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Master Thesis

ACHIEVING HIGH ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT DURING VIRTUAL ONBOARDING

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BI Norwegian Business School

Master Thesis

# ACHIEVING HIGH ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT DURING VIRTUAL ONBOARDING

*A qualitative study of virtual onboarding in three*

*medium- and large sized Norwegian enterprises during Covid-19*

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Julie Mjølid Tømran                                    Birgitte Bendiksen Sandvik

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# ABSTRACT

The world as we knew it changed dramatically during the year 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic hit. Organizations were forced to change their ways of working and many relocated their employees to home-office. Virtual onboarding was conducted for the very first time for several companies. In response to a lack of practice-based approaches to virtual onboarding, this thesis looks at how organizations can conduct their virtual onboarding, to create high organizational commitment among the newcomers. The study aims to answer the following research question: *How to facilitate high commitment among new employees when onboarding is performed virtually?*

The research was conducted using a qualitative approach, with twelve interviews from three medium- and large sized Norwegian enterprises within real estate, banking and accounting. Based on these in-depth interviews we conclude with five practice-based suggestions which can be used as a tool for organizations when conducting virtual onboarding for their new employees, namely; (1) Provide a structured plan, (2) Meeting expectations, (3) Assign a "go-to-person", (4) Establish informal channels, and (5) Delegate responsibility. Further, we have discussed the importance of these categories in virtual onboarding. The study highlights the importance of effective onboarding to create committed employees, especially when they are unable to meet their colleagues or supervisors face-to-face.

The thesis serves as a contribution to organizations in a similar situation, who are obliged or need to conduct virtual onboarding of new hires, which the authors assume will be important even after the pandemic. Lastly, implications for theory and practice are discussed.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

*"The coronavirus, and its economic and social fallout, is a time machine to the future. Changes that many of us predicted would happen over decades are instead taking place in the span of weeks" (Slaughter, 2020).*

The traditional business world as we know it is developing, and companies must respond to changes in order to stay relevant. The employees need to be adaptive and convertible. This has shown to be especially important in the year 2020 because of the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Overnight, Norwegian companies had to make great changes and relocate their employees to home-office, some for the very first time. Suddenly, nearly all the communication between employees and managers was virtual. Even though the business world suffered tremendous loss over this period of time, several companies found themselves growing and hiring new employees (Krüger, 2020).

Although the pandemic and state of emergency hopefully will come to an end, both companies and employees have gained useful experience during this period. Organizations that previously had an "in-office" mentality, have found themselves working remotely. This provides new opportunities for both companies and employees, where companies get access to talent regardless of geographic constraints (Lundgaard, 2021).

Onboarding is defined as "a process through which new employees move from being organizational outsiders to becoming organizational insiders" (Klein & Polin, 2012, p. 268). To onboard in a new organization during such different times can be hard (Navarra, 2020). Bauer (2010) argued that effective onboarding has both short-term and long-term benefits (Caldwell & Peters, 2018). Employees that are onboarded effectively into an organization seem to have "greater job satisfaction and organizational commitment, higher retention rates, lower time to productivity, and have greater success in achieving customer satisfaction with their work" (Caldwell & Peters, 2018, p. 29). In contrast, unsatisfactory onboarding seems to give "lower employee satisfaction, higher turnover, increased costs, lower productivity, and decreased customer satisfaction" (Caldwell & Peters, 2018, p. 29). Ineffective onboarding has shown to have

consequences both for the efficiency of the organization, but also for the effectiveness for new employees (Caldwell & Peters, 2018). Ineffective onboarding could be a waste of the hard work spent in recruiting, and selecting talented employees is not enough if the onboarding is inefficient (Caldwell & Peters, 2018).

The motivation to write this thesis is to highlight the importance and the effects of an efficient onboarding process. By studying how companies have adapted through this past year, and how they maneuver through new virtual trends in the work life, we investigate how companies can facilitate an efficient onboarding process when it is conducted virtually. We have chosen to look at the employee's first 90 days in the new organization, which we have found most crucial (Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Rubenstein & Song, 2013).

Employees from three companies based in Norway were interviewed in this thesis. The organizations differ in number of employees and revenue, but all are medium- to large size enterprises. The companies had to adjust during the pandemic and conduct virtual onboarding. In this regard, we want to see how the onboarding processes can be solved in organizations when it takes place virtually. We have therefore arrived at the following question for our research.

## 1.1 RESEARCH QUESTION

***How to facilitate high organizational commitment among new employees when onboarding is performed virtually?***

## 1.2 PURPOSE

The purpose with this study is to fill a gap in the present research. There are many studies on onboarding in the sense of socialization tactics and practices, the role of social agents such as the supervisor and coworkers, and also some studies on working virtually (Dill, 2020; Allen, 2006; Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Rubenstein & Song, 2013; Klein, Polin & Leigh Sutton, 2015). However, research on how to implement an effective onboarding process when it is performed

virtually, has been relatively scarce. This study is a contribution to current research by looking into how different onboarding tactics and practices are perceived by new hires when performed virtually. Further, we look into how these tactics and practices may contribute to high organizational commitment to the new employee. From this research we will gain information on how the pandemic has changed the practices in companies and if new processes have arisen, which can prove to be valuable, even if companies go back to previous working methods or continue with 'the new normal'. This paper aim to contribute with a practical approach that can be used by companies when onboarding employees virtually.

# 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

## 2.1 ONBOARDING

The purpose with a well performed onboarding is to facilitate newcomer adjustment, where newcomers acquire the knowledge and skills to perform their role in the organization (Jokisaari & Vuori, 2018). The sooner the new employees learn specific company knowledge, get an understanding of the culture, and know the unique aspects of the organization, the sooner the new employees can contribute to the success and competitive advantage of the organization (Klein, Polin & Leigh Sutton, 2015). Recruitment can be seen as part of the onboarding process, but in this study we focus on the first 90 days after employment. Onboarding does not end after two or three weeks, but is still important throughout the 90-day initial adjustment period (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013).

Some researchers differentiate between onboarding and organizational socialization, where onboarding is defined as 'formal and informal practices, programs, and policies enacted or engaged in by an organization or its agents to facilitate newcomer adjustment' (Klein & Polin, 2012, p. 268). Organizational socialization, on the other hand, is the process where employees learn about and adapt to new jobs, roles and the culture of the workplace (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). In this paper we view the organizational socialization as a part of the onboarding process, as Bauer and Erdogan (2010) define it; "Organizational socialization, or onboarding, is a process through which new employees move

from being organizational outsiders to becoming organizational insiders" (Klein & Polin, 2012, p. 268). Thus, in our study we assume that establishing work-relationships is an equally large part of the virtual onboarding as learning the formal practices and policies.

Acevedo and Yancey (2011) concluded that most organizations do a mediocre job of assimilating new employees, even though the benefits of an effective onboarding are many (Caldwell & Peters, 2018). Employees that are effectively onboarded into an organization have better role clarity, self-efficiency, performance, retention, perceived fit, satisfaction, and salary growth. Organizational socialization has also been linked to increased organizational commitment (Klein & Heuser, 2008). A framework was created for researching onboarding practices which divided factors that influence organizational learning into three main categories: organizational tactics and practices, social agents and newcomer productivity (Klein & Heuser, 2008). Based on this, we have divided the theoretical chapters into four main parts, namely the new employee, the supervisor, the team, and the organization. We argue that these four categories on different levels both interact with each other, and have an influence on the effectiveness of the virtual onboarding process. Further, they may affect the newcomers organizational commitment.

One can assume that there are differences among new hires regarding personality and personal needs. To be able compare employees from different levels and positions, and suggest a streamlined virtual onboarding process, we are looking into the self-determination theory, which is an approach to human motivation and personality. In addition, we investigate newcomer proactivity and how it can be facilitated by the company. Further, we assume that the bond between the manager and the new employee becomes even more important when you are working solely from home, because of the physical distance to the rest of the organization. Theories about the role of the manager are reviewed. Then we investigate the role of the team, as they are important for socialization and can be seen as the "organizational insiders". Lastly, the role of the organization is seen as relevant. Including the HR department's responsibilities. Employee's expectations are highlighted. Then we investigate which activities and tactics that can be used

to create organizational commitment. In addition to the four main factors proposed to have an influence on onboarding, we have added a section about working remotely. This section also includes current experiences with virtual onboarding that may support or challenge our findings.


## 2.2 THE NEW HIRE

### 2.2.1 SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is an approach to human motivation and personality, developed by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. The theory is used to explain human motivation and functioning in a variety of domains such as health, sports, education, and work. Research has found three human needs that are the basis for self-motivation and a positive psychological development that may help an individual move past negative habits; competence, relatedness and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These three factors facilitate the optimal functioning of natural inclinations for growth and integration, as well as for constructive social development and personal well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

"Autonomy refers to the experience of behavior as volitional and reflectively self-endorsed" (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009, p. 135). One can say that employees are autonomous when they willingly devote time and energy to their work, because they feel like they have control over what they do. "The need for competence refers to the experience of behavior as effectively enacted" (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009, p. 135). People need to feel like they've done a good job, and they feel competent when they are able to meet the challenges of their work. Lastly, we have the need to feel relatedness, as to be able to interact, feel connected to and experience caring for others. People want to experience a sense of belonging (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

The three needs promote intrinsic motivation. When people are intrinsically motivated, they play, explore, and engage in activities for the inherent fun, challenge, and excitement of doing so (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Work environments that support the three core needs have positive work-related

outcomes (Olafsen, 2017). Opportunities to satisfy the three intrinsic needs will facilitate self-motivation and effective functioning, and it facilitates adjustment by providing the necessary nutrients for human growth (Baard, Deci & Ryan, 2004). Research by Baard & Aridas (2001) supports this and further shows that satisfaction of the three needs was related to attendance, contributions, volunteerism, and spiritual vitality (Baard et al., 2004). Further, research on SDT shows that managers who perform autonomy-supported leadership provide relevant information or feedback if it seems useful. This feedback must be delivered in a supportive, nonjudgmental way, to get higher performing employees who experience greater job satisfaction and better physical and psychological well-being (Baard et al., 2004).

### 2.2.2 PROACTIVITY

Proactive socialization behavior refers to the action of taking initiative in adapting, rather than being passive (Parker, Williams & Turner, 2006). Proactive efforts include establishing social relationships with others and seeking feedback regarding work performance (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). Organizations can design the onboarding to maximize proactivity effectiveness by making information and resources available to employees. Further, individuals can be proactive in their socialization by planning out how they will adapt and by taking an active role (Klein & Polin, 2012).

Proactivity is a product of the newcomers' own initiative. Newcomers who receive higher levels of support feel more comfortable in their work environment and will therefore make more proactive actions (Klein & Heuser, 2008). Individual differences of the newcomer such as personality, demographics, prior work and transition experience, and pre-entry knowledge should influence how companies structure orientating activities for newcomers. It is expected that these differences can have an impact on proactive behavior, and a direct effect on the socialization learning outcomes (Klein & Heuser, 2008).

## 2.3 THE SUPERVISOR

### 2.3.1 MANAGERIAL SUPPORT

Supervisors can have a great effect on employees' psychological well-being. Employees working for a supervisor who is perceived to often engage in positive behaviors and rarely in negative behaviors reported having better psychological health (Gilbreath & Benson, 2004).

