



## Article

# Digital Onboarding: Facilitators and Barriers to Improve Worker Experience

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**Abstract:** The pandemic has forced organizations to find new ways of working. In fact, we are seeing an increase in remote working and this has inevitably impacted onboarding processes. In this respect, the aim of this study was to understand how young graduates under 30 experienced digital onboarding (in terms of emotions and cognitions) when joining organizations with structured Human Resources processes. An exploratory qualitative study was conducted in which participants were asked to fill in ethnographic sheets in order to understand the barriers and facilitators that organizations can implement to improve the digital onboarding experience. We used thematic analysis. What emerged from our study is that newcomers struggled, in digital contexts, to find the right information, to be proactive and to receive immediate feedback in order to understand the context and to understand their fit with the company: it is important not to lose sight of the importance of socialization, but rather to find effective and structured practices that facilitate it and make it last over time. In our study, we argue that a structured digital onboarding program could be a relevant step in order to implement an effective transition towards remote working cultures and an attention to socialization processes.

**Keywords:** digital onboarding; organizational socialization; social and normative learning; proactivity; pouvoir d’agir; thematic analysis



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## 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the pandemic, companies had to find new ways of organizing in order to maintain productivity without exploiting their human resources.

We have seen how, over time, most of the firms have adopted remote working modes and several studies have already investigated how this has influenced organizations’ capability to manage their employees sustainably, by enabling them to flourish and become resilient and effective [1]. Remote working has impacted Human Resource Management as a whole, starting from the practices related to the onboarding of the new employees. However, not so many studies have addressed these processes and their impact on newcomers’ wellbeing and resilience [2–4].

Onboarding is an important process that allows both the candidate and the company to get to know each other, understanding fit and expectations [5,6] and to implement an organizational socialization [7]. This process becomes even more delicate if it takes place remotely, as a digital onboarding. According to Bauer [5], especially in digital onboarding, organizations should accompany and support newcomers to become more and more part of the corporate climate, proposing four activities in synergy with each other. The first one is that of compliance, which involves teaching newcomers the general rules of the company in order to fully understand how it works. A second activity, called “clarification”, allows newcomers to clarify their role and the expectations associated with it. A third activity (culture, i.e., making sense of organizational norms) encompasses a rather broad category that companies sometimes take for granted, assuming that organizational values and norms

can be easily and immediately understood. A final activity that should be implemented is that of 'connection'. The aim of this activity is to focus on the creation of connections and interpersonal relationships, aimed at creating a network of information that is essential for a successful performance of the new employee.

The more organizations implement these activities, the more we will see an improvement in the commitment and job satisfaction of new hires, greater role orientation and fit with the company, consequently leading to a decrease in the turnover rate and allowing them to fully adapt and to flourish [1,8–11]. So far, the positive consequences of remote onboarding for both new employees and the company have been brought to attention. It is necessary, however, to understand whether there are also negative implications or challenges.

In this regard, some studies in the literature have pointed out that there may be dysfunctional outcomes for newcomers if the onboarding process is implemented remotely. In particular, some authors have focused on two salient issues: social and normative learning. Indeed, it is important for newcomers to be able to closely observe the actions and behaviour of their colleagues in order to obtain normative and social information [12–14].

The digital onboarding process and, more generally, remote working makes this information retrieval even more difficult because newcomers have less opportunity to see how other colleagues interact with each other [15], to understand what organizational norms are and how to create positive interactions to form effective relationships as a result. All this could affect their performance [14] and their ability to implement proactive social behaviour [16], unless a smart working culture, focused on strengthening formal and informal relationships and proactivity, is already in place.

In fact, for an onboarding process to be effective, it is necessary that it points to and encourages socialization between newcomers and colleagues who have been with the company for longer [17]. This would lead newcomers to be satisfied with the company they join, to be more productive and more engaged in terms of commitment [18–20], precisely in light of the fact that people are more likely to be curious and learn if they are embedded within human interactions [7,21,22]. In this regard, onboarding can be thought of as a means of accelerating socialization, i.e., learning formal and informal actions and information that help new members become more effective and perceive a better fit with the organization they are part of [23].

In our study, in addition to be thought of as a way to accelerate socialization, onboarding can also be indicated as an activity related to the "Sustainable Human Resource Management". This can be defined as an approach based on the notion of sustainable development: "the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environmental Development, 1987, p. 41). This broad vision has been translated into multiple declinations, touching on issues that concern the management of people in organizations at various stages of professional life [24–26]. Using the analogy of natural resources and environmental sustainability, human resources' sustainability is guaranteed by Human Resources Management practices when they are long-term oriented, equitable, capable to improve employability, work-life balance, self-responsibility and decision-making participation for a better quality of life [1].

