

Analysis of Onboarding Practices in India: A Proposal for Post Pandemic Scenario

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COVID-19 pandemic is altering the work scenario across industries and the future work scenario will demand a high virtual component. The traditional activities undertaken as part of onboarding might be inappropriate in the post-pandemic scenario. The objective of this paper is to develop an onboarding approach that is conducive to the future virtual work scenario. Qualitative analysis of the information gathered from public sources is done based on which a new onboarding framework is proposed. The proposal is rooted in data and theoretically coherent. This paper is a novel attempt to provide initial direction for future researchers and practitioners in the field of human resource practices.

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Introduction

Human Resources (HR) systems of an organization contribute to its competitive advantage and is an important factor that determines the culture (Lado & Wilson, 1994). Organizations invest a considerable amount of resources to get the best people into their fold. Equally important is how the new employees are onboarded effectively and provided with a conducive environment. Onboarding is distinct from traditional orientation programs and focuses on defining multiple roles, cultivating the key relationships, ensuring access to information and follows a phased implementation (Derven, 2008) which could span to a few months. Many organizations have incorporated several activities as part of onboarding. However, empirical evidence indicates that 22% of the attrition happens within 45 days of joining (Virtway, 2019). The scenario is likely to be more troublesome owing to the post-pandemic shifts in work practices. Hence, it is imperative to understand the best onboarding practices that are currently followed and how some of these practices may be better suited for the post-pandemic future.

The COVID pandemic and the ensuing lockdown has forced organizations into adopting virtual work for most of its workforce. This has also necessitated a change in HR practices towards virtual induction and training. In India, most companies are moving towards a virtual onboarding process (Basu, 2020). Onboarding a new employee is an important process which could not only enhance retention rates but also reduce the time required to achieve full productivity. However, virtual onboarding has its challenges and if not done appropriately it may have detrimental effects on the culture of the organization. This study is an attempt to understand the best onboarding practices that can be refined and extended to the post-pandemic work scenario. The paper starts with a succinct review of the literature to bring out the theoretical underpinning. This is followed by deriving appropriate criteria for the selection of firms for the study. Information from secondary sources was used to understand the best practices. A conceptual analysis of current onboarding practices was done and then logically extended to create a proposal for the post-pandemic scenario. The paper concludes with practical implications and directions for future research.

Theoretical Background

Effective management of onboarding could fulfil the distinct needs of both the new individual and the organization. The onboarding experience could reinforce the joining decision and inculcate the feeling of belongingness for the new individual as 90% of the new employees take

a decision to continue in the new organization within the first 6 months (Tarquinio, 2006). On the other hand, onboarding could reduce the time to proficiency of the new joiner (Baek & Bramwell, 2016) benefitting the organization. For example, it takes a new leader four months to be fully functional in the new job (Dai & Meuse, 2007) and a well planned and executed onboarding process has the potential to reduce the time to proficiency by two months (Ganzel, 1998). An onboarding program provides the organization with an opportunity to secure the investments it had made during the talent acquisition process and could hence increase retention and enhance engagement levels (Guangrong & De Meuse, 2007; Jung, 2014) if planned and executed in a thoughtful and standardized manner.

As organizations design and plan the onboarding exercise, they try to ensure that the new employee understands his or her role, organizational expectations from him/her and how would he/she perform for achieving the objectives (Davidson, 2018). It also becomes necessary to make them feel confident in their ability to contribute, valued, and connected with the organization (Baek & Bramwell, 2016). This could be facilitated if he/she becomes knowledgeable about the organizational culture (Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994) and is also socialized. The process of socialization becomes a critical component of the onboarding process as it helps the individual to acquire the attitudes, behaviors and knowledge needed to successfully participate and contribute to his/her company (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

