also an aspect that managers mentioned it was prevalent in the virtual onboarding process. Conducting one on one meetings with new employees meant that they could not be privy to the emotional cues that the employees show, thus, they needed to be authentic and intentional about what they were saying to avoid misinterpretation. Employee 1 indicated that the discomfort that came from joining a virtual call and virtually meeting colleagues, led to them looking for a new job. However, after making an effort to switch on their camera during meetings and reach out to other colleagues for the assistance they changed their attitude, and became intentional about their involvement in the activities and, they are now engaged, employees.

6.2.2 Induction process

Virtual onboarding has encouraged the inclusion of interactive initiatives that were not included in a face-to-face onboarding process. A significant finding from this theme is how richer the onboarding process has become due to the time and effort that is included in the planning process to ensure that new employees are well-equipped.

Krasman (2015) and Chillakuri (2020) illustrate this in their explanation of the characteristics of onboarding which highlight the importance of onboarding as a strategic concept in the organisation which encourages employee engagement. Focusing on the content as well as how that content is shared is important in ensuring that employees have a good understanding of the process.

Virtual onboarding requires additional effort compared to traditional face-to-face onboarding. Howard et al., (2015) assert that employee onboarding can be customised to an organisation, however, it must cover all three phases: pre-onboarding, first-day activities, and probation to be effective. Bauer et al., (2007) add that it must be well thought-out and planned to ensure that both employees and the organisation benefit. The argument expressed by Employee 1 also aligns with Krasman (2015) as it supports the idea that onboarding is not an event but rather a journey that a new employee embarks on and learns about the organisations, their peers as well as their work. Bauer et al., (2007) state that to get the most out of an onboarding process, it must be phased out and focus on specific tasks to ensure easier adoption. The responses from the participants have also corroborated this with the diverse activities that have been introduced in the virtual onboarding process.

The findings from the interviews confirm that the interactive virtual induction process has been beneficial to the new employees, through the inclusion of unconventional activities in the onboarding process. The traditional, face-to-face onboarding typically consisted of formal processes, however virtual onboarding includes activities like quizzes, competitions, games, celebrity cooking classes, and even meditation sessions as stated in interviews with Employees 1 and 3 from the participants. This is aligned with what the literature states, Varshney (2022), customised activities must be included to stimulate new employee interests and break the monotony of having to sit through PowerPoint presentations. The research conducted with the participants that did not have a lot of variety in their onboarding process also highlighted their frustration with extended presentations with limited activities.

This shows also confirms the new employees' need for constant stimulation so that they keep alert to what the organisation is about as well as keep them engaged on the content that is being shared. Therefore, diverse content, as well as methods of presentation, will assist in reaching more new employees, rather than monotonous presentations.

Employees 8 and 5 reported that their virtual induction process was monotonous with no additional activities included outside of the regular PowerPoint presentations. However, both employees also indicated that their organisations are bureaucratic because of the work that they do, and they do not entertain unconventional activities in their organisations.

6.2.3 Hybrid / Blended approach

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the ways of working, especially for knowledge workers in South Africa. Both employees and employers have realised that work is not only confined to the office space but can be done from anywhere in the world and this has led to an increase in remote and hybrid working alternatives. Lonngvist and Laihonon (2017) illustrate the importance of engaged knowledge workers and the positive impact they have on organisational productivity and performance. However, the experience of interview participants confirmed that incorporating a hybrid/ blended approach into the employee onboarding process would go a long way to influencing the effective integration of new employees into an organisation as well as their engagement levels (Shrotryia Dhanda, 2020).

The development of a hybrid approach allows employees to get the best of both aspects of the virtual onboarding as well as the face-to-face onboarding process as it incorporates technology and online interventions. Virtual onboarding allows employees to get through training content at their leisure online, which helps with saving time and enabling better adoption of information and processes (Varshney (2022)). The face-to-face onboarding aspect enables socialising new employees to their peers and to the organisational subtleties that cannot be transferred virtually.

