

CORPORATE INTEGRATION PROCESSES: LESSONS FROM THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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Abstract

This article examines the challenges of integrating new employees into a company in an environment where remote work is growing significantly. The reference situation is the COVID-19 crisis, seen as a case study. To describe the process as accurately as possible and to identify areas of diligence, we use a mixed method based on 51 questionnaires containing numerous open-ended questions and eight semi-structured interviews. The descriptive part of our analysis allows us to focus on the link between the degree of experience and the proactivity of newcomers. It also reveals the differing expectations that newcomers may have regarding what integration should entail. Applying methods from grounded theory, we identify five key areas for companies wishing to effectively integrate their collaborators. The article concludes with the need for companies to return to implementing integration tactics and devices and make the process less dependent on employee proactivity. To continue, it seems crucial to focus on further research for a better understanding of what each individual expects from integration, particularly when new generations are concerned.

Implications for Central European audience: In today's fast-changing environment, swift integration of new employees is increasingly becoming a key success factor. However, the rapid growth of remote activities within companies presents a new constraint that must be considered. Additionally, it is essential to recognize that newer generations may perceive the integration process itself differently or may be less willing to invest effort in it. This research represents one of the first inquiries into this emerging issue.

Keywords: Hybrid working; remote work; employee integration; HR management

JEL Classification: E24, J62, O15

Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis provided an extraordinary boost to the adoption of remote work (RW) (De Boer & Delobbe, 2022), forcing a large portion of the population to work from home for almost two years. It has also led to a decrease in the number of direct contacts with people

both inside and outside of companies. The pandemic has fundamentally changed the way the world works, ushering in a more virtual existence without us necessarily wanting it. This is despite the long-held belief that most socialization aspects could only occur in direct relationships, more precisely in “co-located” learning (Bailey et al., 2015).

This article addresses how industrial companies integrated newcomers during the COVID-19 crisis. It is the logical continuation of previous research conducted through a series of interviews with senior managers (Montenero & Cazorzi, 2022), which enabled us to uncover the perceived effects of the pandemic on corporate life. These effects include the increased use of RW, the search for greater flexibility to meet many new challenges and the difficulty of carrying out certain acts such as recruitment, reframing or dismissals remotely. Although some of the people we spoke to in the previous research mentioned integration as a significant challenge, they could not provide any concrete examples.

Integration is an action that is difficult to grasp clearly. When can integration be considered complete? When and how does a newcomer find a point of balance between his or her national culture of origin and an organizational culture that may be very different? Integration is a complex process, difficult to analyse. In another context, politicians talk a lot about it. However, none of them seem to understand how integration happens because, undoubtedly, there is an element of magic in the way it operates that eludes complete understanding.

RW promises to bring many benefits to employees, such as greater flexibility in managing activities, increased individual responsibility and better management of the separation between private and professional life. However, it also seems to lead to an impoverishment of relationships, which can jeopardize collaboration. Integration, long perceived as requiring direct contact and presence in the company, is one such action. In most cases, at least before the COVID-19 crisis, integration predominantly occurred face-to-face (Nonaka et al., 2000). The pandemic shattered this former pattern, forcing a change in approach, as the proportion of face-to-face work suddenly declined dramatically. In the new hybrid environment, the possibility of on-site exchanges is automatically diminished. Consequently, newcomers need to find ways to recover tacitly transmitted information and overcome the limitations of the virtual context. Work on remote integration is still relatively rare, often limited to onboarding (De Boer & Delobbe, 2022; Rodeghero et al., 2021). Consequently, any empirical data on the subject help advance our understanding of the phenomenon.

Our research focuses on the reactions of two groups of young graduates starting their careers through fixed-term contracts ranging from six to 18 months. We deliberately concentrate on the experiences of employees aware that the time devoted to integration is limited, thereby prioritizing the essential aspects – those that enable them to be effective by reducing the uncertainty associated with their positions, particularly about the organizational culture, the tasks to be implemented and the roles to be adopted (Louis, 1980). Specifically, we seek to break down the integration process as experienced by respondents and identify the most salient areas that are considered to ensure the eventual success or failure of the integration. This automatically leads to further questions, such as how much of this can be attributed to the institution and how much to the newcomers’ proactive action. In addition, given that the respondents are all under 30 years of age, we also explore whether their attitudes towards integration differ significantly from those that we know. Generally speaking, even if the analysed phenomenon occurred during the pandemic, it is not what happened during the

COVID-19 crisis that interests us but rather how we can use the lessons from that period to operate better in future.

After examining the literature on corporate integration and how it operates in times of crisis, we will analyse the collected data to understand how corporate integration occurs in a context where direct contact is becoming a minority and the impact of tacit processes is becoming harder to grasp.

1 Theoretical Framework

In this section, we look at two different approaches to corporate integration: a macro-focus on organizations operating in an international context and a micro-focus on the contributions of organizational socialization. Given our choice of population, we also investigate the consequences of generational differences.

