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**NAVAL
POSTGRADUATE
SCHOOL**

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

MBA PROFESSIONAL PROJECT

**ALL ABOARD! BENCHMARKING HUMAN RESOURCES
ONBOARDING PRACTICES**

December 2018

By: Helene S. Caniac

Advisor: Kathryn J. Aten
Co-Advisor: Anita M. Salem

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**ALL ABOARD! BENCHMARKING HUMAN RESOURCES
ONBOARDING PRACTICES**

Helene S. Caniac, First Lieutenant, United States Air Force

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

from the

**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
December 2018**

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ALL ABOARD! BENCHMARKING HUMAN RESOURCES ONBOARDING PRACTICES

ABSTRACT

This research investigates exemplary onboarding practices for those entering a leadership role. This research supports innovation in U.S. government human-resource practices by providing the community with (1) knowledge of industry-applied practices and (2) recommendations of best practices based on a literature review and interviews with subject-matter experts. Studies by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) suggest that government has neglected leadership development, and onboarding may resolve issues that the studies have identified. This study identifies trends in leadership development theories and assesses the extent to which industry practices align with these theories. The analysis of interview data reveals that most human-resource professionals do not perceive a link between their organization's onboarding goals and onboarding practices. Participants also lacked an understanding of the role that the literature suggests onboarding plays in leadership development. Overall, this study finds that higher-order onboarding practices, to include mentoring, stakeholder engagement, and action planning, are likely the best to support leadership development.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Whether they are new to the organization, or simply new to the position, all newcomers need to identify what needs to be learned and mastered, build satisfying work relationships, understand work politics, and adapt to the organizational culture, values, and vision (Dai, De Meuse, & Gaeddert, 2011). In addition, those in a leadership role must have a clear understanding of their responsibilities, authorities, and available resources and be able to address unspoken assumptions and expectations in order to build group acceptance and assimilate into the organizational culture (Dai et al., 2011).

Onboarding is the process through which individuals acquire the knowledge needed to successfully participate as a new organizational member (OPM, 2017). Organizations can use onboarding to enable new members to develop an aptitude for leadership. Onboarding provides organizations the earliest opportunity for leadership development (Wells, Susan, 2005). This process sometimes begins as early as recruitment, when an organization tailors the employee selection initiatives to organizational needs (Dai et al., 2011). As younger generations enter government service, changing norms, practices, and expectations are likely to affect recruiting and retention of employees in both support and leadership roles (Aten, Salem, & Baho, 2018). Successful on-boarding can help federal agencies respond to these changes and support the success and retention of transitioning leaders (Segal, 2017).

A. DRIVING PROBLEM

According to an exit survey of former executives, the federal government suffers from inadequate retention of executives in government (Office of Personnel Management [OPM], 2016). Former executives largely blamed work environment issues for their decision to leave, notably “senior leadership,” “political environment,” and “organizational culture” (OPM, 2016). According to OPM (2016), agencies have a strong influence on their ability to retain executives. Unfortunately, most federal executives said that “no effort was made to encourage them to stay” in their organizations (OPM, 2016, p. 1). Onboarding is

one way to mitigate these issues, by improving executive understanding of workplace culture and preparing executives for future challenges (OPM, 2017).

The federal government stands to benefit from effective onboarding, if the processes are applied consistently and tailored to leadership development (OPM, 2017). Successful onboarding is known to shorten the productivity curve, increase employee engagement, and reduce turnover (Wells, Susan, 2005). Incorporating on-boarding processes into the leadership appointment process also produces business benefits that result in long-term cost savings, sets new leaders on a course for success, eliminates the need to repeatedly fill top positions, and avoids loss of productivity (Wells, Susan, 2005). Onboarding practices that are consistent with organizational values, and which are consistently applied, can be the best tool an organization has to develop successful leaders, in house (OPM, 2017). According to OPM (2017), executives benefited from onboarding most when the onboarding programs were well established, where executives had opportunities to build relationships and when they received support from their senior leadership. Moreover, research has shown that organizations that chose to invest time and money into leadership development will be the most successful OPM (2017).

Despite the federal government's efforts to standardize onboarding for its civilian leaders, its processes suffer from a lack of consistent application (OPM, 2017). OPM's review of government onboarding revealed that executive onboarding guidance and procedures were inconsistently applied within and across federal agencies (2017). Half of polled executives were not satisfied with their onboarding experience, primarily due to a lack of senior leadership and administrative support (OPM, 2017). Those executives that underwent an onboarding process that was consistent with OPM guidelines were more satisfied with their experience, and generally felt more acclimated to their role and the organization's culture (OPM, 2017).

B. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

Given the opportunity for improvement in government onboarding practices, this study attempts to identify industry best practices for onboarding, in the context of leadership development. The purpose of this study is to benchmark onboarding practices

in industry against literature-recommended practices for senior leadership development. This research aims to provide an understanding of the professional experiences and perspectives of human resources representatives in relation to executive onboarding practices. In devising the study, the author focused on two core research questions:

- **What onboarding practices support the development of ‘good’ leadership?**
- **What leadership onboarding practices are used in industry?**

This study uses qualitative methods to explore the extent to which onboarding practices in industry are aligned with trends in leadership development theories. In Chapter II and III, this study provides background research, through a literature review, to better evaluate the relationship between onboarding and leadership development. After using the literature to develop a conceptual model of onboarding best practices, Chapter IV explains the study’s research approach and methods. Chapter V presents industry perspective gained through interviews with subject matter experts . Finally, Chapter VI discusses the results of the analysis of the interviews and provides onboarding recommendations for government agencies based on industry practices.

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II. LEADERSHIP LITERATURE REVIEW

The Department of the Navy (DON) has sought to improve onboarding for its civilian leaders. If we are to evaluate best practices for onboarding new leadership, we must first understand leaders and the role they play in the organization. This chapter will synthesize leadership theories and key findings in order to provide context for the following chapter, which will summarize published onboarding practices.

Definitions and strategies of leadership have evolved over time, both asserting and challenging the changing social and cultural norms (James & Collins, 2008). The theories of leadership have shifted to accommodate the evolving structures of organizations, which originated and change based on the needs of society. For instance, as society grew to place more responsibility on its leaders, people saw leaders as heroes bound to fix failing system, and thus valued heroic traits, like boldness and bravery (James & Collins, 2008). Despite its elusive definition, few subjects have been studied so thoroughly without generating a common understanding. In his paper, “What is leadership?” Richard Bolden (2004) surveyed studies on leadership strategies and provided a synthesis of the most prevalent theories and why they grew more or less popular over time. His analysis also addressed how leadership can affect organizational outcomes. He notes this lack of a common understanding, “There is no widely accepted definition of leadership, no common consensus on how best to develop leadership and leaders, and remarkably little evidence of the impact of leadership or leadership development on performance and productivity” (p. 3). Leadership may not be universally defined, but Northouse (2013) in *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, identified four general aspects of leadership: “(1) leadership is a process; (2) leadership involves influence; (3) leadership occurs in a group context; and (4) leadership involves goal attainment” (p. 171). In short, leadership is “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2013, p. 171).

A. LEADERSHIP THEORIES

People have long looked to their fellow men and women for guidance. The search for the secret to effective leadership has led to universities investing in leadership certifications courses to meet market demands, and it has driven the corporate world to hire highly paid management consultants to improve their bottom line (Bolden 2004). Many research papers have delved into the intricacies of individual theories; this section will describe the highlights. Generally, researchers categorize theories according to which part of the leader the theories emphasize. Research generally categorizes leadership theories according to their focus on who leaders were (traits, characteristics) and what they did (transactional, transformative.) These categories merge together in the contingency and skills approach to leadership, where leaders must align their strengths with the appropriate work environment.

1. Trait Theory

According to Richard Bolden, trait-based theories emerged in an attempt to assess specific qualities inherent to leadership ability and were an outgrowth of earlier theories based on the personal characteristics of leaders. In the 1840s, the Great Man theory became prevalent in explaining why people turned to specific individuals for guidance. People looked to the historical leaders of the past and noticed that they were mostly strong, brave, and bold men who rose to the occasion when it presented itself (Bolden 2004). The Great Man theory claimed that leaders had to be just that – great men. Accordingly, one had to be born great in order to become a great leader. Later, in the 1930s, the Trait Theory arose and broadened the spectrum for what constituted “great leaders” (Bolden, 2004). Researchers analyzed leadership characteristics (physical, mental, and social) in the hopes of developing a recipe for greatness. In his *Handbook of Leadership*, Stogdill (1974) endeavored to compile a list of desirable traits all good leaders possessed. These traits are presented in Figure 1.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong drive for responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Willingness to accept consequences of decisions and actions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on completing the task 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readiness to adsorb interpersonal stress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vigor and persistence in pursuit of goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Willingness to tolerate frustration and delay
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Venturesomeness and originality in problem-solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to influence the behavior of others
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drive to exercise initiative in social settings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity to structure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-confidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of personal identity

Figure 1. Leadership Traits. Adapted from Stogdill (1974, p. 81).