Employee 4 indicated a preference for the hybrid model in the onboarding process as it allows for focus time whilst working from home. There are no distractions that are experienced whilst working from home as employees do not have to stop and have a chat with a colleague or get pulled into impromptu meetings. Manager 3 also agreed that virtually onboarded employees have the benefit of attending the full onboarding process without managers interrupting any of the sessions. The change over into the office allows for time to interact with peers and share ideas which enhances the depth of information that is shared.

The hybrid model is preferred by employees as it affords them the flexibility to develop good networks with their colleagues in the organisation. Also benefiting from the

immersion experience that comes with interacting in a physical space. In addition, the blended approach also allows for focus time when the employee is on their own and they can get their work done without any disturbances from colleagues in the office.

6.2.4 Fear of the unknown

Chillakuri (2020) summarises onboarding as a process of socialising new employees to the organisational culture, new jobs, processes, and procedures. Respondents from the interviews explain that undergoing the virtual onboarding process is daunting for new employees because of the element of the unknown. Schmidtke and Cummings (2017) confirm that starting a new job is a daunting process for any new employee. Manager 1 highlighted that the lack of physical interaction with peers and managers when an employee starts creates anxiety and uncertainty about the new environment. Ensuring that the same welcoming feeling is extended to new employees is vital to ensure engagement from the first day. Therefore, ensuring that this process is done correctly is important for any organisation.

Interview participants also confirmed that they were anxious about meeting virtually with their teams and having the first meeting with their manager as the technology created a limited sense of presence. In some instances, peers would have their cameras switched off in meetings, which created anxiety for the new employee as they do not have a face to put a name or a voice to (Varshney, 2022). Therefore, providing the correct equipment, good connectivity, and ensuring that all employees fully participate in the activities go a long way in establishing familiarity in the organisation.

6.2.5 Organisational culture

An important theme that emerged from the participant interviews relates to organisational culture and how employees struggled to comprehend the culture of the organisation with limited physical interaction. Chillakuri (2020) explains culture as the most important category during the onboarding process as it encompasses the values and norms that nurture the desired employee behaviour within the organisation. In addition, Amis and Greenwood (2021) emphasise the importance of organisational values as a driver for change as well as behaviour influence in the organisation. Therefore, values and norms must be appropriately conveyed to new employees so they can lead to employee engagement and more importantly a healthy organisational culture.

Interview participants acknowledged that it was difficult to have a good in-depth understanding of the organisational culture in a virtual setting as they missed the organisational cultural elements that can only be experienced in the physical environment (Amis & Greenwood 2021). In addition, limited interaction and visibility with the leadership team also meant that the new employees did not have the opportunity to see the organisational values in action and could only understand them on paper (Chillakuri, 2020). The leadership team plays a pivotal role in mirroring the organisational values and norms that are acceptable in the organisation, therefore their visibility towards and interaction with the new employees will result in a positive influence.

6.2.6 Participative Management

The virtual onboarding process has highlighted the importance and the need for managers to be active in the onboarding process. New employees are motivated and engaged when they see their managers taking ownership and leading them in their work environment. Costas et al., (2016) also affirm the positive impact that high employee engagement has on an organisation's productivity and competitive advantage. Therefore, management must play an influential role with new employees to ensure that they are integrated effectively.

It is also important for the management team to be involved in the management process, this is not only limited to the hiring manager but at an executive level as well. Visibility and accessibility of the management team will ensure that new employees have a first-hand experience of the management team modeling the company culture that they would like to impart. This is illustrated by Manager 3 who alluded to the impact that the Chief Executive Officer's introductory video which is played to all their new employees in their organisation, sets the tone for their onboarding process (Chillakuri, 2020; Bauer & Erdogan 2010).

6.2.7 Conclusion

The responses from the interviews on Research Question 1 uncovered what virtually onboarded employees and hiring managers experienced because of virtual onboarding. The responses from the participants were evidence of the fact that virtual onboarding is a new concept that South African organisations are still learning about, therefore a lot more improvements will be implemented as more experiences are reported on. The experiences that new employees went through must be used as learning points of improvement in making the virtual onboarding process better. It was

also evident from the literature that the structure of the onboarding process is important in ensuring that the onboarding runs effectively (Asatiani et al., 2021; Zhang-Zhang et al., 2022). In addition, being authentic about the process from all parties involved ensures that the process is beneficial to both parties.

