

**Increasing Employee Retention in the Hospitality Industry: Examining the Use of
Connectivism Learning Theory in the Onboarding Process**

Arlene Ramirez

Instructional Systems Design and Technology

College of Library Science and Technology

Sam Houston State University

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Introduction

In developing an employee retention strategy, starting at the beginning of the talent development process is essential. Once an employee is hired, most organizations initiate the socialization process – onboarding. The onboarding process is where the employee is introduced to the organization, familiarized with their role within the company, and encouraged to develop a social network within the firm (Singh et al., 2022). Organizations should ensure that making a lasting positive impression at this early stage is at the core of any onboarding efforts, as there are future ramifications to the tenure of a newly hired team member. An effective onboarding program can positively impact retention rates within an organization (Gupta et al., 2018). Addressing retention is of importance in the hospitality industry which has a turnover rate of 86.3%, an increase from the pre-COVID-19 rate of 79.3%, in the accommodations and food service sector (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2022). Labor is the largest expenditure in the hospitality industry with turnover being a major contributor; however, investment in training continues to be limited (Mandelbaum, 2022). A conservative estimate of hiring and onboarding a new human resources manager in 2023 is approximately \$17,000 (Elliott, 2023). Given the financial implications, onboarding should be a strategic part of any organization's talent acquisition and retention program (Singh et al., 2022).

Onboarding is also a form of professional development (Gupta et al., 2018). Thus, designing an effective learning experience requires finding an approach to build on existing skills and socialize the newcomer into the organization. Doing so requires considering the post-

COVID-19 intrinsic needs of the workforce, such as being acknowledged, growth opportunities, and empowerment (Wiles, 2022). The design should also incorporate the current learning landscape, which focuses on using technology and self-directed and collaborative learning.

In an environment where the socialization of the newcomer is the immediate goal and longevity with the firm is the long-term objective, the connectivism learning theory should be considered. The proposed study will explore the use of connectivism in the onboarding process for luxury hotels to examine if it creates a positive impression about meeting the employee's needs resulting in increased retention.

Literature Review

The current literature has some studies related to the onboarding process and its impact on the intent of employees to remain with their current organization, (i.e., retention). Focus of these studies include the process of socialization, identifying with the organization, organizational support and commitment, and job satisfaction. A gap in research was found as relatively few studies investigated the impact of onboarding on retention in the hospitality industry.

Gupta et al. (2018) found that awareness of a “newcomer’s psychological resources such as locus of control” (p. 75) was important to customize the onboarding process design. The study found that a positive onboarding experience (OE) increased employee retention. Observations from hospitality firms found that employees which appeared satisfied with OE still had high intention to leave. The inverse reaction to OE in hospitality was attributed to the task-oriented nature of the onboarding and the exclusion of a global perspective on how the role of the employee is tied to the success of the organization (Lawton, 2007).

In their paper “Reinventing Employee Onboarding”, Cable et al. (2013) discussed using personal-identity socialization in the onboarding process to increase employee retention. The process involves “encouraging newcomers to express their unique perspectives and strengths on the job from the very beginning and inviting them to frame their work as a platform for doing what they do best” (p. 24). Traditional onboarding methods tend to focus on teaching organizational values and expecting the newcomer to adopt them. A field experiment with Wipro in 2011 found that when onboarding was designed to emphasize individual identity, 32% of attendees were less likely to quit; whereas the traditional format had only 21% that were less likely to quit. Four principles that incorporate personal-identity socialization were proposed for the onboarding process: 1) considering that employees are interested in making a difference and that they want more than just a paycheck or completing a task; 2) helping the employee become aware of the talent and skills they bring to the organization; 3) facilitating the process of creating a social network; and 4) creating a connection between the individual’s strengths and their specific tasks and job responsibilities.

