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Understanding Virtual Employee Onboarding (VEO): The New Normal and beyond

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the intricacies of Virtual Employee Onboarding programs (VEO) from the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak and beyond. The paper aims to understand the strategic significance of the Virtual Onboarding process with recent corporate illustrations of onboarding programs. Besides, the literature discusses the ideal Virtual Onboarding process with examples of the commonly used tools. An effective VEO program is highlighted with the necessary conditions and the program components that should be incorporated to make an inclusive and enriching virtual onboarding experience. There are managerial implications drawn from the research: sophisticated, technology imbued virtual Onboarding can be designed, and the tools and company practices can be applied in the business context of Onboarding. Lastly, the challenges and emerging trends can be insightful to VEO practices for creating an amazing new employee onboarding experience.

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Background

The Covid-19 outbreak had resulted in turbulent times for work populations across the globe. Suddenly the companies had to examine and explore how they worked and identify innovative methods and practices. The recruitment process had to adapt and implement technological tools in video interviews, virtual assessments, and remote onboarding processes. Virtual Onboarding silently took the place of physical Onboarding in such a context (Mets, 2021). The informal onboarding process is where the new employee absorbs information about the workplace without any formal and physical procedures (Bauer 2010). It presents efficient conditions for the recruit to join the workgroup and understand its role and position ((Eklöf & Hallén, 2018). With the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the face-to-face mode of Onboarding is discarded, and onboarding activities are mainly related to video interviews and virtual assessments. A huge segment of the work population had to move to remote work arrangements (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). Along with the remote work trend, there was a paradigm shift in how newcomers were onboarded (Elset, 2018). The physical mode of Onboarding came to an abrupt end from the end of February 2020 as the offices had to be shut down. Still, workflow continued as organizations needed to carry out the recruitment processes during this period and had to put the virtual functions to onboard recruits (Anderson, 2020). Even though flexible work and virtual recruitment were observed much before the pandemic, many companies generated a sense of unpreparedness. The quick adaptation to the onboarding programs to the virtual model was abrupt, and insightful lessons have been learned from the accomplishments and the failures that can implement sophisticated practices in the future. Virtual Employee Onboarding (VEO) extensively uses video conferencing and involves getting to know and building relationships with new hires (Evans, 2021).

The article aims to explore the dimensions of VEO concerning the company initiatives in the onboarding processes and systems. It presents the best and relevant practices for future virtual onboarding experiences in volatile periods to come. Reports of Baker(2020, April 30) offer interesting findings: 86% of the firms have gone ahead with virtual technology to interview during the pandemic.

Literature

Earlier research (Cascio, 2000) had predicted virtual work arrangements as a reality due to the factors like cost reduction in offices, to generate more profits, environmental advantages.

Virtual teams have been compared to face-to-face groups (Hinds & Bailey, 2003) in the use of technology interface (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002), the geographical and brick & mortar crossing (Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004). The degree of the virtual process depends on the complex nature of the assignment (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002), physical settings (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003) and the frequency of the meetings (Moreland & Levine, 2002). Additionally, there have been studies on the significant role of the team members' interaction, especially informal communication (Staples & Webster, 2007). Recent studies have also been on the different dimensions of Virtual Onboarding in recent years (e.g., Hemphill & Begel, 2014; Harpelund, Højbjerg & Nielsen, 2019). From the perspective of Human Resource Management, Onboarding seeks to blend new employees operationally and socially with the company (Heinrichs, 2021). Virtual activities require more sustained efforts from both the firm and the new employees to develop a strong relationship (Harpelund, Højbjerg and Nielsen, 2019).