Bauer (2010) in her 4 C's model on onboarding emphasizes the importance of culture along with compliance, clarification and connection. Compliance pertains to informing the new employee about the basic legal and policy-related rules and regulations (Bauer, 2010) which could be delivered through a well written appealing employee handbook which has all the formalized policies and could act as a ready reckoner. Though such a material is generally shared with the new joiners in the first week of their employment, however, companies which share such materials during the pre-boarding can secure more time for other activities during the first day or week and also able to retain 81% of their new hires in the first year (Davidson, 2018). The connection ensures the formation of interpersonal relationships and establishment of information networks which would facilitate the performance of the new employee and could be achieved through mentorship and arranging introductory meetings with reporting manager and subordinates. Clarification would entail imparting knowledge about the role and the entailing expectations of the organization. When informed about individual targets, timelines and assessment methods early on, new employees found it easy to achieve those goals and also perceived greater importance around the job (Jung, 2014). Clarification could be ensured through meetings with relevant stakeholders and introducing the new employee to employee network groups.

There are several possibilities in the approach and multiple activities that are undertaken as part of the onboarding ef-

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forts. Hence, it is very likely that different organizations and industry sectors would be following a different approach to onboarding. Traditionally, onboarding activities have a very high component of physical presence and face to face interaction. The current pandemic has forced many firms to migrate to virtual work to a greater extent. In the post-pandemic period, the attempt would be to reduce the normal face to face interaction to a very low extent possible. Hence, the current approach to onboarding may be not appropriate for the future scenario. The need is to critically examine the current approach and activities, to create a new approach to onboarding that is more conducive with the high virtual work scenario.

Methodology

To create a proposal for the post-pandemic scenario it is imperative to understand the current onboarding best practices in India. For the same, it is necessary to select the most appropriate industry sectors based on suitable criteria. The first criterion was to identify the industry sectors that have a large number of exemplary organizations worth studying. And the second criterion was to select industry sectors that have a possibility of virtual interaction inbuilt into their work context. There are not specific indices that do a comparative analysis of

industry sectors, but a list of firms based on best practices is widely available and Great Places To Work (GPTW) survey is a prominent one. Hence a comparative analysis of the top 50 firms listed in the GPTW survey and their industry sectors was done. It is assumed that the increasing dominance of a few industry sectors in the GPTW list can be taken as a measure of their continuous upgradation. The analysis revealed that four industry sectors dominate the top 50 list and they are mentioned in Table 1.

Among the four, IT, FSI and HSP are sectors that can migrate to virtual interaction scenario to undertake their daily

operations. For the manufacturing and production industry, the possibility of virtual interaction is less and hence it is omitted from further study. Firms from the selected three industry sectors were studied and information was collected about onboarding practices. The information was collected from articles, websites and videos shared by the firm. The sources are mentioned in Appendix 1. This study does not intend to do a firm wise comparison and hence the findings were cumulatively aggregated to the industry sector level. Later, individual activities at each stage were analyzed to create a proposal for the post-pandemic scenario.

Table 1 Important Industry Sectors in the GPTW List

Industry Sector	No. of firms in 2010 list (out of top 50)	No. of firms in 2019 list (out of top 50)
Information Technology (IT)	10	16
Financial Services & Insurance (FSI)	5	8
Hospitality (HSP)	3	5
Manufacturing and Production (MP)	7	7

The information sources were converted into text and the onboarding practices were analyzed by dividing them into four stages. They are: before joining or pre-onboarding, day one or joining day, the first week that includes day two to six, and the first month that has weeks two to four. This was done separately for all the three-industry sectors and the summarized results are presented in Table 2. It is interesting to note that even though many basic activities are common to the three industry sectors, some activities or practices are still confined to specific industry sectors. For example, during the pre-joining phase, congratulatory and informational emails are common, but

During the pre-joining phase, congratulatory and informational emails are common, but online documentation and campus tours are still not widely practised.

online documentation and campus tours are still not widely practised. Besides, during the first day and first week, meeting the future team, classroom sessions, role-based training and networking sessions are common, but group lunches, gifting company merchandise and pairing with a peer are not so common practices. In the later part of the first month, the common practices are mostly related

to training and mentoring. Some unique practices during this phase are cultural immersion, community volunteering and virtual reality-based programs.