Despite creating a practical grocery list of attributes, both theories have been criticized for their insufficient potential for application. Primarily, the list of desirable qualities for a “great man” was too large to be easily categorized and it was impossible to evaluate correlation between individual attributes and success (Bolden, 2004). Moreover, both theories take an individualistic approach to leadership, assuming only a specific type of person bears any influence. In actuality, employees must interact in diverse environments, notably teams, beneath layers of oversight and bureaucracy (Bolden, 2004). Most importantly, both theories imply that leaders are born, not made.

2. Behavioral Theories

Traditionally, leaders in the military describe themselves by one of two common sayings: “mission first, people always,” or “people first, mission always.” The behavioral theories of leadership similarly categorized leaders into two categories, those who are task-oriented and those who are people-oriented (Bolden, 2004). Fiedler (1964), delved deeper into behavioral theories of leadership and forged the Contingency theory that states that leader success is contingent on how well their assignments are aligned with their skills. For instance, an individual with high personal skills should be placed in less-structured environments. Conversely, those leaders with more task-oriented tendencies and less personable skills should be placed in highly structured units (Fiedler 1964). By matching

a leader's points of focus to the managerial structure and mission set, an organization can better ensure its internal cohesion and ultimate success. These adaptive, context-driven theories were mostly developed to cater to "the situation, the people, the task, the organization, and other environmental variables" (Bolden 2004, p. 10). Behavioral theories were useful in stressing that there was more than one way to lead successfully, and the manner chosen should depend on the environment as well as the leader's individual skill set. The problem with behavioral theories, to include contingency theory, is that they do not provide specific models or guidance for would-be leaders to follow.

3. Transactional, Transformational, and Charismatic Theories

In the 1970s and later, new theories of leadership emerged that were based on the types of interaction leaders had with other people in their organization. These theories include transactional, transformational, and charismatic theories of leadership.

Transactional Leadership is one of the most traditional notions of leadership, though no one individual can claim to have introduced it. In this theory, the health of the relationship between leader and follower is based on the exchanges that are inherent to their duties. In transactional leadership, leaders earn commitment – and reliable work – from their employees, because they provide financial incentives to perform, through their pay and job stability (James & Collins, 2008). Simply put, employees perform their duties, not because they are particularly inspired, but rather because they are compensated for their time performing those duties. This theory is congruent with the incentives advertised by the military to new recruits. For instance, the military can pay for a recruit's college tuition, grant them the opportunity to travel, and provide financial stability. In the context of transactional leadership, the new recruits commit up to ten years of service in signing a contract with the DoD, in the hopes that they will gain job security and opportunity for growth later on.

In his book, *Leadership*, Burns (1978) pioneered the concept of Transformational Leadership. At its core, the theory supports a mutually beneficial relationship between leader and follower, where they strive to challenge and improve each other (Burns, 1978). He notes, transformative leadership "occurs when one or more persons engage with others

in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” (p.20). This kind of leadership is intended to literally transform the organization from within, through the betterment of individuals, focusing on aligning organizational goals with individual internal drives and values (James & Collins, 2008). This theory was especially appreciated for its emphasis on empowering leaders and employees through changing organizations (Bolden 2004). In the context of transformational leadership, a new recruit might join the military to amplify their sense of patriotism and will commit in order to be fulfilled by the value of their duty.

To better contrast the differences between transactional and transformational leadership, Bolden (2004) cites Covey (1992) in establishing Figure 2.

Transformational Leadership	Transactional Leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds on a man’s need for meaning • Is preoccupied with purposes and values, morals, and ethics • Transcends daily affairs • Is orientated toward long-term goals without compromising human values and principles • Focuses more on missions and strategies • Releases human potential – identifying and developing new talent • Designs and redesigns jobs to make them meaningful and challenging • Aligns internal structures and systems to reinforce overarching values and goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds on man’s need to get a job done and make a living • Is preoccupied with power and position, politics and perks • Is mired in daily affairs • Is short-term and hard data orientated • Focuses on tactical issues • Relies on human relations to lubricate human interactions • Follows and fulfils role expectations by striving to work effectively within current systems • Supports structures and systems that reinforce the bottom line, maximize efficiency, and guarantee short-term profits

Figure 2. A Comparison of Transactional and Transformational Leadership. Adapted from Bolden (2004), citing data from Covey (1992).

The concept of transformational leadership is especially relevant when applying the processes of onboarding new employees. Bradt and Tavis (2010) argue that onboarding is actually an act of transformational leadership for managers and employees alike. They explain, “New employees must assimilate into teams and organizations while, at the same time, improving those organizations. This is two-way transformational leadership as organizations transform new employees while new employees are transforming the organizations they are joining” (Bradt & Tavis, 2010). Their research concludes that it is imperative for the organization to properly commit themselves to their onboarding practices.

Transformational leadership is now seen as a dominant leadership theory that explains the influence of leaders on organizational culture. For instance, Schuh, Zhang and Tian (2013) conducted a study to evaluate how the moral and immoral conduct of transformational leaders might affect the efforts of employees, given that this leadership style generates particularly strong commitment and attention from its followers. Their results showed positive correlation between those transformational leaders with high moral behaviors and employee efforts. Conversely, highly authoritative leadership had a negative correlation toward employee efforts (Schuh et al., 2013). However, transformational leadership can also be a dangerous style if leaders use its assets toward immoral goals. Given the potential negative consequences, Schuh, Zhang, & Tian (2013) recommend that organizations, “complement existing efforts in fostering transformational leadership with measures focusing on high morality and low authoritarianism” (p. 638). Specifically, organizations should provide ethics training, create a code of conduct, and reward good moral role models (Schuh et al., 2013).

In the 1980s and 1990s, charismatic leadership came to the forefront. This theory essentially combines the earlier theories to include traits, transformational and great man theories. A leader’s innate charm and attractive nature was supposed to revitalize an organization’s morale, and lead employees out of the slump of corporate monotony (Ehrhart & Klein, 2001). Charismatic leaders have common characteristics, to include: having a highly influential personality, expressing confidence in oneself and in others, setting high expectations for performance, and assigning moral overtones to group

objectives (Northouse, 2013). These characteristics can yield effective leadership, as they inspire employees to action. However, they bear the same risks as transformational leadership. If a leader is persuasive, but not oriented towards moral goals that align with the company mission, their impact is, at best, only temporary, and, at worst, devastating to the integrity of the organization (Northouse 2013). The theory of charismatic leadership provides a rationale for including recruiting as an important part of the onboarding process.

4. Other Leadership Theories

Leadership, including its qualities and its consequences, does not need to come from a position of power. For instance, distributive (team-oriented) leadership and servant-leadership are two of several theories that support the notion that influence can come from any employee, no matter how low they are on the totem pole. According to McLean (2013), distributive leadership is about “fostering a team ethos within which the whole was greater than the sum of its parts” (p. 1). The strategy for distributive leadership is to delegate authority and power in the organization. The outcome of leadership decisions then depends on the team. This theory also suggests pairing the leadership responsibilities with those individuals whose skills are best suited to the task (Mclean, 2013).

Most leadership theories are founded on the goal to attain organizational objectives. However, the goal of servant leadership is to serve others in meeting their full potential (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). The motive of servant leadership is what sets it apart from the other theories. Sendjaya & Sarros (2002) cite examples of servant leadership that are as old as Jesus Christ, but the theory itself has become popular in the 21st century. Liden (2013) argues that workers must be “empowered, creative, and motivated” in order to persevere in the ever-changing competitive marketplace and growingly unstable global political landscape (p.699). Servant leadership is a theory credited with stimulating the sought-after characteristics of empowerment, creativity, and motivation in its followers. The servant leader focuses on the betterment of the followers, enabling them to succeed both at work and at home. This leader will ensure workers have the tools and skills they need most, both to develop themselves and to accomplish the mission (Liden, 2013). By placing such emphasis on worker wellbeing, servant leadership depends on the reciprocity

of the followers toward the leader. Followers will work harder and do what is best for the wellbeing of the organization because of the trust and care they were shown (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). An increase in servant leaders leads to an increase in the well-being of the unit members, higher productivity of its members, and a better quality of work product (Liden, 2013). A servant leadership model implies a long-term onboarding approach that includes active fostering of future servant leaders, through mentorship and grooming techniques.

B. LEADERSHIP SKILLS

In contrast to the belief that leadership is born of innate personality traits, Robert L. Katz (1974) proposed a model for leadership development, which emphasized development of the administrative skillset. The literature is divided on whether or not leadership skills and administrative skills are interchangeable. Bolden (2004) notes the differences between leadership and administration, “People are generally recruited into ‘management,’ rather than ‘leadership’ positions and are expected to complete a multitude of tasks ranging from day-to-day planning and implementation, to longer-term strategic thinking” (p. 8). Despite their similarities, industry and academia tend to pit management and leadership against one another, treating the concepts as mutually exclusive. However, Gosling and Mintzberg (2003) warn against emphasizing the dichotomy, as the segregation of management and leadership could endanger the integrity of the company. They write, “The separation of management from leadership is dangerous. Just as management without leadership encourages an uninspired style, which deadens activities, leadership without management encourages a disconnected style, which promotes hubris. And we all know the destructive power of hubris in organizations” (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003). Following Mintzberg’s approach, this paper treats administrative skills and leadership skills as interrelated management skills.