1.1 International business and organizations

Organizational integration seeks to anchor newcomers to the company's cultural vision. The success of this attempt depends mainly on the roles that newcomers assume within the organization but also on their actions and limitations. Integration also means asking whether newly arrived employees are ready to share the company's values and interpret them like future colleagues or fellow employees. This evolution contributes positively, enabling newcomers to feel at ease in the new environment.

In the professional context, organizational culture plays a fundamental role in creating an attractive image, a communicative action designed to impress newcomers and win over new subsidiaries (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008; Mayrhofer, 2011; Schaaper, 2005). We must remember that employee integration is a system used to influence, direct and ensure the hegemony of the headquarters over local organizations (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008; Mayrhofer & Urban, 2011). Interestingly, the French school has rejected the idea that memorizing a list of values and repeating them like a mantra constitutes an excellent leadership process (Barbichon, 1990; Barmeyer, 2004; Bryon-Portet, 2011; Chevrier, 2018).

Finally, organizational integration is often reinforced during an acquisition or merger (Birkinshaw et al., 2000), particularly in the context of sharing practices between entities that have to work together (Adanhounme, 2016; Lanciano et al., 2017). While integration can be seen as a way of controlling the local level by managing it through "common values" while sharing what is known as "best practices", it is nonetheless surprising that these characteristics are essentially transmitted through a tacit approach (Van de Ven et al., 2000). The tacit approach, backed up by numerous examples, proves more effective than any verbal exchange. If the "coffee-machine system" is always the right way to bring someone into a new context (Harris & Brewster, 1999), how can transferring corporate culture be achieved via video? (Clanché et al., 2023; Vuchkovski et al., 2023) How can this be achieved when presenting concrete examples becomes more difficult? (Shin et al., 2017)

In the wake of the pandemic, several researchers have sought to imagine the future of work and social inclusion within a new context (Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2020). They have concluded that a drastic reduction in face-to-face contact means that human resources have

to be managed differently and that a much more advanced relational level is needed than had existed until now (Branicki, 2020; Caligiuri et al., 2020).

1.2 Organizational socialization

Starting in a new organization marks a decisive moment in the evolution of a professional career. It is a time of in-depth learning, during which the newcomer seeks to make sense of his or her environment (De Boer & Delobbe, 2022). The literature generally identifies four areas of action (Chao, 2012; Delobbe, 2011): (1) acquisition of skills required for the job; (2) comprehension of the expectations related to the individual's role in the organization; (3) social integration and cultivation of harmonious working relationships; and (4) discovery and acculturation to the shared values and tacit norms of the organization.

We would like to mention the traditional definition of organizational socialization: "The process by which a person learns the values, norms and behaviours required to enable him or her to become a full-fledged member of the organization" (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). This occurs when a new employee discovers the value system, integrates the necessary processes and learns the behaviour required in the society, organization, or group (Schein, 1968, p. 2). However, since the first attempts to define how to integrate group members, the traditional system based on lifelong employment and gradual ascent has become much more complex in recent years, with an increasing number of reorientations, changes of jobs or companies, mobility and accumulation of internships or time-limited jobs, as in the case of our target population (Delobbe & De Boer, 2022, p. 141). Several researchers have sought to define new career classifications that consider these developments (Arthur, 2014; Mayrhofer et al., 2014).

Organizations devise various tactics, means or devices to facilitate the socialization of new entrants, which Van Maanen and Schein (1979) termed "people processing devices". However, with the evolution of the organization of work mentioned earlier, the objectives associated with the integration process have changed profoundly. New arrivals are much more frequent and increasingly involve individuals who are with the company only for a brief, even fleeting, period. Human capital has been contractualized (De Boer & Delobbe, 2022).

This situation leads researchers to pay greater attention to the intervention capacity of new entrants (Ashford & Black, 1996; Nicholson, 1984). Gradually, companies have come to expect newcomers to play the most crucial role. The employees are thus active players who deploy various strategies to cope with uncertainty, decipher their environment and learn the requirements of their new role (Cooper-Thomas & Burke, 2012). Several typologies describe these strategies and identify concrete actions: (1) seeking information, (2) seeking feedback, (3) networking, (4) participating in social activities, (5) building relationships with the boss, (6) positively reframing situations, (7) negotiating change at work (Ashford & Black, 1996; Cooper-Thomas & Burke, 2012; Delobbe & De Boer, 2022).

1.3 Generations Z and Y

While the concept of a "generation" is old (Mannheim, 1938), the practice of distinguishing between new and preceding generations appeared around 1968. In 2000, Howe and Strauss defined three criteria for describing a generation: (1) perceived belonging, (2) shared beliefs and behaviour, and (3) shared history. Table 1 provides the names of the different generations.

Table 1 | Definition of generations

Commonly used names	Span of birth years
Silent Generation	1928–1945
Baby Boomers	1946–1964
Generation X	1965–1980
Generation Y (Millennials)	1981–1996
Generation Z	1997–2012

Source: Adapted from Steward (2017)

The description of future generations is prominently featured in the literature concerning Generation Y (Tapscott, 1998/2001; Prensky, 2001; Hornyák & Fehér, 2011). Generation Y has many nicknames: echo boomers, millennials, digital natives, the net generation, the online generation and digital immigrants (Csobanka, 2016). Right after millennials, members of Generation Z have a distinguishing feature in that they were born into a world where communication systems abound (Prensky, 2001). This new generation will play a much more critical role in the future, particularly when many representatives of previous generations retire.