Some critical junctures that define a Sustainable Human Resources Management can be summarized in the following points [27]:

- the quality of support perceived by the organization,
- the quality of the relationship in the workplace,
- the perception of fairness between efforts and achievement
- the results achieved in terms of learning skills in the workplace

Newcomers' perceptions of these issues have their roots in the onboarding period. The entry of people into organizations brings together different generations; both committed to building sustainable working conditions in organizations. Entering an organization means building one's professional role and establishing the benchmark values accompanying

newcomers on their professional journey. In short, the organization's deep values and commitment toward people are made visible during the onboarding period.

Numerous research studies have so far explored Human Resources Management sustainability and its indicators [28–30]. Surprisingly, no research in the literature explores this topic with regard to the onboarding process.

With this article, we want to cover this gap and better understand how the onboarding process is experienced, and to what extent it reveals itself as a “Sustainable Human Resource practice”, triggering not only newcomers' socialization, but also their flourishing and resilient grow.

The advent of digital onboarding makes the above themes even more evident. The onboarding process is made more difficult by the distance imposed by the pandemic and the increasingly widespread smart-working that even more challenges employees' entry into organizations.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The study that will be presented here aims to broaden knowledge on the experience of digital onboarding, starting from the experiences and cognitions of young graduates under 30 years of age at their first work experience (the so-called Generation Y and Z) entering multinational companies, i.e., organizations with highly structured Human Resources processes (selection, recruitment, career development programmes, compensation and training plans). More specifically, this research had the following objectives:

1. To explore the remote onboarding experience (meanings, attitudes, emotional dimensions) and its perceived outcomes, from the newcomers' perspective;
2. To investigate the perceived barriers and facilitators for a successful digital onboarding;

To achieve the research results, we used the method of organizational ethnography by referring to the contributions of authors who proposed both a relevant theoretical framework and a methodological framework to be used in the research. From the theoretical point of view, some points shared by authors who use an ethnographic approach to qualitative research are the following:

- the need to have tools that allow direct observation of the research.
- observation and punctual detection through devices where recording one's observations allow essential data on which to reflect.
- involvement of researchers and subjects in the data collection process to build a more meaningful body of data.
- the data can be the source of a joint reflection process between researcher and subject to build an interpretative hypothesis jointly on the reality under investigation.

The ethnographic tradition has developed different theoretical and methodological references over time. In the present article, we refer to a conception that refers to one of the latest contributions synthesized by Gazi Islam [31] and that emphasizes the active role of the practitioner in the production of research data. The approach is referred to as Para-ethnography and starts from Holmes and Marcus's contribution [32]. The authors argue that it is difficult for a researcher to draw an accurate picture of an organization since it is subject to sudden and unstoppable change. Holmes and Marcus question the very existence of an organizational world with stable cultural traits over time to be brought back into a study process.

The authors argue that in a rapidly changing world with constantly renewing cultural references, practitioners too can be valued through an active role in constructing research data to give value to their experience. Practitioners are more likely to be aware of the salient aspects of their experience in an organization. Gazi Islam [31] further argues that para-ethnography mitigates the differences between the researcher and practitioners in favor of data production and interpretation, supported by an equal relationship between these two figures. The data is generated by the observation and reflections of the research participants. This is especially important when investigating a phenomenon with a lack

of reference literature. It is challenging to decide which junctions to focus on based on a comparison with established theories. Instead, it is necessary to collaborate closely between practitioner and scholar to reconstruct the sense of an organizational process. This mitigates researcher/participant boundaries by promoting a path to finding meaning in an organizational activity in a more shared way [33]. Organizational actors are often bearers of knowledge based on “anecdotal evidence” that is extremely useful in understanding the core of an experience in the organization [32].

Remote induction is a novel organizational process that will remain so, albeit partially, after the pandemic period. There are no studies in the literature that focus on it, and therefore, there is no literature to compare it with. This justifies the methodology we propose for the study described in this paper.

In the study, we wanted to make sense of the onboarding experience attributed to interns facing the effort to become part of an organization. Therefore, we decided to use a methodology that would allow them to make their sensemaking processes visible by giving interns the floor to describe their experience through the methods of ethnographic cards. The decision to give space to the interns’ observations is also motivated by the fact that as onboarding, we had to rely on the use of ethnographic forms filled out independently by the interns based on the description of significant episodes of their internship period.

Referring specifically to the methodology proposed by Gobo [34] and tested by Ripamonti et al. [35] we used the methods of self-administered ethnographic forms for the present investigation.

The forms include a thick description [36–38] by the interns that begins with a narrative of incidents that they have experienced and that affected them in a particular way because it was judged to be significant to their professional development.

