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Onboarding during the COVID-19 and the future of onboarding within a South African municipality

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Orientation: Limited literature on onboarding during COVID-19 and the future of onboarding exists.

Research purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore the implementation of employee onboarding during COVID-19, as well as the future of onboarding within a South African municipality.

Motivation for the study: This research was motivated by the difficulties encountered in conducting online employee onboarding during the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the uncertain landscape of onboarding practices within a South African municipality.

Research approach/design and method: The research employed a qualitative approach, conducting interviews with participants from a South African municipality. Thematic analysis was utilised to examine the data.

Main findings: Several themes on onboarding during COVID-19 emerged from the study, including the use of videoconferencing tools, intranet system usage, and more. The main themes of future onboarding were intranet, improving onboarding processes, and face-to-face onboarding. Several interviewees showcased frustration with the implementation of video conferencing tools, and the impact of load shedding. Participants suggested that onboarding practices might evolve beyond the pandemic as technology implementation becomes more commonplace.

Practical/managerial implications: Human resource professionals must be prepared for the future of employee onboarding, embracing the technological advancements that facilitate this process. Failure to keep abreast with new technology will hinder employee onboarding efforts, potentially impeding their ability to effectively integrate new employees.

Contribution/value-add: This study shed light on the state of employee onboarding within a South African municipality, and can assist to improve the onboarding process and render it future fit.

Keywords: COVID-19; human resource; employee onboarding; intranet; videoconferencing tools; technology; work-from-home.

Introduction

Employee onboarding processes in organisations worldwide had to be reviewed and rethought because of the restrictions put in place during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (Hoa et al., 2023). The implementation of work-from-home measures required the rapid introduction of digital workplaces leading to a wholly online onboarding process with videoconferencing tools and intranet systems (Oranburg & Khan, 2020). The challenge which faced many organisations worldwide, and South Africa in particular, was the lack of infrastructure – systems were not in place or only partially implemented (Goodermote, 2020).

However, the return on investment of online onboarding has been thoroughly explored, indicating that employees who undergo online onboarding become more effective and efficient (Oranburg & Kahn, 2020). Furthermore, organisations which have effectively implemented online onboarding systems can carry this momentum forward, setting their organisations up for success in the Fourth and Fifth Industrial Revolutions (Reaves, 2019).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations and employees relied heavily on existing mobile data networks which allowed onboarding to take place in an online space (Sivathanu & Pillai, 2018). To assist new employees with online onboarding, organisations set comprehensive guidelines which stipulate that employees should have access to the required hardware before the commencement of the onboarding process and know how to use file-sharing websites and communication platforms (University of Pittsburgh, 2020). Furthermore, organisations such as KPMG went to great lengths to ensure that the infrastructure required for online onboarding and remote working was in place (KPMG, 2020).

This study aimed to break the prevailing research status quo where the theories of socialisation, as well as learning and unlearning, served as the foundation of existing literature. The researcher made use of Human Capital Theory as well as Maslow's theory of motivation. Human Capital Theory served as the theoretical foundation for the study, along with a supplementary view being lent through Maslow's theory of motivation.

Problem statement

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, several factors were highlighted which influenced the current and future use of remote employee onboarding, which included a lack of network infrastructure, a poor understanding of new technology, as well as the prevalence of electrical load-shedding across South Africa. Because of these factors, online employee onboarding may fail or become frustratingly slow. In addition, employees who are deemed as lower skilled are at risk because of not receiving training in newly implemented technologies. These factors together create a situation where employee onboarding must be adapted to the needs and skill level of the employee. This article aims to close the existing research gap because of a lack of literature on the implementation of online employee onboarding during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the future of onboarding in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality.

Research purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of onboarding in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality during the COVID-19 pandemic; the future of onboarding; and how existing processes and structures had to be adapted for continued functioning after the introduction of social distancing measures.

Literature review

Underpinning theories

The theories chosen for this study gave the researcher a complete overview of employee onboarding, as well as the factors which contribute to the success or failure of the employee onboarding process. Together, the Human Capital Theory and Maslow's theory of motivation have a symbiotic relationship, where both theories support one another and cover the existing gaps found in either theory.

The Human Capital Theory proposes that adequate investment in the skills and knowledge of employees will improve their economic productivity. Human Capital Theory can be further refined into Human Capital Development, where the primary objectives are to improve the skillsets of employees as well as stimulate their engagement. These objectives can be accomplished through effective employee engagement, which includes mentoring, training, coaching, as well as internships.

Maslow's theory of motivation can be used to investigate the needs of a new employee, and how these needs will guide an employee's decision-making during the onboarding process. Should the new employee's base needs not be met, they could be overcome with feelings of inadequacy, as well as feeling as though they do not fit into the existing organisational culture. This can quickly cause a decrease in employee productivity and loyalty to the organisation.

The onboarding process, as it was known, changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, with organisations required to adapt to new working measures (Klöckner et al., 2023). Like other governments worldwide, the South African government implemented a national state of disaster and lockdown in March 2020 with the intent of stopping the spread of the virus (Stiegler & Bouchard, 2020). With the lockdown extended after the initial 21-day period, it became clear to organisations and their employees in South Africa that change was required to adapt to what was deemed 'the new normal' (Barure & Tivenga, 2022). This change of status quo affected work performed after COVID-19 and the workplace as we knew it was no more (Nkate, 2020). However, it is not all doom and gloom, as the COVID-19 period served as a catalyst for change (Bussin & Swart-Opperman, 2021). Organisations, both public and private, had to review and revisit their existing processes to deal with the problem at hand and ensure that the processes were future fit (Nkate, 2020).

