



The Role of Organizational Culture in the Onboarding Process in Four Small IT Companies: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: In the context of onboarding, which is the process of introducing new employees to the organization, organizational culture plays a key role because new employees first come into contact with specific values, norms, and behaviors that shape the working environment in the company. Onboarding is a process that allows new employees to understand its goals and culture, and successfully perform their tasks. This study examines the role of organizational culture in the onboarding process in small IT companies. Through qualitative interviews with four IT experts working in different companies, the research presents a thematic analysis of how onboarding is aligned with organizational culture. The research results show the role of organizational culture in the onboarding process in small IT companies. Participants pointed out that onboarding is crucial for introducing new employees to the organization and company culture. Communication is recognized as a central element that helps define and maintain culture, while HR (Human Resource) departments and mentors are identified as key factors in the integration of new employees. Also, challenges such as mismatch with organizational culture and lack of a formal culture framework in small companies were recognized as potential barriers to successful onboarding.

Keywords: *organizational culture, onboarding process, small IT companies, qualitative study*

INTRODUCTION

Introducing new employees (onboarding) is an important process that enables their adaptation to the work environment, where the organizational culture plays a significant role. During onboarding, new employees are introduced to the organization's values, norms, and behaviors, which affects their integration, motivation, and productivity (Bauer et al., 2021; Gibson et al., 2022). Organizational culture creates behavior patterns and enables employees to understand the goals and expectations of the organization (Smith et al., 2023).

The specifics of small software companies further highlight the importance of culture in this process. Small firms often operate through flexible structures, with a focus on innovation and close collaboration, but often lack formalized processes for onboarding and managing organizational culture (Turner & Zhao, 2022; Rogers et al., 2024). These circumstances make culture the basic mechanism for adapting employees and achieving organizational goals.

The main goal of this paper is to investigate the role of organizational culture in the onboarding process in small software companies through a qualitative analysis of employees' attitudes, with a special focus on the influence of organizational culture on the success of this process (Bauer et al., 2021). This paper seeks to contribute to a

better understanding of the relationship between organizational culture and the onboarding process, providing useful guidelines for improving these practices in the specific context of small IT companies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Organizational culture

Organizational culture is a set of values, norms, beliefs, and behaviors that define the way employees perceive, make decisions, and communicate within the organization. According to Bauer (2010), organizational culture provides a framework for decision-making and guides employees in their daily work. Gibson et al. (2022) add that organizational culture plays a key role in attracting and retaining talent, especially in dynamic sectors such as the IT industry. In addition, Smith and Taylor (2022) point out that aligning the organizational culture with the onboarding process significantly contributes to a better experience for new hires, increasing their motivation and productivity.

2.2 Onboarding process

Onboarding is a structured process of integrating new employees into the organization. According to Bauer (2010), onboarding consists of four key phases: preparation (pre-boarding), orientation, integration, and follow-up. These stages allow new employees to adapt to

organizational values and norms while supporting them in understanding work processes and achieving productivity. Klein and Polin (2020) emphasize that the goals of the onboarding process include increasing employee engagement, reducing turnover, and quickly adapting to the work environment. Patel and Johnson (2023) specifically point out that organizational culture acts as a key predictor of successful onboarding, while Yang and Lee (2021) highlight the importance of mentors in facilitating cultural integration during this process. In addition, Cable, Gino and Staats (2013) indicate differences in the design of the onboarding process depending on the type of organizational culture, where companies with an innovative culture prefer less formal approaches, while hierarchical organizations use structured procedures.

2.3 The connection between organizational culture and the onboarding process

Organizational culture and onboarding are inextricably linked, as the onboarding process often represents the first contact new employees have with the organizational culture. Gibson et al. (2022) state that organizational culture influences the tone and structure of the onboarding process, while Smith and Taylor (2022) highlight the importance of aligning onboarding practices with company values to ensure long-term employee integration. An effective onboarding process allows employees to internalize organizational norms and develop a sense of belonging. According to Cable et al. (2013), organizations with an innovative culture often provide flexible onboarding programs that allow employees to adapt the way they work to their preferences. On the other hand, hierarchically structured organizations use formalized procedures to ensure that employees adhere to established standards.