In particular, each subject was asked to describe three critical episodes relating to their experience with the aim of eliciting the three most salient events and the reasons for them (Appendix A). Specifically, participants were asked to describe the episodes in terms of facts (column 1), to give evaluations of the salient events according to their own cognitions and emotions (column 2) and to make suggestions for improving the described experience (column 3). Therefore, each ethnographic sheet was divided into three columns corresponding to the objective event, its interpretation and the desired event.

Participants were given the following prompt: *“Describe in the writing ethnographic grid an event, or work-life episode, that struck you in the digital onboarding journey. Think specifically about how the transition of information needed for your job happened, how the onboarding among your new colleagues and referrers happened”*.

For each ethnographic sheet, participants were asked to give a title that summarized the content. The methodological motivation that explains the use of the cards is related to the possibility of making respondents reflect more calmly than in an interview. After the day’s work, the effort to find a space in solitude to rethink one’s experience and find points worthy of analysis involves the activation of critical thinking that allows for a more excellent reworking of the experience.

The participants in the study had to be interns in different companies (the sectors were manufacturing, IT, and services) and their age had to be less than 30 years. We chose to select participants under 30 years of age so that they were interns and at their first work experience. This made it more likely that they were on their first work experience and had never experienced digital onboarding before.

The organisations within which the trainees are placed were selected on the basis of two criteria:

- To be multinational companies belonging to the service or manufacturing sector that welcome internships as a first step for thinking about hiring. In other words, we selected companies that usually put a lot of emphasis on training interns and avoided hiring companies that have a very high turnover of interns. This pre-selection ensured that we hired companies and interns who have a significant mutual investment that makes the internship highly rewarding for both parties;

- We have selected companies in which the internship tutor plays a role of real accompaniment of the intern and not just a formal or bureaucratic role. This set-up has allowed us to meet interns who experience a significant role with their internship tutor;

Furthermore, apart from being all interns, the traits they had in common were that they were highly engaged and motivated in the tasks that the company provided them with in order to have a higher probability of being confirmed as employees after their internship.

The study was conducted on a heterogeneous convenience sample. In order to obtain this kind of sampling, we got in touch with HR managers from different organisations (manufacturing, IT and services sectors) and, firstly, presented the objectives of our study and, secondly, asked them about the possibility of having interns complete the ethnographic sheet by telling us about their experience of digital onboarding.

In addition, in order to verify the comprehensibility of the instrument adopted and the relevance of the information it collected, two pilot tests were carried out.

The ethnographic sheets were sent by e-mail, together with the informed consent and privacy form. In total, 12 ethnographic sheets were collected from men and women, for a total of 36 episodes, i.e., 3 episodes narrated by each participant (Appendix B). We choose only 12 ethnographic sheets because, in the others, participants' themes started to be redundant.

After reading the ethnographic sheets, a thematic analysis was conducted [39], examining the verbalizations reported by the participants regarding their own experience of remote onboarding.

We have done a thematic analysis following the six steps provided by Braun and Clark [39]: Familiarizing yourself with your data; Generating initial codes; Searching for themes; Reviewing themes; Defining and naming themes; Producing the synthesis.

Concretely, we first worked by reading all the cards and re-aggregating them according to content and titles. This first-level coding was done jointly by the team of researchers who read the cards and each, in isolation, classified them by associating the first-level code to each. The comparison between the researchers allowed us to agree on the interpretation of the data. Subsequently, the first-level codes were re-aggregated into a second-level subject area. Subsequent discussion among the researchers made it possible to identify four macro-themes that can synthesize the contents present in the cards and give an interesting summary of the remote onboarding experience.

We synthesized the major emerging themes from the research questions by organizing the first set of initial codes. Subsequently, the found codes have been regrouped according to a structure that has allowed us to identify four macro-themes recurring in the episodes mentioned in the ethnographic sheet:

1. processes of role assumption in digital on-boarding;
2. processes of building relationships with colleagues;
3. processes of coordination with one's supervisor;
4. processes of identification with the organization;

The issues most cited by the narrators that triggered their reflection were highlighted for each of these levels.

**The first theme**, learning one's job, concerns all the critical nodes that have to do with organizing the information and resources available to understand well the demands of the organization about the required task and to provide adequate performance.

**The second theme** concerns relationships with colleagues. Episodes have been recounted that highlight the difficulties in generating connections remotely and the opportunities linked to creating instant connections that can be activated whenever the need arises. This category includes all the episodes that concern a working exchange with one's colleagues.

**The third theme** that emerged from the one ethnographic sheet concerned the relationship with one's boss. Many episodes examined the nature of the feedback received, the support experienced, the way of being introduced to colleagues and the organization.