Table 2 Industry Comparison of Best Practices

Sector	Pre-Joining	Joining Day	First Week	First Month
IT	Informational e-mails. Access to pre-start portal. One day tour of the office. Festive greeting and gifts. Meet a future colleague.	Meeting the manager. Meeting the team. Welcome e-mail from the CEO. Group lunch.	Virtual sessions to introduce the culture, values, processes, products, employee benefits, and development opportunities. Networking sessions with seniors. Pairing with a peer.	Cultural immersion program, Volunteering for local communities. Networking with seniors. Creating a goal plan. Business line focussed training.
FSI	Congratulatory e-mail. Online Documentation. Background verification.	Meeting the manager. Meeting the team. Joining kits to all new joiners.	Classroom sessions to introduce the values, culture, processes, products etc. Networking with other departments. Department specific training.	Mentoring of new employees. Field (external market) exposure.
HSP	Congratulatory emails. Informational emails.	Provide company merchandise Provide welcome gift.	Classroom sessions about firm history, vision, mission, values, service standards and scale of operations. Icebreaking with senior management.	Virtual Reality based business immersion program. Experience day to day operations.

Pre-joining Phase

An analysis of the various activities that are undertaken during the pre-joining phase is provided in the Table 3. The pre-joining phase or pre-onboarding or preboarding starts with emails to selected candidates. These are done both for information sharing and to maintain a constant touch with the candidate. Festive greeting and sending merchandise as gifts are also done to bring an emotional connect with the future employee and make them feel

excited about joining the new organization. Some firms have started undertaking few of the activities (which otherwise used to be done after joining) like documentation and access to internal portals, corresponding to the compliance component of Bauer's (2010) model. Firms also resort to one day tour of campus and meeting with a future colleague creating a connection with the new workplace. Such colleagues act as a peer mentor or peer support and ensure that the candidate does not drop out before joining. These

are mostly done by firms that have a smaller number of employees joining every year and also mostly for candidates who are first-time employees.

Table 3 Analysis of Activities in Pre-joining Stage

Step	Activity	Purpose and Benefit
1	Congratulatory e-mail.	Communicating to the candidate that he/she has made a good career choice. A feel good for the candidate.
2	Informational e-mails.	Provide all essential details to the candidate. It also serves as a branding effort.
3	Online Documentation.	Saving time on the joining day. It is beneficial for firms with large number of new employees joining on the same day.
4	Background verification.	Ensuring the candidate's credentials are genuine. This helps in taking corrective actions before investing more in the candidate.
5	Festive greeting and gifts.	Building a sense of belongingness and community. Making the new employee feel welcomed and a valued member.
6	Access to pre-start portal.	Providing more information that cannot be given through emails, like business unit specific details and development opportunities. Candidates will learn a lot about the firm and some part of the initial sessions that generally happen after joining can be done here to save time and cost.
7	Meet a future colleague.	Providing an opportunity to the candidate for having an informal and frank conversation about the future job. This will reduce apprehensions about the future team mates and the new role.
8	One day tour of the office.	Creating an opportunity for the candidate to see the office campus facility and its general environment.

Joining Day

An analysis of the various activities done on the joining day is provided in the Table 4. Beyond such mandatory documentation, many firms undertake interesting activities to make the new employee feel comfortable and special on the joining day. This includes an email to all employees from the leadership mentioning the details about the new employee. The new employee is provided with company merchandise signaling a sense of unity and value of the employee. Many firms also provide a joining kit that includes all electronic equipment, accessories, access cards, employee rule book, locker facility, bags etc. Such materials

Some firms also organise a team lunch either with the future work team or with the joining batch.

equip the new employee with everything to start working like any other older employee. HR personnel maps the new employee's network and the joining day is then used as an opportunity to introduce future teammates and the manager. Some firms also organise a team lunch either with the future work team or with the joining batch.