Making the best of VEO - the flow, checklist and the X factors

Virtual employee onboarding can be formulated across the different time zones across the other parts of the globe. Undoubtedly, virtual employee onboarding has existed for the last few years, especially with the expanding virtual labor market; nevertheless, the pandemic has triggered it to newer heights. VEO is designed to enable recruits from remote locations to become an intricate part of the team from the starting date of joining and settling down to the new work context. Getting the VEO right is crucial for the effectiveness of the HR function, and a positive virtual onboarding experience can stimulate the company's productivity. The pandemic adjustments taught valuable lessons and have made the management introspect the prevailing VEO processes and the shortcomings and focus on a future-oriented exploration and enhancement of the methods and techniques. Before embarking on a robust VEO plan, a deep analysis of the current onboarding framework needs to be done for adjustments. This process requires all the internal decision-makers' tacit consent and understanding of how virtual Onboarding will be implemented. A well-planned onboarding program imparts flexibility and a sense of support to the new employees.

The VEO usually consists of 3-5 days or may extend more. The virtual onboarding schedule consists of planned activities, primarily technological and platform access, orientation videos, and presentations on company background, culture, core values, and virtual team welcome. Clear goals and expectations should be

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communicated to the participants at the start of the sessions. This sequence of activities is followed by meeting virtually the onboarding buddy assigned by the company. The role of the virtual onboarding buddy is important as there are regular check-ins with them after the first day. The onboarding activities of the rest of the days usually cover the online resources and the essential software, interaction with the HR, and further training on compliance and roles-specific training. On the final day, there is an onboarding satisfaction survey administered to the new hires. The role of the recruitment manager is pivotal in the successful onboarding program and has to cover the extra mile in the initial weeks after the new employee joins. However, HR has to give the checklist of virtual onboarding activities to facilitate the flow. The technological bottlenecks are best worked out at the start of the onboarding sessions. Laptops, associated devices, and any new technology have to be made accessible to the new hire. Troubleshooting and breakdowns are the issues that will erupt from time to time. So the employee should be provided clear instructions on the person to contact for technical support, virtual communication platforms to be used for Onboarding.

Virtual new employee training covers two distinct forms; Role-specific training and IT training. There is enriched and interactive role-specific training on the jobs and videos. The schedule is designed with interactive courses with games, quizzes, and competitions and has an enduring effect on the new employee's mind. The IT training covers familiarity with file-sharing, apps, advanced security software, and cloud backup software. Research shows Virtual Shadowing is effective because it entails remote workers to follow peers who are currently involved with key projects and assignments similar to the new employee's profile. It is the process that ensures that new hires will show their work progress of jobs to preferably established and older team members who will virtually shadow their colleagues. Virtual shadowing is not a one-way process. It is a collaborative mechanism where the virtual new employee can offer valuable suggestions and feedback, instilling engagement. One must remember that virtual shadowing does not imply scanning through the new hire's work progress only but also supports professional growth.

To implement an effective VEO, a streamlined process has to be established from where the level of satisfaction can be measured once the virtual onboarding process is over. Some clearly defined steps can be used to achieve this objective: distribution of the onboarding checklist to the new hires, facilitate the transition from the short-term goals to the long-term goals, coordinate the anonymous completion of the surveys, and an eventual evaluation of the responses.

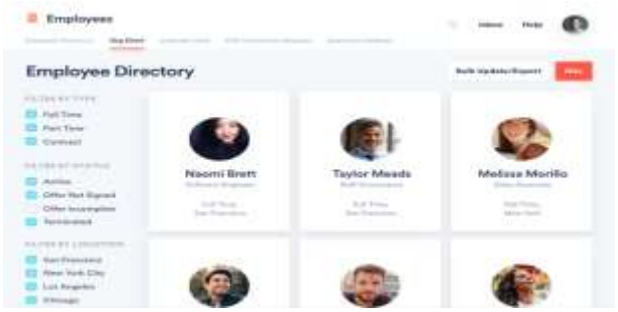
What tools to use

Some effective tools have made the VEO experience smoother and user-friendly.