Finally (**fourth theme**), some episodes refer to the relationship with the broader organizational context. This cluster includes events that occurred in how they relate to

the larger group of colleagues. For example, during meetings or customs experienced in the organization can be attributed to the organizational culture as a whole rather than to individuals.

We report below by way of title the table representing the categories found (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Report below by way of title the table representing the categories found.

Category	Theme	Codes		
Understanding my job	Training	Training was very fast; Remote Training Program ineffective; Virtual Training ineffective; learning is hindered by technical information without prior general orientation.	3	11
	Search for information	Overload of technical information; Unmet training expectations; Inconsistency and incompleteness of information; Insist on obtaining needed information	4	
	Understanding Role Expectations	I did not understand the requirements of my Job	1	
	requests for help	If you ask for helping you're afraid of disturbing; You're afraid of asking the wrong questions; I realized I shouldn't ask too many questions	3	
Relationship with colleagues	Relationships in question	Deserted offices; Can't find anyone if you go to work; Network would be a powerful lever to help you.	3	10
	Uncertain confidence	You can't trust people you don't date	1	
	Fear of exposure	From remote you don't know how much you can "dare"; Taking the floor is more difficult; Taking the floor from remote is more risky; Attendance at meetings is reduced	4	
	Low perceived support	I don't think I can trust colleagues I don't know personally; I don't feel I'm part of a community of workers.	2	
The relationship with the supervisor	Poor feedback	My boss only gives me feedback when he remembers; Boss tells you how it's going but in a somewhat formal way; Giving feedback in teams is not easy; Having feedback critical to construction of one's development path.	4	14
	Fear of judgment	I fear my boss' judgment a lot; I only know my boss remotely; With my boss we never see each other; It's hard to trust; Asking for help remotely is perceived as a dangerous practice	5	
	Unclear engagements	Remotely, the new joiner may feel a sense of alienation; The perception of insecurity is rampant;	3	
	Fatigue to ask for help	Formalizing the request for help may generate fear of judgment from one's boss; Asking for help may be felt as a source of disturbance	2	
Relationship with the organization	Poor organizational knowledge	I can't get a feel for the organization as a whole; I know my industry well but not others; I don't know the people who work outside of my group; Being remote one would expect a stronger effort of involvement;	4	9
	Poor identification with the organization	I'm here today to get my cv then I'll put myself back on the market with no problem; I don't feel particularly engaged in this company; impossible to sniff the climate;	3	
	Psychological contract	Loyalty to the organization lasts as long as it suits me; I can decide to change when I want	2	
Total codes			44	
Total themes			15	
Total categories			4	

### 3. Results

As described above, four key themes emerged that are summarized and described in the following paragraphs.

#### 3.1. First Theme: Understanding My Job

*“Being hired at a new company and not being able to go to the office in person comes with limitations. Being behind a screen doesn’t help. How do I know what time to start and finish? What level of formality to use in emails? How to approach different team members? Understand what is allowed and what is not? These are a lot of questions that are hard to answer if you work from home.”*

*“Sometimes you feel like you know all the procedures you need to work the best, but you don’t know whether to dare and make suggestions that come to you! You don’t know if you unknowingly bump someone’s sensibilities because you don’t understand the actual limits you have!”*

The ethnographic sheets give us back an image of workers who spend a lot of energy trying to understand what their job is and what the company’s demands are when they first enter a company. This difficulty is in great part explained by the effort to give sense to the information and the knowledge encountered. When newcomers enter the company, they have to learn which norms they have to follow (normative information) and which social behaviours they have to exhibit (social information). In order to acquire this type of information, they must first observe the behaviour and actions of their bosses and colleagues and thanks to this social information they can understand how to be in the company, what the demands are, gradually accepting a model of behaviour and then trying to adapt to that model for better adaptation to the company.

Our participants argue that, with remote work (while functional in some respects), the opportunities to see how others interact are significantly reduced. As a result, they have less knowledge of organizational norms and culture and this affects newcomers’ socializing ability to form effective relationships and succeed. A good onboarding experience is aided by a proactive attitude to actively seek information about one’s job and the business environment. Remote working generates the encounter of young people accustomed to quickly locating information online and a corporate world that offers too much. The reported perception is that they find too much information to guide their work. The mediation of an expert is necessary to help give relevance to the most important ones. The feeling reported by recruits is often disorientation and inability to reconstruct a credible map of the organizational context in which they are placed. The interns interviewed recounted many episodes that expressed a fear of being visible in virtual collaborative spaces with their frailties and limitations. The more difficulty in asking for support remote contributes to an uncertain understanding of their work. Declaring that you are unable to do something or that you did not understand your boss’s order well seems to be perceived as a dangerous positioning. In summary, this first area shows us a scenario in which people, remotely, manifest more difficulty in understanding the demands posed by the organization and the nature of the task of their work.