Joining Week

An analysis of the various activities undertaken during the joining week is

Table 4 Analysis of Activities in Joining Day

Step	Activity	Purpose and Benefit
1	Welcome E-mail from the CEO.	Introduce the new employee to the whole firm. Employees feel being acknowledged from the topmost level.
2	Joining kit (work related) to all new joiners.	Ensuring that the new employee is ready to start work from day two onwards. New employee will get a head start and feel at par with old employees.
3	Provide company merchandise as welcome gift.	Sending a signal that the firm values the individual. New employee will feel happy and carry a positive attitude during initial days.
4	Meeting the manager.	Enabling the new employee to start conversations with the future manager and team. New employee will find it easy to reach out to the manager or team members during training period.
5	Meeting the team.	
6	Group lunch.	

provided in the Table 5. The joining week is characterized by knowledge and information sharing sessions and net-working with senior management. The new employee gets to know and learn about the whole firm and the brands as-

Table 5 Analysis of Activities in Joining Week

Step	Activity	Purpose and Benefit
1	Classroom sessions/ Virtual sessions about firm history, vision, mission, values, service standards, scale of operations.	Ensuring that the new employee knows about the firm well. It gives a wholistic picture about the history and future directions of the firm.
2	Knowledge sessions about processes, products, employee benefits, and development opportunities.	Ensuring that the new employee knows enough about specific details of business and the career potential. The activity gives information about the role the firm plays in the market and the future growth opportunities for the new employee.
3	Pairing new hires with a peer.	Mapping an existing employee with the new joinee for reaching out and having a casual conversation. This brings a good level of comfort to the employee and facilitates transfer of tacit information about the work environment.
4	Ice-breaking / Networking sessions with senior management	Signaling that the top management values the new employee. This ensures that the employee gets to hear about the future directions of firm from the top leadership.
5	Introduction to other functions or departments.	Providing an opportunity to meet other departments with whom the employee might have to work with or coordinate in the future. This helps the new employee to know basic details about other members or teams in the firm.
6	Business Unit / Department specific training.	Providing work related training for the new employee. This ensures necessary skills are imparted.

sociated with the firm. Most of this information is much more detailed than that is available on public sources. The first week is also packed with opportunities for getting introduced or connected to the senior management and other functions or departments. Some firms also start department-specific or business unit-based training. These trainings are a precursor to the specific role-based training and are mostly generic.

First Week

An analysis of the various activities that happen after the first week is provided in the Table 6. Many activities that happen in the first week continue into the

first month because it takes a longer time to achieve many of those objectives. Few such activities are networking with senior management and mentoring or coaching by peers or seniors emphasizing on building strong connections, gaining more clarity regarding the new role and the organization’s practices. Also, the first month includes socialization processes like cultural immersion activities and volunteering opportunities to ensure that the employee understands the organizational culture and develops an emotional connection with other employees. Some firms also provide first-hand exposure to the real-time activities and expose the new employee to the market that the firm caters to. Further, the activities become more specific to the department

Table 6 Analysis of Activities in Joining Month

Step	Activity	Purpose and Benefit
1	Networking with senior management	Signaling that the top management values the new employee. This ensures that the employee gets to hear about the future directions of the firm from the top leadership.
2	Cultural immersion program	Creating a bond among employees from different departments/ teams. This helps the employee connect with more people in the firm beyond the work teams.
3	Volunteering for local communities.	
4	Mentoring of new employees by seniors	Ensuring that the new employee gets motivated and knows how to develop self. This sends a signal that the employee should work towards taking up a larger role in the future.
5	Exposure to day to day operations.	Ensuring that the new employee gets a first-hand exposure to the operations and stakeholders. This helps the new employee get a broader picture about the firm and its operations.
6	Field (external market) exposure.	
7	Virtual Reality based business immersion	Ensure that the new employee gets role-based training. This helps in building the required skills and capabilities for carrying out the daily activities.
8	Role focussed training.	
9	Creating a goal plan.	Ensuring that the new employee has a set of short term and long-term goals to develop in the organisation. This provides much needed direction and certainty about the future of the employee.

and the role and include, business immersion activities, role-specific training and creating individual goal plan for the remaining appraisal year. This is important since many of the new employees would join after the first quarter of the financial year and would have missed the goal-setting activities of the team.