Research has found that manager clarifying was significantly related to both role clarity and performance efficacy (Bauer & Green, 1998). It was also found that manager supporting behavior was significantly related to feelings of acceptance (Bauer & Green, 1998). To better newcomer performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, the newcomers should be well task- and socially accommodated (Bauer & Green, 1998). Accommodation does not mediate the relationship between the manager behaviors and newcomer job satisfaction. The research supports the inclusion of manager behavior as an important aspect of the newcomer socialization process (Bauer & Green, 1998).

Jokisaari and Nurmi (2009) argue that among new employees, declines in supervisor support was related to decreases in newcomer role clarity and job satisfaction (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). Individuals that feel a decrease in support over time will have lower levels of positive emotions whilst those who felt that the support increased over time would have higher levels of positive emotions over time (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). Supervisors need to take a more proactive role in their employees' development, which doesn't simply end after two or three weeks, but remains important during the entire 90-day initial adjustment period (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013).

Research has shown that delegation was positively related to new employees' role clarity, job satisfaction and organizational knowledge. This is particularly in the delegation of authority and responsibility to a new employee (Jokisaari & Vuori, 2018). Schein (1978) said that "if an organization wants to speed up the process of integrating its new employees, it must find ways of giving them responsible and meaningful work as soon as possible" (Jokisaari & Vuori, 2018, p. 162). Some employees are committed to the organization despite poor and ineffective

leadership, but research shows that employers that treat their employees with trust and pay close attention to their best interest, increase employee satisfaction and improved employee performance (Caldwell & Peters, 2018).

### 2.3.2 TRUST AND ROLE CLARITY

Leader-member exchange theory (LMX) reflects the quality of one's relationships with the leader (Lapointe et al., 2019). Research argues that employees reciprocate the benefits associated with LMX. This can be support, trust or access to valued resources (Lapointe et al., 2019). Dulebohn et al., (2012) argues that LMX encourages the employees to reciprocate the favorable treatment from their supervisor through a positive attitude (Lapointe et al., 2019). Dirks & Ferrin (2002) found that even though affect-based trust relationships and role-clarity with both the colleagues and the leader were important, it seems like the trust in the supervisor has a greater impact on the performance of the employees than other trust referents (Lapointe, Vandenberghe & Boudrias, 2014)

Jokisaari (2009) argues that work performance is related to leader-member exchange theory and that role clarity and performance are influenced by the employee's perception of support from the leader (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). Research on LMX-theory argues that there is a relationship between LMX and role clarity, and that this could be because individuals in high-LMX relationships interact more frequently with their leaders (Bauer et al., 2006). This is linked to the employee's organizational commitment (Lapointe et al., 2014). Lewicki and Bunker (1996) argue that deeper levels of trust are important to continue the interactions between employee and supervisor (Lapointe et al., 2014). They also suggest that newcomers who perceive that they are paid attention to by their supervisor and co-workers will respond with engagement and trust (Lapointe et al., 2014).

## 2.4 THE TEAM

### 2.4.1 COLLEAGUES AS SOCIAL AGENTS

Individuals or groups who facilitate the adjustment of newcomers by providing information, feedback, being role models, create social relationships and give

support, as well as giving access to broader networks and work-relevant resources are called "social agents". Coworkers, team members and colleagues from other departments can be social agents which helps a newcomer make sense of the new environment (Klein & Heuser, 2008).

When starting a new position where everything is unfamiliar, coworkers are in an ideal position to provide newcomers with assistance in adjusting to the demands of their work role. Useful information could be provided through organizational socialization, but will occur more frequently through work group interactions and social networks (Moreland, Levine & McMinn, 2001). When organizational insiders, such as coworkers, are active in the socialization process such as asking and giving feedback, the new employees will adjust faster to their new job (Jokisaari & Vuori, 2018).

The new employee needs an effort from supervisors and colleagues to create psychological security and develop relationships. When feeling safe, new employees may admit gaps in knowledge by asking questions (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). If a newcomer feels high initial support and trust from coworkers, they are likely to feel that their workgroup wants them to succeed. This will make it easier for the newcomer to have a proactive behavior (Parker et al., 2006)

Newcomer socialization involves repeated interactions between newcomers, coworkers, and supervisors. Research shows the importance of coworker support for newcomer adjustment both initially and over time (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). Support or undermining from an early stage may lay a foundation for later work outcomes, but the research also shows that support from coworkers and supervisors declines within the first 90 days of employment (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). Newcomers will continue to need support over time as they become acclimated, and it is valuable for organizations to prevent declines in support from "social agents" (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). As individuals experienced increases in supervisory or coworker support over time, they also reported increased levels of proactive socialization behavior. Not only are support important over time, but first impressions may also affect a newcomer's

impression of the social environment in their new organization (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013).

Settle-Murphy (2012) argues that assigning a team "buddy" to help the new employee adjust can be beneficial. A "buddy" is a sponsor or mentor for the new employee. It is important that the "buddy" and the new employee benefit from each other's skills and experience. The "buddy" must set aside a certain amount of time during the first weeks to give advice, provide insight and answer questions (Settle-Murphy, 2012). Such conversations should be done in person or through telephone instead of email. This allows for more open and direct conversations (Settle-Murphy, 2012).

## 2.5 THE ORGANIZATION

### 2.5.1 PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT

When starting in a new organization, a psychological contract is made between the new employee and the organization. The psychological contract is defined by Rousseau (1995) as 'individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization' (Heffernan & Rochford, 2017, p. 99). These promises can be both outspoken or something that the new hires only perceive or even imagine based on the interview process (Heffernan & Rochford, 2017).

If the employee feels that the organization has failed these promises, the psychological contract is breached (Lapointe, Vandenberghe & Boudrias, 2013). According to Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo (2007) a psychological contract breach can be linked to lower job satisfaction, trust, affective commitment, organizational citizenship behaviors, and task performance, and to higher turnover intention (Lapointe et al., 2013). Tett & Mayer (1993) defines turnover intention as "a conscious desire to seek out a job with a new organization" (Heffernan & Rochford, 2017, p.101). To avoid a contract breach, Zhao et al. (2007) suggests that organizations will benefit from keeping the expectations for the newcomer at a realistic level at the recruitment stage, hence the organization should provide their newcomers with accurate information. (Lapointe et al., 2013). Turnover as a

result of a psychological contract breach punishes the organization because turnover often results in high cost to employers as they need to find, hire and train a new candidate (Heffernan & Rochford, 2017).

Krackhardt (1992) argues that employees rely on their colleagues when they develop the psychological contract, but also in times of perceived contract breach (Heffernan & Rochford, 2017). Relational contract breaches were found to be the most significant sign of intention to leave (Heffernan & Rochford, 2017). Rousseau (1990) defined relational contracts as promises that are "characterized by open ended noneconomic agreements focused on maintaining the long-term relationship between the employer and employee" (Jensen, Opland & Ryan, 2009, p. 557). Informal social networks can help to see how employees understand their employment relationship and how they respond to breaches (Heffernan & Rochford, 2017).

### 2.5.2 SOCIALIZATION TACTICS

Organizational socialization tactics are commonly described as the approach organizations use to help structure newcomers' early experiences, to mold and shape the new hires behavior, as well as to facilitate the adjustment to the new organization (Klein & Heuser, 2008). Socialization focuses on how individuals learn the beliefs, values, orientations, behaviors, and skills necessary to fulfill their new roles and function effectively within an organization's social environment, and are important to reduce newcomer uncertainty (Ashforth and Saks, 1996). What distinguishes socialization tactics from orientation practices is that socialization is a lifelong process that is most intense when starting a new job, but which also emerges when there are changes to a role, task, or job context (Klein and Polin, 2012).

A study by Van Maanen and Schein (1979) has formed the basis for further research within the field of socialization tactics. Their theory is based on the saying, "what people learn about their work roles in organizations is often a direct result of how they learn it" (Tuttle, 2002, p.72). They suggested that the tactics organizations use once newcomers enter the organization could be usefully classified into six types, that are elaborated below (Allen, 2006).

The first tactic is regarding a collective versus individual approach, meaning how new employees are either grouped together for a common socialization experience, or isolated from one another to be paired up with a more seasoned member for their socialization experience (Tuttle, 2002). The second tactic differs between a formal versus informal approach. When using a formal tactic, the organization has clearly defined activities, which separate the individual from existing members and make it clear that they are a newcomer. Informal tactics refers to socialization provided through on-the-job assignments (Tuttle, 2002). A study by Fondas and Wiersema (1997) showed that there are often used different socialization tactics for executives versus lower-level positions, and that for executives the process was more likely to be informal, nonsequential and individual (Klein et al., 2015).

The third tactic concerns the distinction between sequential and random structuring of activities. Sequential tactics provide information of the sequence of learning activities, such as the order of the events. This is to reduce process uncertainty. Providing the newcomer with a sequential structure when adjusting to a new environment, may reduce anxiety and stress (Allen, 2006). Fixed versus variable tactics refers to the time frame for the socialization process. In a fixed tactic the organization would have conveyed their expectations to the timeline for when the new hire should have adjusted and mastered the role. In a variable tactic the organization sees each individual's progression and process uniquely (Tuttle, 2002).

Further, the fifth tactic is about serial versus disjunctive approach. When a newcomer is taking on a previously undefined role, where there is no one to walk them though, this is seen as a disjunctive process. A serial socialization refers to when the new employee has a role model to follow (Tuttle, 2002). Lastly, we have the investiture versus divestiture tactic which refers to how the organization supports or attempts to break away from the individual's prior socialization experiences and identity (Tuttle, 2002). Investiture is defined as "the degree to which newcomers receive positive or negative social support after entry from experienced organizational members to signal acceptance of an individual's

identity" (Ashforth and Saks, 1996, p. 157). In a case of divestiture tactic, support can be withheld or used conditionally to motivate change in the new hire's identity (Ashforth and Saks, 1996).

Ashforth and Saks (1996) studied the effects of the six socialization tactics from Van Maanen and Schein's (1979) study, divided into two clusters; institutionalized versus individualized tactics. The institutionalized tactics reflect a more structured program of socialization, including collective, formal, sequential, fixed, serial, and investiture tactics to encourage newcomers to passively accept preset roles and thus maintain the status quo. This approach is associated with lower role ambiguity, role conflict, stress symptoms, and intentions to quit and with higher job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational identification. The individualized tactics reflect a relative absence of structure, and may occur more by default than by design, and was associated with self-appraised performance (Ashforth and Saks, 1996).

### 2.5.3 ORIENTATION PRACTICES

Orienting practices describe the activities organizations use once applicants are hired, to help structure newcomers' early experiences such as gaining information, bringing greater clarity, and understanding to their role. These can be both formal and informal. An example of a formal practice is orientation training programs (Klein & Heuser, 2008).

A review of orientation practices led to the *Inform, welcome, guide-framework (IWG) (*Klein & Heuser, 2008)*. The Inform category is divided into three sub-categories because the majority of all orienting activities fell into this category. These categories are *communication efforts, providing resources and training* (Klein & Heuser, 2008). Under communication efforts we find planned one- or two-way dialogues. The providing resources category includes making materials available. The last inform- category is training, which is how the organization facilitates learning. The second category in the IWG-framework is *Welcome*. This category is about providing opportunities to meet and socialize with other colleagues in the organization and to celebrate the arrival of the newcomer. The final category is *Guide*, which is about providing a more personal guide to help

the newcomer navigate the transition and in the organizations. Here we find activities such as being assigned a "buddy" or mentor.