#### 3.2. Second Theme: The Relationship with Colleagues

*“Presenting remotely, having only a few minutes to make an impression creates stress.”*

*“Being away from the company is not conducive to building and maintaining international (wide-ranging) relationships on a formal level.”*

*“In-person meetings have the advantage of being able to share a coffee, lunch or beer and get to know each other more spontaneously.”*

The issue of relationships with colleagues is a sensitive one. It is more difficult to ask a colleague for help because you don’t know them well, and you don’t know whether expressing your weakness or lack of it affects your image. Working from home generates

two effects that make “teaming up” more difficult. The first is related to a relationship that is necessarily more superficial if limited to the meeting on the screen. Interns have repeatedly pointed out that not being able to see each other not experiencing the office slows down the creation of the team climate. Much of the discussion stays on work-related topics, and the supportive relationship also seems to be compromised. The course of meetings from afar is also much more complex. The climate oscillates between competition with others and fear of appearing out of place. In short, relationships with colleagues settle on a level of formality that does not allow for authentic engagement or even consider them as possible supports in the learning process.

### 3.3. Third Theme: The Relationship with the Supervisor

*“I couldn’t stand it anymore. Being able to give feedback on myself and receive it is an important moment of self-building that becomes imperative in my developmental journey. It’s not easy to learn how to evaluate and assess yourself.”*

*“I have realized the added value of constant feedback. The process leads to random assignment of one person, making the relationship work even more difficult with distance. It’s preferable to have someone next to you every day and in the meantime explain the business workings and how to do it. Daily supervision is better from continuous improvement; the saying-done is significantly different from writing things down to 2 h of comparison every three months. The career counselor should be chosen in the race and not regardless” (quotes taken from two one-pages questionnaires);*

The concept of “continuous feedback” is closely related to proactivity. Generation Z to have a highly proactive attitude needs instant feedback: as digital natives, they prefer real-time feedback that is frequent and relevant conversations with managers, which helps them understand the priorities. Furthermore, from the study findings, newcomers need to have timely feedback on their performance to learn and be able to improve certain areas instead of waiting for a review at the end of the year. From the ethnographic sheets, it emerges a substantial difficulty in perceiving feedback dedicated to their way of working on the part of the newcomers. Their perception is that of having prescriptions and rules to follow that are reiterated in the evaluation interviews, but without advice and evaluation dedicated to their way of working. Feedback has become more formal and less incisive. This is a very important emerging theme from the perspective of young hires. Even supervisors point to a substantial difficulty in having a sufficiently structured perception of the people they work with. With respect to the possibility of providing feedback, it seems that supervisors have more difficulty in having a clear representation of how their assigned person is working. Specifically, what emerges from the ethnographic sheets is the complete lack of information previously considered essential that relates to the topic of socialization of the newcomer. Many supervisors pointed out that the issue on which they decreed the success of a newcomer was the way in which the new resource was socialized into the work context. Today, this is the one piece of information that is totally missing. In addition, the impossibility of seeing each other on a daily basis in the workplace leads the supervisor to have a somewhat vacuous image of the people with whom he works. This has repercussions on the possibility of giving timely feedback dedicated to each individual colleague.

### 3.4. Fourth Theme: Relationships with the Organization

*“I believe that technology is a limitation only if we see it as such and only if we want to live it as such. Even at a distance of 600 or 800 km, you can feel close and affectionate, and you can feel 100% (if not more!) part of your team and your organization. Engagement and affection depend on us and on who we have in front of us: wanting is power!” (quote taken from ethnographic sheet);*

The research data show that proactivity, the ability to take the initiative concerning the newcomer’s issues, is a controversial topic. In the ethnographic sheets, it emerges that



young workers struggle concerning their ability to know enough about the organizational cultures of their work. The feeling that juniors report is that they are most familiar with the formal procedures and content related to their work. It is not easy to understand the kind of involvement desired by bosses and the organizational culture in which one is embedded. Many narratives report difficulty in understanding how much the newcomers' initiatives and proposals are valued. This uncertainty about extra-role behavior is a common feature present in the episodes written in the forms. In other words, questions emerge regarding the actual appropriateness of introducing initiatives that are not requested and that can be a source of praise from supervisors and impact sensitivities and limits that are not visible in the organization. In this regard, some authors believe that the company should encourage newcomers' proactive behaviors, especially in online contexts. The literature supports organizations' desirability, providing people with the necessary tools to experience self-efficacy in maintaining proactive behavior. It is more about legitimizing the initiative's willingness rather than focusing solely on personal characteristics and responsibilities. This proactivity can allow the newcomer to feel legitimized to take action and increase their exploratory attitude in the business environment.