Compliance, clarification, culture, and connection are the Four C’s – the distinct levels of onboarding proposed by Bauer (2010). The hierarchical framework has compliance being the most basic level and connection the highest. In the compliance level, employees are educated on legal policies and procedures, and regulations related to the organization. Clarification involves expectations of the roles they will have in the organization and may include training on systems or processes. Culture will introduce the employee to the organization’s history, values, mission, etc. The final and highest level is connection, here the employee can create their internal network and the socialization process is initiated. An organization implementing the

Four C's will experience one of three onboarding levels. Level 1 – Passive Onboarding focuses on compliance and clarification and omits culture and connection. Level 2 – High Potential Onboarding is like the first level but begins to address culture and connection. Finally, Level 3 – High Potential Onboarding incorporates all Four C's and is most often achieved in organizations having a strategic human resources approach and proactively onboarding employees. Achieving this level results in a positive effect on the participants OE and impacts other areas such as employer turnover (Meyer and Bartels, 2017).

The degree of organization identification (OI) experienced by newcomers in the onboarding process was found to have an impact on employee turnover intention (Narayansany & Isa, 2021). Information technology and communications new hires felt isolated and lost at the onset of the onboarding process. After obtaining information about the organization's policies and procedures, culture and more specifics about their role and responsibilities, their comfort level increased. Social integration then begins to take place creating a sense of belonging which leads to OI. An employee will be more likely to want to remain with the firm, thus increasing retention.

The consensus of most literature on the topic of onboarding and retention is clear that socialization is an essential component. Klein, Polin and Sutton (2015) focused on evaluating the onboarding practices employed by organizations. In general, they found that practices varied based on the employee type or area of focus. For example, an executive onboarding process may differ from those of an engineer or an hourly staff member. They observed the following on specific firm practices:

- The actual onboarding experienced by the employee versus what was intended was disparate.
- The quantity and variety of onboarding offerings impacted OE.
- The format of the onboarding was a factor as newcomers found it helpful when it was required versus recommended.
- The timing of onboarding affected OE and earlier was not always perceived as better. Breaking up the process between the recruitment, hiring, and the start date allowed for a more effective way to approach learning needs.

The study highlighted that research on the specific practices used by organizations are limited.

Three main reasons have been noted for the importance of the onboarding process: 1) socialization of the employee into the organization; 2) productive employees; and 3) reduction in turnover intention (Verheyden, 2022). To be effective the process should be strategic, comprehensive, consistent, and measured (Krasman, 2015). Onboarding can be the foundation of organizational growth if it is part of the overall business strategy. A comprehensive plan is one that extends beyond the new hire phase and is a targeted investment in the workforce that translates to employees that are more productive and feel a connection to the organization. Consistency in the implementation, delivery and attention given to the process will also create a positive OE. Finally onboarding should be monitored and evaluated with the same rigor given other business units, operations, or initiatives. Effective onboarding is “a fundamental requirement for business growth and sustainability” (p. 11).

Onboarding is both a socialization and professional development process (Bauer, 2010). Klein and Heuser (2008) viewed the process from an instructional systems perspective. A model

for onboarding would consist of assessing the needs, designing and implementation of the process, and then evaluation. They argued that while this approach is most common in training and development programs, application to socialization practices can be beneficial. Through the use of instructional design, the learning needs of the newcomers could be assessed and programs best designed for acquiring the necessary knowledge. Gagne's model of instructional design was proposed to develop the employee socialization.

Gagne's view of learning design has served as the foundation for several design models (i.e., Instructional Transaction Theory, ARCS Model of Motivational Design, etc.) (Richey, 2000). The common thread is that learning is viewed as an internal process, dependent on past learning, affected by the external environment, facilitated and accelerated using instructional design and strategies.

Boyras and Ocak (2021) identify that the development of technology has impacted approaches such as Gagne's. Learning as an internal process may need to be reconsidered. The digital age has created a need for new learning approaches that do not exclude the impact of technology (Chang et al., 2022). Traditional theories such as behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism were reflective of an era where the development of information was slow. While today knowledge is growing exponentially (Siemens, 2004), these traditional theories considered the process of learning is the main focus versus the value of what is being learned (Hendricks, 2019). Richey (2000) takes it further stating that those receiving the instruction are not considered. Also overlooked is how learning occurs outside of the individual through the use of data that is "stored and manipulated by technology and social media platforms" (p. 3).

