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THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL SOLUTIONS ON ORGANIZATIONAL ONBOARDING PRACTICE: A CASE STUDY OF A SAUDI-ARABIAN ORGANISATION

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Abstract

This research in progress attempts to investigate the impact of digital tools on organisational onboarding practices within the context of a telecommunication company in Saudi Arabia. The research responds to the call for more studies on how digital technologies can improve employee onboarding practices. Using a qualitative methodology, semi-structured interview data will be gathered from new employees to examine how the use of digital tools has enhanced the onboarding practices and its subsequent impact on their engagement and retention. Furthermore, the research aims to contribute to a better understanding of how digital tools can be used to enhance the experiences of employees during the onboarding stage and provide future research on how digital tools change employees' onboarding experiences. In this research, the words "digital technologies", "digital tools" and "digitalisation" are used interchangeably.

Keywords: Organisational onboarding, Digitalization, Saudi Arabia, Engagement, Retention.

1.0 Introduction

Just in the last few years, rapid advances in digital technologies have fundamentally altered how businesses operate. In accordance with Brennen and Kreiss (2014), digitalisation referring to "the adoption or increase in use of digital or computer technology by an organization, industry, country, etc." Businesses that fail to adopt these newer digital technologies will eventually fall behind their competitors (Ebert & Duarte, 2018). In addition, unprecedented challenges were presented to businesses with

the emergence of COVID-19 (Rockwood, 2020). Therefore, organisations have transitioned to operating remotely.

One operational area that could change using digital technology is human resources, particularly employee onboarding. Onboarding includes all the practices that an organisation conducts to facilitate retention efforts and help new employees adjust to new organisations (Peacock & Ruppel, 2019). Those new to the company need to be integrated into the firm's operations and its culture. In many companies, the responsibility for integrating new employees falls upon the human resources and recruiting teams. The process of onboarding is likely to change due to the variety of tools used, including digital tools for HR functions (Fenech et al., 2019; Larkin, 2017).

There are challenges related to organisational onboarding. One of the biggest hindrances to efficient onboarding is time (or lack thereof) for managers to appropriately assess, coach and engage their newcomers (Ferrazzi, 2015).

Organisations will be employing many individuals from Generation Y who are known as digital natives, as they have grown up playing electronic games and using mobile applications. Generation Y expects a smooth user interface in all areas of their lives (Franceski, 2017; Peacock & Ruppel, 2019).

Research by the Society for Human Resource Management shows that nearly 1 in 25 people leave work due to a poor onboarding programme (Fennessey, 2015).

In an economy that competes for talent, employers are sensitive to the costs and inefficiencies associated with talent development, recruiting, hiring and retention (Tyszko & Sheets, 2019). It is estimated that one-third of newcomers become dissatisfied and look for a new job during their first six months of work (Zielinski, 2019).

In today's hopeful but competitive environment, employers wish to probe all potential ways of recruiting and retaining newcomers. New technology trends are addressing this workload issue with software configured to do much of the repetitive operations currently borne by HR specialists. These technologies save time and effort. By way of example, chatbots can be useful for large organisations interested in improving their process efficiency and employee satisfaction. Overall, robust onboarding practices can reduce turnover and significantly improve workplace adjustment (Zielinski, 2019).

However, very little is known about the impact of these tools on onboarding practices (Zidena & Joob, 2020). As such, there is a call for more studies to understand how digital tools affect onboarding practices in an organisation (Prestridge, 2019). Within this context, the core research question this proposed study aims to address emerges: How do digital solutions impact organisational onboarding practices?

1.1 Research Motivation

Saudi Arabia established Vision 2030 which aim to strengthening digital transformation management and supporting local investments in the ICT sectors. This is the author's impetus for making onboarding digital tools related research a high professional priority. Additionally, the novel coronavirus brought about unprecedented and confusing circumstances, and organisations worldwide were forced to shift their entire business platforms online. Moreover, there is no research in Saudi Arabia about using digital tools for new employee onboarding practices. In short, this author's research efforts will be a matter of civic duty to support Saudi Vision 2030.

1.2 Aim and Questions

Aim: To explore the impact of digital solutions on organisational onboarding practices.

Questions: The sub-research questions are as follows:

- What are the challenges and limitations of pre-digitalisation onboarding?
- How digital solutions are changing organisational onboarding practices.
- How do new employees and HR professionals perceive that the digitalisation of organisational onboarding influences employee engagement?

2.0 Literatures Review

2.1 Onboarding

Onboarding is the action via which new hires obtain the skills, knowledge and behaviours needed for becoming efficient employees (O'Neil et al., 2017). The processes of organisational onboarding are explained by Allen (2006). Onboarding is a

multi-stage process comprised of three stages. An anticipatory onboarding stage that happens before organisational entry, an encounter or accommodation stage in which the new employee gets in the company, and an adaptation or role management stage in which the new employee starts adapting and settling in.

There are four purposes of employee onboarding: making the employee feel welcome; ensuring the newcomer has the primary information desired to function efficiently; helping the new employee understand the organisation's identity; and initiating the new employee's onboarding into the company's values, culture and ways of doing things (Dessler, 2013).

Decades of sociology, Human Resources and psychology research clarify the fact that onboarding is a key element whether new employees feel integrated into their new organisations, and thus, whether they plan to stay in their new positions or not (Peacock & Ruppel, 2019).

Onboarding has four separate levels: the so-called *Four Cs*, which are the foundation stone of effective onboarding. Compliance, clarification, culture and connection (Britto et al., 2017).