For all five IWG categories, the number of practices offered or experienced was positively related to newcomers being more socialized (Klein et al., 2015). It is also worth noting that newcomers perceived nearly all specific practices, and all five categories, to be at least moderately beneficial to their onboarding experience. In addition, required activities were more helpful than encouraged activities (Klein et al., 2015). It appears that the optimal timing of practices is very complex, and it depends on the need of the new employee, the specific practice, and how many practices are being offered (Klein et al. 2015). Srimannarayana (2016) found that some organizations included too many tasks and information for the employees to digest. Other organizations offered too few and failed to prepare the employees. He argues that finding the right balance is important for a successful onboarding (Caldwell & Peters, 2018).

## 2.6 REMOTE WORKING

Many organizations had to adapt and start working remotely because of the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Di Martino & Wirth (1990) has defined remote working as "a flexible work arrangement whereby workers work in locations, remote from their central offices or production facilities, the worker has no personal contact with co-workers there, but is able to communicate with them using technology" (Wang, Liu, Qian & Parker, 2021, p. 17). The basis for this chapter includes voices of practitioners working in Human Resources in addition to recent developed research.

To make an onboarding process completely virtual can be challenging. Aleksandra Sulimko, HR director for TheSoul Publishing, has five years of experience with remote working and mentions two challenges in particular; getting paperwork signed, and integrating the new employee into the company culture. Signing documents can be solved with the right digital tools in place (Payne, 2021). It is suggested that it may be easier for companies that already have remote workers to bring in new hires onstream virtually (Dill, 2020).

Co-founder and principal at Salveson Stetson Group, Sally Stetsen, claims that virtual onboarding should never be a "one-and-done" video session (HR News; Alexandria, 2020). She argues that a successful onboarding process should include multiple, interactive video sessions. From experience, HR Director Sulimko, has found three methods for making the new hire understand what makes the organization special (Payne, 2021). First, establish communication processes early on. Then, set up "meet and greets" with as many employees as possible. Coordinate introduction calls to provide the newcomers with a network to use for questions and brainstorming. Lastly, provide the new employees with onboarding videos, where you include interviews with leaders and employees across teams, so the newcomers get a grasp of the structure, roles, their personalities, and how each team and employee is connected (Payne, 2021). Using video is critical to virtual onboarding. The sessions should include an overview of the companies and provide for virtual meetings with team members and business leaders like the CEO (HR News; Alexandria, 2020).

Research has found that working remotely can be connected to higher organizational commitment and job satisfaction, but this can be at the expense of work intensification and greater inability to switch off (Felstead & Henseke, 2017). Bavik et al. (2020) found that employees that get social support at work will experience less loneliness, because online social interactions can meet the employees needs for belonging (Wang et al., 2021). Research has also argued that social support can lead to organizational commitment (Wang et al., 2021). Some researchers argue that even after the pandemic, some jobs will stay permanently remote (Wang et al., 2021).

## 2.7 THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL

By connecting relevant theory with newly hired employees' perceptions and experiences with virtual onboarding, we aim at filling a gap in knowledge and contribute to the development of theory on virtual onboarding. The study focuses on developing a practical contribution to the participating organizations on how to facilitate a virtual onboarding for securing highly committed employees. In the

Conceptual Model (Figure I) below, we propose that the new hire, the supervisor, the team and the organization have a great impact on the virtual onboarding process, which further affects organizational commitment. Further, we have examined these four categories' effects on virtual onboarding, based on the perceptions of the participants interviewed.
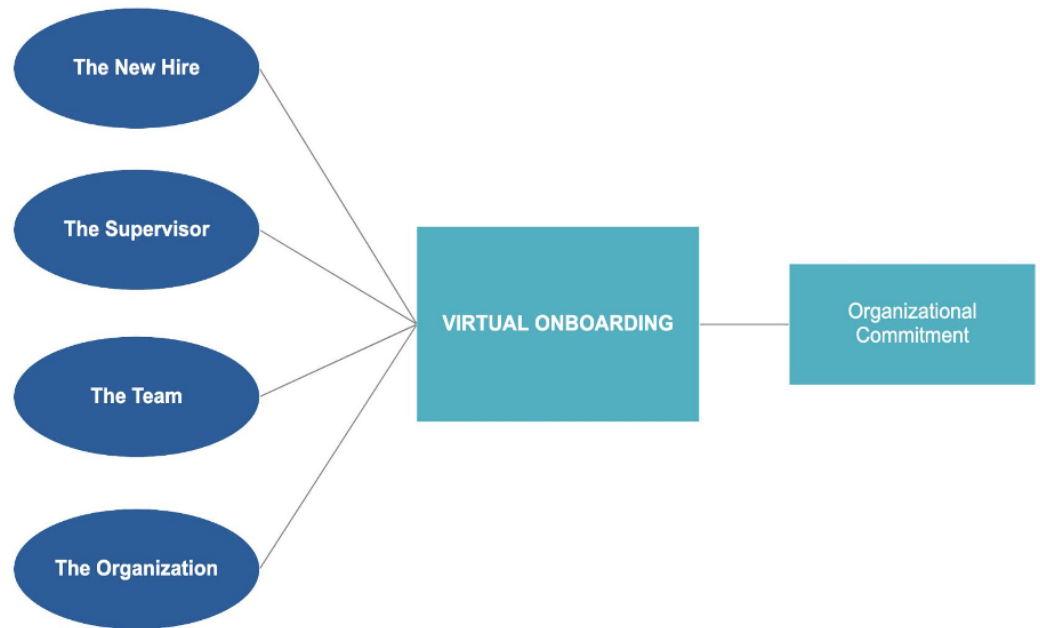


(Figure I: The Conceptual Model)

# 3. RESEARCH METHOD

Our aim for this thesis is to gain insight to the newcomer's interpretation of the virtual onboarding. We want to understand how the organization, the manager and the colleagues' behavior and participation during the onboarding period have affected the newcomers' experience, and hence their commitment. Qualitative research is frequently used within organizational studies, where the focus is to research people's interpretation (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This is the basis for our choice of method. Qualitative research provides considerable, descriptive detail and emphasizes the importance of the contextual understanding of social behavior (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This research has an abductive approach. Such an approach is beneficial if the goal is to discover other variables and other relationships (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The abductive approach refines existing

theory, rather than inventing new ones (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). In this case we use theories related to onboarding, to discover if other variables and relationships apply to virtual onboarding.

## 3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

Choice of research design depends on the research question and the objectives of the study. A research design gives a framework for the analysis and collection of data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In our thesis we have chosen a case study as our research design. "A case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 37). The bounded system can be explained as something you can "fence in", such as a phenomenon, a program, a group, an institution, or a community (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this case we have looked at the phenomenon of virtual onboarding, which was an unfamiliar situation for the participating organizations.

We are using a qualitative case study design to understand the dynamics present within a specific setting, in this case the common context is the onboarding phase. Our study is based on the experiences of new employees from three different companies in Norway, who work from home-office. The main purpose of the paper is to explore which factors that positively or negatively affect the virtual onboarding process. Although findings based on case-study designs often can be difficult to generalize (Bryman & Bell, 2011), we believe that the results can provide value to other companies in similar branches and contexts.

By asking open-ended questions we get an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of virtual onboarding. In-depth interviews are prominent for getting a deep understanding of the participants feelings, thoughts, experiences, perceptions, and knowledge (Patton, 2002). Conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews is preferable as we want to convey an individual's perceptions, experiences, and attitudes to understand the context (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). In semi-structured interviews the interviewer has a series of questions that are in a certain sequence, but are able to vary the order of the questions, which creates some flexibility to ask further questions in response to

the applicant (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions are chosen to ensure full and descriptive answers, to get good insight into the participants' viewpoints.

## 3.2 SAMPLE

Our sample consists of employees from three medium- to large sized enterprises in Norway. They work in real estate, banking, and accounting. The choice to cover several industries is based on the fact that we want the results to be somewhat generalizable, as the working methods and conditions in these industries can be seen as relatively similar during the pandemic. The selection is also taken to gain access to a wider range of interview objects, who have experienced a virtual onboarding. A requirement for inclusion in the study was that participants usually worked "in-house" at the office, but were moved to home office due to the pandemic. Hence, virtual onboarding is a new experience for both the companies and the new hires.

Another measure taken in order for our findings to be applicable to a broader audience, is to interview participants from different levels and divisions in the organizations. From this selection we were able to find differences and similarities across pay grades and work tasks. The interview objects are between the age of 25 and 55, with two thirds women and one third men. The youngest participants are newly graduated, while others have extensive experiences. All are permanent employees, hired after the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, but before the end of January 2021. To participate in the study the candidates had to work remotely within the first 90 days of their employment, as this period is considered most critical.

All of the participants are selected by the companies' HR-department, but have voluntarily participated. We aimed at a sample of about ten to fifteen participants, depending on the answers we got. We conducted additional interviews until we reached theoretical saturation, where no new information was provided to us (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Twelve interviews were conducted in total and table I (Participant Demographic) shows the variation in demographic information

among the participants. The order in Table I does not match the template analysis (appendix 8.4), due to anonymity for the participating employees.

| Participants | Gender | Age group |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| 1 | Female | 40-50 |
| 2 | Male | 40-50 |
| 3 | Female | 30-40 |
| 4 | Female | 40-50 |
| 5 | Male | 20-30 |
| 6 | Female | 50-60 |
| 7 | Male | 40-50 |
| 8 | Female | 30-40 |
| 9 | Male | 30-40 |
| 10 | Female | 20-30 |
| 11 | Female | 20-30 |
| 12 | Female | 30-40 |

(Table I: Participant demographic)

## 3.3 DATA GATHERING

The reviewed literature is the basis for our developed interview guide (appendix 8.1). The interview guide was sent to a new hire at the faculty of BI Oslo to check if the questions were relevant, easy to understand, did not overlap and were formulated correctly. The questions are grounded in the previously mentioned categories; the organization, the supervisor and the coworkers. Then we had a section about the interviewee, their experiences, expectations and also if they felt committed to the organization. We have focused on receiving the candidates' perceptions of the socialization tactics used, and the different programs and activities offered by the organization. Lastly, we explored how the participants perceived their managers and coworkers' behavior and support.

Because of the ongoing pandemic and strict Governmental rules, the interviews had to be conducted virtually. All of the participants had their camera turned on, so we were able to read their facial expressions while asking the questions and

receiving their answers. One of the interviewers moderated the conversation to be able to actively engage, while the other took notes and observed the candidate. Roles were switched between the interviews so that one would not get too exhausted due to several interviews every day. All interviews were audio taped, to be able to re-listen and transcribe. Since all our participants were Norwegian, we conducted the interview in their native language, to keep a natural flow in the conversation and make it easier for them to answer. The answers were later translated and transcribed. Most interviews lasted for about an hour. Some participants were very brief in their answers and those interviews lasted about thirty minutes. At most we had four interviews in one day, but some days only one depending on the schedule of the participants.