Scholars devote much time to analysing the characteristics of Gen Y and, more recently, Gen Z. One main reason is the growing number of conflicts between generations. In one American study, 64 HR professionals in large companies reported such conflicts (Eisner, 2005). Some articles (e.g., Eckleberry-Hunt & Tucciarone, 2011) aim to advise on the changes to be made when teaching Generation Z students: working in groups using the trial-and-error method, avoiding traditional lectures without active participation and giving more room for creativity.

Various research studies on onboarding carried out in the USA with Gen Y or even Gen Z show the importance of exchanges and communication. In particular, newcomers from these two generations must understand the objective behind every action. Ongoing direct communication with the manager is fundamental to guiding the newcomers' actions, knowing whether the problem has been adequately understood and knowing whether the action has been effective. Interestingly, a study of Gen Z shows that 25% are ready to leave their job before the first six months if the onboarding has not been successful (Schroth, 2019). Furthermore, both generations are characterized by a strong need for recognition, probably even more pronounced among Gen Y members. On the negative side, Gen Y members may be more likely to react badly to stress and suffer nervous breakdowns.

Scholars have different analyses of the phenomenon regarding the link with the company employing them. Many examples show lower commitment, which can lead to more frequent departures compared to previous generations (Stewart et al., 2017).

2 Methodology

The COVID-19 pandemic created a significant shock that affected new employees differently. Some employees, especially at the beginning, started to work remotely immediately and did not meet their managers or colleagues until much later, when the pandemic restrictions

diminished drastically. At the other end of the scale, others seem to have got over their medical and social obligations and continued establishing many contacts valuable to their integration as if nothing had changed.

2.1 Research question and work hypotheses

Our objective is, of course, to understand how the process of corporate integration was experienced by newcomers during the COVID-19 crisis. However, our intention is more general and we hope that what happened at a time when companies were obliged to implement RW to ensure their sustainability can be used to better understand how the integration process may unfold when the share of RW increases significantly, as is currently happening in most countries. In this sense, we would like to use the experience of companies and employees during a pandemic as a ground for experimentation.

On the other hand, we give preference to younger employees on limited-term contracts because they seem to us to be more representative of tomorrow's employees, who will almost undoubtedly work in a hybrid mode. The new generations entering the market have a greater familiarity with tools used for RW. Moreover, limited-term contracts force them to concentrate on the most essential aspects of integration. Finally, by limiting ourselves to the French cultural context, we aim to eliminate any reactions to the integration process that might be attributable to cultural differences. Assuming that the effects of culture are more or less identical, the differences identified can be the result of other factors.

Our research question concerns integration in the context of COVID-19, that is, understanding the key factors influencing the quality of new entrants' organizational socialization. It aims to extend the understanding of a specific situation to the hybrid functioning of companies in general while taking a closer look at a key question in the literature, namely understanding what approach to take in a new context between tactics put in place by the institutions concerned or proactive action undertaken by the interested new entrants themselves.

2.2 Our target population: young professionals

We questioned and interviewed two groups of young professionals who found themselves in a similar situation but in different contexts.

Group A is made up of young French graduates who have completed their studies and obtained limited-term jobs abroad in French companies. In our case, these jobs were in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Romania. This process is part of a government scheme to assist companies (VIE = *Volontaires Internationaux en Entreprise*). The questionnaire (Figure 1) was sent directly by the three Business France agencies mentioned above to the 168 people identified as being employed at the time of the inquiry. Thirty-nine responses were received (a return rate of 23.2%). These young professionals are used to working on international projects and have found themselves not only in a new company but in a new country. Among the respondents, 44% are under 25 years old and the remainder (66%) are between 25 and 30.

Group B is made up of students in their final year at Neoma Business School. They are required to complete an end-of-study internship lasting at least six months. These students are not all French, but they all do their internship in France with a French company. They have less professional experience than the individuals in Group A. The questionnaire was sent to

thirty-two students and we received twelve responses, for a response rate of 37.5%. Half of the respondents are under 25 years and the other half are between 25 and 30.

2.3 Mixed-method research

For this research, we opted for a mixed-method approach (Bazeley, 2008), based on using two types of tools: (1) a series of online questionnaires (see Table 2) for two different populations of new employees (see below); and (2) several semi-structured interviews as required. The combination of these two approaches is used to obtain a precise description of the reactions and expectations of our respondents concerning their integration into the company where they work. While Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) identified forty reasons why a researcher might use a mixed approach, Adamson (2003) focused on three main objectives: identifying and eliminating possible contradictions, asserting the credibility of findings and providing as much information as possible on the phenomenon used. It is this last option that aligns with our intention, as we seek to use the strength of one method to reinforce the other (Morgan 1998, 2018).