### **Two emergent ways of working**

Having ascertained the existence of specific difficulties concerning the possibility of effectively managing the digital onboarding process, two different ways of working one's entry into the new organization emerged from the stories.

#### ***Mode 1: Episode: "Role mismatch"***

*"Here as soon as they understand that you are not aligned with the requirements and the expected role and they let you know that they will not reappoint you. You're always on the defensive for fear of being considered unsuitable for the required profile." (Quotes taken from ethnographic sheet);*

In this first group, we have included all the accounts that emphasize the newcomers' fear of taking initiatives during the internship, in a confusing scenario, and without great supportive relationships. A picture emerges from these ethnographic sheets of an organization that is difficult to get to know. Here, organizational cultures are described as very judgmental and careful to monitor primarily the fit between demands on the candidate and the candidate's ability to meet them in an adhesive manner. The internship period is described as a trial period that monitors the match between candidate characteristics and organizational demands. Organizations moving in this direction seem to focus more on the fit of newcomers, expecting quick and effective compliance.

Confronted with to this modality, newly hired react by putting in their head a series of behaviors that bring them to be as much as possible adherent to a model accepted by the organization of belonging. This attempt stems from the fear of not responding positively to the demands of the organization and one's boss. The key issue in this first group of cards is the fear of the newly hired carrying out work tasks without sufficient information and a correct map of the organization of reference within which to place themselves.

#### ***Mode 2: Episode: "Use of computer program"***

*"My mentor listened to some suggestions I made concerning data management. I had developed an expertise at the university that I was allowed to put to use right away."*

In the second group of cards, newcomers report episodes that account for the possibility of taking the initiative concerning their role in a context of great uncertainty.

If the first vision aims at the adaptation of the newcomer, the second goes beyond this dimension because it aims more at adaptability, understood as the development of the capacity to reflect on one's professional project and therefore to find their way to navigate the organizational demands and opportunities. An organization that, albeit at a distance, helps and encourages the newcomers to grow, allowing them reflect on who they are and who they want to be, triggers adaptability more than adaptation. Adaptability allows for continual questioning of one's role, adaptation to the organization and weaving of effective

relationships in a perspective of organizational socialization. Organizational cultures described in this second group seem therefore very supportive of interns' initiatives. More interested in creating spaces for action and experimentation rather than making a compatibility check of the newly hired.

#### 4. Discussion

From the verbalizations of the participants in the study, two different visions of digital onboarding emerge. The first view, which is more in line with what the scientific literature describes, emphasizes the objective of companies to quickly socialize newcomers so that they can adapt easily and quickly. In this way, they will be able to have quick indications regarding the new organizational culture in which they are inserted, to understand the specifics of their work and how they can carry out the tasks assigned to them.

There is, however, also a second vision of remote onboarding which enables people to become more flexible in terms of skills and ways of thinking, to create continuous learning situations, to change and to adapt effectively to the new context [40].

If the first vision aims at the adaptation of the newcomer, the second goes beyond this dimension because it aims more at adaptability, understood as reflexivity with respect to one's own professional project, as the ability to understand the context in which one is inserted, to question oneself about cultures and oneself, being able to understand the fit with the task and the organization [41–44].

These two ways of thinking about job placement are based on different conceptions of the individual-organization relationship and on individual agency, or "pouvoir d'agir" [40].

We refer to the difference between the concept of "capacity to act" and that of "Pouvoir d'agir". The "capacity to act" refers to what the individual can do based on competencies and which can potentially support organizational action. It is the theoretical possibility of action regardless of contexts. "Pouvoir d'agir," on the other hand, underlines what is can be accomplished given the singular characteristics of the situations in which the person performs [40,41]. "Pouvoir d'agir" includes the individual and their context as a unit of analysis.

The first way of thinking about the insertion of the newcomer and organizational socialization particularly emphasizes the problem of the individual-organization fit and the possibility of making available to the new employee all the information and knowledge which will allow him to fit correctly into a context where there is a space which the new person can occupy. In so doing, they seem more concerned to abilitate newcomers' "capacity to act", rather than their "power to act". The second mode, on the other hand, allows the newcomers to be empowered in their actual possibilities to influence the context around them. Here, the individual is at the center of the organizational scene. The underlying aim of the onboarding here is the possibility of using the interns to achieve the objectives agreed upon with the organization and constructing an entry path into the world of work that allows them to develop their ability to act and influence reality—pouvoir d'agir.