## 3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

When conducting the interviews, we both recorded and took notes during the conversation. This gave us both audio and notes of non-verbal behavior such as the participants hesitation before answering a question, facial expression, and the participants mood (Saunders et al., 2012). After each interview we set aside time to debrief and transcribe by comparing notes, perceptions, quotes, and discussing results. While transcribing the interviews we highlighted relevant information (Bryman and Bell, 2011) and sorted the data into a template (appendix 8.4) formed on the basis of theory, to get an overview of our findings and be able to see the connections. To verify that the transcription was factual and exact, we listened to the audio and read through our notes to make sure that any transcription errors did not occur.

The template analysis contains categories per themes and attaching units of data to the categories (Saunders et al., 2012). These categories were; if the participant experienced high or low LMX; how involved the team had been in the onboarding process; activities offered; how proactive the participant had been in the onboarding process; mentor arrangement; if they felt socialized; their expectations to the virtual onboarding; if their psychological contract to the organization had breached; if they felt the virtual onboarding was successful; and finally, if they felt committed to the organization. These categories are seen as relevant based on

reviewed theory and participant's interpretations. After all transcripts were coded into the template, it was used to analyze our findings.

## 3.5 QUALITY OF THE STUDY

The interview guide commenced open questions to decrease the possibility of bias and increase reliability (Saunders et al., 2012). We attempted to avoid any leading follow-up questions due to the flexibility in a semi-structured interview. The recording of the interviews ensured accurate data. To not miss any valuable information and avoid transcribing errors, both researchers were present during the interview.

It can be difficult to generalize the results in qualitative research, as the sample and setting are small and specific (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The purpose of our research is to examine a particular setting, namely virtual onboarding. There are no confounding elements in our results, and we have found a connection between theory on onboarding and our findings about virtual onboarding.

## 3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is important to emphasize that the organizations contributing to the study were explained the aim of the thesis, how it was to be carried out and what requirements we had for the interviewees, before they made the decision to participate. They were free to say no and could ask as many questions as they needed to make their decision. Furthermore, an informed consent (appendix 8.3) was sent to the participants, which also explained what the study was about, who carried it out, and that audio recordings of the interviews would be taken. In the beginning of each interview, we presented ourselves, the study, and clearly emphasized the anonymity of the study. We assume that the new employees will be careful about sharing negative publicity about their new workplace, so we specified early that they would not be recognizable in the thesis. The study will subsequently be shared with the organizations and the participants who expressed a desire to read the results.

# 4. RESULTS

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

From our interviews we learned that the information and activities in the participants onboarding was mostly unstructured. Some obligatory formalities such as signing documents and a virtual training with information about the organization were led by HR departments. Other activities for socialization and learning specific systems and tasks were initiated by the team leader. In some cases, the participants had an overall overview of the onboarding, but not quite a sequential structure to it. Regarding the structure of activities, the results were mixed. Some had team members to learn from and a predefined role, but no concrete plan of the structure of the training. The socialization tactics in the organizations were mostly individualized for all the participants, which seemed to be by default and not by design.

All participants in the study felt welcomed in their new organizations. Several of the interviewees had extensive work experience which seemed to make them more independent in the onboarding process. Others were graduates with less experience, which led to other expectations to the onboarding. The organizations put a lot of responsibility on the managers to structure the onboarding and on the newcomer to be proactive. There has been varying participation from the employees' teams, but several candidates have had a mentoring arrangement to guide them in the onboarding. Further, we elaborate on these findings divided into two clusters; orientation practices and socialization.

## 4.2 ORIENTATION PRACTICES

### 4.2.1 ACTIVITIES

Each interview started by getting an overview of the activities and information provided to the new hire during the first months of their onboarding. Some of the participants did not at first remember the activities they had participated in, which one can assume originates from a non-existent plan. Most of the respondents had

attended digital courses about the companies, typical introduction meetings, where values, strategies and the overall business structure was explained. Before the pandemic, these meetings were physical at the office where networking was an important part. The past year, these meetings were conducted on digital platforms like Microsoft Teams, and it could be either virtual meetings or livestreams.

The possibility to ask questions and meet other newcomers in virtual meetings was mentioned by several candidates as a constructive replacement for physical onboarding. Other participants were provided with video presentations. For some of the respondents this was suitable as they had a lot of work even from the first week. As one of the participants stated: *"I liked that you can rewind the video to see everything again. Then I could watch whenever I had the time"*. For others, such presentations had less value: *"I had to go through mandatory online courses. This was very unengaging, and I did not get much out of this".* Another participant did not meet any other newcomers or colleagues to socialize with during these sessions, but had an informal welcome meeting with an introduction to the company held by the newcomers closest leaders. This gave the respondent the opportunity to ask more questions and she felt it reflected the culture of the company in the sense of how they are very helpful, supportive, and set aside time for her to feel included right away.

The more experienced employees, often in leadership positions, started to work right away. They did not have the time for joint sessions and different onboarding activities meant for socialization with others outside their area of responsibility felt less important. If they needed information, they seemed to have the confidence and contacts to ask. As one respondent in a leadership position said: *"You want to start making value for the company as soon as possible, and the best thing was to manage my own onboarding experience"*.

### 4.2.2 DEADLINES

The possibility to rewind and watch the video-sessions again if needed was helpful for some of the participants with busy calendars. On the other hand, some of the participants struggled to complete the presentations, both because one-way communication worked poorly for them, but also because no deadline had been

set. The formal documents to be signed had deadlines, but the virtual information activities had not. This led to uncompleted activities for some candidates. Usually, the participants had ongoing conversations with their leader about how the onboarding was going and if they needed any help. None of the interviewees showed any signs of stress due to unclear expectations from the company, but no deadlines or expectations were communicated.

### 4.2.3 TRAINING

Our findings indicate that the virtual training of work tasks was successful. The participants reported to master their tasks and nearly all of the participants felt like they were a resource for their organization within a somewhat short period of time. None of our participants knew exactly when the organization or their leader expected them to be fully accommodated, but assumed that they were on time with mastering their tasks. Still, some felt the need to excuse themselves and explain that they would have adapted or learned faster if they had not been sitting at home. By embroidering, we found that this may be due to low proactivity, shyness, or lack of training. A few interviewees had more undefined roles and no one to walk them through. These participants claimed to be proactive in figuring out their work themselves, but were skeptical to this approach. As one of them stated *"You can hire incredibly talented people, but when you lack training, you get nowhere"*.

### 4.2.4 INFORMATION AND TIMING

In all three firms, new hires had a lot of paperwork to sign and tests to complete. Some participants mentioned that they might have scrolled through some tests too fast because there was not enough time set aside to complete everything in the first weeks. Some felt that it did not provide useful value to them because there was too much information at once, while others struggled to keep up when everything was written in English. *"It was too much information at once. It also came in a period where there were a lot of other things to do at work. The organization informs a lot, maybe a little too much. But in a way, it becomes too much anyway, because you are new."* From earlier work experience, most participants knew that these formalities are required in the companies. They had neither strong positive nor negative feelings and thoughts about these tests and

formal contracts. As we interpret these answers, there are no differences or challenges concerning information and timing when onboarding is done virtually versus physical. Yet, the uncertainty we sensed during the interviews seemed to be caused by the lack of structure and formal plan.

## 4.2.5 EXPECTATIONS

An important part of our interviews was to uncover the new hires' expectations of the onboarding. Then we wanted to discover whether they were fulfilled or not. The results indicated great differences between the participants in terms of their different roles, and based on their previous experiences with onboarding practices.

The youngest, newly graduated participants, mostly inexperienced in similar roles, seemed to have higher expectations for the onboarding process than the older and more experienced workers. One of the participants explained that he compared his onboarding with his former, fellow students' onboarding processes. These friends had started working in large consultant companies, where the onboarding is very institutionalized, with a lot of new hires at the same time and many planned activities. Another newly graduated respondent had been participating in an internship before, where the onboarding had been very formal and structured. This was her only comparison, which made the virtual onboarding in the new company seem less planned, prepared, and structured.

The three companies we have gained an insight into in this study are considered well known in Norway, with a good reputation. During our interviews we discovered how that can impact the newcomers' expectations. Some of the participants shared that they had certain expectations when starting in a well-known company. The respondents were also aware that their organization hires several new employees, and this created expectations about the structure of the process as well as the work environment and leadership. On the other hand, experienced workers seemed to have lower expectations of the onboarding process. These expectations were formed by previous experiences in similar companies and branches. One candidate had previously experienced that *"here is the task, figure it out"*. Hence, her expectations for onboarding in the new organization were low. Others had lower expectations due to the ongoing

pandemic. As one of the participants stated, *"I am somewhat satisfied with the process as the situation is demanding for the company"*.

Even though all three organizations are well established, we found that the onboarding processes had been less structured than anticipated among the participants. The formal part of the onboarding included signing documents like the 'code of conduct' and Non-Disclosure Agreements, together with an intro-session initiated by the HR department. The onboarding activities such as different orientation practices and socialization tactics, were mostly initiated by the leader. When onboarding in-house, there used to be several joint activities initiated by the company's HR-departments. Some of these were discontinued when the employees were relocated to home office, and their respective leaders got more responsibility to initiate joint activities. Therefore, the activities were arranged for the team only, and not the whole organization. Due to an individualized onboarding with voluntary activities, the process varied a lot between departments, and participants onboarding in the same organizations could have completely different perceptions about the process.

The interviews identified the importance of a structured plan, frequent feedback, and follow-up meetings. In cases where there was a structured plan, it created a feeling that the company was prepared for the newcomers' arrival, which made them feel welcome.

## 4.3 SOCIALIZATION

### 4.3.1 SUPPORT

Our findings implies that the mastering of work-tasks worked well virtually, but building social relationships was more difficult and took more time than physical in-house onboarding. The task-oriented employees thrived under home-office where they were in peace and quiet and could do their job effectively. Our findings indicate that as long as these employees received positive feedback on their work, they felt satisfied and also committed to the organization. The respondents that expressed a greater need for socialization seemed to struggle more with remote working, and needed more frequent feedback and social

gatherings to get committed to the organization. Our findings indicate that even if you master your tasks, you are not necessarily committed to the company, as you need to feel an identity and belonging to the organization. *"It did not take long to feel like a work resource, we were understaffed when I started. Still, it doesn't feel like I have to be here for the rest of my life, I feel no strong affiliation yet. It could be because of the home office and that I get a little more distant from the employer and the other people, but it's not that I'm looking for a new job. I'm not dissatisfied either"*. This indicates that there are differences to an optimal onboarding due to the new hires' personalities, the work roles they have, and previous experiences.

### 4.3.2 A SENSE OF BELONGING

When onboarding is physical at the office, socialization happens naturally. You meet by the coffee machine and are invited to lunch by coworkers. Working from home these activities were, for some of the respondents, more or less absent. As one of them stated *"An empty calendar and few tasks does not feel good"*. Another participant also explained the importance of proactivity during virtual onboarding. *"When you participate in a physical onboarding, you just show up and people take responsibility for your onboarding. When you are in the home office, you have to take much more responsibility for onboarding yourself"*. When the employees don't have colleagues physically around them, virtual feedback and ad-hoc conversations are important.