Table 2 | Questionnaire

Category		Questions
1.	General information	How long have you been working in the company? Basic description of the work done
2.	Organization of work	Do you have a tutor? Do you belong to a clearly defined group? What do you need to feel integrated? Do you consider that starting work during the pandemic was an advantage? A disadvantage? Why? What was the impact on your integration?
3.	Remote work	What share of your work was done remotely? Did the actions done by the company help you feel good? Can you give examples of actions? Could you mention an action that would have helped you feel better integrated?
4.	Integration	Do you feel integrated today? Why or why not?
5.	Conclusion	Reaction to being integrated during a pandemic

Source: Summary of questionnaire made using Google Forms

The first objective of the survey is to gather qualitative data on the attitudes of employees discovering a new job and a new company, with a greater or lesser proportion of employees working remotely. We included several open-ended questions to enable respondents to express their views in detail. Following the first level of analysis of the data received, essentially for descriptive purposes, we plan to use the approach described in grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which involves putting together the comments and reactions reported by questionnaire respondents and proceeding to a coding process.

After this initial coding exercise, it may seem useful to validate the identified categories further or introduce others. To do this and following the logic of grounded theory, we contacted eight respondents who had left their contact details (five from Group A and three from Group B). We

asked the same questions as in our basic questionnaire but allowed interviewees more time and freedom to express themselves. These interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. We transcribed and analysed them to complement the online questionnaire material. The coding of comments derived from both the questionnaires and additional interviews led us to define five nodes, using expressions that resonated with the content of the questionnaires: (1) a feeling of inefficiency; (2) isolation and relational limitations; (3) ill-conceived procedures; (4) the central role of the tutor; and (5) workplace well-being.

2.4 Confidentiality and anonymity

To guarantee confidentiality, we refrained from soliciting any information on the identities of respondents in the survey. Instead, we simply suggested that respondents provide their e-mail addresses in case they wished to complete this information during an interview. It was from this group of individuals that we found the respondents to contact for our semi-structured interviews. No mention of name or e-mail address was made in the transcripts, which were instead identified by numbers.

In addition, we chose not to ask any questions about nationality or gender because, firstly, we did not feel that this was justified in an essentially French context and secondly, this type of question had created difficulties in previous research.

3 Analysis of Results

3.1 First level of analysis: descriptive approach

Our data analysis enables us to describe the experiences of these young professionals as they embarked on their roles and integrated into a new company. We can also identify several key integration points by comparing the two groups.

Group A (see Table 3) presents various functions, including activities (Table 3, Section 1.3) such as production or quality, which require on-site presence even during a pandemic. This observation should be linked to the responses to Section 2.1, which indicates that 31% of the respondents have never worked remotely. However, even if our study population included individuals who did not work remotely, they were still affected by COVID-19, as many of their contacts worked remotely at certain times of the week.

Table 3 | Group A data: Answers to questionnaires sent by three Business France agencies between 3 September 2021 and 20 January 2022

Category	Number of answers	Percentage
1. General information		
Number of names in the database	168	
Number of answers	39	23%
1.1 Gender		
Males	27	69%
Females	11	31%
1.2 Age		
Under 25	17	44%

Between 25 and 30	22	56%
Over 30	0	0%
1.3. Activities		
Production/operations/quality	9	23%
IT	8	21%
Marketing and sales	6	15%
Logistics	5	13%
Finance/accounting	5	13%
Other	6	15%
2. Work organization		
Never	12	31%
Less than 20%	5	13%
Between 20% and 50%	8	20%
More than 50%	3	8%
Always	11	28%
2.1. Do you have a tutor?		
Yes	30	77%
No	9	33%
3. Integration		
3.1. Do you feel well-integrated today?		
Yes	28	72%
No	11	28%
3.2. What would make you feel good about the company after the first few weeks? (More than one answer possible)		
Being introduced to colleagues	29	74%
Having regular meetings with my tutor	24	62%
Speaking openly with colleagues during breaks	21	54%
Working on a short project	20	51%
Having someone explain the corporate culture	12	31%
Sharing useful information on the company	5	13%
Other	12	31%
3.3. Did the company implement actions that made you feel integrated?		
Yes	26	67%
No	5	13%
I don't know.	8	20%
3.4. Can you mention an event you'd like your company to organize?		
Presentation to colleagues – welcome meetings	9	23%

Company visits (offices, plants, etc.)	5	13%
Afterwork activity, including team-building	5	13%
Moments with the whole team (lunch, office days, etc.)	5	13%
Other (special small projects, courses, etc.)	4	10%
I don't know.	11	28%
3.5. What impact did the fact of starting during a pandemic have on your integration? (More than one answer possible)		
Less knowledge of colleagues	18	46%
Less understanding of managers	17	43%
Poor knowledge of processes	10	26%
3.6. Isabelle Barthes of EM Strasbourg has written that teleworking "condemns new recruits to be third-class employees". What do you think of this statement?		
I totally agree	4	10%
I tend to agree	23	59%
I tend to disagree	10	26%
I disagree	2	5%

Source: Online questionnaire

When identifying the actions that facilitated integration (Table 3, Section 3.2), we notice four categories: (1) far at the top (50% of mentions), we find everything that facilitates relations with colleagues: formal introductions or informal meetings during breaks (including online); (2) next, we have a rapport with the tutor or mentor (24%); followed by (3) information about the company, its culture (12%), or more practical elements (4%); and (4) finally, 11% of the respondents mentioned working on a small project that could serve as an introduction to the company.