Onboarding generally starts between the signing of the employment contract and the first day of work, and it continues during the recruit's initial period of employment with the organisation. However, there is little agreement on exactly when onboarding ends (Schroth, 2019).

The emergence of the millennial workforce has meant that organisations should explore alternative platforms for onboarding and engagement. Sixty-nine percent of employees are likely to remain with a company for three years if they are provided with a first-class onboarding experience (Mukherjee, 2018). The literature on onboarding often takes one of two forms: 1) a report on the links between organisational behaviour, newcomer behaviour and learning or adaptation; and 2) a process model of onboarding as a whole.

The onboarding phase should be perceived as a critical success factor for an attraction and retention strategy. Optimised onboarding presents clear and significant benefits to organisations, such as more effective employee/manager communication, stronger bonds among colleagues, faster culture assimilation, and an important contribution to

employee engagement and retention (Cesário & Chambel, 2019). In the same vein, Hassan (2020) has argued that the onboarding process is an investment in the employee and their experience in the new role, which helps them feel more committed. Karambelkar & Bhattacharya (2017) suggested that the better approach could be to treat the onboarding as a change for the new employee and for the organization, and to apply the change management process.

2.2 Organisational Onboarding Goes Digital

The onboarding process is one of the areas on which organisations should focus their redesign efforts (Keebler & Watson, 2014). Companies are now developing or adopting the best digital tools and processes to improve user experiences, especially via self-service portals for onboarding and offboarding (Lamb, 2019). Onboarding digital tools can help managers gather key success indicators, such as higher employee retention and greater employee engagement. Furthermore, this process helps increase clarity and simplify communication inside organisations (Ferrazzi, 2015). A new, open-source conversational bot for new hires has been suggested in a recent study. The authors believe that this type of conversational bot is able to interact with new joiners smoothly and that the rate of retention for open-source contributors will increase. While this is likely a good idea, it should be confirmed after using the bot. (Dominic et al., 2020). Similarly, using bots for onboarding new software engineers offers the potential for faster onboarding times and even less time spent by experienced software engineers mentoring newcomers (Dominic et al., 2020).

In the same vein, advances in technology could produce quite a difference in the process of onboarding. Even though they will never be a substitute for personal communication, techniques such as self-service portals, virtual interviews, and learning management systems increase its effectiveness. Creativity in conjunction with technology makes an organisation's culture and objectives clear and attractive for newcomers (Sheth, 2015). From a technical perspective, a menu-based chatbot experience is more optimal for new hires' onboarding. Conversational chatbots are very complex and time-consuming to implement, and much more prone to error (Miciu'a & Miluniec, 2019).

Finally, technological gaps will always exist as the field of human resources evolves in its operations and practices (Patton, 2017). Despite recent advances in technology,

many organisations remain at the tip of the IT iceberg when it comes to automating and optimising the onboarding process (Prestridge, 2019).

2.3 Onboarding in Times of Crises

More recent attention has focused on virtual onboarding due to changes that occurred in businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent article by Rockwood (2020) reports that in a Post-COVID-19 world, digital onboarding will be a reality for many organisations if it was not already (Miller & Nichols, 2020; Rue, 2020).

In this regard, one question that needs to be asked is whether the digitalisation of organisational onboarding solutions will be optional or necessary after 2020?

This section is to confirm the importance of the subject and therefore to what extent this area of research is promising.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy

The interpretivism paradigm is best to develop a deeper understanding of the impacts of adopting different digital tools for onboarding practice.

3.2 Sampling

The selection of the participants will be through non-probability sampling methods. Purposive sampling will be used to generate an exploratory sample. The recruited participants will be new employees at STCS Company, as these individuals will be onboarded to their new workplace.

3.3 Collecting Data Mode

Due to COVID-19, a semi-structured interview will be carried out remotely, and pilot interviews will be conducted prior to official interviews to ensure the effectiveness and validity of the formal interviews.

I would like to collect data during multiple stages according to the recruitment seasons in STCS. Additionally, I am targeting new employees who have joined the organization

for one year or less. I would like to do 40 interviews at minimum until data and analytical saturation is achieved.

3.4 Data Analysis Method

An inductive thematic analysis will be utilised as a data analysis model. The six steps of thematic analysis defined by Braun and Clarke (2013) will be followed. Also, the process for data checking will be the constant comparative method. This strategy entails comparing discrete pieces of data with others to reveal similarities or differences in order to develop perceptions or discover patterns between or among data points (Pickard, 2013).

4.0 Expected Contribution

Contribution to research: In the case of new digital tools utilised in telecommunications institutions, the complexity and uncertainty that surround the Saudi Arabian context remain exposed and require data synthesis action into a theoretical solid.

Theoretical contributions: I will be developing a framework by utilizing a specific theory or concept, but at this point in time, I am investigating all the potential theories and concepts for the purpose of comparing them.

Contributions to practice: I will provide worthwhile insights for those who are faced with the need to evaluate the digitalisation of new hire onboarding practices and their relationship to employee engagement and retention. As all advanced tools for onboarding have been created in-house, this study's results will indirectly help the Digital Transformation Team at STCS to develop and improve these tools according to the new employee's feedback.

5.0 Limitation

I would like to focus on welcoming onboarding for different types of roles. I will focus on onboarding in specific departments and roles, not on team onboarding or project onboarding, for example.

Practically, the results cannot represent all new employees and the entire telecommunications sector. Also, according to the current access available to me, I

would like to look for onboarding for the telecommunication sector, but I am keeping the door open to another sector (two case studies). Therefore, I cannot generalise the results.

The geography of this work will be limited. The number of participants could be considered a limitation of this research.

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