Katz, in looking at the skills required for successful management, describes the “Skills of an Effective Administrator” as resting on three pillars: technical, conceptual, and human (Katz, 1974). Katz defined an administrator as one who “(a) directs the activities of other persons and (b) undertakes the responsibility for achieving certain objectives through

these efforts” (p.3). While some may argue that effective administration is not inherent to the definition of leadership, good leadership may only be termed successful when the organization achieves its goals, and effective administration is crucial to doing so. Across the three skills, leaders must not only be well versed in their subject matter, but they must also know when to use their talents appropriately.

Effective administration and successful leadership depend on a combination of technical, conceptual, and human skills (Katz, 1974). Technical skill encompasses the specific tools an administrator needs to accomplish the job they are assigned. The type of technical proficiency required depends on the department and level of the task at hand. Conceptual skill is the ability to have a “10,000-foot view” perspective of the organization. It includes understanding the interdependency of the functions in the organization, as well as how the company interacts within the industry at large. Finally, strong administrators also require human skill, which is also known colloquially as “people skills.” A combination of self-awareness and empathy allows the leader to influence the organization on a personal level and steer an organization toward an objective. These human skills are required to some extent at all levels of management. Ultimately, effective administration requires a combination of all three skills, depending on the position held and the level of management.

The benefit of the skills approach to leadership is the ability of an organization to mold their administrators into better managers. Because these skillsets can be developed, they prioritize action and performance over potential (Katz, 1974). This particular approach to leadership development may be the most relatable to the U.S. Armed Forces, where military leaders must typically work with the uniformed service members assigned to their unit, regardless of their personality traits. In that instance, grooming a future leader cannot exclusively depend on the qualities a person has, but rather what one can be trained to do, and ultimately, achieve. Katz (1974) concludes:

This three-skill approach emphasizes that good administrators are not necessarily born; they may be developed. [...] By helping to identify the skills most needed at various levels of responsibility, it may prove useful in the selection, training, and promotion of executives. (p. 10)

For onboarding programs, a skill development approach implies a long-term process of leader development and calls for ongoing opportunities for skill development.

C. LEADERSHIP RESULTS

An important aspect of this study's discussion of leadership is to identify measurable outcomes that are related to quality leadership. These are the outcomes that onboarding programs should focus on when measuring their effectiveness. Although it remains difficult to ascribe specific outcomes to leadership, alone, Bolden (2004) acknowledges the strong relationship between what he calls "management and leadership development" and enhanced "management and leadership capability" (19). He argues that this enhanced capability leads to enhanced organizational performance.

A leader can affect organizational performance on three levels: individual, group, and organizational (James & Collins, 2008). First, the individual effect takes hold initially, after development, and primarily affects the leader. This effect reveals itself through increased technical competence and enhanced productivity. It may also result in greater communication skills and strategic thinking. Second, the leader's development also impacts the organization at the group level—specifically, the leader's subordinates and colleagues. The improvements from this level are similar to the ones that impacted the individual leader, but now enhance the group beyond the leader, through interaction. Measurable outcomes at the group level include "decreased absenteeism and staff turnover, increased willingness to work overtime, and enhanced participation, accountability and suggestions/feedback" (Bolden, 2004 p. 20). Finally, beyond the group level, leaders also have an impact at the organizational level. Organizational leadership effects include increased profit and share values, customer satisfaction and better relationships within the industry. These three outcomes-- individual, group, and organizational outcomes—are the ultimate measures of success for both executive performance and onboarding programs.

D. LEADERSHIP AND ONBOARDING

Moving forward, it is important to remember that changes in demographics have often called for new theories and methods in leadership development. This is still true. For instance, Globokar (2018) remarked that Generations Y and Z value freedom, flexibility,

and fulfillment more than their predecessors. Similarly, Aten, Salem, and Baho (2018) note that the changing structure of work and shifting cultural norms influence perceptions of leadership and the retention of military millennials. Considering this, organizations may have to take a more collaborative, lateral approach to leadership and leader development than previously theorized (Aten et. al, 2018).

In industry, we see a similar shift. After decades of cultural evolution and technological development, industry has learned to take a multifaceted approach to leadership that addresses the complexities of modern work life. Gosling and Mintzberg (2003) detail this complexity:

Be global, managers are told, and be local. Collaborate, and compete. Change, perpetually, and maintain order. Make the numbers while nurturing your people. [...] To be effective, managers need to face the juxtapositions in order to arrive at a deep integration of these seemingly contradictory concerns. That means they must focus not only on what they have to accomplish but also on how they have to think. (para. 3)

This complexity calls for a broad yet individualized approach to leadership (Liden, 2013). Likewise, onboarding practices, (among other policies) must take a long term and multi-faceted approach to leader development. Leaders set the tone at the top, establish a vision and goals for the company and its members, and take ultimate responsibility for mission accomplishment (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003). Onboarding is one of the key structures through which leaders integrate into the organization to accomplish these goals. Bradt and Tavis (2010) describe the importance of onboarding in terms of transformational leadership. They stress that leaders must use their assets to get buy-in from employees to achieve a shared goal, “Onboarding is not about acquiring, accommodating, assimilating and accelerating new employees. Those are merely steps on the way to realizing a shared purpose” (p. 2). The relationship between leadership and onboarding can thus be described as a virtuous cycle. Unlike a vicious cycle, a virtuous cycle delivers positive results where successful onboarding practices help develop leaders and ensure they have the support required throughout their tenure to accomplish the mission. Those leaders, in turn, have the power to influence their HR organization and directly impact onboarding effectiveness by initiating and supporting onboarding that supports transformational leadership.

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III. ONBOARDING LITERATURE REVIEW

Onboarding, for executives and general employees alike, can be defined broadly as the procedures used to integrate new members (employees and executives) into an organization. More specifically, executive onboarding is “acquiring, accommodating, assimilating and accelerating a new leader” into the organization (Ndunguru, 2012, p. 1). Onboarding for executives is often seen as different than employee onboarding because the role requires a more strategic perspective. This perspective is focused on the consequences for the organization as a whole and often carries higher stakes. Because executives are responsible for the overall performance of the organization, they need to manage the higher expectations that come with the new role (Ndunguru, 2012). The overall goal of executive onboarding therefore is to help these new leaders assimilate into their new roles. In support of this goal, there are a number of practical objectives for the process of onboarding. These objectives range from orienting the new leader to basic organizational functioning to those practices that help leaders transform cultures. For example, the most basic onboarding processes introduce new members to the organization’s tools, technology, personnel and culture (Kopoulos, 2017). Onboarding practices that support transformative leadership on the other hand, help leaders engage with their subordinates, peers, and supervisors to support organizational strategies.

Onboarding can occur at a number of stages in an executive’s career path. For external hires, Sampson (2013) argues that onboarding should begin contemporaneously with recruitment. Sampson notes that the interactions an organization has with its future member, through a hiring manager, supervisor, or fellow employee, impacts the ease and speed with which new leaders integrate into the organization. For internal hires, executive onboarding begins the moment a person is introduced to key stakeholders and is therefore considered a part of their overall professional development (Bradt & Tavis, 2010). The following practices remain the most well-established across industries and have earned their place in many formalized corporate onboarding programs.

A. ONBOARDING PRACTICES

Industry applies a wide range of executive onboarding practices. These onboarding practices can be conceptualized under five basic activities: compliance, orientation, stakeholder engagement, action planning, and mentoring. These practices make implicit assumptions about what is needed to develop specific types of ‘leaders.’ Ultimately, companies are likely to select practices that align best with their expressed leadership theories.

1. Compliance

The most basic form of onboarding consists of practices built to satisfy compliance with the organization’s policies and procedures. These compliance activities are common to all employees and do not address the organizational complexities facing new leaders. To be compliant, all employees must fill out employment documentation, receive safety briefings and undergo other industry-mandated training (Kopoulos, 2017). Compliance is the most consistently applied onboarding goal, because organizations have legal incentives to ensure it is completed.

Compliance activities consist of pre-boarding and initial pre-requisite trainings. The earliest stage of onboarding, pre-boarding, is internal to the company and impacts the ease of the subsequent onboarding processes. This activity encompasses the organization’s efforts leading up to the employee’s first day with the organization (Kopoulos, 2017). The pre-boarding stage involves gathering the documents that the new hire will need to review and sign, compiling pertinent informational data, and ensuring that the new employee has everything they need on their first day (Chaneski, 2015). For instance, during the pre-boarding phase a company creates IT accounts, assigns office space, and informs personnel that a new member is coming aboard (Kopoulos, 2017). These efforts primarily reflect the planning stages of the next form of compliance, which is prerequisite training. Onboarding practices during the first few days of pre-requisite training focus on core required trainings. Typical trainings at this level consist of understanding security procedures, sexual harassment training, and familiarization with information technology systems (Chaneski, 2015). In this initial process, there is an expectation that the employee will adapt to the

company's way of doing things, often without a request for the new hire's input. Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, and McKee (2014) note that an emphasis on compliance training is most closely tied to leadership theories that de-emphasize skill development, because it assumes a one-size-fits-all approach to integrating new people.