The subsequent sections (Table 3, Sections 3.3 and 3.4) and Section 2.2 above provide indirect information on company actions. Firstly, we are surprised that 23% of the respondents lacked a tutor to help them integrate. In addition, the respondents' requests highlight actions that some host companies did not organize, such as an official presentation of the newcomers (23%) or a tour of the premises (13%). In their comments, some interviewees indicated that organizing certain actions in remote locations was probably more challenging when many people work remotely. As a project manager in the Czech Republic put it: *"In a changing environment, you have to know how to innovate... And this is often more difficult than it seems for many managers."* (Group A)

While 62% of those interviewed considered themselves integrated at the time of the interview (Table 3, Section 3.1), notably this population, who started their employment during the pandemic, seems to be partly convinced that this was more difficult or even influenced the quality of their integration. Furthermore, in response to Isabelle Barthes's statement that recruits during the pandemic could become third-class employees, 69% of the respondents said that they were inclined to agree (including 10% who agreed), which still seems a high figure.

For those interviewed, the pandemic and remote working affected relationships and knowledge of colleagues (40%), links with management (37%) and knowledge of company processes (22%).

Group B (see Table 4) is much more homogeneous. These individuals all work in marketing. They all have tutors, as required by law.

The lack of experience may well explain why we find such dependence on the relationship with the tutor for the quality of integration (Table 4, Section 3.2). Analysis of the comments also reveals less initiative-taking.

There is a contradiction in the responses regarding the quality of integration: even when you are integrated, the consensus is that integration during the COVID-19 period makes you a second-class employee. This phenomenon seems to denote dissatisfaction with the current situation and the way the process has unfolded.

Table 4 | Group B data: Answers to questionnaires sent to NEOMA interns between 3 September 2021 and 20 January 2022

Category	Number of answers	Percentage
1. General information		
Number of names in the database	32	
Number of answers	12	48%
1.1. Gender		
Males	1	8%
Females	11	92%
1.2. Age		
Under 25	6	50%
Between 25 and 30	6	50%
1.3. Activities		
Marketing and sales	12	15%
2. Work organization		
2.1. Share of remote work		
Never	2	17%
Between 20% and 50%	10	83%
2.2. Do you have a tutor?		
Yes	12	100%
No	0	33%
3. Integration		
3.1. Do you feel well-integrated today?		
Yes	12	100%
No	0	0%
3.2. What would make you feel good about the company after the first few weeks? (More than one answer possible)		
Being introduced to colleagues	2	12%
Having regular meetings with my tutor	12	75%

Sharing useful information on the company	2	13%
3.3. Did the company implement actions that made you feel integrated?		
Yes	11	67%
No	0	13%
I don't know.	1	20%
3.4. Can you mention an event you would like your company to organize?		
Presentation to colleagues – welcome meetings	2	14%
Company visits (offices, plants, etc.)	12	86%
3.5. What impact did the fact of starting during a pandemic have on your integration? (More than one answer possible)		
Less knowledge of colleagues	10	83%
Poor knowledge of processes	2	17%
3.6. Isabelle Barthes of EM Strasbourg has written that teleworking "condemns recruits to be third-class employees". What do you think of this statement?		
I totally agree	12	100%

Source: Online questionnaire

When comparing **Group A** and **Group B**, we notice fundamental differences in their composition. Group A is made up of individuals who have already completed several internships with companies, particularly abroad. Moreover, the highly selective recruitment process of VIE allows us to imagine that we are dealing with an elite. Furthermore, analysis of the soft comments shows a difference in the tasks faced by the individuals. Group A is generally recruited for very specific projects, which means that they participate in team meetings at a very early stage. By contrast, members of Group B seem to have fewer strategic tasks, requiring less integration into project teams. In this situation, the primary interlocutor is the tutor and interactions with other individuals are less frequent. Several interviewees said that they often felt isolated and disconnected from other members of the company. *"I had my project, several indications given by my tutor, but without an organizational chart or a telephone list, I didn't know who to contact to go further."* (Automotive sector – Group B)

The analysis also shows that members of Group A were more proactive and much more forthcoming about what they wanted from the company or how to speed up their integration process. The appropriation of the phrase denotes dissatisfaction with the situation they experience within the company. This distinguishes them from Group B, who exhibit a much more varied perception of their integration and satisfaction with the process. These two groups, therefore, have a different perception of what integration entails, i.e., the state they need to have reached to consider themselves integrated. This is an important point that we will discuss later on.