Discussion

The proposal for post-pandemic scenario should be built around the possibility

of a near-total virtual work and the in-person interaction should be limited to as minimal as possible. Based on the analysis of the onboarding best practices a new model is proposed. This new model is divided into four phases namely, pre-joining, joining day, first week and first month. The first week includes the days beyond the joining day and the first month included the weeks beyond the first. Multiple steps or activities are listed in each phase and the order is created logically. The proposed model is given in Table 7.

Table 7 Proposed Onboarding Framework for a Virtual Work Scenario

Phase	Activity	Details
Pre-Joining	Welcome e-mail and follow-up emails	Offer details and periodic information about the firm.
	Online delivery of welcome kit	Stationery to set up home-office, employee guideline book, T-shirt, mugs, etc.
	Information Request	Individual details collected to initiate online background verification
	Knowledge building	Online courses to be completed before joining.
Joining Day	Joining documentation	Issue ID cards, bank account application forms etc. To be done on campus.
	Virtual Introduction	Video call from HR followed by call(s) with the future Manager / Team.
First Week	Mandatory training	Online training programs to be completed.
	Video call with buddy	Employees are also assigned to a peer mentor for informal discussion and emotional support
	Video call with senior management	Ice-breaking session with the Business Unit / Division head to welcome the new joiner(s)
First Month	Video call with support groups	Meeting with support groups to know who they should contact for any needs in the organization.
	Job / Project Specific Training	This can be done in a mix of virtual and on campus mode.
	Virtual exposure to Daily operations	Employee assisted by mentor / manager to have video calls with stakeholders and virtual tour of facilities
	Virtual interaction with customer	Employee introduced to customer(s) by the manager or any team member.
	Virtual goal setting exercise	HR to work with manager and employee to set goals for the whole year.

A series of informational emails will ensure the recruit is informed.

The proposed model starts with a pre-joining phase and the activities carried out during this phase are collectively referred to as pre-onboarding or preboarding practices. The overall purpose of this phase is to provide sufficient information to the recruit so that the initial apprehensions are reduced and also to create an emotional connect. A series of informational emails will ensure the recruit is informed. This will also serve to process some portion of the documentation work and background verification work, before joining which encompasses the objective of compliance. This will save time and resources post joining. Online delivery of welcome kit will serve to create an emotional connect with the recruit as it is a personalized way of giving office stationery and company merchandise. This incurs cost and hence may not be possible in all scenarios like entry-level graduate recruitment, where the numbers are very high. However, for middle-level recruits and lateral recruits, this activity is feasible. This would help create a better emotional connect with the recruit. Recruits may be asked to undergo knowledge building session on a suitable online platform which fulfils the objective of clarification about the new role. This platform could also be used to provide more information about the firm that could not be provided over email. Such activities will serve to enhance knowledge as well as confidence about the firm.

The joining day is a phase that cannot be converted fully into a virtual mode because it involves several documentations that has legal and financial implications. Nonetheless, in-person interaction can be limited. After the joining formalities and issue of access cards and identity cards, the rest of the process is more about introducing the new employee to others focusing on the connection component of Bauer's (2010) framework. This can be done virtually to reduce in-person interaction. Traditionally, the first day also used to involve activities like a campus tour, group lunch and orientation sessions by HR manager etc. These are not included in the proposal due to multiple reasons. Firstly, a campus tour can be converted into a short video provided the firm has invested in it and has created online resources. Secondly, a group lunch with the joining batch, or HR team or future functional team cannot be converted to into a virtual one. However, the group video call could be conducted and the same can be done after the joining day. Finally, the orientation session could be done virtually and some of those can be made part of the knowledge sessions during the pre-joining phase.

The first week is really important and this is the phase where orientation activities get completed and the start of generic training and socialization of the new employee to the organizational culture. The training can be converted fully into virtual unless it is a unique scenario like manufacturing firm. Along with this training, the first week should include several video calls, for one-on-one conversations or group conversations. The

new employee should have a peer mentor assigned for informal discussion and a few video calls should be scheduled so that he/she can develop the new connections built during pre-boarding or on the first day. This will enhance the emotional support and the new employee will start getting connected with the firm deeply. This could also be done before joining, provided the pre-joining drop out rate is almost nil. Else the time and effort of the peer mentor become a wasteful expenditure and questions might also arise on the capability of the peer mentor. Further, video calls with senior management and support groups should also be scheduled. This will ensure the new employee knows whom to contact in case they face difficulties during the initial phase of work. Also, call with the senior management will serve to clarify the organizational expectations and align the aspiration of the new employee with the vision of the organization.