A vital point to note is the need for organisations to be agile and accommodative to the changing nature of the ways of work, due to technological shifts and or the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, the need to ensure that new employees are highly engaged is also important as this has a big influence on their performance in the organisation as well as their willingness to stay (Amis & Greenwood 2021).

6.3 Research Question 2

How do employees perceive employee engagement after a virtual onboarding process?

This question seeks the perceptions of employees, based on their lived experiences and observations on employee engagement after undergoing virtual onboarding. By understanding the lived experiences as well as observations from managers the researcher can assess the emerging themes and assess how they influence employee engagement. The emerging themes from their research question are Job embeddedness and satisfaction, quick and seamless integration, building relationships, and onboarding period.

6.3.1 Job embeddedness and satisfaction

Job embeddedness is an important factor that was evident in both employees' and managers' responses from the interviews. Kahn's theory of engagement (Kahn 1990) supports that engagement is focused on three factors, physical, cognitive, and emotional, therefore organisations need to create suitable conditions that allow for employees to be fully present and engaged in the workplace. Govender and Bussin (2020) highlight the different levels of engagement with a special focus on the first level, engaged employees as the most preferred as employees show behaviours of high commitment and passion for the work they do and the organisation. The feedback from the interview participants indicated positive experiences from the virtual onboarding process. Employees 4, 6, and 7 indicated their happiness with the virtual onboarding and how it has made it easy for them to interact with colleagues in the organisation.

Achieving high engagement during the employee onboarding process becomes essential for new employees because managers can leverage the momentum and maintain high levels of engagement. Shrotryia and Dhanda (2020) advise that managers must not confuse employee engagement with job satisfaction and commitment, an employee can be satisfied with their role and even stay within the organisation, but it does not always translate to high engagement. Therefore, it is important to constantly evaluate and monitor the new employee's integration into the organisation and deal with any queries and concerns they may raise.

6.3.2 Quick and seamless integration

Quick and seamless integration is an emerging theme from the respondents' interviews with both virtually onboarded employees and the hiring managers. The use of technology in the onboarding process allows for some of the tedious administrative and compliance training processes to be automated and completed before the employee's first day with the employer (Varshney (2022)). The experiences of Employee 2 agree with the literature, their virtual onboarding experience allowed them to complete all the necessary documents and receive all their equipment before their first day with the organisation. This hastens the process of onboarding employees and leaves more focus time for other immersive activities in the onboarding process.

Compliance as indicated by Bauer and Erdogan (2010) and Chillakuri (2020), in the four models of onboarding is the lowest-ranked category in the onboarding process because of the low complexity and scope that it requires. Therefore, automating this process leads to a quicker integration process as new employees can completely take on documents before their first day as well as read through compliance and organisational policy material beforehand. Krasman (2015) supports this argument by vouching for employee access to all the necessary information beforehand so that they are well-equipped to be productive as soon as possible.

An important point to note from the participant interviews was raised by Manager 3 who indicated that management needs to be diligent regarding ensuring the safety of company information while the employee is in their environment. During employee onboarding, a lot of company information, intellectual property, and strategies are shared with employees, thus strict confidentiality needs to be exercised to ensure privacy. Continuous communication about the importance of upholding confidentiality and privacy becomes a big concept that organisations will have to deal with.

6.3.3 Building relationships

An enabling environment that encourages the nurturing of sustainable relationships internally and externally is also an important emerging theme, especially for employees being virtually onboarded. Manager 3 indicated that a good onboarding structure requires knowledgeable people who share information with the new employees and act as links for the new employees and the business. Bauer et al., (2007) advise that pairing up the new employee with a buddy (fellow employee) in the organisation helps with creating familiarity with processes and peers as the buddy will work as the contact person. Assisting with a buddy would also ensure that the new employee is constantly engaged as they have a direct link to business through the buddy. Alexander (2021) agrees that the implementation of a buddy system for the new employee creates a sense of comfort for the new employee as they have a reliable point of contact.

Unlike a face-to-face onboarding process where employees physically meet with the team and start informally building relationships, virtual onboarding is different. Alexander (2021) and Varshney (2022) stress the importance of commitment from both new employees and managers to make relationship building in virtual onboarding successful. As much as formal communication and processes are important to follow, the inclusion of informal communication contributes immensely to building relationships. Therefore including informal activities, such as virtual coffee sessions to catch up, helps in building relationships and creating networks within the organisation.

