The Onboarding Process as a Means of Organizational Identification

Jayme Keefer
Queens University of Charlotte
When employees first join an organization, they often participate in an onboarding process of some form. Onboarding is part of the socialization process and serves a variety of purposes for organizations. For some, onboarding primarily consists of task-oriented training sessions while for others, onboarding is more focused on orientation and learning the daily life within the organization. Regardless of the specific purpose, successful onboarding programs have the general theme of connecting employees’ personal identities to the larger organizational identity or culture. While it seems evident that a cohesive personal and organizational identity is essential for effective employees, questions can be raised about whether organizations should encourage organizational identification during the onboarding process and if such identification poses concerns for work-life balance.

**Onboarding in Context**

Before discussing specific onboarding approaches, it is essential to understand where onboarding sits in relation to larger organizational life. At its core, an organization’s ability to function rests on its ability to foster collective sense-making where all members of the organization have a similar frame of reference to make sense of situations around them and make decisions that represent the organization as a whole rather than only individual members.

For organizations to engage in sense-making, they must first provide information to establish a frame of reference. Weick’s Theory of Organizing asserts that organizations must do what they can to reduce equivocality, or uncertainty, in order to effectively engage in organizational sense-making. The process of reducing equivocality involves three steps: enactment (defining the situation), selection (choosing which information to accept and reject), and retention (information kept for future use) (Littlejohn et al., 2017, p. 304). Reducing equivocality occurs in several stages of organizational life and in a number of contexts.
Robert McPhee (as cited in Littlejohn et al., 2017) explores these contexts in regards to four categories of messages. One is reflective self-structuring where communication establishes formal structures and operations of the organization. This could include an organizational chart outlining a formal chain of command. A second category of messages is institutional positioning where the organization situates itself among other organizations in its industry. This is typically achieved through public relations and external branding. Activity coordination is a third category where work roles and divisions or labor are negotiated. This includes individual job descriptions and the operation of departments. While these types of messages are essential to new members learning about their role in the organization, the fourth category of messages is perhaps the most critical in fostering organizational identification. McPhee’s category of membership negotiation discusses how communication “socializes individuals (especially newcomers) and negotiates boundaries” (Littlejohn et al., 2017, p. 308). This is where employees learn what it means to be part of the organization and begin to identify with the company. While this can happen in a number of ways throughout the employee life cycle, it is especially effective in the early stages where an employee would experience organizational onboarding.

**An Overview of Onboarding**

All employees experience the employee life cycle that consists of four major stages: (1) forecasting and finding talent, (2) onboarding, (3) managing talent, and (4) transitioning (Graybill et al., 2013, p. 201). While the third and fourth stages involve the professional development of employees and their transitions to other roles, the second stage of onboarding is of particular interest to organizations as employees assimilate to their organization. Human resources managers exhaust extensive resources in the search for qualified talent and for those
resources to not be wasted by the employee leaving the organization, management must invest in a proper onboarding program to retain good employees.

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) defines onboarding as “the process by which an organization assimilates its new employees” (Managing the Employee, 2017, n.p.). The onboarding process typically fulfills a number of needs for the organization. On the practical side, it provides the Human Resources department with an opportunity to complete legal paperwork and comply with legal employment regulations. On the socialization side, it allows employees to learn more about the organization. Specifically, thorough onboarding programs teach new hires about the organization’s mission, vision, and values; how the company works on a daily basis; and acceptable work behaviors and expectations. Most importantly, onboarding encourages employees to become engaged with the organization and develop a personal loyalty to the company (Managing the Employee, 2017). Put another way, “It's about showing new hires how the company operates and how their positions fit within the bigger picture. It's a way of introducing people to your company's culture and integrating them into teams” (Bortz, 2017, p. 45) Formal onboarding processes can vary in length from one day to a full year, but generally the content and quality of the program is far more relevant to study than the duration (Graybill, 2013).