2.4 Characteristics of small companies

Small companies, especially in the IT sector, have specific challenges and opportunities in designing the onboarding process. Rogers, Kim, and Zhao (2024) point out that the lack of formal resources in small organizations often makes it difficult to implement structured programs, but the flexibility and close collaboration that characterize small teams allows for more direct employee integration. Kim, Lee, and Park (2023) add that interpersonal relationships in small teams are key to facilitating employee adaptation, but also that the lack of standardization of onboarding practices can be a challenge. Formalizing the onboarding process in small companies can contribute to long-term employee retention

and reduced turnover. Brown and White (2024) indicate that the introduction of formal procedures in small companies is possible, even with limited resources. In addition, Robinson and Carter (2022) point out the importance of leadership in bridging challenges in the onboarding process, while Yang and Lee (2021) point out that mentors play a key role in supporting new hires in small companies.

RELATED WORK

Recent research provides extensive insight into the connection between the onboarding process, organizational culture, and factors that influence successful employee integration. These studies particularly highlight the importance of mentoring support, knowledge exchange, and adaptation to the specifics of organizations, which are key elements of successful onboarding. Lužar (2024) points out that the activation and use of existing knowledge significantly contribute to successful exchange among employees while mentoring and cooperation play a key role in that process. His research shows that using existing knowledge contributes to a 13.2% increase in exchange between engineers, which further highlights the importance of organizational culture in facilitating these processes. These findings suggest that a culture that encourages open communication and collaboration is critical to successful onboarding. Additionally, Murgoski (2024) explores how factors such as generational differences, work experience, and job type shape perceptions of organizational culture and influence the design of the onboarding process. He indicates that adapting the onboarding practices to these factors contributes to creating a positive work environment, which enables faster and more efficient integration of employees. Such adjustments not only improve the work experience of new hires but also strengthen overall organizational cohesion.

Koman, Boršoš, and Kubina (2024) contribute to this discussion by investigating sustainable human resource management and its connection to recruitment and onboarding processes. Their results indicate that organizations that align their culture with technological innovation achieve greater efficiency in the integration of new employees. Their research emphasizes that technological changes should not be seen in isolation but in the context of an organizational culture that allows employees to accept and adapt to them. Gibson et al. (2022) provide valuable insights into the role of organizational culture in talent retention. Their research shows that clearly defined cultural values increase employee loyalty and engagement. Similarly, Smith and Taylor (2022) point out that aligning organizational culture with onboarding practices not only reduces employee turnover but also increases employee engagement. These findings further support the importance of coherent onboarding strategies that reflect organizational values. Robinson and Carter (2022) point out the role of leadership in bridging challenges during onboarding,

especially in smaller organizations where leaders often have direct contact with new hires. Their research indicates that leadership not only facilitates employee adjustment but also strengthens trust and bonding within the team. Additionally, careful change management in hybrid work environments during onboarding is becoming increasingly important (Gibson et al., 2022). At the same time, organizations that successfully balance the exploitation of existing resources and the exploration of new knowledge encourage innovation and enable employees to better adapt to a dynamic work environment (Robinson & Carter, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach to understand organizational culture's role in shaping the onboarding process in small IT companies. The study used semi-structured interviews with IT experts (with many years of experience in IT) from four different companies. The research aims to uncover the role of organizational culture in the onboarding process. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews, live or via an online platform, and then thematic analysis was applied to identify key insights from the participants. The thematic analysis involved transcribing the interviews and discovering themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

4.1 Sample

The sample consists of four small IT companies with fewer than fifty employees. Participants were selected for our study if they were interested in our research, that is, if they voluntarily wanted to express their views. Care was taken to ensure that they were IT experts with many years of experience. Participants were selected to provide comprehensive insight into the integration of organizational culture into onboarding processes.