2. Orientation

Once the new hire is compliant with policies and regulations, orientation begins with familiarizing the new employee with their team, their workspace, and the organization itself. First, team introductions are an important orientation activity where employees are introduced to their supervisors, mentors, and other important members of their team (Watkins, 2013). This initial team interaction helps imbue what Watkins (2013) calls "collective responsibility" for the new member. It is a low level form of relationship building. Second, workspace orientation focuses on the physical attributes of the workplace. New employees are shown the location of their desk, parking space, bathroom, break room, and other useful departments (Kopoulos, 2017). Finally, the initial introduction to the organization itself includes basic briefings on organizational structure, strategy, and functioning. This initial orientation may involve briefings from senior officials to impart the company's mission, vision, and strategic plan for the future (Steer, 2013).

Organizations have different timelines for orienting new employees. Companies schedule these tasks anywhere from one day up to two weeks. Some invite all new hires to the orientation, en-masse, while other companies provide orientation days on an individual basis (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013). Some organizations also make time for the top executives to interact with the newest hires during their first few days (Chaneski, 2015). Ultimately, an organization's approach to onboarding varies based on the size of the organization and how frequently they receive new inbound employees (Cable et al., 2013). Orientation and compliance practices are common to both regular employees and new leaders.

Organizations that only provide these rudimentary onboarding practices reflect a perspective on leadership that is more transactional than transformative (Antonakis &

House, 2014). These practices are transactional because they pre-suppose that employees remain engaged in the mission because of the benefits and security the organization provides (Antonakis & House, 2014). These practices tend to be one-size-fits all, and do not cater to individual strengths or desires (Cable et al., 2013). The goals of orientation and compliance achieve only a minimal level of integration, and dedicate little time to individual development (Bradt & Tavis, 2010). The following onboarding practices of action planning, stakeholder engagement, and mentoring however, reflect a perspective that leaders have the capacity to transform their followers for the betterment of the organization (Grillo & Kim, 2015).

3. Action Planning

Action planning includes individual and organizational planning that focuses on creating a pathway for development and learning. These plans usually take the form of initial, midterm and yearly reports and follow-up interactions with other members in the organization. The appropriate training, development, and work outcomes are laid out in the action plan, and these establish the employee's future initiatives (Day et al., 2014). Often, the planning includes regular feedback sessions to improve the new hire's productivity and integration into to the organization (Day et al., 2014).

Individual action planning centers on the short and long-term progression of the new hire and focuses on technical and human skill development. Ndunguru (2012) notes that these plans are intended to foster individual improvement, help the leader set goals, develop leadership skills, and advance the leader's career. Individual action plans can help the employee frame their career in the context of the organization as a whole (Antonakis & House, 2014).

Organizational action planning is rooted in the conceptual side of skills leadership by providing the new executive with a 10,000-foot view of the organization. Here action planning becomes strategic planning (Katz, 1974) and change management (Bolden, 2004). Often, action planning is combined with mentoring to tailor the plan to individual needs and goals. Action planning aligns with skill-based leadership theories, because the practice assumes the individual can be trained and developed into the appropriate role

(Katz, 1974). Action planning is also closely tied to both transactional and transformative theories of leadership because it emphasizes accountability by connecting leadership input and follower outcome (Antonakis & House, 2014).

4. Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement activities focus on building interpersonal relationships. Byford et al. (2017) note that onboarding activities related to stakeholder engagement include companies' scheduling their executives for "meetings with key stakeholders to accelerate a transfer of deeper knowledge about the business, the team, the culture, and strategic priorities" (p. 8). Byford also notes that without this level of commitment for including stakeholder engagement in the onboarding process, executives may neglect important organizational issues (Byford et al., 2017). For Byford, the ideal onboarding application of stakeholder engagement involves a customized approach to strategic engagement, where engagement activities include building relationships with four stakeholder groups—superiors, peers, subordinates and external stakeholders.

When building relationships with the first stakeholder group—superiors—typical executive onboarding activities include sitting in on higher-level board meetings, providing facetime with superiors, and establishing mentorship programs (Minnick et al., 2014). Onboarding activities targeted at developing relationships with the second group—peers—include new leaders shadowing or working in a different department of the company, and leaders meeting regularly with other managers and supervisors (Steer, 2013). Building relationships with direct reports is viewed as a key activity for leader assimilation in that it helps executives engage in deep discussions with their subordinates and focus on team-building and strategy co-development (Byford et al., 2017). This practice also enables the executive to keep the less experienced and subordinate employees in mind when making organizational decisions that may affect their wellbeing (Steer, 2013). Finally, it is important to include external stakeholders in engagement onboarding activities. Building external awareness and connections grants the new hire a deeper and broader understanding of their organization's role in industry (Steer, 2013).

The goal of stakeholder engagement is to strengthen relationships in order to build morale and change or reinforce culture (Ndunguru, 2012). Leader-member exchange theory suggests that stakeholder engagement is in fact one of the most important onboarding activities for new leaders, impacting the effectiveness of the new executive's integration (Nichols & Cottrell, 2014). Leader-Member Exchange theory posits that a positive and trusting relationship between leaders and their followers leads to a positive working environment and ultimately improved organizational effectiveness (Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997). Mutual trust, respect, and friendship are the key to commitment and, people are more committed and productive if there is a likability between leader and follower (Day et al., 2014). Stakeholder engagement, along with mentoring, places the greatest importance on interpersonal relationships and are executive onboarding activities that are closely tied to the leadership concepts of transformational, servant, and distributive leadership.

5. Mentoring

There are three types of mentoring or coaching programs; new hires may receive mentorship from a supervisor or manager, from a peer, or from someone outside the organization. Companies differ in how they use mentorship programs depending on their resources and leadership philosophies (Steer, 2013). The most common type of mentoring is that received from direct supervisors, because of the natural frequency of their transactional interactions and their shared goal of improving the employee's productivity (Graybill, Taesil Hudson Carpenter, Offord, Piorun, & Shaffer, 2013). Ideally, managerial mentorship provides the new hire with guidance on career progression and also considers the member's overall well-being and fit within the company (Graybill et al., 2013). Peer mentorship, colloquially termed the 'buddy system,' is particularly useful in furthering an employee's orientation to the workspace and to helping them understand the culture of the organization. The new hire is able to be more informal with their peers, asking questions designed to help them socialize and integrate with the company (Graybill et al., 2013). A third form of mentoring is external coaching. Companies typically offer this additional resource to their executives, though employees at any level of an organization can benefit from external coaching. Levinson (1996) defines executive coaching as a relationship

between an executive and a consultant, from outside their organization, who employs “behavioral techniques and methods” to help the executive “achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance” (p. 142). This can help the new hire develop skills better suited to their role as an executive (Levinson, 1996).

As our interview data will show, companies use a combination of mentorship techniques to target different development goals. Most organizations assign a formal mentor in the employee’s first few days, but after that, companies differ in their approach to leadership coaching. The most comprehensive executive onboarding programs include mentoring or coaching by a human resources partner, a manager, and an “external assimilation coach” (Ndunguru, 2012). Mentorship is a proven onboarding practice in developing and retaining new hires and becomes even more essential when the new hires are diverse. Grillo and Kim (2015) explain, “employees who are in different demographic groups from their leaders may not recognize unwritten organizational rules as well as other employees” (p. 4). With the increased globalization of industry, appropriate mentorship becomes crucial in ensuring an inclusive understanding of the organization’s culture (Graybill et al., 2013). The use of mentorship in executive onboarding reflects a transformational view of leadership and assumes that leadership is a developmental process. Proponents believe that mentoring will bestow the characteristics of transformational leadership (authenticity, ethics, and meaning) onto the new member and the organization. (Bradt & Tavis, 2010).

B. CONCLUSION

Onboarding practices have a significant impact on new leaders and on the organization. Lacking systematic and ongoing onboarding practices, new leaders are at risk. They are more likely to vacate their position within their first two years because of poor organizational integration (Cashman & Smye, 2007). Onboarding benefits for new leaders include improving their assimilation into the culture and their understanding of the organizational dynamics. Cultural assimilation is key to a leader’s success since leaders struggle most with understanding and assimilating into the cultural norms of the organization. Byford et al. (2017) conducted a survey of nearly 600 newly hired executives.

The majority of failed executives reported that their failure was due to “organizational culture and politics, not lack of competence or managerial skill” (Byford et al., 2017). Furthermore, 70% of the executives surveyed blamed their lack of understanding about norms and practices on their inability to understand and fit into the organization. According to Byford et al., executives sought “constructive feedback” to help them gain insight into their organization and reduce their likelihood of failure (p. 5). Mentoring and stakeholder engagement are two practices devised specifically to address the aforementioned concerns (Steer, 2013).

Additional benefits to onboarding include increased retention (and ultimately productivity), and improved change management. Onboarding can directly impact the longevity of an executive (Ndunguru, 2012). Almost half of new executives hired from outside the organization will fail in their first 18 months, despite documented attempts at onboarding (Grillo & Kim, 2015). The cost of these failures tend to largely exceed the cost of recruiting a new executive (Martin, 2014). However, consistently applied onboarding processes can improve retention rates by 25 percent and improve productivity by 11 percent (Kopoulos, 2017). Steer (2013) notes that increased retention can not only reduce recruitment and knowledge costs, it can also ensure organizational tradecraft stays in-house. Moreover, onboarding increases the productivity of new hires by providing them the tools with which to start working seamlessly, as soon as possible (Steer, 2013). Onboarding can also be a medium through which organizations both effect and adapt to change. Onboarding remains the first opportunity for a company to either mold or be shaped by a new member (Grillo & Kim, 2015). Strong onboarding practices can help an organization adapt to change and improve the resiliency of the company in their industry (Day et al., 2014). With longer tenure at the top, leaders have time to instill continuity of practices, create consistent mission and vision, and ultimately provide greater stability for future employees.