Employee onboarding during COVID-19

With the introduction of work-from-home measures, several problems were immediately evident to employees and their employers (Bussin & Swart-Opperman, 2021). Firstly, employees who were not deemed 'essential' and worked from home had to be furnished with the relevant hardware to conduct their daily responsibilities (Nkate, 2020). For some employees, this included the provision of mobile routers and data (Saurombe et al., 2022). Secondly, organisations were compelled to amend their organisational policies and procedures to accommodate moving work processes to an online space and ensuring that their employees could work remotely (Sanchez et al., 2022). This was unknown territory for many employees, as remote work was not a common phenomenon in South Africa (Cisco Systems, 2020). According to Statistics South Africa (2020), before the

COVID-19 pandemic, only 1.4% of respondents in a survey indicated that they worked from home. This is in sharp contrast to the response during the lockdown when the number of respondents who worked from home increased to 77.9%.

As a result of the travel restrictions imposed as well as work-from-home measures, there was a considerable need for videoconferencing tools such as Microsoft Teams, Skype and Zoom (Matisic & Högman, 2023). These applications ensured that employees could collaborate and still work efficiently and effectively (Karl et al., 2022) and that meetings, webinars, employee onboarding and job interviews could continue (Nkate, 2020).

Onboarding and remote work during COVID-19 were made possible by videoconferencing tools; however, other factors which contributed to the success of online onboarding must be mentioned (Van Zoonen et al., 2021). Firstly, Blöndal (2021) notes that effective and open communication with new employees by their managers assisted in answering the new employees' questions and alleviating their levels of anxiety. Secondly, ensuring that employees had access to information regarding the organisation also proved beneficial (Van Zoonen et al., 2021). This included an employee handbook or guide, job description, email signature, onboarding checklists and a document detailing the software and programmes which the organisation used (Steifo & Thomasson, 2023). This information could be accessed in the organisation's intranet system (Pentikäinen, 2021). Thirdly, the use of an onboarding mentor was noted to reduce anxiety in new employees (Cesário & Chambel, 2019). When a mentor has been identified, that mentor must be available, engaged and positively inclined to new employees and willing to devote his or her time, guidance and support to the new employee (Bhakta & Medina, 2020).

The implementation of remote work and online onboarding of employees was not totally problem-free: new employees had problems in understanding certain work processes and knowing where to find the information required to perform their duties (Al-Habaibeh et al., 2021). Furthermore, several factors must be implemented for online onboarding to be a success (Jeske & Olson, 2022). These include mimicking a full workday in a virtual space, using detailed planning for work tasks and establishing a set format for meetings (Goodermote, 2020). From a hardware perspective, Statista (2023) noted that only 29.4% of South African users had access to a work laptop or desktop, which significantly hampered online work and information sharing.

This lack of hardware can be attributed to a substantial decrease in funding in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality (Statistics South Africa, 2021). With the COVID-19-related restrictions on the sale of tobacco and alcohol, as well as the decrease in fuel sales, the income generated by the government and its various municipalities dwindled (De Villiers et al., 2020). This had the knock-on effect of forcing

cost-cutting measures such as the cancellation of non-essential programmes and projects and the suspending of new equipment purchases (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2020).

Employee onboarding post-COVID-19

Remote work and online onboarding are expected to remain viable work processes in the future, with the benefits of these processes now being more widely understood (Lal et al., 2023). Coronavirus disease 2019 can be likened to a pilot test of the feasibility and benefits of digitising work processes with a view to the future workplace (Nagel, 2020). Benefits include cost and time savings and a reduction in travelling (Beno, 2021). However, for the seamless implementation of online onboarding and remote work, investment in infrastructure and the development of information and communication technology (ICT) skills are crucial (Nkate, 2020).

When looking at the future of work, it was found that the difficulty in onboarding virtual teams was exacerbated by problems associated with the existing network infrastructure and the impact of electricity load-shedding (Pavlina, 2020). South Africa's sole electricity provider, Eskom, implements temporary electricity interruptions to prevent total electrical grid failure caused by excessive demand, which hampers the network infrastructure and the continuation of online onboarding efforts (Olaitan et al., 2021). Furthermore, Hemphill and Begel (2021) found that online onboarding reduced the opportunities for informal communication and that new team members often felt left out. This made it difficult to create a sense of trust among employees (Allard & Cagenius, 2021).

The future of onboarding

It has been argued that COVID-19 simply accelerated the pace of change in the nature of work – the automation of processes and the introduction of new technology – which had been a long time coming (Yawson, 2020). The process of onboarding new employees will, in future, look very different when compared to onboarding before and during COVID-19, with the major changes being the implementation of new technology and the use of virtual teams (Yawson, 2020). This technology injection can take the form of artificial intelligence, chatbots and the automation of various processes in the office (Ritz et al., 2023). However, certain factors will remain relevant and required in future onboarding processes, such as the need for experienced mentors and keeping the process human (Bhakta & Medina, 2021).

Artificial intelligence can be used in several ways, for example as a chatbot, to aid new employees in accessing information relevant to the onboarding process (Ritz et al., 2023). Automating processes such as applicant screening can also be performed using artificial intelligence, and disqualified candidates can be filtered out, thereby reducing the time spent on the selection process (Gan & Yusof, 2019).

When dealing with virtual teams and virtual employee onboarding, the importance of a mentor cannot be overstated, as the mentor will familiarise all new employees with the requirements of their new positions (Katerere, 2022). As with the use of mentors, keeping the onboarding process human will assist the overall onboarding process (Heinrichs & Rommerskirchen, 2021). This can be done by ensuring that communication with new employees occurs on other than virtual platforms which can create a lack of emotional attachment on the side of the employee (Heinrichs & Rommerskirchen, 2021).