**Personal and Organizational Identity**

In helping employees more fully and meaningfully assimilate, some organizations are using their onboarding programs to focus less on orientation and more on identification. By better understanding the organization, employees can negotiate their personal identity to align more with the organizational identity. Employees enter an organization with a relatively well-established personal identity which consists of “the more unique characteristics” that define a
person and sets them apart from others (Littlejohn et al., 2017, p. 79). This identity may include more inherent personality traits, previous experience, skills, and personal preferences. Some studies of the role of personal identity in work settings identify further aspects of how employees characterize themselves. Farmer & Van Dyne (2010) explore the role of self-concept and the idealized self in their research. Their study focuses on the helping identity and the industrious work identity. They concluded that high salience of both of these role identities have a negative correlation with an employee’s likelihood to exhibit organization-desired behaviors (Farmer & Van Dyne, 2010).

While Littlejohn et al. (2017) do not specifically explore the organization, it could logically be considered a form of cultural identity. Cultural identity, as they define it, involves “membership in a particular cultural or social group” (p. 79). In other words, it is a collective identity that one feels when he or she is part of a larger whole. When individuals are employed by an organization, they become part of the whole. They take on a role within the organization that defines them and contributes to their personal identity. Conversely, social groups are a collection of individual identities and those identities constitute the whole. Because of the constant constitutive interaction between personal and cultural identities, individuals must continually negotiate between their many identities.

**Negotiating Identities**

Negotiating identity involves managing the many different identities each person possesses for him or herself to reflect the situation and create a coherent and stable identity profile. Littlejohn et al. (2017) discuss Ting-Toomey and her ideas regarding her Identity Negotiation Theory. Ting-Toomey suggests all individuals strive for “identity security, inclusion, predictability, connection, and continuity” (p. 79). They balance these goals as they navigate the
value content and salience of their identities. Value content refers to the values and beliefs of one’s identities and salience refers to the strength of the loyalty to a particular identity (Littlejohn et al., 2017).

Organizations that wish to develop loyalty among their employees must realize the importance of using onboarding practices to help employees negotiate their personal and organizational identities. The editors of the MIT Sloan Management Review, for example, acknowledge the importance of identity in the employee socialization process. Their “personal identity socialization” approach “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” (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013, p. 24). As management leaders recognize the value of identity negotiation, other organizations may begin to implement similar approaches as well. A well-negotiated identity is essential for any effective employee, but the issue arises of whether the organization should encourage a cohesive personal and organization identity during the onboarding process.

Benefits of Organizational Identification

Already, a number of organizations and researchers are beginning to recognize and further study the implications of a well-negotiated employee identity. One study of Indian call center workers suggests that both the personal and cultural identities of a new employee affect more than just his or her loyalty. The study shows that the negotiation skill of an employee and the salience of his or her cultural identities actually influences the level of that worker’s job performance (Das, 2012). This highlights a tangible, bottom-line-focused justification for businesses who wish to implement an identity-based onboarding process.
Further, a study of Chinese airline workers demonstrates the importance of salient organizational and relational identities in employee satisfaction. The researchers found that workers who have strong dyadic connections with coworkers and strong affiliations with their organization are less likely to describe organizational behaviors as unfair or engage in counterproductive work behaviors (Yang et al., 2013). This again highlights the importance of encouraging workplace connection beyond a simple employer-employee relationship. Connected identities created in onboarding processes are the key to resolving a number of challenges organizations face throughout the employee lifecycle.

**Possible Threat to Work-Life Balance**

With organizations often asking much of their employees, the issue of work-life balance has become increasingly prevalent in discussions of organizational life. As the work and personal life spheres begin to intersect, work-life conflict can develop. Work-life conflict “is a form of inter-role conflict whereby the fulfilment of role demands emanating from one domain (i.e. work) interferes with fulfilling role demands in another domain (i.e. home or leisure activities)” (Kinman & Jones, 2007, p. 238). A work-life conflict can stem from a number of factors including over-commitment, long working hours, rapid change and less separation between work and home. While Kinman & Jones (2007) do not specifically discuss organizational identification, it is reasonable to assume that a strong negotiated personal and organizational identity could be seen as reducing the separation between work and home and thus result in a work-life conflict.