Video calls with senior management and support groups should also be scheduled.

After the first week, the activities become more function-specific or role-specific. This starts with the job-specific training and will continue for several weeks or may be months depending on the nature of the job. The duration will be more in the entry levels as the jobs are more operational compared to the middle and senior level jobs, which are more managerial or strategic. Depending on the industry these job/roles specific training can be done virtually, but it

has limitations and some on-campus component may be necessary. Firms that have invested in e-resources and virtual reality platforms can provide virtual exposure to daily operations and virtual interaction and customers. The onboarding activities should end with a goal setting exercise involving the new employee, HR manager, mentor (or a coach) and the team manager to ensure the new employee is aware of the deliverables, capable of carrying out the job and equipped with all the support that is required.

Conclusion

COVID pandemic is altering the landscape of business firms like never before. The current situation and the days to come would demand more flexible practices like virtual work. This will become a part of the work culture and hence the HR practices also need to adjust itself towards such a scenario. Onboarding practices serve as the initiation point for inducting employee into a new work culture and hence it should incorporate multiple virtual interventions. The possibility of revisiting onboarding practices during the pandemic provides an opportunity for the organization to design the programs or initiatives from the new employee's perspective and hence creating a competitive advantage. A comparative study of best practices in three industry sectors suggests that several activities are currently in practice which is also feasible in the virtual scenario, but they are not common across sectors. Onboarding can be divided into four phases namely, pre-joining, joining day, first week and first month spread

across compliance, connection, culture and clarification components of Bauer's (2010) onboarding model. Few activities at each phase could be logically sequenced to create a framework for onboarding in a virtual work scenario. The proposed framework has 14 activities across four phases. These are generic and hence can be adopted by firms across industry sectors.

This paper has two limitations. Firstly, the data used is taken from different sources and an equal number of articles and videos from every sector would have improved the comparability. However, this diversity of data sources reduces the bias. Secondly, this study analyses only three sectors that are prominently featured in the GPTW survey list. Firms in other industry sectors might be following some unique and interesting practices. Inclusion of more sectors could have improved the generalizability of the findings. Nonetheless, the findings of this study and the proposed framework make significant contributions to research and practice. Firstly, very few studies have attempted to understand onboarding as an important HR practice and this paper moderately fills that void. Secondly, analysis of best practices and synthesis of the same in the context of a post-pandemic work scenario is the need of the hour. This paper is one of the early attempts in this direction. Finally, this paper explores the literature and examines the actual practices to create a framework that is logically sound and practically useful.

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Appendix 1 Online Sources Referred

Industry	Information Sources
Financial Services and Insurance	https://www.ujjivan.com/html/training_development_programs.php https://www.mahindrahomefinance.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Know-Your-Company_Web-Upload.pdf https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AAMnKNwxYyc
Hospitality	https://www.forbes.com/sites/danabrownlee/2019/09/04/how-the-best-companies-to-work-for-engage-employees-and-retain-top-talent/#2453ca591eca https://www.coursehero.com/file/40958970/Hilton-New-Hire-Training-docx/ https://talentmgmt.com/2013/12/05/how-careers-become-voyages-at-marriott-international_trashed/
Information Technology	https://www.sap.com/india/about/careers/joining/job-application-process.onboarding.html#onboarding https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fs5m4bw_cqA https://www.images2.adobe.com/content/dam/acom/en/customer-success/pdfs/adobe-adobe-connect-case-study.pdf https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAufP0qJ4Sg https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-on-boarding-process-like-for-new-employees-at-Cisco-Bangalore https://www.salesforce.com/blog/2019/05/onboarding-hacks-engage-new-employees.html https://medium.com/@sunnypatneedi/my-first-month-as-a-newhire-at-salesforce-ae42e7318bac