IV. RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODS

The objective of this study is to support innovation in U.S. Government human resource practices by providing the community with knowledge of trends in leadership development theories and industry-applied onboarding practices. The research aimed to provide an understanding of the professional experiences and perspectives of the subject matter experts who participated in the study in relation to executive onboarding practices. In framing the study, the author focused on the following research questions.

Research Questions

- What onboarding practices support the development of ‘good’ leadership?
- What makes a good leader?
- What leadership onboarding practices are used in Industry?
- What are innovative industry practices in leadership onboarding?

The first phase of the study involved background research to better evaluate the relationship between onboarding and leadership development. The author conducted a literature review of both leadership theories and onboarding practices. This research informed a coding structure from common themes in the literature. The second phase involved conducting interviews of subject matter experts in human resources regarding industry-applied onboarding practices. The final phase involved analyzing the interview responses. The author examined the interview notes and coded the responses based on the structure of established onboarding practices found through the literature review. The findings presented in this study come from the interpretation of themes that emerged during data analysis.

A. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the first phase, the author conducted a review of existing literature on leadership theories, before conducting a similar review of published, recommended onboarding practices. The literature review involved a search of articles in academic databases such as

EBSCO HOST, the Dudley Knox Library catalog, and Google Scholar, using the following keyword search terms: leadership, leadership theories, leadership development, onboarding, onboarding practices, executive onboarding. This led to a review of 70 articles. From this review, the author constructed conceptual model of onboarding practices, based on interpretive reasoning of common themes in the literature. The author identified the following common practices: orientation, compliance, stakeholder engagement, action planning, and mentoring.

B. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

In the second phase, this study used a purposefully selected sample and data collection methods that involved short, open-ended interviews between participants and researchers. Initially, a team of two researchers identified two national-level human resources conferences: The 2018 Society for Human Resource Management Annual Conference, and the 2018 Culture Summit. The researchers attended the conferences and polled attendees and guest speakers, alike. Interviews consisted of 75 relatively short (five to ten minutes) person-on-the-street style interviews. These interviews were semi-structured, designed to inform an assessment of the role of onboarding practices in industry. Researchers conducted opt-in discussions with human resources professionals, asking them to describe onboarding processes in industry. This approach resulted in findings derived from the participants' perspectives, enabled follow-up questions for greater clarification, and allowed for new, unanticipated insights. These interviews consisted of three main questions and appropriate follow-up questions, as described below.

Interview Questions

- What onboarding practices and information for leadership does industry use?
 - What onboarding practices are available/innovative?
- What onboarding practices and information does your organization use?
 - How does your organization measure onboarding results?
- Describe the process your organization used to select/develop your onboarding practices?

- What barriers were there to implementing those processes?
- What enablers are there to onboarding?
- What were the desired outcomes of onboarding?

Upon completion of the interviews, the researchers compiled their notes and analyzed the answers that the human resource representatives provided.

C. DATA ANALYSIS APPROACH

In the final phase, the author complied the interview responses and analyzed them through the lens of their literature review. The data analysis involved pattern matching onboarding practices that were revealed through the interviews. These results were then categorized according to coding structure from the literature review. The coded responses were categorized, looking for common themes that arose during the interviews. The author then selected quotations for each theme, where available, and added relevant examples. First, onboarding activities were categorized into five principal practices, as exemplified in Table 1. Next, the desired outcomes were classified into onboarding goals, which were defined by the frequency of the terms used by participants. Those outcomes with the most common frequencies are described in Table 2. In analyzing cited enablers and barriers to onboarding, results were grouped by overarching themes, as seen in Table 3 and Table 4, respectively. For every instance that a participant mentioned an activity that corresponded to a practice or an outcome, it was noted under its category and tallied for every repeated mention. Moreover, how companies measured their onboarding practices was categorized on a binary scale: either respondents knew how or they did not. The author describes these results in greater detail in the following chapter.

Table 1. Coding Onboarding Practices

Practices	Examples from Interviews
ORIENTATION	Personalized recruitment; introductions to leadership, team, payroll; physical workplace orientation; dedicated day(s) to new employees; indoctrination.
COMPLIANCE	Mandatory paperwork; safety briefing; ethics training; creating IT account; “We have all new hires sign our code of conduct and receive instructions on sexual harassment and equal opportunity reporting.”
ACTION PLANNING	Regular meetings, improvement-oriented evaluations, 360 feedback; “Our employees regularly meet with their direct supervisor to discuss initial expectations and goals, and how to reach them.”
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT	Interaction with executives; briefings by senior leadership; “building relationships;” inter-departmental training; job shadowing; “Members of our sales team will work in the engineering department, and vice-versa.”
MENTORING	Assigned mentor or “buddy”; personal relationship; informal career guidance and assistance; help in “understanding company culture.”

Table 2. Coding Onboarding Goals

Onboarding Goals	Examples from Interviews
ORIENTATION	“Acclimation;” “Feel welcomed;” “Know where the bathrooms are located.”
COMPLIANCE	“We want them to meet industry standards.” “Get paperwork out of the way.”
JOB PREPARATION	Improved time to productivity; “We want to make sure that they have everything they need to get to work as soon as possible.”
RETENTION	“Retain talent;” “reduce turnover.”
PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT	“Challenge themselves;” more knowledgeable; stretch assignments; career development; “become better experts.”
CULTURAL INTEGRATION	“be a good fit;” “feel comfortable;” “psychological safety;” “understand our culture;” “align with our values.”
STRATEGIC THINKING	Build morale; long-term relationships; “Perspective;” “Customer point of view;” “bigger picture.”

Table 3. Coding Enablers

Enablers	Examples from Interviews
TECHNOLOGY	Specialized software for a streamlined process; “facilitates documentation,” “improved communication”
ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT	HR proximity to leadership; allocated funding; leadership treat onboarding as a priority, “make time for mentorship”
SIZE	Large company “more experienced,” “has the resources to invest in onboarding.” Small company can “effect change more quickly.”
AGE	“We’re new so we can build our process from the ground up;” Younger staff and leadership; “open to new ideas” “not set in their ways”

Table 4. Coding Barriers

Barriers	Examples from Interviews
TECHNOLOGY	Outdated software; “The slowest part is getting new hires set up with IT.”
OTHER DEMANDS	Onboarding as additional duty; “Not a priority of higher-ups.”
TIME	“We don’t always have the time to onboard as well as we’d like to.”
BUREAUCRACY	“Layers of oversight,” “hard to get anything done/approved”
VACANCIES	“Frequent turnover” makes it hard to establish consistency in onboarding.
SIZE	Company is “so big,” “so small;” “Hard to scale onboarding process,”
LACK OF POWER	No dedicated onboarding staff; undertrained HR personnel; understaffed

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V. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

During our interviews, participants identified onboarding activities they thought were recommended by industry and those that their organizations applied. Those activities were then categorized into five general practices as outlined in our literature review: orientation, compliance, stakeholder engagement, action planning, and mentoring. Our data revealed four main findings. First, participants were unable to distinguish between onboarding for executives and that for general employees. Second, participants seem to believe that their organizations they more onboarding practices than is common in industry. Third, our data revealed a trend that some onboarding practices were more frequently applied than others. Lastly, for the most part, the applied onboarding practices supported organizational goals. Our data also revealed common enablers and barriers to successful onboarding.

A. ONBOARDING PRACTICES

Interviewees identified onboarding activities associated with five primary practices: orientation, compliance, stakeholder engagement, action planning, and mentoring. The data, as shown in Figure 3, revealed that organizations applied some practices more than others. Orientation was the most applied onboarding practice, followed closely by compliance activities, then mentoring and stakeholder engagement. Action planning was the least applied onboarding practice.

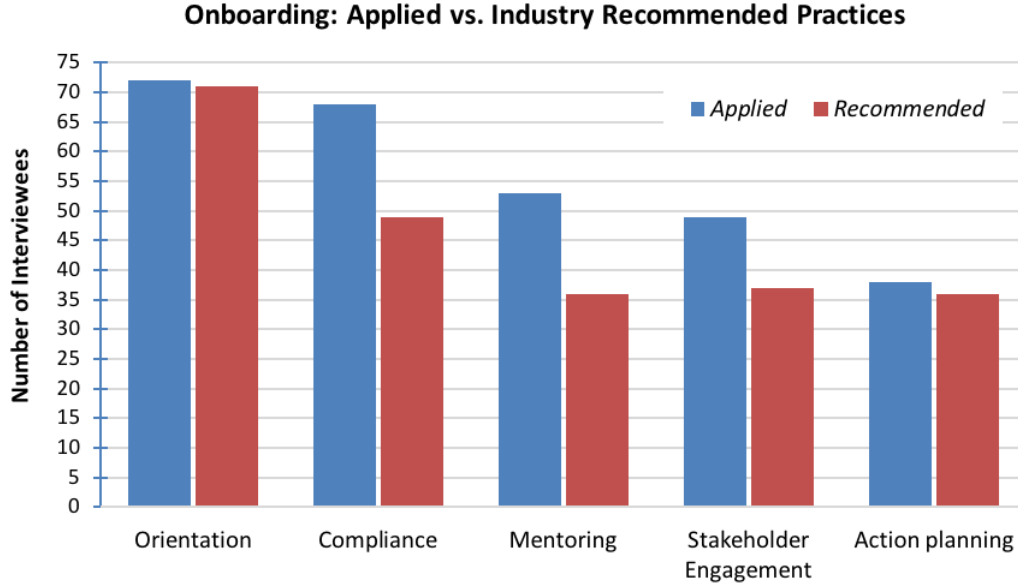


Figure 3. Interview Results: Onboarding Practices

Orientation involves familiarizing new hires with their team, their workspace, and the organization. This practice was the most commonly cited, as it was applied by 72 out of 75 companies surveyed. Orientation was applied and recommended in relatively even amounts. In line with pre-boarding, the earliest application of orientation included one company’s effort to match their recruiter’s career experience with the career of a prospective new hire. Many participants credited a thorough recruitment processes for a more inclusive orientation, some citing up to four rounds of interviews. One participant recalled her own experience, “I had to give a presentation to everyone in the office and every employee had to agree to my hiring. This was easier to implement as a small company of 25 people.” The interviewee explained that this was to ensure the new hire both felt welcome and was a good fit for the organization.