Source: Typelane

("Typelane,"n.d.) Typelane is the web-based employee onboarding and offboarding platform that enables efficient Onboarding and offboarding experiences. This onboarding platform is a single-driven platform, convenient to use with smart workflows and secured compliance. Onboarding is only the tip of the iceberg. It has several added work support attributes like customized tasks, nested subtasks and checklists, visual databases with relationships and collaboration techniques with the team, and more than 35 apps to help the individual. Clickup, on the other hand, is more comprehensive and has customized applications for all kinds of tasks.



Source: Zenefits

("Zenefits,"n.d.) Zenefits has focussed features of virtual Onboarding – there is the offer letter section with templates, background checks done by its partner Checkr, self-onboarding support, tax documents created with the aid of information from the self-boarding, use of digital signatures, account provisioning with the integration features. Darwinbox has also charted out a professional flow chart of the onboarding process, and they call it the digitally seamless onboarding experience ("Darwinbox;"n.d.).

The new hire experience is a significant aspect that has been highlighted by the onboarding statistics (Ismaili, 2020).

Companies have deeply resorted to video conferencing applications such as Skype, Zoom, or WebEx over the past one and a half years. However, these onboarding interviews can be segregated into smaller sessions to alleviate the fatigue level. In such circumstances, only the salient competencies can be assessed to cut-short long drawn sessions. The installation of the IT programs should be delivered or installed on the new employee's devices by the IT department before the scheduled date of the onboarding program. Work-related platforms (password handler, antivirus) and team collaboration platforms (chat, file sharing) should be arranged beforehand. E-signing tools such as DocuSign or HellowSign can be used so that signed contracts can be accessed fast. VEO can be an enriching experience by collecting novel ideas from the team members to develop interesting ideas for the workday activities. Even including the honest feedback of a new hire about what went well and what did not. It can create well-designed virtual onboarding activities. Many firms use direct up-front top-down communications of leaders and use Facebook, Twitter, Slack or LinkedIn to keep up the employee engagement (sending emails, notes, videos and calling new team members. Onboarding can also be conducted in groups, maybe as classmates, or based on hobbies and interests or professional paths.

Going digital

With the emergence of regular virtual onboarding activities, all hard copy manuals, contracts, employee policy handbooks, packets should be converted into digital files or provided virtual access to an online employee portal. To empower and impart flexibility to the employees, training and learning modules should be designed so that new hires can complete the resources assigned independently. Self-learning pace and the system can save the managers' precious time from covering the entire process, and only the gaps and weak areas can be trained. The onboarding resources should be made available at one central location for the new employees.

The digital checklist should have the following:

- User login and access to required company information
- Wi-Fi capacity
- Licensed company software
- VPN requirements
- Access to updated video-conferencing tools
- Short videos on the usage of company software, preparing reports and other necessary features which are essential to perform the work smoothly

The company background and work culture elements should ideally cover a brief introduction (the history, achievements, vision, mission and business plans) and the code of conduct. Continuous blending initiatives of the new employee into the workgroup and the organization need to be done through individual or group video or conference calls to break the ice. Quick, short team sessions, WhatsApp chats, and weekly catch-ups with the supervisor alleviate the initial bottlenecks. The employees' feedback is a must-needed part that can enable a system-driven training and development program. This is an area that is widely overlooked in VEO programs. Feedback can be collected from attitude surveys of the recruits, individual sessions and the performance tracking software

The checklist contents vary from company to company and depend on several factors like the size and scale of operations, the nature of the industry, and the employee profile to be onboarded. Usually, the initial resources are the interview questions, job duties, company website, and background. The essential onboarding process will include interviews, assessments and meetings with the group members to ensure an organization-person fit after the hob-person fit is done in the initial phases. The offer letter is the inception of the operational aspects of the duties, responsibilities, and standards are stated in detail. The onboarding process does not end with tax and legal forms, the contract letter, banking form related to the payroll, health and insurance plans.