The results of the study highlight the difficulties organizations face today in pursuing this last goal through digital onboarding. Making the necessary information available and giving consistent feedback and sufficient room for action to the newcomer is not enough for triggering her/his "pouvoir d'agir", and often impoverishes the process of insertion into the world of work. Digital onboarding situations seem to challenge precisely this second aspect. Because of the difficulties highlighted in the study, it is as if working conditions were constructed that put the individual in the state of not being able to experience organizational relational life, of not being able to attend workplaces and therefore not being able to share and cultivate own "personal projects" powerfully. This aspect is critical, since it is crucial for newcomers to experience the possibility of partially influencing their own world, in order to identify in their future job and to perceive that they contribute to the development of their working context.

With regard to the issue of the Human Resources Management sustainability, on the basis of the study carried out, we believe that a vision of onboarding that puts people in

a position to experiment with their own power of action is more capable of generating a working environment that gives space to people self-responsibility and capacity to flourish and grow. The human resource sustainability in the onboarding phase is therefore linked to the possibility of being placed in a generative environment that first and foremost invests resources of time and energy to generate working conditions that are good enough for newcomers. The data showed us that very often, on the other hand, we think of newcomers in a too instrumental way.

## 5. Conclusions

The pandemic has forced companies to reorganize and adopt different ways of working: consider, for example, how quickly they have had to adapt their onboarding processes to a digital format and, more importantly, without having guidelines or previous experience to refer to. It is assumed that, as a result of this transition, an increasing number of organizations will choose to work in digital or mixed modes, and that is why there is a need to understand the sustainability of remote onboarding programs and make them as structured functional as possible.

In fact, organizations should implement specific digital onboarding practices to reduce the uncertainty and anxiety that newcomers experience, helping them make sense of their new environment and providing them with the necessary resources and information to become fully functioning and effective organizational members in their new role [7].

To do this, companies need to implement structured and functional digital onboarding processes that allow newcomers to feel supported and guided in their entry, to be able to better understand the organizational culture, to develop their sense of self-efficacy, to understand their role and fit in the organization and to be motivated [42–45].

It has been observed that between onboarding practices that aim at adaptation and those that aim at adaptability there are some common points, such as allowing the newcomer to socialize, to understand his or her role and to understand whether or not there is a fit with the company.

There are, however, specific features of digital onboarding that aim at adaptability and not adaptation. If the organization supports and sustains the person by giving him/her information, but also helps him/her learn where to look for it and encourages him/her to develop a proactive mindset, it is aiming at adaptability [45–47]. Furthermore, investing in the exchange between the generations present in the company, making sure that there is a real take-over by an experienced worker, is a fundamental condition to help the newcomer to use the internship with an orientation function on his/her professional future. From what the interns learn, the “buddy” figure does not exhaust his/her function by giving feedback on the quality of the work done. On the contrary, it can become a central figure for the newcomer, allowing him/her to activate a space of confrontation with the aim of professional orientation. The advice and feedback received can go beyond the problem of performance in one’s internship, but can also be used to start to establish one’s own career path. The company’s investment in interns can generate an organisational culture of investing in new generations. The culture of including new generations through an investment programme on on-boarding is an important signal in favour of a culture of sustainability in organizational life.

Digital onboarding, unlike traditional onboarding, certainly challenges some conditions of effectiveness, but to be satisfactory and functional it requires more attention and structured practices. In particular, we believe that an onboarding process that aims at adaptability (and not adaptation) helps newcomers to better understand the working context in which they are inserted and to live it with an exploratory attitude. In order to do this, however, the support actions that the company has to provide must take the form of structured processes so that the conditions described above are developed, i.e., socialization, an effective search for information, a proactive attitude and constant feedback.

From a methodological point of view, this article has highlighted the importance of designing a data collection setting that makes the figure of the research subjects more

relevant. The para-ethnographic methodology used made it possible to enter deeply into the experience of the newcomers, through a process of data generation guided by the participants.

It is possible to have dense descriptions of one's own experience in an organisation to the extent that people can take the floor and indicate to the researcher the salient data from which the perception of the quality of one's own organizational life is constructed. This step is made possible by a qualitative methodology that provides research protocols that make people increasingly central to the data generation process.

## 6. Limitation and Future Research

The sample size is not large, but we felt that the sample size was sufficient because, in a qualitative logic, we can achieve variability by using the criterion of saturation. When the participants' themes started to be redundant, the sampling stopped and it was considered sufficient because we felt it gave us enough information to reach saturation. Another limitation could be found in the limited and heterogeneous sample involved that cannot allow the generalization of results. Finally, the sample used in this study were just from Italy; there might be a specific bias in the perception of sustainability, onboarding and organizational practices due to the particular Italian labor market. On this point, future research with a cross-cultural approach is needed.

In the future we would like to think about another research that could investigate possible connections between specific onboarding practices and specific employability characteristics, since this link is not found in the literature. It would be useful, in fact, to investigate both at a theoretical level and at the level of cultural awareness because good onboarding is implemented not so much in the number of initiatives proposed by the company, but in the way it is implemented.