Recent learning trends indicate that: 1) individuals will work in a variety of unrelated fields in their life, 2) learning will be more informal using personal networks and communities of learning, 3) life-long learning will become the normal practice, 4) technology will define and shape our thinking, 5) both the organization and the individual become learning organism, 6) technology will take on the role of learning theories, and 7) instead of “know-how” the focus will be on “know-where” – knowing where to find the information (Siemens, 2004).

Generation Z, those born between 1997 – 2012 (Meola, 2023), comprise 60% of hospitality workers (Soto, 2022). Gen Z grew up with technology and are considered to be one of the most diverse generations (Meola, 2023). Engaging this generation requires personalization and on-demand availability. Gen Z tends to have a short attention span, value self-reliance and independence, which explains their preference for self-directed learning (“Teach the next generation”, 2022). Conversely, this generation also seeks interaction and collaboration with 57% of them preferring in-person learning activities, compared to 47% of Millennials.

“The digital age and computer-based communication have enabled a rethinking of collaborative learning and experienced based learning” (Boyras & Ocak, p. 1124). Consider that onboarding requires making connections (socialization of employees) and learning (actionable knowledge) (Siemens, 2004), it follows that design of the process should consider a theory which reflects the current environment (Boyras & Ocak, 2021). Connectivism, a theory for the digital age, should be considered to engage not only Gen Z but others in the workforce. The theory is based on the understanding that today information is constantly being acquired. Individuals need to disseminate the information and identify what is relevant and how to use in

the decision-making process in a constantly changing environment. The main tenets of connectivism are (Siemens, 2004):

- Learning and knowledge rests in diversity of opinions.
- Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes (i.e., any object that can connect to another such as books, computers, people, etc.) or information sources.
- Learning may reside in non-human appliances.
- Capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known.
- Nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning.
- Ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill.
- Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivist learning activities.
- Decision-making is itself a learning process.

“Connectivism is an epistemological approach based on interactions in networks both in the individual’s mind and the outside world” (Boyras & Ocak, p. 1123). In the current digital environment where knowledge is unlimited, connectivism requires the learner to know how to access and apply available information instead of reverting to memorizing and attempting to understand everything. The theory also encourages locus of control over how information is accessed, encouraging dialogue with a unique perspective both in a social and learning network.

Congruent with the views of Gen Z, newcomers to an organization who experience socialization and training processes in groups, felt a strong connection to the firm than those doing so individually (Bauer et al., 2007). Chang and Busser (2019) found a connection between

thriving employees and increased retention. “When the work environment encourages decision-making, discretion, broad information sharing, or a climate of trust and respect, thriving is strong” (p. 197). These sentiments align with many of the tenets of connectivism. The study also found that an employer has an impact on the turnover intention based on the perception the employee has on employer support. Training that considers these factors can have an impact on the psychological contract (OI) between the firm and its employees, which impacts turnover intention.

Professional development is a contributing factor to an increase in both the employee’s and the organization’s performance which can impact retention (Schettino & Capone, 2022). Developing an onboarding strategy that capitalizes on both the ability to effectively socialize and develop new talent can translate into competitive advantages beyond increased retention. Millennial and Gen Z have a different expectation from the organizations they want to join (Price, 2022). Transparent, individualized, collaborate and engaging onboarding experiences rooted in an environment that reflects “their life in the real world” (Boyras & Ocak, p. 1122) is the expectation. Already well into the Fourth Industrial Revolution and on the doorsteps of an even more sophisticated digital age with new instruments being developed under the Web 3.0 platform (i.e., ChatGPT, AI, AR, VR, etc.) will require a new approach to socialization and education of newcomers to the organization.

A review of the literature specifically connecting the onboarding process and employee retention in the hospitality industry is limited. Even more sparse is research discussing how the use of specific learning theories, such as connectivism, as a strategy in the design of the onboarding process would impact employee retention.

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