The fun factor

Virtual Onboarding can appear disconnected, and the recruits suffer from the fatigue of long-drawn meetings, so some enjoyment and fun should be introduced. A pre-onboarding questionnaire can be sent to the new employees beforehand to get prepared. There can be some connection games that can generate friendship and break the ice. Little activities like personal talk, photo challenges and fun games can arouse eagerness for the coming days. Games like Mingle Bingo and This or That (personal preferences) are more commonly played to ease the unknown factor. A Bingo card can be given to the new hires, and then they can be sent to the breakout room. The game's objective is to find out more information about the group members that match the squares of the box. This or that, for example, shoots

personal, interesting questions about the participants between two choices. Similarly, a host of other fun and stimulating activities can be chosen, of course, considering the other items of the plan to be covered and the time allotted.

Employee engagement is a challenge in the virtual onboarding process, and old employees can use a planned schedule of story-telling and narrative. There can be virtual snack dates scheduled for more close interactions with welcome packs and cards. Additionally, there should be an online portal to assist as a help center for doubts and confusion. As discussed before, virtual Onboarding is a platform to communicate essential information. The HR has to create and give the employee access to his organization's email address, a brief calendar of activities in the initial joining period, software resources, and help.

Employee feedback

Employee feedback is an integral part of the post-virtual employee onboarding process. A continuous and consistent feedback system has to be designed to improve the prevailing system. The essential purpose of VEO is the same as traditional employee onboarding: making employees understand the company culture and become a part of the team. Employees experience more connection with the organization and the colleagues; there is clarity on the company's business directions and mission. The survey can be a planned, systematic way to assess people's pulse subtly. The information obtained from the feedback can be used in multiple ways, like designing result-oriented VEO programs, narrowing the topics and sub-topics in the schedule and increase overall retention rates. Open-ended questions can generate narrative and details, but most organizations prefer scale surveys (1- 5 scales or 1-10 scale).

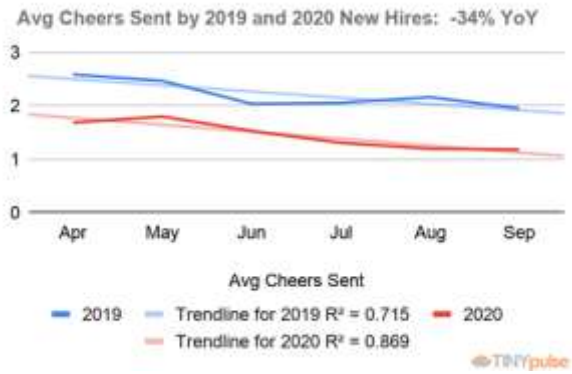
There should be initial statements/questions related to the onboarding experience:

- I feel welcome in the company.
- What are the things you like about the onboarding program
- Your roles and responsibilities are clear to you?
- How could we improve the onboarding experience? What was missed out?
- I have received adequate training so far.
- Have you been trained on the processes related to your roles and responsibilities?
- I may need more training in certain areas.
- Have you received a detailed briefing on the various aspects of the organizational culture?
- I have the right decision to join the firm.

More questions can be added to the bucket related to the onboarding experience, culture, and familiarity with the team, job knowledge, and engagement. The recruit satisfaction score is then collected and analyzed. The value-added responses could be incorporated into the onboarding program, and online HRMS platforms can check the daily pulse of the recruits.

Removing the hiccoughs -towards a streamlined VEO

Niu (2021) of TINYpulse presented some startling data regarding the effectiveness of onboarding programs during the pandemic. New hires were still having the lost feeling as they could not connect with the organizational culture. The biggest challenge of virtual Onboarding is making the new hires thoroughly experience the company culture and the people in a virtual model.