Research design

Research approach

A qualitative research approach was used to explore the use of onboarding in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. This allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the subject, without making any generalisations. An inductive research approach was used, where the researcher read through the data once all the interviews concluded and identified codes which emerged from the collected data. An exploratory research design was used as limited information was available and few studies had been conducted on onboarding during the pandemic as well as the future thereof. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection instrument. Interpretive phenomenology assisted the researcher in understanding the complexity of the study while investigating the personal experiences of the participants. Axiological, ontological, epistemological and methodological standpoints were used as the research paradigm. Axiology guided the ethics of the researcher during the study (Alele & Malau-Aduli, 2023). Ontology in its simplest form is how reality is viewed. Ontology helped the researcher understand what was described by the participants (Alele & Malau-Aduli, 2023). Epistemology for this study related to the knowledge gained through the interviews, what the basis of this knowledge was and what could be done with this knowledge (Al-Ababneh, 2020). The methodological standpoint included the type of research methodology chosen, as well as the use of the data collection instrument for this study (Al-Ababneh, 2020).

Research strategy

A qualitative research strategy was chosen, as the primary objective of this study was to explore the lived experiences of the HR personnel in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. Interpretive phenomenology was used. According to Picton et al. (2017), the use of phenomenological research combined with semi-structured interviews has the advantage of allowing the participants to be verbally expressive in their responses to the questions posed. Qutoshi (2018) explains in a quite simple example that the participants can be seen as actors and the overall objective is to describe the relationship which exists between these individuals and the world in which they live and work.

Research method

For this study, qualitative research was used and in-depth questions were asked to explore the contributing and constraining factors related to employee onboarding during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the future of onboarding in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. The study made use of an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the phenomena within the correct context and prevent accidental or deliberate generalisation. Thematic analysis was used to identify the main themes stemming from the interview questions. The primary research instrument of the study was a semi-structured interview with the participants. The interview guidelines were shared with the participants beforehand and the interview itself was conducted for the majority using Microsoft Teams. In three instances, face-to-face interviews were conducted.

Research setting

The research setting consisted of 10 interviewees – one administrative officer, two senior HR consultants, two deputy HR directors, a functional HR head, a key account specialist, a manager, an HR consultant and a competency development officer. Of the interviewees, all, except the administrative officer and the two senior HR consultants, were interviewed using Microsoft Teams.

Research participants and sampling methods

The target population of this study consisted of employees of the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality who formed part of the HR function and were involved in onboarding new employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this study, purposive sampling was used to identify a sample of fewer than 20 participants who matched the specific inclusion criteria: working in the HR department of the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality and being involved in the employee onboarding process. Data saturation were reached with the 10th participant, after which data collection was concluded. The sampling for this study was based on the qualities of the participants.

Data collection methods

The data collection method for this study was a semi-structured interview, conducted face-to-face or using Microsoft Teams at the behest of the participants. During the interview, the interview guide served to supplement data collected during the interview process. Full transcriptions of the interviews were made. The use of the recorded interviews and transcripts provided the researcher with a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of the participants.

Data recording

The interviews were recorded and stored for record-keeping purposes. Because of the nature of qualitative research interviews and the sheer amount of data generated, data retrieval to conduct data analysis proved invaluable. All the interviews were recorded, with a verbatim transcript of the recording. Before the interviews, consent was received from all participants in the study to record their interviews.

Strategy to ensure data quality and integrity

The study's trustworthiness was ensured using the trustworthiness techniques, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Overall, the trustworthiness of the data in this study was secured through extensive literature research, as well as the data collection and analysis methods which were used (Rose & Johnson, 2020). The credibility of the findings was established by ensuring that the findings were a representation of the information obtained from the interviewees and that this information was the correct interpretation of the interviews conducted (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Transferability was addressed by meticulously describing the research context so that the conclusions of this study could be transferred to other studies in a similar context (Nassaji, 2020). The dependability of the findings involved the evaluation of the findings by the participants, as well as their recommendations (Nassaji, 2020). The confirmability of the findings relates to the possibility of other researchers confirming the findings of this study, by using the same or similar data collection methods used in this study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used for the data analysis component of this study. Thematic analysis was chosen as it allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the information obtained from the participants, as well as flexibility and interpretation while the information was analysed. The thematic analysis involves several steps (Scharp & Sanders, 2018): familiarising oneself with the collected data; generating coding categories; identifying themes from the collected data; reviewing these themes; defining and naming the themes; and finding examples in the collected data which relate to the themes. The thematic analysis process consisted of analysing the information obtained from the participants and deconstructing this information into smaller pieces of information before the data analysis commenced.

ATLAS.ti was used for the coding of the collected data. This allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the information obtained during the data collection process. The coding of themes included identifying recurring points within the data. These points, or codes, were classified and collectively called themes. These themes were then replicated within the ATLAS.ti software in a dendritic network.

Reporting style

The findings of this study were substantiated with verbatim quotations from the participants. To ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, each participant was assigned a number.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Tshwane University of Technology's Faculty of Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (reference number: FCRE2022/09/002-MS [2]). This study adhered to the ethical guidelines in the confidentiality agreement signed by the researcher, and the anonymity of the participants was maintained during the study. Permission was sought and obtained from the Director of Knowledge Management in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality to conduct a study involving the personnel of the municipality and the participants were furnished with an informed consent leaflet and interview guide before the commencement of the interviews. Participants were notified that their participation in this study was voluntary and that their identities would be concealed during the research and interview process. Furthermore, participant anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the data collection and reporting components of the study, with measures taken to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data collected. No participants were harmed during the study.

Findings

The findings of the study, which include the responses obtained from the participants, are presented in this section. The responses of the participants were categorised thematically into main themes and subsequently divided into sub-themes. Based on the themes and sub-themes identified, the findings offer a clear indication of the constraining and contributing factors related to online onboarding during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the future of onboarding in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality.

Table 1 provides an overview of the main demographic information of the participants. This information includes the age, job title, years of employment and the highest qualification obtained of all the participants. The ages of the participants ranged from 41 years to 61 years. The participants' length of service ranged from 1 year to 14 years of service. The qualifications of the participants ranged from a matric certificate to a doctoral degree. Table 1 also indicates the positions held by the respective study participants.