6.3.4 Onboarding Period

The onboarding is a key theme that emerged from the respondents is that the virtual onboarding timeframe seemed to have increased compared to the face-to-face onboarding. Research conducted by Krasman (2015) and Chillakuri (2020) found that the onboarding process is an important process of integrating a new employee into the organisation, therefore adequate time must be allocated to the process. When conducted virtually, onboarding follows a more structured approach and there is a commitment from both the new employee and the hiring manager. Also, commitment from subject matter experts who can assist with knowledge sharing with the new employees.

Howard et al. (2015) confirm that different organisations have different timeframe commitments for the onboarding experience. Respondents have agreed that there is

more commitment to a three-month long and in some cases up to a year of onboarding for new employees. Manager 1 indicated that they have had to increase the virtual onboarding timelines from three months to five months as new employees are taking longer to settle in compared to their counterparts who had face-to-face onboarding.

The respondents from the interviews also confirmed that the onboarding timeframe has also increased in the virtual onboarding process. Commitment from the managers has also increased making it more impactful to both the new employee and the organisation. There are high expectations that a well-planned onboarding period leads to higher employee engagement levels for new employees.

6.3.5 Conclusion

Ensuring that a new employee is well socialized into the organisation, is an important aspect of ensuring that employees stay within the organisation. Virtual onboarding is considered an enabler to high levels of employee engagement, and it is evident in the participant interviews that it is an important activity in the employee lifecycle. The analysis of the responses from the participant interviews gave insights into the themes that employees deem as important factors in their journey towards engagement.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

The study set out to explore the experience of the virtual onboarding process on knowledge workers in South Africa and how this influences their engagement level. There is rich information found in the literature on the concept of employee onboarding. However, information on employee engagement is fragmented in literature due to the complexity of the concept and the lack of consensus between theorists on a single definition of the concept. This research intends to contribute to the existing body of knowledge through the interrogating of the collated themes from the experiences that the participants underwent through the virtual onboarding compared to the face-to-face onboarding process.

The world of work, after the COVID-19 pandemic, requires employers to be aware of the needs and requests of the employees in the market. Employee onboarding is a vital step to ensure that they get it right the first time. This includes setting up the new employees by providing them with the relevant information, networks, and documentation within the organisation, so they become, productive, highly engaged, and committed to the organisation.

This chapter summarizes the key findings as well as highlights to management the implications for organisations that make up the knowledge economy. An ineffective virtual onboarding process could have implications for the effectiveness of the new employee, and this could negatively impact their engagement levels in the organisations (Caldwell & Peters, 2018). Therefore, developing an effective and inclusive virtual onboarding process will help in improving not only the engagement levels but also the performance and productivity of the new employee.

7.1 Findings

It is noted that virtual onboarding is a prevalent concept that organisations are dealing with in the current work environment. There is a significant shift in organisations that have implemented a blend of virtual onboarding as well as face-to-face onboarding. Organisational agility in the onboarding process is becoming a factor that must be considered to ensure that new employees not only commit to and stay in an organisation but also contribute effectively. Employees are drawn to the flexibility that the virtual onboarding process provides; employees can log in to sessions from the comfort of their own homes or a coffee shop and if they miss a session they can always catch up when they have a moment. However, to complement the engagement aspect a blend of the face-to-face onboarding aspect is also found to be

relevant. The perceived distance that is felt in the virtual onboarding process is not felt when employees meet face to face, therefore employees appreciate the flexibility to exercise both options based on the convenience each process provides.

7.2 Limitations of the research

The research was conducted with most respondents from the financial services sector and limited respondents from other knowledge sectors, based on the availability of the respondents. Therefore, this was not a representation of the complete population as it disregarded other industries that have knowledge workers as part of their staff complement.

The study did not take into context the different timeframes that each organisation takes to onboard its new employees. There is no single model that organisations follow when inducting new employees therefore the influence of each process is dependent on the content of the onboarding process, timeframe, and consistency that all hiring managers have in imparting knowledge and guiding new employees into the organisation.