In addition, it would be useful to investigate how digital onboarding practices are perceived by other categories of workers who are not Generation Z and not newcomers.

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## Appendix A. Example of Ethnographic Sheet

The aim of this study is to describe, interpret and comment on the experience of onboarding ("entry into the company") of new recruits in organizational contexts characterized by a consistent remoteness of activities. The typical elements of an onboarding process are: Orientation (practical and organizational information, credentials and tools, physical/virtual environments)—Relation (meeting and socializing with company tutors, managers, colleagues, etc.)—Training (training on company culture and procedures, on the activities to be carried out)—Feedback (definition of objectives to be achieved and possibility of feedback after a defined time). However, depending on the company, the process and its activities may be organized differently and spread over several days or weeks. When filling in the forms proposed below, I invite you to examine, one at a time, at

least 3 significant events (“worthy of reflection”) that have characterized your experience of virtual onboarding in the new company, declining the reflections on the basis of the stimuli proposed and your sensitivity. Overall, the compilation will take about 25 min, but you can take as much time as you need. In respect of privacy, data will be collected anonymously and processed in aggregate form. Thank you for your valuable contribution.

Brief description of company role (max. 200 words):

Event	Event Interpretation	Ideal Event
<p>Objective reconstruction of an episode/situation experienced during the onboarding experience:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What premises?</li> <li>- What happened (episode details)?</li> <li>- In which context?</li> <li>- Who was involved?</li> </ul> <p>What outcomes?</p>	<p>Reflections, considerations, personal emotions in relation to the event described:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- My expectations</li> <li>- My experience (e.g., difficulties, criticalities, unexpected events, facilitators)</li> <li>- My opinion/position</li> </ul>	<p>Suggestions/alternatives for structuring an ideal onboarding moment (decline in relation to the fact commented on).</p>

## Appendix B

Event	Event Interpretation	Ideal Event
<p>Objective reconstruction of an episode/situation experienced during the onboarding experience:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What premises?</li> <li>- What happened (episode details)?</li> <li>- In which context?</li> <li>- Who was involved?</li> </ul> <p>What outcomes?</p>	<p>Reflections, considerations, personal emotions in relation to the event described:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- My expectations</li> <li>- My experience (e.g., difficulties, criticalities, unexpected events, facilitators)</li> <li>- My opinion/position</li> </ul>	<p>Suggestions/alternatives for structuring an ideal onboarding moment (decline in relation to the fact commented on).</p>
<p>“During the face-to-face meeting and also at a distance, I asked several times for more information about the organization of the company, the procedures, the different roles. My company tutor limited himself to superficial information and, to date, although I have a fairly clear picture of the HR function, the rest appears to me to be rather blurred and undefined; “My company periodically organizes (approximately every 3-4 months) “homeboarding weeks”, during which new employees are invited for a week of training in one of the offices in their region. This year, unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 issue, it was not possible to hold this in-person event and had to be converted to a week of virtual group training. . . . get to know colleagues from other European countries and create important links within the company, allowing them to have the opportunity to move around widely. A virtual event doesn’t just allow you to stop and chat during a coffee break or have a beer together in the evening, it ends at the close of the webconference”;</p>	<p>“Recorded virtual trainings are great for the first approaches to a new job where you need to be trained, but being recorded they don’t allow for interaction. Having four experts from different areas who took the time to help me understand them better and make me autonomous allowed me to speed up my learning process a lot, while giving me the chance to get to know my colleagues more closely and bond with them. I really appreciated this initiative, both on the technical side and on the human relations side”;</p> <p>“I would say traumatic: after 3 years of work, finding yourself in a completely new job where your knowledge is zero was demoralizing. In this case, the distance didn’t help because most of the time, as I didn’t know the people, I had the impression that I was disturbing them every time I looked at my notes and had further doubts. In spite of this, the network of people assigned to me by my manager was unbeatable: very attentive, interested in making me understand things and incredibly helpful. The only criticism I found was related to the huge amount of topics touched on in a very short time”;</p>	<p>“To support a totally digital and smart onboarding every company should create for me a small and concise handbook that can accompany the new employee in all the small activities that are encountered once seated at the desk and opened the PC. . . . to create that level of autonomy that is essential for a new employee to get motivated and become a little confident with the tools they use and have been given”;</p> <p>“Ideally HR should hold a meeting to explain in a very transparent way what the best practices are within the company, clarify expectations and answer any questions. Then the manager you report to could set up a meeting and go into detail about how the team is structured, how it moves and what is expected. It could be very helpful to go to the office one day - just the manager and the new team member - to have a tour of the office, the facilities, to pick up the laptop and to get acclimatized or at least imagine what it might be like to work there;</p>

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