The findings from the study highlighted the main constraining and contributing factors identified by the research participants. Of these factors, the participants highlighted the following sub-themes most often; the use of videoconferencing tools; the use of an intranet system; the effect of electricity load-shedding; the lack of resources; and he lack of stable network and mobile connections.

Table 2 illustrates the primary research objective themes, as well as the themes relating to the future of onboarding in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality.

Theme 1: Technology

Technology relates to the tools used in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, both hardware and software, to assist onboarding efforts. The sub-themes which were identified included videoconferencing tools and an intranet system.

TABLE 1: Summarised demographic information of the study participants.

Participant number	Age (years)	Job title of the participant	Years of employment	Highest qualification obtained
P1	58	Administrative Officer	10 years in current position	National Matric Certificate
P2	60	Senior HR Administration Consultant	10 years in current position	National Diploma in Human Resource Management
P3	48	Competency Development Officer	5 years in current position	Doctorate in Quality Assurance in Education and Training
P4	41	HR Consultant	15 years in current position	National Diploma in Human Resource Management and Financial Management
P5	52	Deputy Director: Salary Administration	Since 2004	Honours Degree in Psychology
P6	43	Manager	1 year	National Diploma in Project Management
P7	44	Consultant	5 years in current position	Degree in Business Management
P8	61	Deputy Director: Recruitment and Selection	Since 2004 (19 years)	Master's Degree in Business Leadership
P9	59	Key Account Specialist	More than 15 years	Master's Degree in Human Resource Management
P10	46	Functional Head: Recruitment	10 years	Honours Degree in Psychology

HR, human resource; P, participant.

TABLE 2: Onboarding during the COVID-19 pandemic and the future of onboarding in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality.

Main theme	Sub-theme
1. Technology	1.1. Videoconferencing tools
	1.2. Intranet
2. Infrastructure	2.1. Network infrastructure
	2.2. Load-shedding
3. Access to resources	3.1. Access to hardware
	3.2. Access to mobile data
	3.3. Funding
4. Onboarding best practices	4.1. Increased scope of onboarding
	4.2. Use of mentors
5. Hybrid onboarding	5.1. Face-to-face onboarding
	5.2. Online onboarding
6. Future onboarding	6.1. Intranet
	6.2. Improving onboarding processes
	6.3. Face-to-face onboarding
	6.4. Availability of resources
	6.5. Load-shedding

Subtheme 1.1: Videoconferencing tools

Videoconferencing tools were widely implemented in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality to ensure that work continued in a remote setting. A large degree of employee onboarding occurred with the use of Microsoft Teams. The use of videoconferencing tools was evidenced in the experience of Participant 8 in this study, who highlighted the ease of using videoconferencing tools and the ability to work from anywhere if connected to the Internet:

'The other thing that's also effortless is you can have these type of things [*online onboarding events*] in the evenings, anytime anywhere, people can be on holiday or be anywhere in the world and just a click of a button and I will be here.' (Participant 8, Deputy Director: Recruitment and Selection, 61 years old)

Furthermore, Participant 10 indicated that where positions were filled during the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews and selection occurred using videoconferencing tools:

'Those positions that we filled during COVID-19 period they were largely via your Teams to be honest, we never had so many inductions in that period.' (Participant 10, Functional Head: Recruitment, 46 years old)

Subtheme 1.2: Intranet

The intranet system used in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality provided an online archive of information for new and incumbent employees alike. Participant 5 gave a comprehensive overview of the benefits of utilising an intranet system:

'We had that [*a physical booklet*] years ago, but people tend to be lazy to read. You know they like being entertained. And that is the thing that we all can acknowledge you know. So yeah, the conditions of service for instance is a 60-page document. So, there's no way that you can give that to an employee. Costs are involved so what we do is we refer to all those documents and then we say listen, this is where you're going to get the documents on the intranet.' (Participant 5, Deputy Director: Salary Administration, 52 years old)

Furthermore, Participant 7 highlighted the benefit of an intranet system, in particular saving paper and the ease of finding documentation, if the correct filing system and naming convention are used:

'You could probably set up some form of files that you can create to say 2023 onboarding you can divide it into like correct naming, convention so that when you go and look for the documents it's easy for you to find. So, there are definitely benefits. We're no longer printing or killing trees anymore, it's easy for us to share the documents because if it's a contract that we have printed and they signed it in the old days you would need to share it with someone who is in another office, you would have to think about scanning and making another copy. If it's online, all you do is just forward it to the relevant person.' (Participant 7, Consultant, 44 years old)

Theme 2: Infrastructure

The City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality relies heavily on existing infrastructure for online onboarding. This includes network and cell towers, fibre providers and a constant electricity supply. Load-shedding was grouped under the infrastructure theme, as an ineffective power grid infrastructure results in load-shedding.

Subtheme 2.1: Network infrastructure

Network infrastructure, including Wi-Fi and cell towers, can impact the connectivity of employees and employers alike. Where there is a lack of network infrastructure, the online onboarding process will be adversely affected. During the data collection process, Participants 3 and 10 explained that it was mostly employees who struggled with network

infrastructure issues, as the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality head office did not experience load-shedding:

'… then secondly, access to the internet and technologies could have actually assisted, but a lot of people were not actually having that access to this kind of technologies.' (Participant 3, Competency Development Officer, 48 years old)

'… and in the candidate space, because for us we conducted interview here in Tshwane house and we never had any loadshedding or connection problems. So, connection problems were largely on the side of the interviewees.' (Participant 10, Functional Head: Recruitment, 46 years old)

Subtheme 2.2: Load-shedding

Load-shedding is, unfortunately, a commonplace phenomenon in South Africa, with the duration of load-shedding periods not decreasing. This impacts all remote and online working processes, as the network towers cannot keep up with the amount of load-shedding in a day. Participant 9 highlighted the problem of constant load-shedding and its effect on Wi-Fi connections for the employees:

'My experience is that wi-fi sometimes doesn't properly work if you've got other loadshedding my experience is that wi-fi really has a problem with that sometimes even cell phone connections are bad.' (Participant 9, Key Account Specialist, 59 years old)

Participant 10 echoed these statements and indicated that connection problems occurred which could be attributed to load-shedding:

'The only issue that arose I think it was connection problems lately, maybe due to loadshedding that occurred.' (Participant 10, Functional Head: Recruitment, 46 years old)

Theme 3: Access to resources

The City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality and its employees were affected by their lack of access to resources like hardware, mobile data and funding.