Across interviewees, orientation experiences differed in both the duration and the onboarding format. Some organizations held orientation on one day for all new hires to attend before their first day of work. Other companies held their orientation over several days. One participant, representing a company with an international presence, stated, “New employees from different offices around the world fly in for a week of onboarding at our

headquarters in San Francisco.” Many orientation activities included strategy in their initial briefings, discussing their mission, values, and company culture. One participant said, “We usually have one or two employees from each department give a presentation. Then, the CEO or COO will give a talk about our values and what our goals are as an organization.” Larger companies had similar practices where they onboarded many employees at once. As part of the orientation, many companies also ensured new hires interacted with different departments, including information technology (IT), human resources, and sales. The application of this practice sometimes overlapped with stakeholder engagement activities.

Compliance was the second most utilized onboarding practice. Compliance activities are those built to bring new hires in line with the organization’s policies and procedures. According to participants, compliance included filling out mandatory employee documentation to get paid and sitting through industry-specific training. Beyond ensuring new hires were aware of their benefits, participants noted their organizations also provided appropriate security and safety briefings as well as ethics training. To reinforce ethics in the organization, one participant noted, “We have all new hires sign our code of conduct and receive instructions on sexual harassment and equal opportunity reporting.” To facilitate compliance, some interviewees applied pre-boarding techniques. As one stated, “We try to get a lot of the documentation out of the way before they show up for orientation day. That way, we don’t overwhelm them with paperwork on their first day.” Compliance was not cited as an industry standard as often as it was applied. This may be because most participants seemed to take the compliance activities for granted as an industry norm.

Our data revealed that mentoring was the third most applied onboarding practice. Mentoring is the act of providing new hires guidance for their careers and personally assist in their integration into the workplace. A majority of participants, 51 out of 75, cited mentoring activities. However, interviews suggested that mentoring was not viewed as an industry-wide recommended standard. Mentoring activities include both supervisor-subordinate relationships, peer to peer relationships, and external coaching. Top-down mentorships were the most common out of the three, with 43 out of 75 participants citing it as an applied practice. Peer-mentoring was only cited by 30 out of 75 participants. None

of the human resources representatives interviewed mentioned external mentorship or coaching. Few companies applied both supervisory and peer mentoring techniques. One participant was strongly in favor of dual-mentoring, stating, “We assign one buddy mentor from a different department to help them acclimate to the organizational culture as a whole. They can turn to them without fear of sounding stupid. We also assign a mentor who is on a managerial level above the new hire, to help develop them through their career at the company.” The company that applied these two types of mentorship also ensured the peer mentor’s direct supervisor was aware of their assignment as a buddy. Many of those respondents that did not already utilize mentoring, mentioned that they would consider applying mentoring in the future to further onboarding.

Stakeholder engagement activities include building relationships with four main groups—superiors, peers, subordinates, and external stakeholders. While it was applied by a majority of participants, stakeholder engagement was not much thought of as a recommended practice. Given that most participants did not consider onboarding practices for leadership, specifically, stakeholder engagement activities focused on developing relationships with peers and supervisors. These activities included new hires purposefully interacting with higher leadership and inter-departmental peers to foster a better understanding the organizational mission. As one participant stated, “Our employees spend two weeks of in-depth shadowing a different department. For example, members of our sales team will work in the engineering department, and vice-versa.”

Action planning involves creating a pathway for new hires’ development and learning. It was the least mentioned onboarding practice, applied by only 38 out of 75 organizations, and it was seen as equivalently recommended in industry. Although action planning can be applied at both the individual and organizational level, participants only referred to activities tailored to the former. According to participants, this practice included the use of 30–60-90 day plans, regular one-on-one meetings with supervisors or managers, and regular check-ins to discuss progress and set goals for their future. One interviewee explained their procedure, stating, “Our employees regularly meet with their direct supervisor to discuss initial expectations and goals, and how to reach them.” Participants also cited improvement-oriented midterm and annual performance reviews as examples of

action planning. There was no mention of organizational, executive, or leadership-oriented action planning, to include strategic planning or change management practices.

B. GOALS OF ONBOARDING

As shown in Figure 4, our interviews revealed that human resource representatives used onboarding practices to support their organizational goals.

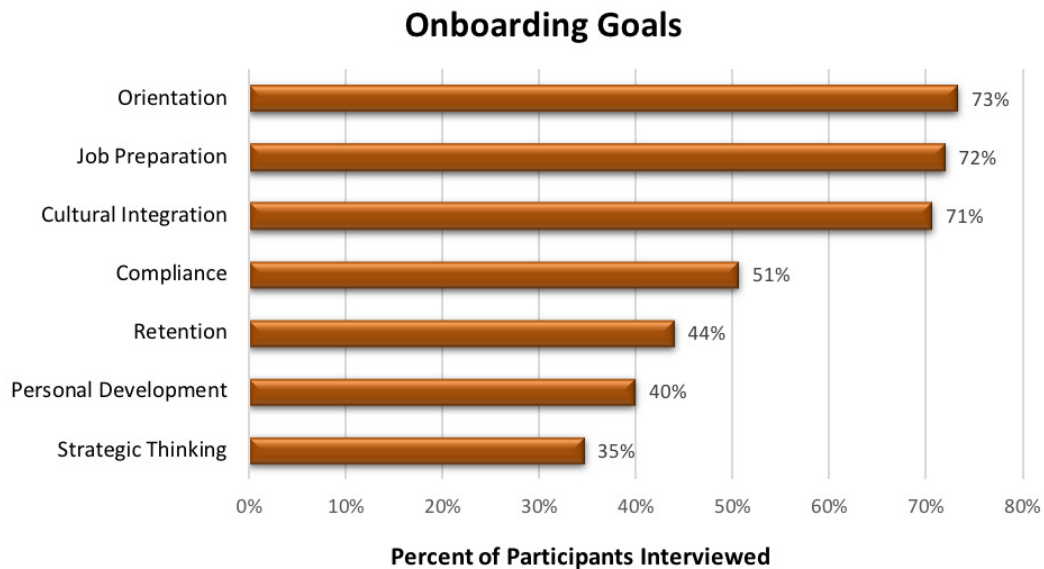


Figure 4. Interview Results: Onboarding Goals

In alignment with actual practice, two of the top named goals of onboarding were primarily job focused. Orientation and job preparation were the most mentioned goals of the onboarding process. As one participant noted, “We want to make sure that they have everything they need to get to work as soon as possible.” Compliance seemed to be thought of as a necessary purpose of onboarding, and approximately half of participants mentioned it. Most participants also believed cultural integration was one of their organization’s primary onboarding goals. Those same participants seemed to rely on orientation and mentoring to reach that aim. Fewer than half of participants cited retention as an onboarding objective. The least mentioned goals included strategic thinking and personal development, which may correlate to a lack of action planning and stakeholder

engagement, respectively. Finally, none of our interviewees mentioned any relationship between onboarding practices and leadership development.

C. MEASURING ONBOARDING RESULTS

For the most part, interviews revealed that outcomes were measured qualitatively. Only 41% of interviewees knew how their company measured the results of onboarding practices. Companies employed various ways to measure, including climate surveys, engagement surveys, and exit interviews. One strong advocate of these techniques said, “What gets measured gets done.” The most commonly mentioned measuring tool was the application of climate surveys. Participants explained that while climate surveys attempt to measure the morale of an organization, focusing on safety and ethics, engagement surveys gauge whether the employee feels challenged, fulfilled, and ultimately, happy at work. One participant said, “One of the results of our engagement surveys is an inclusion index. This tells us how psychologically safe our employees feel; Whether they feel like they can contribute and their ideas feel validated.” Additionally, some companies apply the Employee Net Promoter Score (ENPS) used to measure employee loyalty and commitment. This score is derived from the question, “On a scale of 1–10, How likely are you to recommend this organization as a good place to work?” According to participants, in compiling the answers to similar questions, companies can gauge what employees think of their organizations. Only one participant noted that their company measured time to productivity, which was tracked in their 90-days interview. Exit interviews seemed to be the last resort for many companies. These last interviews, conducted with employees who are leaving the organization, are the organizations’ final attempt to understand why they failed to retain these employees. Finally, none of the participants mentioned measuring onboarding practices in the context of leadership development.