Source: Niu(2021)

The figures highlight that these hires (2019 before Covid and 2020 Covid periods) still lack peer recognition and less awareness of organizational values than the previous recruits. There is a disparity between what they provide as feedback and what their actual conduct demonstrates. Employee engagement was measured by a recognition program that offers peer-to-peer recognition of their colleagues. The year 2020 new hires exhibited 34% less recognition of their peers than the year 2019 recruits. The inevitable questions arise: Have virtual Onboarding failed? Or the lower success rate was only time-specific and related to the unique COVID-19 situation? Covid or otherwise, VEO is a reality in HR activities today and will continue in the future. The challenges of VEO cannot be undermined because the lack of physical interaction (especially in the pandemic period) has resulted in reduced team bonding for the existing employees who have worked closely. There may have been a sense of alienation from the company and its brand and a slump in the level of morale. One cannot undermine the value

of the regular office talk, coffee breaks, department meetings, seminars, and training programs in person. There are flipsides of video conferencing as compared to in-person meetings and communications. Ironically, video conferencing only focuses on business-related matters and cannot substitute for friendly office interactions. The long stressful hours of office interactions through zoom and other platforms have resulted in severe fatigue. There have been many research articles and survey findings on mental health and employee relations issues.

There are issues with Virtual onboarding teams related to proper facilitation (Lurey & Raisinghani, 2001), conflict (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005), bruised group morale (Bos et al., 2006) and information flow (Curtis, Krasner & Iscoe, 1988). This problem aggravates when team members have projects that are dependant on each other, like the creative team of an advertising agency, where informal fluid communication is needed. Natural communication deters potential differences and conflicts (Kiesler & Cummings, 2002). The traditional mode of interaction gives the added benefits of physical demeanor like age, attire, body language (Griffith & Neale, 2001).

In their research, Ahuja and Galvin (2003) had aptly highlighted that the focus on virtual interaction among the new team was primarily about the work that needed to be completed. There was no emphasis on core principles, shared meanings of culture. Peer mentoring can support such shortcomings. VEO requires an increased number of communication chains, due to which people have to spend a lot of time on digital communication platforms. This again leads to the commonly used zoom fatigue or virtual fatigue syndrome. This is a trade-off of VEO to some extent and implies the physio-psycho sense of exhaustion, stress and worry because of excessive use of virtual platforms (Wiederhold, 2020).

What some companies taught us

NEO is a marketing automation software startup that has implemented the VEO program to enhance the growth of customer sales and support teams spread across the globe. The purpose of the VEO was to outline product knowledge and strategic management and initiatives. The company introduced a blended online training model followed by the VEO program in e-learning modules, virtual live sessions and on-demand resources. Besides, a centralized onboarding portal was created for efficient interaction with each other. The welcome package was made available to the employees round the clock. Employee coordination and monitoring were done through a central location. The Virtual Onboarding was conducted rigorously for six months to increase the internal sales and customer support workforce. On the positive side, HR reported that VEO had made the onboarding activities cost-effective. Dell experienced initial hurdles as a large number of the new employees were used to working with varied domains, networks and did not have access to vital company information. This had caused much delay in connecting with these employees, negatively affecting their productivity, and delayed their involvement in virtual onboarding programs like benefits or compliance training. Initially, to overcome this shortcoming, Dell provided each new employee with a separate laptop apart from the main laptop, but it became costly in the long-term process. The breakthrough came from Dell Wyse vWorksoace's virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI) solution that provided a virtual desktop solution to all recruits on the current hardware. This virtual onboarding process of the company saved additional onboarding days and over one million dollars over five years that included the cost of the different laptops. This is a strategic and operationally effective measure that Dell had taken, and that made the onboarding process employee user-friendly and at the same time achieved suitable centralization of newly onboarded employees(Trevor,2021, July 17).