Subtheme 3.1: Access to hardware

Hardware such as laptops and computers were only provided to certain levels of employees in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, which resulted in a significant number of employees who did not have access to the hardware required for online onboarding processes to occur. Participant 8 discussed in depth the differences between the various levels of employees in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, and how these levels of employees either had access to hardware or needed to make use of computers in the offices of the municipality:

'We experience problems where you get to your lower levels and during that time, we did use Teams, that was a problem. If you have interviews for truck drivers or general workers, they do not have that skill and what we did in that instance, is we let the people come in and we have an office where there was a computer for them, where Teams was loaded then they will come in and they will use our computers and in between candidates, we will re-sanitize the whole area so that's what we did because they do not have the computer. So, on lower levels it

will definitely have an impact and on the higher levels when you get to directors, deputy directors those people all normally have smart phones, laptops, data, and the Teams programme is already loaded on there, they use it for their current meetings. So definitely it will still have an impact, yes.' (Participant 8, Deputy Director: Recruitment and Selection, 61 years old)

Subtheme 3.2: Access to mobile data

Many employees in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality did not have adequate access to mobile data, which can be attributed to the cost of mobile data in South Africa. Participant 8 highlighted the problems new employees faced regarding mobile data, as long meetings and onboarding sessions could deplete an employee's mobile data bundle:

'A problem that we actually experience is when you put on the cameras, when you video stream the bundle and the data used it's sometimes too much for the candidate and the other side you know so that was still a problem.' (Participant 8, Deputy Director: Recruitment and Selection, 61 years old)

Subtheme 3.3: Funding

Funding in the context of this study relates to the reduced income of the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality because of restrictions on the sale of alcohol and tobacco during the COVID-19 lockdown period, as well as decreased sales of petrol owing to work-from-home measures. Participant 2 highlighted the implementation of hiring freezes because of the diminished income of the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality:

'Now we're just hiring people into essential jobs. I don't even think we hired one person last month because the board doesn't have money.' (Participant 2, Senior HR Administration Consultant, 60 years old)

Participant 5 also indicated that two factors which influence the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality include keeping up to date with the latest technology as well as the cost associated with technology such as server rooms:

'So the biggest thing for us at the moment is to try and stay abreast with technology but also affordability in terms of the network that we are running and I mean we run a big server room, there's a mirror also in some other location, it's costing a lot and to do all those things with loadshedding is one of the factors that I think influenced us mostly.' (Participant 5, Deputy Director: Salary Administration, 52 years old)

Theme 4: Onboarding best practices

During the data collection for this study, various onboarding best practices were identified, which included an increased scope of onboarding and the use of mentors.

Subtheme 4.1: Increased scope of onboarding

If the scope of the onboarding process is increased, this can ensure that the onboarding process of a new employee is comprehensive. Participant 3 described what an onboarding process should include to be beneficial to the new employee:

'… induction should not be about employee benefit but sharing of organizational knowledge and to get to these newly appointed

individuals so that they can actually fit into the organization quickly and then enough time also should be devoted to this process.' (Participant 3, Competency Development Officer, 48 years old)

Participant 5 also mentioned that onboarding efforts were assisted by increasing the duration of the onboarding process and breaking down the process into fragments:

'… yeah, I think just what assisted a lot is that we took our time because earlier than that we had basically 2 days. Where they now decided to say let's spread the induction cause over to few days or even in fragments you know or one day, a year, or maybe after a month.' (Participant 5, Deputy Director: Salary Administration, 52 years old)

Subtheme 4.2: Use of mentors

The use of a mentor when a new employee undergoes onboarding ensures that information is shared with the new employee. This can alleviate the burden of onboarding on the HR department and impact the intent to leave the new employee. Participant 3 discussed his or her view of mentors being used in the onboarding process and what a mentor's role would be:

'A newly employed person will need somebody else that will be mentoring them. This is how we do things here and you had that induction, but we are still continuing to mentor you which is still part of induction that this is how things are done and where you are expected to do this and that and that one becomes an ongoing thing for a month or so until somebody gets settled.' (Participant 3, Competency Development Officer, 48 years old)

Theme 5: Hybrid onboarding

Hybrid onboarding in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality can take the form of face-to-face or online onboarding. Both forms of onboarding have their benefits and their disadvantages.

Subtheme 5.1: Face-to-face onboarding

Face-to-face onboarding was the de facto standard of onboarding before the COVID-19 pandemic and still has a place in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. As a result of the sheer number of lower-level employees in the municipality, face-to-face onboarding will remain in use. Participant 2 shared with the researcher that if done correctly, face-to-face onboarding was yet a relevant process for employees:

On the question: So in your opinion, induction is better if it's done in person, face to face, in a venue where all the information is passed on to the people right there?:

'I agree with that 100%.' (Participant 2, Senior HR Administration Consultant, 60 years old)

Participant 10 indicated that face-to-face onboarding is more beneficial to employees who do not possess the required technology to undergo online onboarding:

On the question: So in your opinion, do you believe that a hybrid system where employees that can be inducted online should be

inducted online and employees who as a result of not having the necessary technology or network connections should rather be inducted face to face?