Despite extensive discussion of work-life balance, there is actually a lack of empirical data regarding threats to work-life balance. A study by Bulger, Matthews, and Hoffman (2007) explores the implications of employees’ work life boundaries. While vague, they conclude “the
ways in which individuals manage their boundaries have implications for their experiences of work/personal life balance. Consistent with past theoretical work, we show that there are both positive and negative consequences of managing multiple roles or domains” (p. 373). While the researchers do not heavily explore what the negative consequences of poor separation of work and personal life could be, they do acknowledge that there certainly are negative consequences of blurred boundaries. One could argue that organizational identity is a blurred boundary between work life and personal life as it asks employees to create a cohesive identity that spans both of these domains. Thus, a strong organizational identification could threaten an employee’s ability to keep work and personal life at home.

Possible Solutions

Organizations across industries have been experimenting with organizational identification in the onboarding process. Some organizations, such as Disney, have implemented onboarding processes that focus heavily on organizational identification. Disney is well-known for their University 101 onboarding program. During the program, employees are educated on all aspects of Disney stories, learn about the parks, and most importantly, they make the transition from employee to Cast Member (16 Rules for Cast Members, 2017). Despite the strong focus on identity, Disney still encourages employees to separate work life and personal life. Very little is known about the exact onboarding program, but it has been said by former employees that a number of rules are in place to keep the “magic” or Disney within the gates. Such rules include not taking costumes off park grounds, keeping facial hair trimmed, and not discussing their job on social media (16 Rules for Cast Members, 2017). Still, these rules—particularly those regarding personal appearance—can pose very strong work-life conflicts that could negatively affect the work environment and the health of the employee.
On the other end of the spectrum, there is an argument for work and life to be completely separate. In a Charlotte financial firm, I have heard testimonies that there is very little discussion of organizational culture or identity in the onboarding process. Instead, onboarding is entirely functional and task-oriented. Employees are taught how to do the basics of their job and that is all. In the organization, employees seem to appreciate this approach. From anecdotes, employees enjoy the ability to leave work at work and keep work life separate from their personal lives. While this strategy neglects the benefits of organizational identification, it also avoids potential work-life conflicts.

**Suggested Solution**

Both of the above solutions have their merits. The Disney solution fosters a strong sense of organizational identification from a day one of being a Cast Member, but it arguably goes too far in blurring the boundaries between home life and work life. The financial firm solution takes the opposite approach preferring to create a very strong boundary between personal life and organizational life. While this is an acceptable solution to many of the employees, it also neglects the benefits of organizational identification. In both of these solutions, employees do not have a choice in how much they identify with the organization. They are either all in, as with Disney, or all out, as with the financial firm. This does not seem to be the ideal solution.

Employees should have the option from day one to choose how much they want to identify with the organization. One way to do this is to incorporate optional social events into the onboarding process. These social events serve a number of functions. For one, it gives employees ownership in how much they choose to identify with the organization. When employees have ownership over their identity, they are less likely to feel that the organization is attempting to manage their identity for them. Optional social events also allow employees to
discover for themselves what the organization is and how they fit into it. It is a less prescriptive approach and more of a constitutive approach where employees engage in collective sense-making. This is the approach Weick would advocate for as it allows members to reduce equivocality through communication. Finally, optional social events allow employees to develop meaningful relationships with coworkers who can more meaningfully contribute to the process of reducing equivocality and creating bonds with the organization (Friedman, 2014).

This strategy is not fool-proof. It runs the risk of employees not experiencing the same onboarding process or not identifying with the organization equally. However, this is a risk that seems acceptable given the benefits to both the employees personally and the organization collectively. It allows employees to engage in the organization on their own terms and create meaningful bonds with their organizations.
References


Bortz, D. (2017 Dec.). All onboard: How HR leaders at four small companies are taking onboarding to new heights by creatively engaging new hires in their organizations’ cultures and teams. *HR Magazine.* 45-49.