A major discovery from the interviews conducted was how long it takes for a newcomer to feel properly socialized when working remotely. One of the participants stated that after more than three months, she still didn't feel like a full-fledged part of the organization. There were many employees that she had not met or been able to socialize with yet, which made her feel like a newcomer; *"I feel like a resource, but not 100%. There are still many things I don't know. In one way I am new, but I am no longer that new"*. We got the impression that this participant was very social and that working remotely made her feel more alone. This participant implied that her position was difficult to conduct virtually, because it usually is based on socializing across the organization and getting a feeling of the culture. The candidate felt like it was difficult to create the

connections she needed through virtual meetings. Completely opposite, one of the leaders interviewed felt included and onboarded after only two months. *"My position was entirely new, so it was very sought-after, and this made me feel like a part of the organization very rapidly"*. This participant was included in a lot of virtual meetings, and got to contribute from the very first week at work.

### 4.3.3 EXPERIENCE AND ROLE DIFFERENCES

We investigated this feedback further and found great differences between new hires in leadership roles, roles that included project work, and those with more repetitive tasks at a lower hierarchical level. We found that the respondents in leadership positions and project work positions had nearly full calendars from the first week, which led to socialization with several other employees from different departments. Findings indicate a higher level of belonging to the organization among these, than those who had empty calendars where *"the team meeting became the highlight of the week"*.

Our findings imply that leaders in our study were onboarded more efficiently to the organizations, than those at lower levels. Leaders have often been through a long recruitment process, and they seemed more confident. They also often have more experience and are more self-driven. One participant said that: *"One of the team members in my management team works in HR, so he has been taking care of me from the start"*. Another leader stated that: "*My team reached out to me in the beginning, and therefore it was a natural crossing point for me, were we early on set up meetings on Microsoft Teams or telephone"*.

Our findings indicate some difference between the candidates with experience and those without experience. Those employees who had extensive experience with "in-house" onboarding, seemed to be more self-driven in virtual onboarding as well, and almost immediately felt valuable for the organization. One of the participants who had long experience expressed her concern for new graduates in the same situation as herself: *"Had I been a recent graduate and this was my first job, it would not have worked"*. Our findings indicate that candidates that are inexperienced need more feedback and support. One candidate stated that: *"I feel sorry for the younger people that are starting their first job at home office. I can*

*sometimes feel like I have too much to do, but I feel sorry for those who have too little to do"*. Several respondents said that during the first weeks in a new job, daily meetings with the leader where they got to ask questions were important. One of the respondents said that she gathered up questions to ask her leader, and if the meetings were more infrequent, she would be stuck at the same place for too long. Our findings imply that daily interactions with the leader or other "go-to persons" is important to get ahead in the job. On the other hand, some of the candidates expressed that they felt trusted by their leader, and that they liked not feeling supervised all the time. One participant said that: *"My leader has been available and supportive, but not too ongoing, making sure that I didn't feel monitored".*

### 4.3.4 FEEDBACK

From one of the respondents, we got the sense that she felt more important in her previous workplace, where she had a lot of contacts and responsibilities. The home-office situation did not fit her well, and she felt like it didn't really matter what she delivered. One can argue that both constructive feedback and praise was missing. Feedback from the leader naturally decreases over time, which was fine for most of the respondents, as they became more independent. For others, decrease in feedback made them feel more alone.

Our findings indicate that having a "go-to-person" is important in an onboarding process. One candidate stated: *"It is important to have one "go-to-person". Especially during a virtual onboarding, then I felt like I always had someone to reach out to"*. For some of the interview objects this was their leader, for others it was a colleague. Several of our interview candidates had been appointed a mentor or "buddy" that was their assigned "go-to-person". Our findings show that such an arrangement works well for most, but the assigned mentor must have enough time to answer questions and make themself available for the new employee. *"My mentor did not have time for me, so I don't really see the value in such arrangements"*. Our findings also indicate that the mentor must be available and take initiative for the arrangement to be effective. One of the respondents stated the value of such an arrangement by saying *"my mentor reached out to me on*

*Facebook before I started in the organization, and this made me feel like I had someone to ask the very first day"*.

Most of our candidates did not emphasize the meaning of the team and for some participants the team had less of an importance. Others had closer relations to their coworkers and one participant invited her team to a virtual wine tasting. *"I have a great team, and I felt like they would accept my invite, even though I was fairly new"*. The most important thing for the participants was having one "go-to-person". Our findings also indicate that it seems somewhat irrelevant if that person is a colleague, the leader, or the assigned mentor. The important factor was that the new employee had someone to ask, without feeling like they were bothering the other person. One of our respondents had a leader in another country, and had not met him because of the pandemic. Still, he felt included and onboarded because he had a colleague that took responsibility. *"My closest colleague has made up for my absent leader, as he has been very supportive and available for me in the whole process"*.

Virtual onboarding is lacking socialization and networking outside the teams and departments. Our findings imply that virtual onboarding makes the employees very team oriented, as their only interactions during the week was with their closest team and manager. Even the candidates who worked on projects across departments, felt that they did not have a proper overview of the organizational structure. For the newly hired in manager positions, this seemed to be different. They often got more thorough presentations of the company structure and employees. The absence of a better overview and networking in the introduction sessions seemed to make most employees more distanced to the organization, and the team or department became representatives for the whole company.

### 4.3.5 INFORMAL CHANNELS

What was repeated in the interviews was the lack of informal small talks that are happening around the office. Every interview object said that they missed the opportunity to ask a quick question to the colleague at the desk next to him or her, the *"coffee-talks"*, or the *"magic around the coffee machine"* as one candidate stated. Several of the candidates agreed that the onboarding from home could be

ineffective. Some candidates waited until the next scheduled meeting with their team or supervisor to ask questions, and this meeting could take place several days later.

According to respondents, virtual meetings quickly became very formal. It has a set time and agenda, and the meetings rarely pass the scheduled time. Physical meetings, on the other hand, might not start until ten past because everyone is getting a coffee or wrapping up a conversation with a colleague. *"If you talk for 5 minutes with a colleague at the office, it feels like no time has gone by. If you talk for 5 minutes in a virtual meeting, you feel like you have taken up too much of the time"*, one respondent said.

Our findings indicate that the organization should aim to have informal platforms for the employees to talk about other things than work, but also make room for quick questions that employees might have. One candidate stated: *"you feel like you need to ask something important to convene someone to a virtual meeting"*. Our findings indicate that employees that had open, informal platforms to ask questions and to socialize seemed more satisfied. One interview object shared that *"my team leader sends me a "good morning" every day. This has made it easy for me to reach out when needed"*. Several candidates said that virtual meetings with few people gave more room for informal small talk.

Our analysis showed a difference between organizations regarding the formality of communication. Some employees used the chat-function for sending quick messages and expecting quick answers. One interview object said that *"it was easy to use 'slack' to chat with my supervisor or team members when I needed help"*. Other employees used e-mail when asking questions, which seemed more inefficient for getting short answers and information during the onboarding and training phase. One candidate stated that *"I was new to the digital tools used, like Microsoft Teams and so on. It took me a while to get the hang of it"*. Another stated that *"Working virtually becomes very formal because you reach out over email or arrange meetings"*.

Some of the leaders had initiated a virtual coffee-meeting to socialize their newcomers. "Virtual morning coffee can quickly become staccato", one participant shared, as *"The natural flow in a conversation is hard to bring to a virtual meeting"*. Another participant also stated that it could be too much time spent in front of a screen each day *"I do not quite see the value of having virtual lunches in an already packed everyday life, I want a break from the screen at lunch"*. Yet, our findings imply that the offer or possibility to meet others online is important for many, as *"some days working from home have been a bit heavy"*.

### 4.4 SUMMARY

Our candidates expressed different virtual onboarding experiences, but still there were some generalizations that could be made. Our findings imply differences in expectations to the virtual onboarding process between the newly graduated and the more experienced employees. We found indications that leaders were onboarded more efficiently with an individualized approach, than employees at lower-level positions. We highlight the importance of having a "go-to-person" for the new hires when onboarding is virtual. This ensures that the new employees have someone to ask questions at all times, and do not get stuck at one place for too long. Our findings indicate that the virtual training of work tasks seemed to be successful as all candidates felt like a resource for the company, but that efficient socialization during a virtual onboarding process seemed more difficult to achieve. When the employees don't have colleagues physically around them, feedback and ad-hoc conversations virtually are important. Further, we will discuss these results with relevant onboarding theory.

# 5. DISCUSSION

We have divided the discussion into two main parts; theoretical contribution and practical contribution. In the theoretical contribution we elaborate on the findings related to onboarding theory, and whether this theory applies when the onboarding is conducted virtual. We have discussed if there are any additions, developments, or counterarguments to the original onboarding theory. Our findings in the theoretical contribution are further used to provide a practical contribution for

facilitating an efficient virtual onboarding. We have divided the practical contribution into five explanatory categories. These categories serve as a suggestion and tool to organizations that want to improve their virtual onboarding process and create organizational commitment.

## 5.1 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

### 5.1.1 THE NEW HIRE

According to Self-Determination theory, competence, relatedness, and autonomy facilitates optimal functioning of natural inclinations for growth and integration, as well as for constructive social development and personal well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In virtual onboarding, most of our respondents reported the need for competence as fulfilled. They were educated, experienced, and got the training they needed. Other candidates shared that they did not get an optimal training. The participants argued that the lack of training was due to poor resources in their department, and not because the training was conducted virtually. The need for autonomy was also achieved, as they seemed motivated to work and to get ahead of their tasks in their new positions. The need to feel relatedness on the other hand, was not fulfilled among all participants. We found the need to interact, feel connected and experience care to be most challenging during a virtual onboarding to a new company. We found that the new hires who felt a sense of belonging, expressed more excitement, and seemed to be more engaged in their work. Our findings support the Self-Determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) as all needs provided satisfaction among employees. Still, we highlight the need to feel relatedness as especially important to fulfill in a virtual onboarding, but also the most challenging.

Regarding proactivity, all participants felt proactive to some extent. By examining these statements further, we found that those who felt comfortable in their new role because of higher levels of trust and support from their leaders, also felt more comfortable to take initiative for learning and socialization. Our findings also emphasize the importance of proactivity when working remotely, as you are not provided with the informal information that is readily available when onboarding "in-house". Our findings support reviewed theory where organizations should

make information and resources available to employees, to maximize proactive efforts from the new hire (Klein & Polin, 2012). Further our findings add the importance of establishing social relationships to increase proactive efforts. Those employees who had someone they trusted, also felt comfortable with asking questions or taking initiative to social activities.

### 5.1.2 THE SUPERVISOR

Research argues that managers can contribute to both role clarity and performance efficacy (Bauer & Green, 1998). It is also found that manager supporting behavior was significantly related to feelings of acceptance (Bauer & Green, 1998). Our findings indicate that this theory also applies when the onboarding is virtual. In our analysis we found that those candidates who felt a higher level of support and involvement from their supervisor, also felt committed to the organization within a somewhat short period of time. With support and involvement, we include factors such as coaching and facilitating.

According to a study by Jokisaari & Vuori (2018) delegation was positively related to new employees' role clarity, job satisfaction and organizational knowledge. Our findings confirm this theory, where those who early in the employment got responsibility and assignments, sooner felt like a part of the organization. Our findings imply that this theory also applies when the onboarding is virtual. When employees are at home-office, the lack of meaningful tasks and responsibility could, according to our analysis, affect job satisfaction.