'Definitely yes.' (Participant 10, Functional Head: Recruitment, 46 years old)

Subtheme 5.2: Online onboarding

Online onboarding became more commonplace in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality because of the social distancing measures put in place. Online onboarding has been used with great success; however, it is not without its pitfalls and problems. Participant 8 indicated that with the trends in technology, online onboarding using Microsoft Teams would become more prevalent:

'Ohh no definitely not you know, we are marching in future, like I say the panel opted for onboarding to use Teams because it's just more convenient.' (Participant 8, Deputy Director: Recruitment and Selection, 61 years old)

Participant 10 indicated that online onboarding can reduce costs on the part of the employee, as well as allow the employee to log in wherever they are:

'… what we talked about earlier as well to say when people come for induction also it's quite costly and sometimes you get more than 100 people in one venue which is it's health wise not ok, it also means that we also need to adopt an online induction programme that maybe we would invite people online, people with log in wherever they are.' (Participant 10, Functional Head: Recruitment, 46 years old)

Theme 6: The future of onboarding

The study highlighted various sub-themes that were deemed essential to the continued success of the onboarding process in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. These sub-themes included the continued use of an intranet system; improving the onboarding processes; face-to-face onboarding and ensuring the availability of resources.

Sub-theme 6.1: Intranet system

The continued use of an intranet system in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality will ensure that future employees who undergo onboarding have a vast online repository of information, reducing the need for new employees to travel and reducing the cost of printing for the employer. Participants 4 and 5 highlighted the benefits of an intranet system, such as the ease of accessing the system and the reduced need for travel on the part of new employees:

'… either on a link or on a something and the person can then sit down at a library on a hotspot, go through the whole process, answer questions and submit it virtually without the person having to come in. So, no matter where the person is, he has free access, and he can do it wherever he wants, and he can send it through for further handling.' (Participant 4, HR consultant, 49 years old)

'There's no way that you can justify these days asking people to travel from Bronkhorstspruit to the city to come and ask questions about pension funds. So, there's just no way so we

use the intranet, we use our electronic media. There's no way that we can time wise and travel, you know, all the risks involved in travelling the roads these days. You can't ask people to come to meeting in the town hall we're going to show you how your pension fund work, you know. Um, so yah, we use the intranet, and the two biggest factors is make it available everywhere.' (Participant 5, Deputy Director: Salary Administration, 52 years old)

Sub-theme 6.2: Improving onboarding processes

Human resource personnel in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality must renew their efforts to ensure that all employee onboarding processes are improved and upgraded, which can be done by adding technology and implementing factors which assist the employer and employee alike. Participant 5 highlighted that the process could be made more informal, allowing new employees the opportunity to ask questions and contribute to their onboarding:

'I think I've said a lot it's just that in my experience is very relevant is that there's much emphasis on a more relaxed, informal induction process then what we had years ago. So, you get a lot of better reaction when it's informal because that is the platform where people want to ask the questions and you know people normally are afraid to ask questions. So, what we've experienced is that make it smaller groups? And make it informal so that people feel that they can ask questions and contribute.' (Participant 5, Deputy Director: Salary Administration, 52 years old)

Participant 3 also indicated that the employee onboarding scope can be increased with more information being given to new employees:

'Induction should not only just focus on employee benefits and all those things, they need to know exactly if they're looking for training, which department do they actually go to and like, for example academic TMA that deals with training and then when they want bursaries where do they go?' (Participant 3, Competency Development Officer, 48 years old)

Sub-theme 6.3: Face-to-face onboarding

Face-to-face onboarding will still be common in the future because of the sheer number of lower-level employees in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality; therefore, the process as a whole must be improved to ensure its longevity. Participant 9 indicated that there was still a preference for face-to-face onboarding, as the process was more personal:

'I think there's a general preference to face to face interaction. I think people perceive it to be more personal in nature. So, I think the people have preference to move back to face to face.' (Participant 9, Key Account Specialist, 59 years old)

Participant 10 noted that room should be made to onboard employees face-to-face, where there is a challenge to adopt new technologies:

'… so it's a challenge for them to adopt into the new systems of online. So, we should also make a room for them so that at least we could see them face to face.' (Participant 10, Functional Head: Recruitment, 46 years old)

Sub-theme 6.4: Availability of resources

Every attempt should be made to ensure that the prerequisite resources for effective onboarding are in place. This includes seeing to it that the new employee has mobile data and access to hardware, that the employer's Wi-Fi is fast enough and that where needed there is a backup power solution. Participants 4 and 5 both mentioned that the availability of Wi-Fi and mobile data would allow for continued online onboarding:

'[A]s long as there is hotspot for Wi-Fi and the person has a phone or the library has a computer available and he can access the link, it can be done.' (Participant 4, HR consultant, 49 years old)

'… seeing to it that your Wi-Fi is available or in a way that people can access wi-fi even though remotely you know a lot of us still have got 3G they work relatively well. Um, so you can you can basically access the network throughout the city from the different points.' (Participant 5, Deputy Director: Salary Administration, 52 years old).

Sub-theme 6.5: Load-shedding

Load-shedding affects both the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality and any new employee. Efforts by the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality to reduce the incidence of load-shedding have not been successful, which has the adverse effect of online onboarding not taking place. The employee who most likely does not have a backup power solution thus is not able to attend online onboarding sessions. Furthermore, load-shedding throughout the day hinders the recharging of backup lithium batteries found in cell towers, which disrupts all Wi-Fi and mobile connections in the area. Participant 9 summarised it perfectly by saying that continued load-shedding would affect the Internet and Wi-Fi connections of employees and would disrupt all online onboarding efforts:

'So the candidate needs to be in a place we have got proper internet and the connection, and I'm afraid with current loadshedding that may sometimes not be that easy because somehow loadshedding affects the internet and Wi-Fi.' (Participant 9, Key Account Specialist, 59 years old)

Participant 10 also indicated that the headquarters of the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality is not subjected to load-shedding; therefore, the primary concern is on the part of employees to be connected and online during periods of load-shedding:

'… and in the candidate space, because for us we conducted interview here in Tshwane house and we never had any load shedding or connection problems. So, connection problems were largely on the side of the interviewees.' (Participant 10, Functional Head: Recruitment, 46 years old)

Discussion

The main themes which emerged from the data collection of this study included technology, infrastructure, access to resources, onboarding best practices and hybrid onboarding. In addition, the theme of future employee onboarding was identified. The literature review highlighted the factors

which were encountered by employees conducting online onboarding during COVID-19, as well as factors which could assist or hinder future online onboarding efforts. The results of this study shed some light on what was done well during COVID-19 and what needs to be improved upon in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality for future onboarding endeavours to be a success.