7.3 Implications for management and stakeholders

The research has identified applied ways in which practitioners can effectively implement virtual onboarding to influence employee engagement. According to Caldwell and Peters (2018), onboarding is generally ineffective due to the process not being afforded the status that it deserves from a strategic element perspective. Organisational decision-makers tend to not provide the necessary support and funding that is required to develop and implement effective onboarding processes. Therefore management needs to be authentic and commit to supporting the employee onboarding process.

As indicated in the there are short-term and long-term benefits that will benefit both the employee and the employer. Effectively onboarded employees have greater job satisfaction, loyalty, and commitment to their work and organisation which leads to reduced turnover numbers and reduced training and recruitment costs (Chillakuri, 2020) & (Bauer & Erdogan 2010). In addition, the transparency that is delivered through the onboarding content encourages higher employee engagement levels as employees are knowledgeable, confident, and trusting of the environment they work in (Caldwell & Peters, 2018).

The current ways of work are shifting towards remote working and hybrid models, which means that organisations need to be proactive about the different expectations that employees will be expecting. Therefore, periodically evaluating and monitoring the virtual onboarding process will improve the process leading to more effective results.

7.4 Recommendations for future research

To have a better understanding of virtual onboarding and its influence on employee engagement, more investigation needs to be conducted, taking into consideration the changes in technology brought about by the change in the 4IR, ways of work, and complexity of the work done. The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic showed that organisations need to be agile in planning for unforeseen changes that are present in the work environment.

The researcher noted that further research on virtual onboarding and how it influences motivation, employee productivity, and performance within the organisation is required. Virtual onboarding is utilised for employees that are on remote work or hybrid options, therefore ensuring that employees are well equipped to be functional from day one goes a long way to contributing to employees staying in the organisation.

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Appendix 1: Informed Consent Letter



Good day Participant,

I am currently an MBA student at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science and completing my research in partial fulfilment of an MBA qualification.

I am researching on, "**The experiences of the virtual onboarding process on knowledge workers in South Africa**" as well as to explore and understand their levels of engagement in the organisation." Our interview is expected to last about an hour and will help us understand how virtual onboarding influenced the engagement levels of knowledge workers.

The interview will be audio recorded and will be transcribed by a third party, who will be required to sign a non-disclosure agreement. **Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty.** All data will be reported without identifiers. If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me.

Our details are provided below.

Researcher name:

Fiona Katerere

Email: 25248172@mygibs.co.za

Phone: 076 146 7019

Signature of participant: _____

Date: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____

Research Supervisor Name:

Dr. Vivienne Spooner

Email: Spoonerv@gibs.co.za

Phone: 011 771 4350

Appendix 2: Consistency Matrix

Interview questions for addressing research Question 1

Themes	Research Questions	Interview Questions	Perspective (Employee/ Manager)	Article
Distant and detached Interactive Induction process	How do knowledge workers describe the experience of virtual onboarding vs. the face-to-face onboarding process?	a) What platform/s were utilised to conduct the virtual onboarding process for you in the organisation?	Employee	Chillakuri (2020) Varshney (2022)
Extended Onboarding period		b) How long was the virtual onboarding process? (From start to finish)	Employee	

Building relationships Fear of the unknown		c) Did you get an opportunity to interact with other employees in the team during onboarding, what were their roles, and what was that experience like?	Employee	Alexander (2021) Bauer (2007)
Interactive Induction Process		d) What activities were included in this virtual onboarding process and what was your experience with each of the activities?	Employee	Varshney (2022)
		e) On average how long was each activity and was it sufficient for you to complete all the activities?	Employee	
Building relationships Participative Management		f) Did you sense a positive feeling towards your manager?	Employee	Bauer (2010) Costa et al., (2018)
Organisational Culture Misalignment		g) Did you feel connected to your company's work culture through the virtual onboarding process?	Employee	