4.2 Data Collection

Data were collected using qualitative research methods, specifically semi-structured interviews (Flick, 2021), to gain in-depth insight into the role of organizational culture in shaping the onboarding process in small software companies. The semi-structured interview format allowed for flexibility in the research, ensuring that key themes were consistently addressed across all interviews. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or virtually, depending on the participants' availability, and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent for later transcription and data analysis. The data collected provided a basis for analyzing how organizational culture influences onboarding in companies. The interview

questions were designed to elicit participants' experiences and perceptions of the onboarding process, with a focus on organizational culture. After conducting the interviews, the interview transcripts were analyzed using QDA Miner Lite software.

4.3 Data Analysis

Following the methodology for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), data were analyzed to identify the main themes and patterns across the studies with four participants. The studies revolved around organizational culture, and onboarding processes, by employees in small IT companies. When applying thematic analysis, we identified themes about the observed phenomenon. We opted for thematic analysis due to our experience in investigating issues within onboarding (Gaborov et al., 2024). Inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used as a data analysis method. The authors used interviews to collect qualitative data. All qualitative data were prepared in Microsoft Word documents and imported into the QDA Miner Lite software tool for qualitative data analysis (anonymized, 2024). Qualitative data were analyzed inductively to generate themes using a well-established six-stage approach, the steps of which can be summarized as: familiarization with data; generation of initial codes; identified themes; reviewing and refining themes; and defining and naming themes (Proudfoot, 2023).

The first step involved reading the interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the responses. During this phase, notes were made regarding initial thoughts and impressions on key concepts across interviews.

The next step was to identify and code the significant sections of the study. Coding involves the work of studying and organizing the collected observations (Locke et al., 2022). The codes are identified by reading the documents in the mentioned software. Each participant's responses were broken down into specific codes. After initial coding, the codes were grouped into broader themes that helped address the research objective. The identified themes are presented and analyzed in the next section of the paper.

RESULTS and discussion

This section presents the results of the study, which presents five main themes that emerged from the analysis of the studies. The identified themes were reviewed by revisiting the coded data and ensuring that each theme accurately reflected the ideas. The main themes were

considered relevant to the research goal. After reviewing the themes again, the final themes were:

1. Onboarding as a means of integration into the organizational culture - It arose from discussions about the role of the onboarding process in introducing new employees to the company's values and rules
2. The importance of communication in organizational culture - Communication has been identified as a central component that shapes culture and facilitates integration.
3. Challenges in matching candidates with organizational culture - Problems with fitting into a team and conflicting individuals often disrupt team dynamics.
4. The role of HR and mentors in shaping the onboarding process - HR selection and mentoring work are key to guiding employees toward the organizational culture.
5. Mentorship support as the foundations of successful onboarding - Mentors play a key role in conveying the culture.
6. Limitations in the development of organizational culture - The lack of a formal framework and the

spontaneity of culture development present challenges for smaller companies.

Figure 1 shows a thematic framework with identified main themes. The main themes are represented as blue ellipses. There is a white rectangle in the middle. This indicates that the study looked at the influence of organizational culture in the onboarding process.

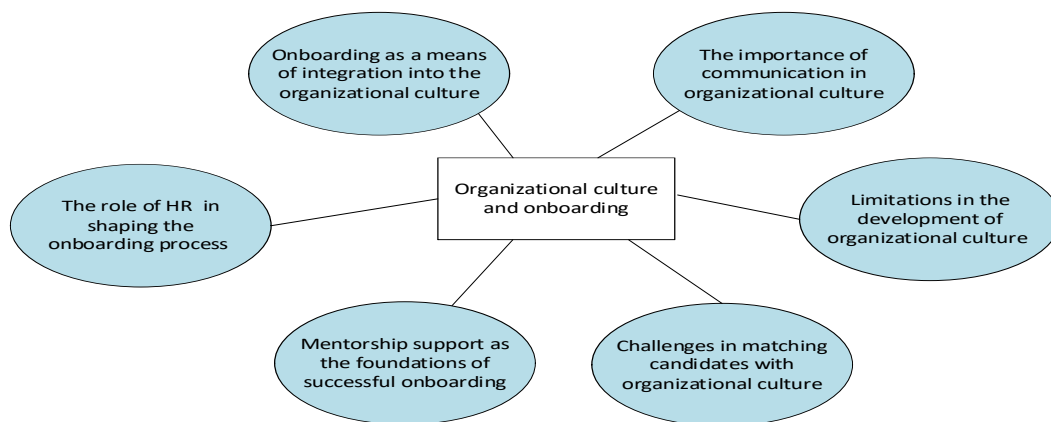


Figure 1 Thematic framework: Integration of organizational culture through the onboarding process