Outline of the results

Theme 1: Technology

The findings of this study indicated that technology served as the foundation for work performed remotely. These factors included the use of videoconferencing tools and an intranet system where relevant information could be stored for employers and employees alike. New employees could bookmark the link to the organisation's intranet system for easier navigation (Geciene, 2023).

Subtheme 1.1: Videoconferencing tools

Videoconferencing tools were crucial to not only remote working but also online onboarding of new employees. The benefits of using videoconferencing tools cannot be overstated, as without them, online onboarding will not be possible. Videoconferencing tools such as Microsoft Teams and Skype will ensure that the future workplace remains digitised and that processes such as online onboarding can continue in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. A study conducted during COVID-19 indicated that virtual meetings and training proved to be very beneficial to employees who were geographically dispersed or had their movements restricted because of social distancing measures (Liu et al., 2021).

Subtheme 1.2: Intranet

An intranet system in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality has multiple benefits. Firstly, it instantly reduces costs by eliminating the printing of booklets for new employees. Secondly, it puts an end to the printing of irrelevant information and allows for new employees to look up the information which they need. An intranet system can take the form of a Dropbox or Google Drive system, which makes it easier to implement and keep updated. This coincides with research which found that the intranet system of an organisation could be improved upon with the addition of comprehensive role descriptions which would assist new employees with easier access to information (Brødsjø et al., 2023).

Theme 2: Infrastructure

This study explored the effect of network infrastructure and load-shedding. The findings related to both these sub-themes are described in this section.

Subtheme 2.1: Network infrastructure

This study highlighted the effects of network infrastructure on online onboarding efforts. The research found that there was a persistent requirement in South Africa to improve the existing network infrastructure for online onboarding to continue without disturbances (Olaitan et al., 2021).

Subtheme 2.2: Load-shedding

Load-shedding is a persistent problem encountered by the personnel of the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, including new employees. This sub-theme emphasised the need for backup power supply systems for new employees, such as an inverter. This coincides with research conducted in Africa where it was found that the supply of electricity was not constant and that electricity alternatives should be provisioned for employees who were working remotely (Kokt & Chipunza, 2022).

Theme 3: Access to resources

The study highlighted the disparities between lower- and senior-level employees regarding hardware availability; lower-level employees did not receive hardware though steps were taken to accommodate these employees in the offices of the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. Senior employees were less affected by these matters, as laptops and computers were procured for their use, especially in the case of deputy directors and directors. Furthermore, not all new employees had access to sufficient mobile data, which hindered the ability to onboard these new employees in an online space. Lastly, because of the decrease in funding from the local government, there were budget shortages which needed to be navigated, resulting in hiring freezes and the cancellation of non-essential projects. A survey conducted in multiple municipalities in South Africa found similar results, where equipment purchases were suspended because of reduced funding (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2020).

Subtheme 3.1: Access to hardware

As can be seen from the responses, lower-level employees in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality did not have access to hardware such as laptops and desktops. This can be attributed to the financial state of the municipality and the types of jobs performed by these employees. Research conducted into the availability of ICT infrastructure highlighted the role it played in remote work setups, as well as the ability of employees to communicate in real-time (Sahut & Lissillour, 2023).

Subtheme 3.2: Access to mobile data

The research participants indicated that strong mobile and Wi-Fi networks would ensure that online onboarding could occur, now and in the future. Katerere (2022), however, recommends that any online onboarding should be flexible to accommodate instances of mobile networks being disrupted because of load-shedding. This may include the availability of online information for new employees and recorded and uploaded onboarding sessions.

Subtheme 3.3: Funding

The City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality does not have the required funding to ensure that all projects are approved. The lack of funding is not necessarily because of faults on their part, but rather to the greater effect of restrictions on the sale of alcohol and tobacco during the COVID-19 pandemic. This lack of funding is found not just in local municipalities but also on the national government level (De Villiers et al., 2020).

Theme 4: Onboarding best practices

This study highlighted best practices for the onboarding process, irrespective of whether the process was online or face-to-face, namely the increased scope of the onboarding process as well as the use of mentors during the process. Increasing the scope of the onboarding process will lengthen the process, and also the ability of the employee to ask questions and gain information. The use of a mentor gives new employees a guide and a sounding board for the duration of their onboarding. This mentor can show the employee how various work functions are performed and answer questions that the new employee may have. Research into the effect of a workplace mentor indicated that there was a decrease in psychological stress and an improvement in work satisfaction and organisational commitment (Wellcome Trust, 2020).

Subtheme 4.1: Increased scope of onboarding

By increasing the scope of the onboarding process, time can be spent on ensuring that the employee is fully onboarded into the organisation and that the onboarding process offers a positive return on investment for the organisation. While increasing the scope of onboarding will increase the duration thereof, it also ensures that the new employee has adequate time to ask questions. This coincides with research conducted at NEO, a start-up company specialising in marketing automation software, where the organisation introduced a blended training model which integrated its virtual employee onboarding component (Varshney, 2022).