3.2 Second level of analysis: identification of nodes

Our analysis encompasses all responses to open-ended questionnaire questions, reactions, comments, examples and transcripts of semi-structured interviews. As is customary when using grounded theory, we analysed the data as we went along. This involved using open coding, wherein we compared parts of the same discourse or different interviews, grouped

information considered to be similar and finally created conceptual categories that are the main aspects of our findings. This work enabled us to identify five key trends, conceptual categories or areas of diligence for the implementation of special integration policies.

A feeling of inefficiency

Generally speaking, respondents feel less effective in fulfilling their assigned roles, as they know that they have limited knowledge of the company. For some, *"the simplest things become difficult"* (Group A) or *"[we] need more time to understand the job and the different missions"* (Group A). One interviewee summarized the problems encountered by saying that the most challenging thing was *"checking that all the people [had] the same approach as you"* (Group A). While this kind of statement may be familiar to all start-up employees, it is very difficult, when you only meet colleagues remotely, to know whether your way of working is similar to that of others in the company.

Semi-structured interviews show that the feeling of belonging to a human group, of being integrated, is often the fundamental objective of new arrivals, which would enable them to accept doubts or a feeling of temporary inefficiency. Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 497) stated that *"belonging is our human need to form and maintain lasting, positive and meaningful interpersonal relationships"*. This sense of belonging is the central element that enables team members to create the emotional patterns and cognitive process necessary to overcome doubts and uncertainties and to accept goals. The opposite situation can generate a form of mental malaise and make work very uncomfortable (Manago & Krendl, 2022).

In a remote or even hybrid context, this feeling of ineffectiveness will likely be experienced critically by newcomers. However, the manager or knowledgeable colleagues may find it difficult to perceive. Care will no doubt have to be taken to circumscribe it and respond to it effectively.

Isolation and relational limitations

Several newcomers report feeling lonely and marginalized at times. Even in the company, they experience difficult situations: *"I was alone and lost in the office."* (Group A) One person, in particular, wrote: *"Without eating or having coffee together, it is very difficult!"* (Group B) There seems to have been a lack of discussion of certain operating specifics that cannot be found in the procedures. As one newcomer confided: *"I did not have the opportunity to learn the tricks, [which] normally happens when we are all together."* (Group B)

It seems that this gap persists even when the situation improves. One person, for example, said: *"Before, during confinement, it was easier because we had video conferencing. Now, people mostly [interact] with people they knew before."* (Group A) Some lacked the time to deepen relationships and turn colleagues into allies. Alternatively, in other cases, you may have some problems contacting the right colleagues. You would think that switching to a hybrid operation would make it easier to keep in touch. However, the colleagues you would like to meet are not always there when you need them: *"They're not working when you are, and they can't help us when we need them!"* (Group A)

Increasing the number of joint work situations, even from a distance, can facilitate integration by providing opportunities to observe the capabilities, reactions and personalities of new

colleagues. Our analysis shows that Group A, the French abroad, seems to have fewer problems. Given that they are working on highly technical subjects, they have many meetings, sometimes face-to-face, for training or project progress updates. Conversely, Group B, working more on marketing projects, has less frequent review meetings.

Ill-conceived procedures

Among the problems or limitations mentioned by respondents is that procedures are not sufficiently clear, or more precisely, that they are difficult to understand from a distance when you do not have access to what is not written down on paper. Several respondents insist that they are missing certain details to solve problems that seem obvious to people who have been with the company longer. Newcomers mention their limitations about the procedures that they have discovered off-line: *"[We're] beginning to understand how the company works, but our unfamiliarity with customers and certain manufacturing procedures block[s] us."* (Group A) Alternatively, *"We don't have the means to properly express our ideas remotely because we're missing information that has never been passed on to us."* (Group B)

Survey participants sometimes insist that procedures should be designed differently, incorporating more detail or providing hands-on videos, during which users could give some additional information, perhaps comments on their practical application. They also mention the absence of team building in general and remote meetings conceived differently: instead of delving into the project details, they would take the time to answer questions or react to the newcomers' expressions of astonishment.

The tutor is a central figure.

One aspect of integration seems fundamental to us: the tutor's behaviour, namely how the person responsible for integrating a newcomer organizes his or her integration. For many respondents, this is the central figure on whom the quality of the integration depends, the one who will act as the interface between the newcomer and the team. Our survey shows that most (88%) of the respondents consider themselves integrated when they reply. The remaining cases are all linked to the absence of a designated tutor.

What do integration candidates expect from their tutor (or manager)? Respondents highlight three essential responsibilities: (1) clearly demonstrating trust in them; (2) emphasizing the helpfulness of their actions, showing appreciation for their work and generally offering positive encouragement; (3) having concrete knowledge of all the company's operations and being able to share it. As one interviewee mentioned, they appreciate a manager who tells them: *"Let me explain the organization and procedures in terms of organization... Explain to me what surprised you or what you find hard to understand."* (Group B)

Workplace well-being

At the end of our analysis, the issue of workplace well-being comes to the fore, as it is more or less indirect at all data levels. It is a crucial issue for all stakeholders involved in the transition to RW and, later, the implementation of hybrid operations. Presented by experts, managers and the company itself as a way to improve employee well-being, new working methods (RW or hybrid) have yet to demonstrate their ability to guarantee this promise. Research into the subject points to several problems, from the often-unbearable isolation of remote workers to the difficulty of establishing a clear separation between private and professional life. While most people who can work remotely appreciate this possibility, it is sometimes difficult to

integrate them into this new world. Many interviewees used the term “well-being” at some point in their answers.