Organizations must re-invent the onboarding processes and programs to bond and connect employees with the company and its people. Worthwhile and deeper connections are the need of the hour because of the lack of immersion in the new work system, and efforts sometimes fail to instill such a connection. It is challenging to give a feel of the actual work on a remote platform. Videocalls cannot substitute the sincerity and the camaraderie of face-to-face interaction among new and old hires. Widening communication gaps can lead to adverse mental health and performance issues. Role ambiguity has been a common issue, and it has been traced from VEO effectiveness surveys that sometimes the tasks and duties are spelled out. The employee failed to grasp things, many points were left uncovered, and due to shortage of time, those areas could not be revisited. The new members of the virtual teams find it challenging to understand and connect with other team members in routine things like the rationale of some activities, their availability for discussion. This disconnect leads to low interaction, trust issues and differences among the team members. The supervisor faces problems in watching, coaching and examining the new hires sometimes. Hemphill & Begel (2011) pointed out the lack of absorption of tacit knowledge because of these barriers of learning partnership and the unknown factors. In

addition, recruited learners have doubts about the performance evaluation processes.

So what's new?

In their survey, Baker (2020) found that 68% of HR professionals focus on developing critical competencies post-covid. The primary HR thrusts were found to be designing organizations and introducing transformation (46%), present and future leadership (44 %), future of work (32%) and focusing on good employee experience (28%).

Where does Virtual Employee Onboarding (VEO) figure out in this context? VEO in such a background can create an engaging and enduring positive employee experience with actual communication and individual impact to build and sustain a connection between the new hires and the organization. Herein comes the role of virtual empathy onboarding doing the rounds. Empathy virtual onboarding is individualized and customized and single-mindedly focuses on the new employee's professional and personal needs, identifying the new hire's many initial obstacles and providing appropriate support, counseling them to look at the priorities. VEO cannot be sustained without virtual accountability also. Virtual Accountability refers to the sense of responsibility that the onboarding talent acquisition team has to take and should be cascaded to even the technical support, the HR department, and the particular department members. Concrete goals have to be established, and expectations lead to effective programs in the overall accountability process. These expectations should be communicated and observed proactively from time to time by the supervisors. Accountability is easier said than done and must be implemented through well-planned communication programs and principles of engagement. Some examples used can be the handbook, brochures, weekly or bi-weekly emails, and accountability sessions. Employees begin to feel detached when they do not come to the office for long periods and do remote work. Review of work has been made convenient by the tools of the various videoconferencing platforms. Managers usually go for weekly development programs to discuss the challenges and the achievements and also simple stories. To sum, the salient foundation of virtual Onboarding and subsequent such programs is trust. This is generated by the supervisor's encouragement and support that will sail the new employees for high performance in times to come. The fun factor, as discussed before, should not be ignored and be purposefully assigned in the virtual happy hours, coffee breaks and frolic activities.

The HR department should note that no matter whether the Virtual Onboarding program (VEO) needs to be designed or re-designed, the activities should be grouped into physically doable ones and those that can be done virtually. The virtual activities can include a virtual buddy for the cultural acclimatization process, providing online resources about company activities, reports, whitepapers to scan through, an initial partnering of the new hires with the old employees of the department so that the former can get to know about the team and the work department. Furthermore, there can be instruction guidelines and timesheets, e-learning modules. Organizations can also partner with the reputed HR consultancies to outsource such programs to implement effective VEO programs in collaboration with such agencies.

Conclusion

For companies that did not previously allow remote work, the COVID-19 crisis has forced many of them to change this stance, resulting in new insights about what happens when a large portion of the population works remotely. Even after the crisis, Armonk (2020) estimates that 54% of people prefer to continue working remotely. Another study identified a similar sentiment, where 54% of those surveyed said they would quit their job for another if it offered more flexible work arrangements (Hickman & Robison, 2020). Because of its increased prevalence, various studies have investigated the impact of virtual work on individuals and teams (e.g., Ahuja & Galvin, 2003; Cascio, 2000; Coovert & Thompson, 2013; Scott & Timmerman,1999). To sum, virtual employee onboarding is here to stay and gain momentum soon. Even in an unprecedented time, companies should continuously innovate and implement techniques and tools to onboard recruits effectively. The paper has highlighted some new and current employee onboarding practices with organizational illustrations for sustained prospective employee satisfaction and business continuity.

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