Research shows that those employees that perceive that they are paid attention to by their supervisor and co-workers will respond with engagement and trust (Lapointe et al., 2014). This is supported in our findings where those who felt support from their supervisors and coworkers showed higher commitment to the organization. Dirks & Ferrin (2002) argues that trust in the supervisor has a greater impact on the performance of the employees than other trust referents (Lapointe et al., 2014). This does not correspond entirely with our findings, where we found that when the onboarding is conducted virtual, it seems somewhat indifferent if the employee trusted a colleague, an assigned mentor, or the supervisor. Since all employees are at home-office, it seems like other trust

referents than the supervisor could strengthen the employee's commitment to the organization.

### 5.1.3 THE TEAM

Research suggests that when colleagues are active in the socialization process the new hire will adjust faster to their new job (Jokisaari & Vuori, 2018). This is supported in our findings where those who had support from one or more team members felt like a part of the organization within a somewhat short period of time. Still, our findings also indicate that the most important factor for the newcomer during a virtual onboarding process is to have one "go-to-person" to reach out to, regardless if this person is a team member or not. Our analysis implies that the team has less importance than first anticipated when starting this research.

Research has found that assigning a team "buddy" to help the new employee can be beneficial (Settle-Murphy, 2012). This corresponds with our findings, but we also found that it is important that the "buddy" has set aside enough time for the new hire. Most of our candidates benefited from having an assigned mentor or "buddy" when the onboarding was conducted virtually. It is easier for a newcomer to have a proactive behavior if they feel high initial support and trust from coworkers (Parker et al., 2006). This theory corresponds with our findings, where those who felt supported by their team, supervisor or "buddy" reached out more frequently to other coworkers, both for job related subjects, but also social events.

### 5.1.4 THE ORGANIZATION

The psychological contract includes an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization based on the new hire's beliefs (Heffernan & Rochford, 2017). In this study we looked at the new hires' expectations of the virtual onboarding process, where all respondents reported some expectations to their respective companies. Generally, because all three organizations are well known with a good reputation. Our findings indicate that employees' expectations could be a structured process, available leaders or supportive colleagues. Not all expectations were reported as fulfilled, which according to our findings, led to a psychological breach among some of the candidates (Lapointe et al., 2013). Our

research implies that those respondents who did not feel satisfied with the virtual onboarding process, did not feel a strong commitment to the organization. These findings correspond to previous studies (Lapointe et al, 2013; Heffernan & Rochford, 2017). Our findings confirm reviewed theory and implies that the organization should establish the new employee's expectations at an early stage, to be able to fulfill them.

Further, we have analyzed the socialization tactics which Van Maanen and Schein's (1979) divided into two clusters; institutionalized versus individualized tactics. When studying the effects of these two clusters, Ashforth and Saks (1996) associated an institutionalized tactic with lower role ambiguity, role conflict, stress symptoms, and intentions to quit and with higher job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational identification. Our findings argue that high job satisfaction can be achieved with an individual approach as well, as those with long experience seemed to need less structure and formal meetings. They enjoyed learning tasks at their own pace, and to be a resource from day one. They learned skills necessary by on-the-job assignments and virtual meetings.

All our respondents reported having experienced an approximately individual approach, still our findings do not imply high levels of stress or intentions to leave. In general, a more institutionalized process could be beneficial, as the respondents reported the lack of formal structure and collective socialization experiences as negative when onboarding is virtual. Collective activities could be effective in virtual onboarding, as participants reported feeling isolated from other departments in the organization. These findings indicate that an organization does not have to choose either institutionalized or individualized tactics, but could benefit from a mix of the two.

From the IWG-framework (Klein & Heuser, 2008) we found two categories most challenging when onboarding is virtual. The first one is the "communication efforts" under the "inform" category. Those candidates who reported frequent feedback-sessions with their manager seemed more satisfied with the virtual onboarding process. By conducting frequent, short meetings the new hire was able to be more efficient in the learning process, as they got quick clarifications to their

role, task or other problems that occurred. The second category to highlight when onboarding is virtual is "welcome." Theory emphasizes the importance of welcoming the newcomer and providing opportunities to socialize with other colleagues (Klein & Heuser, 2008). This is in line with our findings and is seen as critical when working from home. As the respondents explained, the welcome and socialization happens naturally at the office, but when working from home it is important that the organization make time so that the newcomer feel included. It is important to remember that socialization is a lifelong process (Klein and Polin, 2012).

### 5.1.5 SUMMARY

To summarize, most of our findings regarding virtual onboarding correspond with reviewed theory on onboarding. Yet, there are some differences and interesting thoughts to highlight. First, the need for competence, autonomy and relatedness for intrinsic motivation is relevant in virtual onboarding. However, the need to feel belonging is the most important, but also the most challenging. We found that the need for belonging can be linked to proactivity by the newcomer, as social relationships increase proactive efforts. Further, research highlights the relationship between the new hire and the supervisor as important in an onboarding process. Our findings argue that trust and support can be established by other trust referents as well, such as coworkers or a mentor. Then, by providing the newcomer with responsibility, a feeling of inclusion and trust can be achieved. Lastly, socialization theory argues that an institutionalized approach creates high organizational commitment. Our findings contradict this, as some of the participants experiencing an individualized process, still expressed organizational commitment. However, by providing a planned structure for the virtual onboarding process, including networking and socialization across departments, seemed to meet the new employees' expectations, regardless of position and previous experience.

## 5.2 PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTION

### 5.2.1 PROVIDE A STRUCTURED PLAN

First, the structure of information and activities organized by the organization and managers are discussed, as the design can help maximize proactivity effectiveness by making information and resources available to employees (Klein & Polin, 2012). Candidates revealed that the virtual onboarding activities conducted were randomly structured, with few concrete plans and deadlines. Theory argues that the lack of structure and plan is proven to cause stress among new employees, and a more institutionalized approach is positively related to organizational commitment (Ashforth & Saks, 1996).

Our findings show that our candidates did not seem stressed, but rather expressed low engagement to the onboarding activities. Our findings implies that an institutionalized approach could be beneficial for streamlining collective activities and for socialization, but an individualized approach was beneficial in the specific role training. An individual approach tailored to the candidate, combined with several collective and required activities seems to be a more optimal choice of tactic when onboarding is virtual. The candidates have different experiences, which influence which tactic that are most suited, but all candidates reported a desire for a better overview and larger networks in the organization.

We found great differences in commitment among employees in the same organization. Most socialization activities were not planned or mandatory throughout the organization, but something the leaders were responsible for implementing. Klein et al. (2015) argue that required activities are more helpful than encouraged activities, which indicate that organizations should provide mandatory activities to complete. This will provide all new hires the same welcome and meet some of the expectations we found among new hires. Our findings show that the manager has a large responsibility in the virtual onboarding process, a more personal plan in addition to the required activities could be provided by the organization. It could also be beneficial to help structure mandatory activities in a way that suits their new hires well. An example could be that it would be mandatory for the department to have a social gathering virtually,

but it could be planned and executed in a way that would suit the new hire, and help communicate the culture of the organization.

As Sally Stetson (HR News; Alexandria, 2020) experienced, there should never be one video session only in a virtual process, but rather multiple interactive sessions. Our findings support her experience, as some participants after several months in an organization still had not completed the videos they had received. Others were unable to keep up with one-way communication in these videos. Opposite, some of the participants enjoyed videos they could watch when they had the time. As shown in previous research it would be more beneficial to have a structured plan and time set aside to participate in interactive onboarding sessions with others (Ashforth & Saks, 1996). In these different cases we found that experience was a related factor. Prior work experience could be expected to not only impact proactive behaviors but also to have direct effects on socialization learning outcomes (Klein & Heuser, 2008).

Results from our study implies that an individualized approach was better suited for the more experienced workers and those in leadership positions, as they were more self-driven. The graduates and those who had previously participated in more formal programs needed a more structured plan with better overview of activities. Although those with experience managed a more unstructured tactic, we see that more structure and a collective approach for socialization and cultural learning could be beneficial for most employees when onboarding is virtual. This would gather the new employees in more interactive information meetings where they have the possibility to ask questions and get a proper welcome. Such meetings could give them time to process and adjust, and multiple interactive sessions may be beneficial for networking. This approach will give the newcomers an experience of the culture, instead of mere talk. It appears that the optimal timing of practices is very complex, and it depends on the need of the new employee, the specific practice, and how many practices are being offered (Klein et al., 2015). This also applies to virtual onboarding, where a structured plan and individual approach can help meet the individual's needs. It is important to make enough time during virtual onboarding, and not stress all activities within the first two weeks.

## 5.2.2 MEETING EXPECTATIONS

Research shows that the organization should provide their newcomers with accurate information and that a psychological contract breach can lead to lower job satisfaction and lower commitment (Lapointe et al., 2013). Our findings clearly support this statement. If the expectations of the newcomer were not met, the associated organizational commitment was low. These expectations derived from the amount of work in the onboarding period, the supervisor's availability and support, and the organizations' virtual onboarding process. We found that the expectations varied between the employees, and that the younger, newly graduated employees had higher expectations for the onboarding practices than the more experienced employees. One of the companies asked their newcomers during the recruitment process what could disappoint them. This could be a way of charting the expectations of the newcomer, to prevent a psychological contract breach.

Our findings indicate that being hired in a recognized, medium- to large sized Norwegian enterprise also brings some expectations for the newcomers. Even though the work situation during the pandemic was new for both the company and the new hire, employees still had certain expectations of the virtual onboarding process. These expectations existed regardless of what was communicated during the recruitment phase. If the expectations were not met, our findings indicate that the newcomers were less committed to the organization, than those applicants whose experiences corresponded with expectations. This could be linked to theory where relational contract breaches are linked to the intention to leave (Heffernan & Rochford, 2017). Our findings imply that the organization should try to map out the expectation of the newcomer, to be able to fulfill them and avoid a psychological contract breach.

## 5.2.3 ASSIGN A "GO-TO-PERSON"

Our findings indicate that having an assigned "buddy" or mentor is beneficial for the new employee. This gives the employee an assigned "go-to-person" that ensures that the employee has someone who provides frequent information and answers to questions efficiently. Our research shows that many of the employees

that were onboarding from home-office became inefficient, because they did not want to interrupt their supervisor or team members. This could be avoided if the mentor and the new employee create an environment where the new hire always feel free to ask questions. According to previous research the "buddy" must set aside a certain amount of time during the first weeks to give advice, provide insight and answer questions (Settle-Murphy, 2012). This is also in line with our findings, where we found that if the mentor did not have enough time for the new employee this could make them feel forsaken.

Further, our findings imply that those employees who had an engaging team or mentor were more proactive and took more initiative. This is supported in theory where they state that it is easier to have proactive behavior for the newcomer if they feel high initial support and trust from their coworkers (Parker et.al., 2006; Jokisaari & Vuori, 2018) Even though having an engaging team is important, our findings show that it is less of an importance than anticipated. It is important for the new hires to have at least one "go-to-person", whether this person is the assigned mentor, a colleague, or the supervisor. We found implications that new hires who had engaging team members that were available for questions, sooner felt a part of the organization than those who had not. Research shows that trust in the supervisor has a greater impact on the performance of the employee than other trust references (Lapointe et al., 2014). Yet, we argue that when onboarding is virtual, other colleagues can also provide the needed trust and support.