When a recruit has a poor grasp of what his or her job description calls for, *“he doesn't feel at ease with the group. He loses self-confidence and no longer dares to take the initiative.”* (Group B) The aim here is for managers or institutions to monitor the evolution of well-being in the most diverse situations of corporate life. As we saw earlier, integration is a key act that is more difficult to master from a distance. It therefore requires a great deal of care and attention to ensure that the employee's well-being is not disrupted.

Although well-being seems to play a more important role among the younger generations, it is undoubtedly emphasized in remote working situations since it is one of the fundamental arguments justifying its use, particularly in all matters relating to work-life balance (Volfová et al., 2023).

Phenomena associated with new generations

Our interviewees provide relatively primary descriptions of their integration expectations. Among the items mentioned, the most important is being introduced to colleagues, getting to know them and knowing what they do (74%). Next comes the desire to have regular follow-ups with the tutor (62%), who should be able to tell the person concerned whether they have followed the company's processes properly and give them practical advice. For 54% of those interviewed, it is also important to be able to talk to colleagues outside the time devoted to working on projects. A description of the company's culture is cited by only 31% of the respondents, and very often, it is the processes involved in carrying out the tasks that were mentioned as essential. Moreover, nothing is added about belonging to the group or career prospects within the company.

The employees' limited-duration contracts undoubtedly influence their responses. However, one might have expected a significant number of respondents to wonder whether they would be hired after the end of their contract. This very basic description can probably also be explained by the new generation's different relationships with the companies where they work (see the literature).

Many comments from respondents highlight a lack of patience and high expectations relating to the employing company. These reactions go back to what we saw in the literature section: On the one hand, we see a less pronounced desire for belonging and on the other, a greater propensity for stress. These aspects will certainly need to be considered when defining an action plan.

4 Conclusion

4.1 Stress and well-being

Our research shows how much the integration process seems disrupted within a remote environment. New employees express doubts about their effectiveness with the rest of the team and also struggle to understand procedures without face-to-face exchanges, which they find difficult, if not impossible. These situations create a disconnection with the pursuit of well-

being at work at a time when this idea is an increasingly significant requirement. The importance of a certain comfort level is present in all the interviews, as well-being has now become one of the significant demands of employees and is often only possible by implementing an effective hybrid system. Using RW poses challenges and problems for employees, as it breaks the codes and procedures that they have relied on until now. Integration hinges on maintaining harmony with one's group, in this case, one's team, and sharing its values and goals.

4.2 Importance of monitoring new arrivals

In our research, the primary concern of every recruit revolves around how to effectively communicate with colleagues without raising too many questions about the quality of his or her current work. This is where the central role of the tutor or manager comes into play, acting as an intermediary between colleagues and clarifying his or her role and tasks. Secondly, the manager is supposed to act as an intermediary between the employee and the company. The manager's behaviour in managing teams can be decisive, particularly concerning the following actions: (1) taking care of subordinates and making them understand that they are essential; (2) speaking sincerely to subordinates; (3) getting team members to know each other better; and (4) making procedures better understood.

These actions should help newcomers understand that *"[their] work is valued"* (Group A). This means *"discussing things with [them] regularly"* (Group B). In addition, most interviewees mention the fundamental help that a sincere conversation or quality feedback can bring when one is experiencing a psychological crisis. These actions enhance the new employee's performance, benefitting everyone involved. Likewise, having the opportunity to introduce yourself to new colleagues in a video helps to clarify future relationships. It is a way of informing colleagues about what the new team member is working on and initiating a collaborative process.

While some interviewees ask about the company's organizational culture, others (particularly in the second group) ask about procedures: *"When I'm in the company, I don't understand the procedures I use"* or *"I don't know what the procedures are"* (Group B). Understanding company-specific procedures is similar to what we have already said about integration. They are not simply routines applied automatically but are directly linked to the company's values and vision. They never exist in isolation from what has given the company a certain logic. Integration is complex, where the tacit side is more important than the words. The tacit dimension cannot be replaced by a simple video conference. Our research shows that integration is partial or takes longer to set up in such a situation.

When integration is deemed successful, it is essentially due to the proactivity of the new employees rather than to the mechanisms put in place by the institutions. We note such statements as *"The company did not support the new form of work."* (Group A) or *"At a distance, there was no connection and integration with the group."* (Group A) The result is a strong expectation for innovative approaches to correcting or overcoming distance. Of course, participants insist on the importance of face-to-face interactions – precious moments to capitalize on – but they also sometimes imagine changing the approach to RW.