These themes highlight the role of organizational culture in shaping the onboarding process in small IT companies. Participants identified onboarding as a key mechanism for introducing new employees to the company culture. It provides a structured opportunity for new employees to become familiar with the company's expectations. One participant emphasized, "Onboarding itself is the time and place for the new employee to get to know the internal organization and the organizational culture. This allows the new employee to be productive."

Communication emerged as an essential element in defining and maintaining organizational culture. Participants indicated that the onboarding process plays a significant role in establishing communication norms among employees and between employees and customers. One respondent explained, "There, employees get to know how the company works, with the organization, how to communicate with colleagues in the company, how to communicate with clients using various communication channels."

Participants mentioned the challenges of ensuring that new hires align with the existing organizational culture. While technical competence is essential, a mismatch in cultural fit was identified as a significant obstacle that can disrupt team dynamics and organizational harmony. One participant stated, *"If someone is a conflicted person, there is little chance that they will pass the HR selection, since the selection also includes psychological tests." "If HR has done its job properly, you get a quality person who easily fits into the company."*

Mentoring support is the foundation of successful onboarding. A mentor is a trusted counselor or guide. Many businesses and industries offer mentoring to guide new employees and help them meet organizational expectations. One participant stated, *"It's only important that we don't behave badly towards others"*. Communication during the onboarding process should be positive and open, and mentors play a key role in conveying the culture.

Human resources departments and mentors have been identified as factors that contribute to shaping the onboarding process and ensuring the successful integration of new employees into the organizational culture. HR in the selection process defines the ideal candidate profile and conducts psychological assessments to assess compatibility with the company culture. As one participant noted, *"For each workplace, a profile of people is determined, which is indicated to the psychologists in HR, and they work out that profile in detail."*

Several participants pointed out that culture develops spontaneously, rather than being deliberately designed. While this approach can work in certain contexts, it can lead to inconsistency and unclear expectations among employees. One participant reflected, *"We do not have a specially designed organizational culture, but it is something that came spontaneously."*

These results highlight the interconnected roles of engagement processes, communication, and human resource practices in shaping organizational culture, while also pointing to challenges and opportunities for smaller companies in formalizing organizational culture frameworks.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The presentation of this thematic analysis and the final thematic framework can help practitioners understand the importance of organizational culture. Industry practitioners should adhere to organizational culture, as it significantly

affects the quality and performance of employees. If new employees understand and adopt organizational culture, they are more likely to adapt faster and contribute to the team.

Researchers can identify the key steps applied when conducting inductive thematic analysis. They can also see the impact of integrating organizational culture into the onboarding process and develop more comprehensive frameworks that explain the importance of organizational culture.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to establishing trust in the accuracy, integrity, and transparency of the research process and its results. It is particularly emphasized in qualitative research, where the collection and interpretation of data require attention to ensure that the research is reliable (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As part of this research, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted, which allowed the participants to freely express their experiences. Before and during the interview, a good relationship was established with the participants, which created an atmosphere of trust and open communication. All the authors of the paper agreed on the defined themes, which made the analysis process more reliable. It is assumed that the insights obtained from the research may be applicable in other smaller IT companies as well. The reliability of the research is ensured by applying a systematic approach to data collection and analysis. During the thematic analysis, the researchers followed the guidelines for its implementation and described the entire process in detail. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and any disagreements were resolved by discussion among the authors.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

Thematic analysis indicates that the onboarding process of new employees is crucial for their integration into the company, but its success depends on alignment with the organizational culture, communication practices, and engagement of the HR team. It was concluded that the data emphasize that the hiring process also focuses on the ability to adapt to the dynamics of the organizational culture, which leads to the company's chances of success. Future research is planned to expand by increasing the number of participants in the study, and special attention will be paid to the attitudes of employees who are just at the beginning of the onboarding process and do not have significant work experience in the IT sector.

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