D. ONBOARDING ENABLERS AND BARRIERS

Participants remarked on the presence of both enablers and barriers in their implementation of onboarding practices. According to our interviews, onboarding was primarily enabled by the application of new technology and by the demographics of an

organization. On the other hand, barriers to onboarding included companies not making it a priority, and not having a formalized program for onboarding.

1. Enablers

Participants emphasized the positive role that technology played in successful application of onboarding practices. As an asset, improved technology has increased the speed of communication for global companies whose employees are onboarded from different and distant locations. Participants said the growing availability of workplace communication and organization tools has facilitated the documentation of mentoring, action planning, and executing 360 feedback. For example, many companies have invested in dedicated communication and onboarding software to streamline the process at the onset of recruitment. As one participant noted, “We use Slack for all of our internal communication. We can talk in team chat rooms, or have our own private discussion. It’s helpful when not everyone in the company is co-located.” Another participant mentioned using Lattice, which is a performance management software to automate and streamline their feedback and review process.

Participants mentioned that the demographics of an organization affects the implementation of onboarding practices. For instance, some participants credited their company’s size and youth for the ability to improve onboarding. Smaller organizations can affect institutional change more rapidly. These companies could re-imagine new onboarding protocols and implement them with little lag time. Participants also stressed the importance of getting leadership buy-in. Participants credited their proximity to leadership for their ability to make onboarding a priority throughout the organization. As one HR representative mentioned, “I was lucky to have the CEO’s ear, due to my position as a VP. I argued for a greater emphasis on culture development, so, he made me the VP of Culture and now I can do what I want to improve our processes.” The small size of an organization enables stakeholder engagement more readily because there are fewer bureaucratic layers between leaders and their employees. On the other hand, larger companies tend to have the resources to invest in a structured onboarding program. Interviewees also revealed that the age of an organization has a role to play in facilitating

onboarding practices. Newer companies, like technology start-ups, can build their onboarding program from the ground up, all while catering to employee input. An older organization can rely on its experience to innovate onboarding within the structure of their company.

2. Barriers

Barriers to onboarding included a combination of a lack of prioritization by organizations and a lack of formalized programs. There did not appear to be one primary barrier, but rather a combination of obstacles. Respondents attributed a lack of prioritization to inadequate resources and lack of executive support. For instance, 38% of participants mentioned that other demands get in the way of a company's focus on onboarding. Also, 29% of those interviewed mentioned time as a barrier. One interviewee noted, "We don't always have the time to onboard as well as we'd like to." Several participants noted untrained or insufficient personnel affected the speed of onboarding in their organization. According to 21% of participants, trying to change the onboarding process was made more difficult by layers of bureaucracy. Onboarding was further hindered by what seemed to be a lack of executive support. For instance, 14% of participants blamed frequent turnover and vacancies for inadequate onboarding, and 20% noted a lack of power to affect onboarding. One participant gave an example of good executive support, saying, "Our senior leadership considers mentoring part of an employee's official duty, so they give both buddy mentors and supervisors time to mentor, and treat it like a priority and not a distraction."

Additionally, some organizations seemed to suffer from a lack of formalized onboarding programs. This problem was primarily affected by the size of an organization, under-informed HR personnel, and technology gaps. Smaller, newer organizations had a less robust or structured onboarding program. Younger companies, including tech start-ups, implemented most of the practices, but expressed concern at being able to scale their process. As one participant stated, "We have a great program, now. But how do we maintain the interpersonal interactions with leadership, when we expand from 20 people to 2000? That's what we're trying to figure out." Our interviews also revealed that most

participants felt disconnected from the onboarding process. Some HR professionals remain uninformed about the life cycle of their onboarding program. Participants often provided a caveat before answering, stating “Well I don’t know much about the onboarding process, but I can speak to it a little.” Relatively few participants mentioned having personnel dedicated to onboarding and culture management. Finally, many interviewees blamed out of date technology for poor onboarding implementation. As one participant noted, “The slowest part is getting new hires set up with IT.” These complaints generally expressed the need for greater investment in the onboarding process, from improved technologies to empowered personnel dedicated to onboarding.

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VI. CONCLUSION

According to the federal government, executive onboarding has historically fallen short of expectations. Earlier research revealed that half of executives were left wanting in their onboarding experience, even though successful onboarding has been shown to increase productivity and retention. Thus, this study set out to provide guidance for future executive onboarding initiatives. Specifically, this study aimed to evaluate how industry onboarded its employees, specifically in the context of leader development. This chapter will discuss the implications of the findings, provide recommendations, and acknowledge future considerations. The literature review revealed trends in the application of leadership theories and corresponding onboarding practices. There has been a stylistic shift from transactional to transformational leadership, as industry embraced less hierarchical structure and emphasized the relational aspect between leader and follower. When it comes to onboarding, the literature revealed five main industry best practices: orientation, compliance, mentoring, action-planning, and stakeholder engagement. Ultimately, the literature suggested that higher-order, more strategic onboarding practices are best for transformational leadership development. The data from industry revealed, however, that many industry human resource representatives were unaware of leadership-specific onboarding practices, and companies were inconsistent in their application of onboarding practices.

A. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The interview findings demonstrated that participants did not think of onboarding in terms of leadership development. The most applied industry practices did not align with best practices described in the literature that support higher-order leadership strategies. Furthermore, the data revealed inconsistencies in how companies implement onboarding practices. For instance, there was a gap between what participants believed to be industry-recommended practices and their company-applied practices. Inconsistencies were also seen in the enablers and barriers to onboarding. Finally, while many company

representatives touted the importance of onboarding, relatively few were aware of how to evaluate its impact.

1. Disconnect between Onboarding and Leadership Development

This research sought to evaluate how industry used onboarding to support leadership development. However, participants had a difficult time segregating general onboarding practices from executive onboarding practices, and they did not seem to view onboarding practices in the context of leadership development. Participants did not see onboarding procedures as specific to leadership development. This finding indicates that human resources representatives may have a poor understanding of the potential role and importance of leadership development in the onboarding process as suggested in academic literature.

Interviews with industry representatives revealed that most of the organizations neglected the onboarding activities and goals that most support executive development and leader assimilation even though there has been a shift in desired leadership styles. This shift emphasizes leader skill development, relationship building, and strategic orientation as key elements for leader and organizational success. For instance, the leader-member-exchange theory stresses the likability factor in creating a productive relationship between a leader and an employee. The literature review revealed that stakeholder engagement, individual action-planning, and mentoring emphasize developing the interpersonal relationships that would best support the exchange theory, and thus, productivity. The literature specifically recommended these above three practices for use in executive onboarding, as they are activities that empower transformational leadership styles.

While most organizations in this study applied at least one onboarding practice for senior leaders, the practices rarely fulfilled more than the basic goals of employee orientation and job preparation. The most applied onboarding practices were therefore orientation and compliance activities, such as IT training and introductions to company strategy. This indicates that industry is focusing primarily on the basic forms of onboarding and is neglecting leader development opportunities. This is in alignment with older theories of leadership that see the leader as fully developed and their role as primarily transactional.

Recent research has shown, however, that for new leaders, orientation is but one of five essential phases of onboarding. The higher-level onboarding practices, like action planning, stakeholder engagement and mentoring, better align with desired transformational leadership practices. However, this study found that among participants, these practices were the least utilized.

The interviews also revealed that onboarding goals were not aligned with leadership development goals. While participants believed cultural integration was one of the main onboarding goals, few applied the onboarding practices most closely tied to cultural integration – action planning, stakeholder engagement, and mentoring. In addition, the least-mentioned goals for onboarding were strategic thinking, personal development, and retention, even though these are widely touted in the literature as essential for new leaders. First, participants revealed that retention was not a priority as an onboarding objective. This implies that companies do not have a long-term approach to onboarding, and do not concern themselves with the longevity of the employee within the organization. There was also a notably weak focus on strategic thinking. This may be related to a lack of knowledge of higher-level, executive onboarding practices. The lack of strategic thinking as a goal aligns with the relative lack of stakeholder engagement and action planning practices, so its neglect supports a decreased focus on personal and inter-personal development as an onboarding goal. The literature noted that personal development and strategic thinking are key to developing executives from within the organization and, ultimately, key to the success of the company. The lack of organizational focus on higher order onboarding practices suggests that there is an expectation that orientation and compliance will be sufficient to accomplish higher order onboarding goals. Given the lack of measures of effectiveness, human resources professionals may not relate onboarding practices to organizational goals.

Finally, even the most structured onboarding programs described by participants neglected their executives. Human resources representatives seemed genuinely unaware or uninformed about the need for leader-specific onboarding. It should come as no surprise, then, that companies have a difficult time retaining executives, and those executives often experience failure within their first two years.