4.3 Creating new devices

The analysis shows that the new employees whom we interviewed were highly responsive. This enables them to cope with the new situation and integrate in 88% of the cases. However, we do notice a high level of expectation on the company's part, which is nonetheless considered to be the origin of this change in working methods. For many years, companies have tended to rely more on newcomers' proactivity than on processing devices. We believe that transitioning to a hybrid operation requires companies to change their approach and consider implementing new tools. In our view, this is necessary to avoid losing efficiency, but also to avoid discouraging employees. We have seen that well-being is fundamental for these young people (as mentioned in the literature but confirmed by our research). In this way, we must avoid provoking hasty departures or nervous breakdowns.

We are firmly convinced that there are plenty of ways to change the approach and define new tools that are better adapted to the new situation: visual presentations of processes with a question/answer section, remote integration team-building activities, open discussions alongside project meetings, etc. Of course, when we talk about changes in the approach, this often involves training managers or others in charge of integrating newcomers.

5 Limitations, Discussion and New Avenues

5.1 Limitations

Our research sheds light on a phenomenon that has been somewhat overlooked: during the pandemic, companies continued integrating new employees who were unable to benefit from the same process as those integrated earlier. We have seen that the integration process can be longer and more complicated when employees work partly remotely. However, it is worth looking at the integration process itself. Some interviewees say that they consider themselves integrated, even though they work mainly remotely. What kind of integration is this? Probably only professional integration linked to a particular task. However, integration can also be understood in various ways: (1) anticipating the behaviour of other team members; (2) knowing how to play with procedures, i.e., going as far as possible without getting into trouble; and (3) understanding the company's values and operating in collaboration with other company members.

We believe it is essential to better understand what new entrants expect from their integration, especially in the case of new generations entering the market. Some evidence suggests that, in some cases, they may be content to choose a favourable place to work without too much involvement with the corporate culture and its associated obligations. We also think it would be interesting to better understand what new generations are concerned with, such as climate change, well-being or having time for themselves, and whether they are prepared to leave and look for other opportunities if their expectations are unmet.

We also regret that we have not yet interviewed managers and executives to discover the difference between their approach, which is essentially that of Baby Boomers and that of the new generations. It will be essential to know whether they have new ideas yet to be used by the people we interviewed as part of our research. Similarly, with the evolution of technology,

new approaches may be proposed shortly. Who is currently doing this? This is an area we should be keeping a close eye on.

Finally, the data collected, all related to the French cultural domain, do not enable us to assess the impact of national culture on the perception and experience of integration. We would now like to go further and compare reactions of groups from different cultures. Approaches to integration, and RW in general, undoubtedly vary from country to country and from context to context. It would be interesting to understand better how this happens.

5.2 Discussion

Several recent studies have highlighted the importance of good employee integration, not only in terms of the speed with which they would be effective in their role and therefore productive, but also for their organizational alignment and level of commitment (Tsipursky, 2023). This latter characteristic is fundamental, as it determines the quality of the new hire's work, but it can also translate into a high level of employee turnover.

Turning our attention now to RW, several seminal articles have questioned the impact of changing work methods on employee engagement (Baudewijns et al., 2015; Gerards et al., 2018). Today, this influence has been empirically demonstrated, whether we are talking about flexible working (Silitonga & Batubara, 2023) or new ways of working (NWW) (Duque et al., 2020). At the heart of this latter concept, defined as any form of work "that allows workers to choose when and where they work, using information and communication technologies" (Renard et al., 2021), we find RW, which involves a change in the temporal (working hours) and physical (at home or in an office specially designed for hybrid working) conditions in which employees operate.

Given the importance of this change in the relationship between the new hire and the company, we are surprised that some recent studies on onboarding procedures say nothing about RW (Godinho et al., 2023), while others (Mitrofanova, 2023) focus on the requirements of onboarding, with a particular emphasis on the importance of a variety of channels for teams to connect and of regular entertainment methods. In general, the most recent articles stress the importance of creating new online tools (Ziden & Joo, 2020), sometimes insisting that the ideal forms of communication for the new context do not yet exist (Scott et al., 2022). Research has also been carried out on the issue of young generations. In an attempt to adapt the tools to be used, Heimburger et al. (2019) imagined and tested gamification linked to onboarding. Among other tools aimed at facilitating remote onboarding, some research has highlighted the importance of developing remote training courses (Williamson-Yarbrough & Ramos-Salazar, 2023) on items that are typically covered through formal and informal exchanges between the new employee and his or her tutor or colleagues.

While attempts have been made to define the most suitable tools, little research has focused on the importance of how the tutor (manager) intervenes to facilitate the integration of new employees. In a paper on remote onboarding, Hoogeveen (2023) reviewed the various forms of management, preferring the coaching style for technical employees and the democratic style for others. This last point reinforces our finding on the importance of the persons in charge of onboarding new hires, tutors or line managers and raises the question of their selection or training.

While the most recent articles on the younger generation confirm that it is more difficult to get them to commit (Chillakuri, 2020; Rebel & Willeke MacDonald, 2023), there is still very little research into what they expect from corporate integration and what needs to be done to facilitate their onboarding. It seems clear that the most modern tools will have to be used and adapted to what young generations use daily. We need to break down old hierarchical patterns, but we also need to go further and adapt the vocabulary that we use to address them.

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