Declines in supervisor support were related to decreases in newcomer role clarity and job satisfaction (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). Our findings support this claim, as one of the candidates still felt new after several months in the new position. She did not have a "go-to-person", and with decreasing support from her supervisor, her role felt unclear. This made her motivation, satisfaction, and commitment low. According to Lapointe et al. (2014) newcomers who perceive that they are cared about by their supervisor and coworkers will reciprocate with engagement and trust. Our findings imply that those employees who felt a stronger connection with their supervisor, where the supervisor became their "go-to-person", seemed more committed to the organization. Our findings indicate that those new hires who had high LMX felt confident to ask questions, which in turn

led to better role clarity. This is also shown in theory which argues that there is a relationship between LMX and role clarity, and that this could be because individuals in high-LMX relationships interact more frequently with their leaders (Bauer et al., 2006). It can be hard to achieve high LMX in virtual onboarding, but our findings indicate the importance of establishing such relationships.

Our suggestion for organizations is to facilitate a "go-to-person" to provide support for the newcomer. Our study shows the benefits for the organization by establishing such relations for the newcomer. Based on this research, the organizations should provide training or guidelines for supervisors, mentors and team members to ensure availability and create an optimal "go-to-person". We also suggest that the newcomers are informed about the purpose of this arrangement to make sure that they reach out when needed.

### 5.2.4 ESTABLISH INFORMAL COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

In our research we found that some of the participants had very little informal conversation during the virtual workday. They had contacts they could ask work-related questions, but did not know many of their new colleagues personally. Our findings indicate the importance of an informal chat when working remotely, where a colleague by saying "hi" in the morning, opens for a conversation during the day. The lack of small talk by the coffee machine, all the informal talk that usually happens in the canteen, the first few minutes of meetings and around the corridors was missed by all the candidates. Informal social networks are important to understand the newcomers' employee relationship (Heffernan & Rochford, 2017) and to provide a more personal guide to help the newcomer navigate the transition into the organizations (Klein & Heuser, 2008).

Both our findings and reviewed theory are clear about the importance of establishing social relationships with the newcomer. Our analysis of the data (appendix 8.4) indicates that those who felt socialized also felt more committed. Those with a larger social network and those who had someone to trust, seemed more satisfied with their workplace. The difficulties when conducting a virtual onboarding is how to create such informal talk, when sitting in front of the screen

and having a busy workday. Overall, our study shows that facilitating social gatherings is highly necessary as not everyone is equally proactive and outgoing to do so themselves.

For some of the respondents a virtual lunch was not the best option. They already had so much time in front of the screen, that they would rather do something else in their lunch break. Some organizations had suggested taking lunch walks with someone who lived nearby, but for a newcomer it was hard to take initiative, and some also lived far away from their colleagues. From our research we found that organizations should establish directives of the use of the different digital platforms. In one of the organizations, they had a chat-service that was meant for instant short messages, socialization and to be an informal channel. This was well known to all the employees in this company. When everybody in the organization had the same understanding of the use of the channel, like group chats and instant one-to-one conversations, it was easier for the new hire to reach out to their colleagues. In other organizations, even the chat-function in Microsoft Teams was formal. Useful information occurs more frequently through work group interactions and social networks (Moreland et al, 2001), which substantiates the claim to establish such informal channels for socialization.

Another example retrieved from our interviews was to set aside a few minutes for an informal chat in the beginning or end of meetings, initiated by the meeting convener. This was to experience the vibe and social codes in the organization, and to establish social relations. Relational contract breaches can give employees an intention to leave (Heffernan & Rochford, 2017). Our research on virtual onboarding shows that offering a place to be spontaneous and "drop by" digitally can create a stronger bond between the employees, which in turn can lead to higher organizational commitment.

### 5.2.5 DELEGATE RESPONSIBILITY

To reduce newcomer uncertainty, theory suggests focusing on socialization (Ashforth & Saks, 1996). Further we elaborate on the importance of feeling like a resource and a part of the organization, and the benefits that come from feeling a sense of belonging.

We found individual differences to the outcome of the socialization tactics used, mostly based on previous experience and current roles in the organization. This statement is supported by Klein & Heuser (2008) which expects that such differences can have an impact on proactive behavior, and a direct effect on the socialization learning outcomes. In our study, the leaders expressed self-confidence and competence. They were proactive in finding information and seemed to be confident in their new positions at an early stage. They did not need a lot of support from their leader as they managed their tasks and had a busy calendar from the first week. This is supported in theory where Schein (1978) said that "if an organization wants to speed up the process of integrating its new employees, it must find ways of giving them responsible, meaningful, work as soon as possible" (Jokisaari & Vuori, 2018 p. 162). As research argues, newcomers who feel comfortable will make more proactive actions themselves (Klein & Heuser, 2008). One can argue that newly hired managers feel comfortable in their role. This could be because they are experienced or paid attention to by their team and co-workers. As Lapointe et al. (2014) found, such attention can lead to engagement and trust. To create trust and confidence among those who are not in leadership positions can be more difficult when onboarding is conducted virtually. Our suggestion is to delegate tasks and responsibility to the newcomer within the first critical 90 days.

As Jokisaari & Vuori (2018) showed, delegation of authority and responsibility was positively related to new employees' role clarity, job satisfaction and organizational knowledge. The tasks delegated to employees in our study did not have to be of great importance, as some of the participants seemed to have gained organizational knowledge just by being responsible for social happenings or virtual meetings. We also found that employees that had been given such responsibility, felt more valuable and socialized, as they had to reach out to others in the organization to complete the tasks given to them. By making information and resources available to employees, organizations can maximize proactivity effectiveness among new hires (Klein & Polin, 2012).

Niemiec & Ryan (2009) found that when people are intrinsically motivated, they play, explore, and engage in activities for the inherent fun, challenge, and excitement of doing so. This intrinsic motivation is promoted by feeling competent, autonomy and relatedness. In our study, those with long experience expressed competence and showed a greater motivation for their work. Those candidates who felt more alone and with few contacts showed lower satisfaction and commitment. From our analysis, the need for caring, interaction with others and useful feedback during virtual onboarding are related to organizational commitment. Providing new hires with responsibility can create motivation and a sense of belonging by making them feel valuable.

## 5.3 CONCLUDING MODEL

After discussing our findings, we have suggested five different organizational and managerial actions that influence the new employee's commitment when onboarding is performed virtually. These findings are summarized in the Concluding Model (Figure II). This model shows how related theory, and findings from our interviews are related to high organizational commitment. The model highlights relatedness for the new hire, as those who managed to feel a sense of belonging during a virtual onboarding, seemed more committed to their organization. For the supervisors, we found feedback to be the most important contribution during the onboarding phase. Further, the team can provide support to establish social relations and trust. However, our findings indicate that other trust referents like a colleague or a mentor can provide the support as well. Lastly, we highlight that the responsibility of the organization is to provide a structured process and meet the expectations to make the newcomer feel welcome. Our research suggests that these four factors, together with the five practical tools, can contribute to organizational commitment.
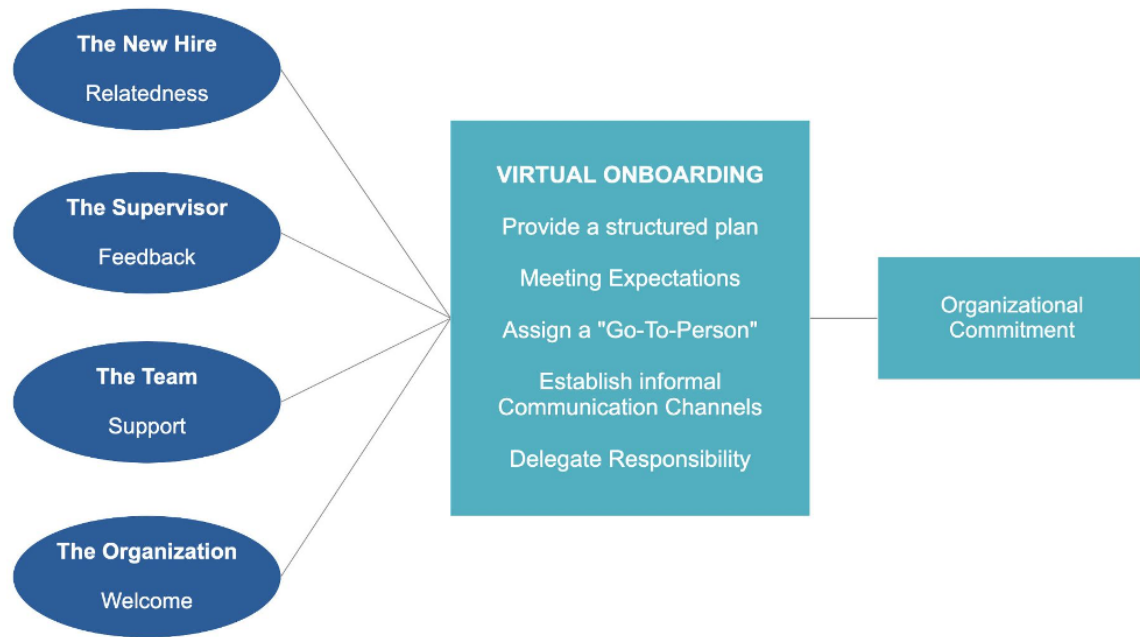
(Figure II, The Concluding Model)

# 6. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to offer a practice-based insight to how organizations can facilitate high commitment among new employees when onboarding is performed virtually. Our study provides an insight to new employee's perceptions and experiences with virtual onboarding, where the situation of virtual training and socialization was new to both the new hire and the organizations participating. In this section we will elaborate on limitations to the thesis and suggestions for future research. Further, we wrap up our findings with a conclusion to the thesis.

## 6.1 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are some limitations to our research. Since this study relies on the respondents' impression of their managers, team, and organization, a clear limitation is that the study is based on interviews and subjective conceptions, and might not be generalizable. Further, due to the sample size we might have missed important perspectives from other employees. Future research can therefore use a larger sample size to get more generalizable answers or use a qualitative study to

be able to discover other related factors to creating organizational commitment during virtual onboarding

A second limitation is that the study is based on some specific branches and employees' perceptions. Our candidates consisted of employees from Norwegian enterprises within real estate, banking, and accounting, with positions that before the pandemic worked mostly "in-house" at offices. Future research can expand this to see if the five suggestions could prove useful outside these industries.

A third limitation to our study is that there were only 12 participants from medium- to large sized companies and only three men represented in the sample. The uneven balance between gender could affect the results. Future research could therefore investigate if different genders experience virtual onboarding in the same way. Another limitation could be the lack of variety in company sizes. Future research could challenge these findings by looking at companies with variable sizes.

As the business world is changing, the study provides practical implications for a variety of organizations which find themselves in the same, unfamiliar situation. Further, it could be interesting to examine different working methods and tools that can be used in virtual onboarding, as technology is evolving quickly. It could be beneficial to learn more about how to structure virtual meetings or activities to engage the new hires.

## 6.2 CONCLUSION

Our theoretical contribution is based on different onboarding theories where we found that several of the theories reviewed are relevant for virtual onboarding. Further, our findings demonstrate some difficulties when onboarding virtually, where the most challenging factors being socialization and creating a feeling of belonging. We found these factors to affect the organizational commitment among the new hires. Our study shows that when employees are not able to meet their colleagues or supervisors face-to face, an effective virtual onboarding process should include socialization activities. From the interviews conducted, we have

concluded with five practical suggestions on how to facilitate an optimal virtual onboarding. These suggestions are; (1) Provide a structured plan, (2) Meeting expectations, (3) Assign a "go-to-person", (4) Establish informal channels and (5) Delegate responsibility. These five suggestions are actions that both the supervisor and the organization can facilitate for the newcomer. Our findings indicate that if these suggestions are in place, the newcomer will essentially feel more included and more committed to the organization.