Subtheme 4.2: Use of mentors

The use of mentors during the onboarding system is beneficial to all new employees, easing them into their new organisation. Katerere (2022) found that a mentor would be the new employee's first point of contact and assist the new employee in settling into his or her role in the organisation.

Theme 5: Hybrid onboarding

This study highlighted that while face-to-face and online onboarding were used to varying degrees in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, both proved to be beneficial to new employees.

Subtheme 5.1: Face-to-face onboarding

As a result of the sheer number of lower-level employees in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, face-to-face onboarding is still commonplace. Face-to-face onboarding is a valid option when employees do not have access to the hardware required for online onboarding. Research conducted into the effectiveness of face-to-face onboarding found that in some instances it could be more effective than online onboarding (Gregory et al., 2020).

Subtheme 5.2: Online onboarding

Online onboarding can be used effectively at the middle and senior levels of the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, as these managers have access to the required hardware as well as the network infrastructure to support online onboarding. This coincides with research done in Africa, where there is a lack of network coverage in large parts of the continent, and existing network connectivity measures are plagued by low bandwidth and the high costs of mobile data (Kokt & Chipunza, 2022).

Theme 6: The future of onboarding

This study identified factors crucial to the successful implementation of future employee onboarding programmes in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, that is, the continued use of an organisational intranet system; improving the onboarding process; ensuring that face-to-face onboarding remains viable; and making available the necessary resources for onboarding to both the municipality and the new employees. However, load-shedding will impact future onboarding efforts in the absence of alternative energy or backup systems.

Sub-theme 6.1: Intranet system

The continued use of an intranet system in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality will ensure that an information repository is available to all employees regardless of working hours. An additional benefit is that new employees can download only the information which they require, reducing the need to search for information or to print an employee booklet. This was echoed in research relating to the cost reduction benefits of an intranet system which established that an intranet system allowed for 'paperless' communication (Pentikäinen, 2021).

Sub-theme 6.2: Improving onboarding processes

The online onboarding process can be improved through the addition of automation software which removes the burden from HR personnel, allowing them to focus on other onboarding components. The participants argued for a degree of informality in the onboarding process, which would allow new employees to ask questions and socialise with their colleagues. This coincides with research done in Microsoft, where recommendations for remote onboarding included promoting communication, encouraging team members to switch on their cameras, assigning an onboarding mentor and ensuring that information regarding the organisation was provided (Rodeghero et al., 2021).

Sub-theme 6.3: Face-to-face onboarding

Face-to-face onboarding can still be implemented with great effect, especially in the event of a large onboarding session with multiple new employees. Many new employees prefer a physical onboarding system, deeming it more personal. This coincides with research which established that employees should be offered a choice between remote or face-to-face onboarding (Kokt & Chipunza, 2022).

Sub-theme 6.4: Availability of resources

Future onboarding efforts will benefit from continued improvement in network infrastructure and means to work around load-shedding. According to research, up to 10% of the population worldwide still do not have access to network infrastructure which allows them to complete their work (Sokolic, 2022).

Sub-theme 6.5: Load-shedding

Load-shedding can hamper any online onboarding efforts, as the network towers do not have sufficient time to recharge their backup battery systems between periods of load-shedding. It is one of the biggest contributors to the unsuccessful implementation of online onboarding efforts currently and seems unlikely to end soon. This is evident in research conducted into the decline of various industries as a direct result of load-shedding, which indicated that government and mining, in particular, were badly affected (Mabuza & Maphosa, 2023).

Practical implications

This study added to the body of knowledge regarding employee onboarding during the COVID-19 pandemic and the future of onboarding in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. It can be stated with some degree of certainty that the workplace as it was known before COVID-19 will not be the same again, with many employees reaping the benefits of working from home. Online onboarding for the municipality was created during the lockdown and HR personnel rose to the challenge of onboarding new employees in an online space. However, the future use of online onboarding in the municipality depends on the investment in and implementation of new technologies as well as the improvement of existing infrastructure.

This study and its findings can be used to good effect not only in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality but also in other municipalities in South Africa which experience the same or similar financial predicaments and a lack of proper infrastructure.

Limitations and recommendations

This study was not without limitations. The sample size of this study would ideally have been bigger than the 10 participants; some potential participants refused to be a part of the study or stated that they were not relevant to the study. Furthermore, the data collection interviews for the first two participants occurred in a face-to-face setting, resulting in time spent on a verbatim transcription of the recording. Subsequent interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams, with a transcription created during the interview process. Lastly, reluctance on the part of the participants to be a part of this study hampered efforts to gain more participants.

It is recommended that other municipalities within South Africa conduct an asset and skillset audit to determine what tangible and intangible assets they have within the municipality and use these when conducting employee onboarding. For example, where it makes financial sense to conduct employee onboarding on a face-to-face basis, and then implement it as such.

Future research

Unique challenges or successes relevant to the local government context deserve deeper exploration and this calls for another future qualitative study. Future research into this topic can explore the use of employee onboarding during COVID-19 among other municipalities in South Africa and draw comparisons with this study. Furthermore, research can be performed to explore the future implementation of employee onboarding processes in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. For this purpose, research measuring instruments utilising a quantitative research approach can be based on the findings of this study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlighted the use of online employee onboarding in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the future use of online onboarding. Exploring the responses of the participants offered a practical perspective on the use of onboarding now and in the future. Participants identified the benefits of both face-to-face and online onboarding, as well as the factors which would hinder future onboarding efforts. Systems and functions, such as intranet systems and onboarding mentors, will be of benefit to any onboarding process, with cost savings and time reduction advantages for both employers and employees.

In closing, this study is not a critique of any state-owned entity, but rather a guide to the effective implementation of online onboarding processes, now and in the future, in a South African context.

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Authors' contributions

J.O. conducted this research, C.M.S. was the supervisor, and K.F.L. was the co-supervisor.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, C.M.S.

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