2. Inconsistencies in Onboarding

The data revealed that interviewees think they are exceeding industry standards in their application of onboarding practices. Interviewed representatives stated that, for the most part, they applied relatively more onboarding practices than what they perceived their industry recommended. In this study, industry-recommended refers to the practices participants cited when asked what they believed were common, established, and recommended onboarding activities in the field of human resources for their organizations' industry. There are two possible reasons for these results. Both the context of the interviews and personal experience of the participants may have affected the answers provided. The interviews were conducted at professional human resources conferences. Participants, as representatives of their companies, may have had incentive to make their organizations sound more proficient than they are. Interviewees may also have overstated their onboarding efforts, relative to those recommended in their field, due to the potential fear of embarrassment in highlighting their organizations' failures, let alone their departments' lack of commitment to onboarding. Moreover, it seemed easier for respondents to recall their own organization's practices than those recommended within the human resources field. It seemed respondents naturally recalled practices with which they had more recent personal experience. It is also possible that participants took some onboarding practices for granted and therefore neglected to mention them. This may indicate a lack of awareness of industry standards when it comes to new hire development. The disconnect between perceived 'best practices' and actual practices reinforces the idea that while some practices are commonly applied across many organizations and industries, there remains no established standard within the human resources profession for onboarding.

Moreover, the data revealed that when it comes to onboarding, many potential enablers became barriers depending how they were applied by different organizations. For example, technology can be both a barrier and an enabler. One company may be reliant on technology that is out of date and thus cannot keep up with the growing organization's demand. Another company may use technology to off-load some of their work. Several participants noted that too much reliance on technology can add to the bureaucratic layers that take time away from interpersonal relationship building. Geography is another duality.

A large company may have difficulty with stakeholder engagement due to geographical distance. Another large company may send their executives on learning tours to connect distant departments. Likewise, company size can be an enabler or barrier. For instance, a smaller or newer company may not have the resources or experience to build a structured onboarding program. Meanwhile, an older organization may be too entrenched in its ways to adapt older practices to modern concepts of leadership.

Finally, the interviews revealed that most onboarding outcomes were measured qualitatively and inconsistently. Less than half of participants even knew whether their organizations measured the success of their onboarding programs. Without adequate metrics to gauge the effectiveness of onboarding, the organization has no incentive to change its practices.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

Upon consideration of the preceding findings, this study offers four high level recommendations for implementing onboarding. Organizations should start by considering recruitment as a first step in building organizational culture. Second, if companies hope to retain their employees and executives, they may need to tailor the onboarding experience around the leadership styles they want to support. Third, companies should apply literature-suggested best practices for executive development. Lastly, organizations should measure the result of their onboarding efforts.

1. Begin with Recruitment

Recruitment is a key part of onboarding because it can establish a strong foundation for long-term success, by selecting pre-qualified leaders, reinforcing organizational culture, and easing the acclimatization of new employees. If companies treat the first stage of onboarding as recruitment, then they wield a great deal of power in their ability to define their culture by the caliber of employees they onboard. Organizations can impact organizational culture by recruiting members whose values they want to emphasize. For instance, if the organization wants to build a more ethical reputation, they should recruit members who have a record of integrity and good moral conduct. Also, trait-based leadership theories support the notion that leaders can be identified early in the recruitment

process, based on their personality and other desirable traits. Thus, organizations should consider the potential for leadership in all of their new hires. Purposeful recruitment also prevents any leadership mismatches, as companies can control for positive traits and attributes that align with direct supervisors and the position requirements.

An organization's recruitment procedure is the first chance to improve the new hire's overall onboarding experience. The literature suggests that interactions an organization has with its future member, through a hiring manager, supervisor, or fellow employee, impacts the ease and speed with which new leaders integrate into the organization. For example, matching a recruiter's career experience to that of a prospective new hire helps the new hire relate to their potential future. Requiring a prospective hire to interview with multiple members of the organization, to include peers, can ensure the new member feels welcome and is a good fit for the organization. The earlier the employee feels integrated, the sooner they can be productive without having to overcome cultural barriers.

2. Use a Tailored Approach

Organizations should use a tailored approach to executive onboarding that addresses leadership development and organizational resources. First, tailored onboarding practices should support the development of transformational leaders and should reflect company values. Transformational leadership emphasizes a mutually beneficial relationship between leader and follower, pushing each other to improve themselves and their environment. Given that this leadership style generates particularly strong commitment from followers, it may prove effective in combating retention issues. If companies abide by the trend towards transformational leadership styles, they must consider the corresponding emphasis on relationship building, and build their onboarding experience using interpersonal practices. An organization's expression of desired leadership will set the tone at the top, and thus, should reflect the company's culture and its values. Within this culture, organizations can establish their goals for onboarding and apply the practices best suited to accomplishing them.

Onboarding practices should also account for the organization's demographics and its available resources. For instance, smaller organizations are more agile and can affect

institutional changes more rapidly, while newer organizations are often flatter and more inclusive and can seek out employee input in building their onboarding process. These companies could re-imagine new onboarding protocols and implement them with fewer bureaucratic barriers. Moreover, how organizations treat their resources, both financial and physical, can affect their success. Larger companies can leverage their longevity and financial resources to invest in a more robust onboarding program. Any onboarding initiative may miss the mark if it is neither well integrated, nor consistently applied. For instance, implementing newer onboarding technologies will only be effective if the employees are trained and capable of applying them. Even without process and technology innovation, the literature suggests that applying the established practices consistently can maximize the benefits of onboarding.

3. Use Onboarding as a Development Practice

Organizations should emphasize stakeholder engagement, mentoring, and action planning practices to ensure deeper leadership development that focuses on relationship building, a key to successful leader assimilation. Stakeholder engagement grants the new hire a deeper and broader understanding of the key stakeholders and their organizational culture. Understanding and engaging with employees enables the executive to keep the less experienced employees in mind when making organizational decisions that may affect their wellbeing. This perspective can help the low-level employee understand the reasons behind corporate policy and motivate their organizational loyalty, which may, in turn, improve retention. Engaging with other internal stakeholders can also improve situational awareness. This engagement can include employees shadowing or working in a different department of the company. By allowing executives to see how other people in other sectors work, they can learn how the organization functions, how people function within the organization, and they can be inspired by new techniques and innovations. These activities may also yield a greater appreciation for the interdependence between departments and the interconnectivity required to fulfill the mission. For instance, sitting in on a higher-level board meeting, allows executives to participate at a more conceptual level, by learning about the organization's role in industry and its day-to-day internal functioning. This wisdom is invaluable to an employee who hopes to lead others in the

organization by allowing them direct access to the culture. Moreover, interfacing with a customer allows the employee to understand the impact of their work, and may increase motivation for the employee to perform.

The second way to ensure leader development is by using established mentoring programs, at both the manager and peer level. This can directly support onboarding goals while increasing productivity in the long run. Our research shows that mentoring allows direct feedback and accountability. However, for it to be effective, organizations, and their most senior leadership, need to realize the impact of mentoring and support this activity. This study found that mentoring supports the goals of faster orientation, faster job preparation, and more in-depth cultural integration. For instance, the literature reveals that, when employees are in a different demographic category than their leader, appropriate mentorship becomes crucial in helping new members understand unwritten rules that they otherwise would not recognize. Mentoring activities also yield greater productivity. Executives have highlighted the importance of relationship building in helping them navigate a new organization. For instance, a close and positive working relationship with a supervisor can accelerate a new member's transition by helping them reach peak performance sooner. Moreover, peer mentoring can help establish a professional network on which the new member can rely on for organizational guidance. In providing organizational support, companies should grant their employees time for mentoring activities, and recognize their efforts as a boon to the organization, not as a distraction to their prescribed duties.

The last component of an onboarding development program is action planning. Action planning creates a pathway for learning and development, combining individual goals and organizational strategy. The literature recommends action planning as one of the best practices because it supports a skills theory of leadership, which lends an organization agency over its ability to mold leaders from within. For example, regular feedback sessions enable supervisors to guide members in accomplishing their own initiatives, while simultaneously fostering technical skill development. Moreover, this practice creates reciprocal investment between new hires and their parent organization. In this practice, supervisors help the new member set goals, develop leadership skills, and advance the

individual's career. In turn, the new member feels more confident in their position and becomes more productive. Action planning emphasizes accountability by connecting leadership input and follower outcome, allowing a company to build future leaders from within.

4. Measure Results

Lastly, it is essential for organizations to measure the results of their onboarding. Companies cannot resolve a problem that they are unaware of. Metrics should include cultural assessments, leader development metrics, and organizational benefits. Organizations should routinely conduct an assessment of organizational culture with their employees. These assessments can include climate, engagement, and exit surveys. Measuring impacts also allows for companies to incentivize certain processes and behaviors. For instance, companies can tie employee efforts in onboarding and relationship building to their performance reviews. With a greater understanding of the issues and needs of their workforce, organizations can resolve issues in retention and safeguard future success.

C. FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

This research focused on exploring industry's application of executive onboarding and identifying trends and recommended practices, but there remains room for further research. Further studies might compare these onboarding practices to Navy practices and make recommendations, accordingly. Future research might also look into greater detail at select companies that are considered industry leaders in executive onboarding, focusing on a more specialized pool of participants. Finally, companies should be mindful of evolving demographics and how they may affect their culture and eventual success. Further study could be given to evaluating how the demography of companies affects the integration of modern concepts in leadership and onboarding. Younger generations may enter the workforce bearing different expectations than their predecessors. It behooves organizations to invest in understanding, and catering to, the needs of their employees to optimize their productivity and future success.

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