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# 8. APPENDICES

## 8.1 INTERVIEW GUIDE ENGLISH VERSION

**General information - background**

Gender:

Age:

What is your position in the company?

Start date in company X?

Experience (from previous jobs, similar companies etc.):

Would you describe yourself as an introvert or as an extrovert?

**Leader/Team/HR**

How would you characterize your supervisor in the onboarding process?

How would you describe your relationship? (Indicative, supportive, absent, trustworthy?)

Has the support from your supervisor decreased or increased during the onboarding process?

How would you describe the communication and feedback (structured/unstructured meetings, how often ect.)

How would you describe your team/department in the onboarding process? (Active, participating, absent etc.)

Do you feel like your team talks about personal things, do you get to know them on a personal level?

How involved has the HR department been in the onboarding process? (E.g. Have they initiated joint activities, plans, guidance etc.)

**Onboarding practices and programs:**

Which activities were offered and which have you participated in?

How was the timing for the activities and the given information?

Was it a clear/structured plan for the onboarding process? Did you know which activities were planned for you and when (deadlines from organization)? How much time is set aside for different activities or programs?

How proactive and engaged will you describe yourself during the onboarding experience?

Were you assigned a mentor and what was your experience with this arrangement?

Who was your "go-to" person, and what type of role/position did he or she have?

### Socialization tactics:

At what point did you feel that you were a part of the organization/team?

Which activities did the company provide to ease the socialization-process? (E.g. lunch, quiz, meetings).

Were you the only new employee or did you have a group where you were several in the same situation?

### Virtual onboarding:

How did the onboarding process in company X work?

What worked well?

What worked less well?

How did virtual onboarding work for you?

How would you describe the differences between virtual and "regular physical" onboarding based on past experiences?

### Psychological contract:

Was the onboarding-process as expected? (Better/worse?)

Do you think your expectations to the onboarding would be any different if it was not an ongoing pandemic?

Was the onboarding process as expected? Was the company as expected?

What kind of expectations did you have to the work environment and were these expectations met?

Would you describe yourself as committed to the organization? (Why/Why not?)

### Summary:
Do you have any other thoughts or experiences you want to mention? Good or bad.

# 8.2 INTERVIEW GUIDE NORWEGIAN VERSION

**Generell info - bakgrunnsinfo:**

Kjønn:

Alder:

Hva er din stilling?

Hvor lenge har du jobbet i selskap X - og hvor mye hjemmefra?

Erfaring (tidligere stilling, lignende firma etc.).

Vil du beskrive deg som introvert eller ekstrovert?

**Leder/Team/HR-deltakelse:**

Hvordan vil du beskrive din nærmeste leder i onboarding-prosessen?

Hvordan vil du beskrive deres forhold/relasjon?
(Veiledende, støttende, fraværende, pålitelig)

Har lederens støtte endret seg underveis?

Hvordan vil du beskrive kommunikasjonen og feedback fra leder i perioden?  (strukturert/ustrukturerte møter, hvor ofte etc.)

Hvordan vil du beskrive ditt team/avdeling i onboarding-prosessen?
(Aktiv, deltakende, fraværende osv.)

I teamet, kommuniseres det bare om jobbrelaterte ting, eller også mer personlige ting, følelser, hvordan man har det? Blir man kjent på et personlig plan?

Hvor deltagende har HR-avdelingen vært i onboarding-prosessen?
(Har de initiert felles aktiviteter, planer, veiledning osv.)

**Onboarding aktiviteter:**

Hva slags aktiviteter har du deltatt i? Eksempler på noen digitale? (kurs, tester, møter..?)

Kan du fortelle litt om timing på ulike aktiviteter (hvis det finnes noen) og informasjonsflyten.

Var det en tydelig plan på onboardingen? Visste du selv hvilke aktiviteter som var planlagt og om det var noen deadline på gjennomføringen? Hvor lang tid var satt av til opplæring/sosialisering?

Hvor proactive/engasjert var du selv i onboardingen?

Har du blitt tildelt en fadder/mentor i onboardingen, og hvordan har du eventuelt oppfattet dette?

Hvem har vært din "go-to" person og hva slags rolle har hun/han hatt?

**Sosialiserings Taktikker**

Når/etter hvor lang tid følte du at du var en fullverdig del/ressurs i organisasjonen/teamet? (Hvor lang tid har det tatt).

Hvilke aktiviteter har bedriften anvendt for å sosialisere deg inn i gruppen? (f.eks julebord, lunsj, quiz, møter)

Var du den eneste nyansatte og har derfor gjennomført prosessen alene, eller har dere vært en gruppe med flere nyansatte sammen i samme situasjon?

**Virtuell Onboarding:**

Hvordan synes du onboarding- prosessen i selskap X fungerte?

Hva fungerte bra? (Noen aktiviteter eller tiltak?)

Hva fungerte mindre bra?

Hvordan fungerte virtuell onboarding for deg?

Hvordan vil du beskrive forskjellene mellom virtuell onboarding og "vanlig"/fysisk onboarding på kontoret fra tidligere erfaringer?

**Psychological contract:**

Hvordan vil du beskrive dine forventninger til sosialiseringen/onboardingen i bedriften?
Ville forventningene vært annerledes om det ikke hadde vært en pågående pandemi?

Gikk onboarding prosessen som forventet?

Hvilke forventninger hadde du til arbeidsmiljøet? Har bedriften, leder og medarbeidere innfridd forventningene?

Hvor lojal er du til organisasjonen?

**Avslutning:**

Er det andre ting du har tenkt på eller lagt merke til de første månedene som har vært bra/dårlig eller annerledes fra tidligere erfaringer?

Er det noe annet du har tenkt på som kan være relevant for oss å vite?

# Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet *" Virtuell Onboarding"*?

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å finne ut hvordan onboarding fungerer når det gjennomføres virtuelt. I dette skrivet gir vi deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

**Formål**

Prosjektet gjelder vår avsluttende masteroppgave ved Handelshøyskolen BI. Formålet med studien er å belyse effekten av ulike onboardingpraksiser når onboardingperioden gjennomføres virtuelt. Det er mange studier om sosialiseringstaktikk og ulike praksiser, rollen som sosiale agenter blant ledere og kollegaer, og også noen studier om å jobbe virtuelt. Derimot er forskning på hvordan du best kan onboarde virtuelt relativt knapp.

Ut ifra dette har vi landet på følgende problemstilling: Hvordan oppnå høyt organisatorisk engasjement blant nyansatte når onboarding (sosialisering) utføres virtuelt?

**Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?**

Handelshøyskolen BI er ansvarlig for prosjektet.

**Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?**

For å besvare problemstillingen ønsker vi å intervjue kandidater som hadde oppstartsperiode mellom april og desember 2020, som selv har opplevd onboarding virtuelt på grunn av hjemmekontor under pandemien Covid-19. Utvalget vil bestå av 10-15 deltakere fra ulike roller og nivåer.

**Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?**

Deltakelse i prosjektet innebærer å delta i et intervju som vil ta om lag 60 minutter, hvor du vil bli bedt om å besvare spørsmål omkring din oppstartsperiode i organisasjonen. Temaer i intervjuet vil være sosialisering, ledelse, onboardingsaktiviteter og dine erfaringer. Vi kommer også til å be om alder, stilling og erfaring fra lignende roller.

Vi vil ta lydopptak og notater under intervjuet.

**Det er frivillig å delta**

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykket tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. Alle dine personopplysninger vil da bli slettet. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke

vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg. Det vil ikke påvirke ditt forhold til arbeidsgiver.

**Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger**

Vi vil bare bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrivet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket. Lydopptak og notater fra intervjuet vil kun være tilgjengelig for student og veileder. Lydopptak lagres på ekstern harddisk, notater lagres atskilt på privat datamaskin. Din kontaktinformasjon vil lagres atskilt fra lydopptak.

Deltakere i prosjektet vil ikke kunne gjenkjennes i oppgaven. Kun oppfatninger og meninger vil bli publisert, og kan derfor ikke knyttes opp mot enkeltpersoner.

**Hva skjer med opplysningene dine når vi avslutter forskningsprosjektet?**

Opplysningene slettes når prosjektet avsluttes, noe som etter planen er 01.07.21.

**Dine rettigheter**

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- innsyn i hvilke personopplysninger som er registrert om deg, og å få utlevert en kopi av

  opplysningene,

- å få rettet personopplysninger om deg,
- å få slettet personopplysninger om deg, og
- å sende klage til Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger.

  **Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?**

  Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

  På oppdrag fra Handelshøyskolen BI har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

  **Hvor kan jeg finne ut mer?**

  Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med:

- Veileder Ellen Rebeca Kackur, student Julie Mjølid Tømran, eller student Birgitte Bendiksen

  Sandvik ved Handelshøyskolen BI.

- Personvernombud Vibeke Nesbakken (vibeke.nesbakken@bi.no) ved Handelshøyskolen BI.

  Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til NSD sin vurdering av prosjektet, kan du ta kontakt med:

  • NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS på epost (personverntjenester@nsd.no) eller på telefon: 55 58 21 17.

  Med vennlig hilsen

*Student*                 *Student*                 *Veileder*

Julie Mjølid Tømran    Birgitte Bendiksen Sandvik    Ellen Rebeca Kackur

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# Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet «Virtuell Onboarding», og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

- Å delta i intervju

- Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet

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(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

# 8.4 TEMPLATE ANALYSIS

**Template analysis**

| Participants | Previous onboarding experience | LMX | Team involvement | Activities offered* | Proactivity (participants own view) | Assigned mentor | Socialized | Expectations to the onboarding | Psych. contract breach | Successful virtual onboarding | Committed to organization |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Yes | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | Yes | 1 | 3 | Yes | No | No |
| 2 | Yes | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | Yes | 3 | 3 | No | Yes | Yes |
| 3 | Yes | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | No | 3 | 3 | No | Yes | Yes |
| 4 | Yes | 3 | 1 | 1 | 3 | Yes | 2 | 2 | Yes | Yes | No |
| 5 | No | 2 | 1 | 1 | 3 | Yes | 2 | 3 | Yes | No | No |
| 6 | Yes | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | Yes | 3 | 2 | No | Yes | Yes |
| 7 | Yes | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 | Yes | 3 | 2 | No | Yes | Yes |
| 8 | Yes | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | No | 3 | 2 | No | Yes | Yes |
| 9 | Yes | 3 | 1 | 1 | 3 | Yes | 3 | 2 | No | Yes | Yes |
| 10 | No | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | No | 2 | 3 | Yes | No | No |
| 11 | Yes | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | No | 3 | 3 | No | Yes | Yes |
| 12 | Yes | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | No | 2 | 3 | Yes | Yes | Yes |

**Scale 1-3**:**

1 = low

2 = medium

3 = high

* Scale of offered and completed activities. Both socialization activities and programs. These are divided between few, moderate and several activities (1-3), based on our perceptions of the information provided during the interviews.

** The scale is a measure from low to high, based on our perceptions of the information provided during the interviews.