Interview questions for Employees addressing research Question 2

Themes	Research Question	Interview Questions	Perspective	Article
Job embeddedness and satisfaction	How do employees perceive employee engagement after a virtual onboarding process?	a) Can you provide examples of colleagues' behaviours who show what it means to demonstrate employee engagement and those who don't show this?	Employee	Kahn (1990) Govender and Bussin (2020)
		b) c) Do you consider yourself an engaged employee? Please explain.	Employee	

		d) In your opinion how do you think your engagement in the organisation was affected by virtual onboarding?	Employee	
Onboarding period		e) What is your understanding of the onboarding process?	Manager	Chillakuri (2020) Krasman (2015)
Quick and Seamless Integration		f) Have you hired new employees who have undergone the virtual onboarding process and face-to-face onboarding? Please explain.	Manager	
Onboarding period		g) Have you noticed a difference in the time taken to settle in for employees who have	Manager	

		<p>undergone seen a virtual onboarding process vs those who underwent face-to-face onboarding? Please explain.</p>		
Quick and seamless integration		<p>h) Do you have any insights that you would like to share that may improve the onboarding process?</p>	Manager	Varshney (2020)

Appendix 3: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

List of questions for Employees

Research question 1, How do knowledge workers describe the experience of virtual onboarding vs. the face-to-face onboarding process?

1. Demographic Questions:

- a) When did you start working at the organisation?
- b) Which industry do you work in?
- c) What is your occupational category/level of work?
- d) Which generation level do you fall in?
 - I. Gen Z – (1997 – 2012)
 - II. Millennials – (1981 – 1996)
 - III. Gen X – (1965 – 1980)
- e) Have you had experience with virtual and/or face-to-face onboarding?

2. Detailed Questions:

- j) What platform/s were utilised to conduct the virtual onboarding process for you in the organisation?
- k) How long was the virtual onboarding process? (From start to finish)
- l) Did you get an opportunity to interact with other employees in the team during onboarding, what were their roles, and what was that experience like?
- m) What activities were included in this virtual onboarding process and what was your experience with each of the activities?
- n) On average how long was each activity and was it sufficient for you to complete all the activities?
- o) Did you sense a positive feeling towards your manager?
- p) Did they feel connected to your company's work culture through the virtual onboarding process?

Research question 2: How does virtual onboarding influence employee engagement in knowledge workers?

- a) Can you provide examples of colleagues' behaviours who show what it means to demonstrate employee engagement and those who don't show this?

- b) Do you consider yourself an engaged employee? Please explain.
- c) In your opinion how do you think your engagement in the organisation was affected by virtual onboarding?

Semi-Structured Interview Guide: List of questions for Hiring Managers


Research question 1. How do knowledge workers describe the experience of virtual onboarding vs. the face-to-face onboarding process?

- a) What is your understanding of the onboarding process?
- b) Have you hired new employees who have undergone the virtual onboarding process and face-to-face onboarding? Please explain.

Research question 2: How does virtual onboarding influence employee engagement in knowledge workers?

- c) Have you noticed a difference in the time taken to settle in for employees who have undergone seen a virtual onboarding process vs those who underwent face-to-face onboarding? Please explain.
- d) Do you have any insights that you would like to share that may improve the onboarding process?

Appendix 4: Ethical Clearance



**Gordon Institute
of Business Science**
University of Pretoria

**Ethical Clearance
Approved**

Dear Fiona Katerere,

Please be advised that your application for **Ethical** Clearance has been **approved**.
You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.
We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.

[Ethical Clearance Form](#)

Kind Regards

This email has been sent from an unmonitored email account. If you have any comments or concerns, please contact the GIBS Research Admin team.

Masters Research

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Appendix 5: Codes Created

Categories

Isolated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Anxiety •Overwhelmed •Uncertain •Distant •Disengaged •Loneliness
Engaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Feeling of inclusion •Engaged •Acceptance
Fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Lack of understanding •Confused •Fearful •Expectations
Supported	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Supportive •Guidance •Happy •Anticipation
Employer Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Management interaction •HR Assistance •Acceptance •Entertainment
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Virtual freedom •Independence •Autonomy
Onboarding process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Induction •Probation •Orientation
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Buddy System •Team meetings •Catch up Sessions
Involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Sense of belonging •Included
Hybrid approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Unconventional ways of working and activities •Reliance on technology
Security issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Password protection •Information allocation •Single sign ons
Agile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Seamless •Reactive

