

Getting IT-Professionals on Board in Hybrid Work – An Organizational Discontinuity Theory Perspective

Research-in-Progress

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Introduction and Research Background

One of the most profound and far-reaching shifts Covid-19 brought about for workers and organizations has been the widespread implementation of hybrid work (HW). Due to potential health risks of the rapidly spreading disease, very many organizations across most industries were forced to offer a substantial number of employees the opportunity to work away-from-office (Waizenegger et al., 2020). Consequently, flexible work away-from-office and the associated benefits of wellbeing and satisfaction likely to manifest in increased work autonomy (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007) and release from commuting burdens (Gerpott et al., 2021) were made available to a broad population of workers. However, on an individual level many of these workers also experienced the disadvantages associated with this way of working, such as the increased stress intensified technology use causes (Carillo et al., 2020), blurred work-life boundaries that can result in an inability to disconnect from work (Derks et al., 2016), and professional isolation due to the lack of encountering and interacting with co-workers and managers (Hafermalz & Riemer, 2020). Considering both the benefits and drawbacks of working away-from-office, it seems logical that the majority of remote-capable employees¹ prefer a combined model (Wang et al., 2021), i.e., hybrid work which entails a configuration of working in more than one location, combining a physical and a virtual work space, sharing time between the two (Halford, 2005).

Since, multiple surveys have indicated the popularity of HW among remote-capable employees (Dowling et al., 2022; Wigert, 2022) it seems unlikely that employers will restore the pre-pandemic status quo, which in most cases was full on-site work (Kane et al., 2021). Consequently, it seems likely that HW will remain the way work is done for a great share of workers, making it indeed the frequently proclaimed "new normal" working arrangement.

Despite being popular among workers, HW has pitfalls and brings challenges for workers and organizations. Especially, HW complicates workers' collaboration, since crossing the added boundaries that stem from distance in space and time (Asatiani & Penttinen, 2019; Halford, 2005), often brings major changes in working circumstances, which hold challenges for efficient collaboration. Watson-Manheim et al.'s (2002) organizational discontinuity theory (ODT) conceptualizes these changes as discontinuities. According to the ODT, either organizations that typically follow a top-down logic, or workers who follow a bottom-up logic, can introduce measures – so called continuities – to handle the discontinuities (Watson-Manheim et al., 2002). Thereby, continuities aim to mitigate negative consequences or stabilize positive consequences of boundary crossings in organizations. The discontinuities in HW can be particularly critical to workers who are new to organizations as these workers lack experience and supporting networks to cope with them properly. Eventually, this can hinder the successful socialization of newcomers.

¹ We adopted this term from Wigert (2022), who used it in his GALLUP survey to refer to the share of all employees in the U.S. whose jobs can be done remotely, which according to the survey, is roughly 50%.

The literature emphasizes how important newcomer socialization is for organizations and workers. On the one hand, it reduces costs by decreasing turnover (Becker & Bish, 2021; Peltokorpi et al., 2022) and enhances efficiency by improving worker performance (Boekhorst et al., 2022). On the other hand, it is centrally important for individual workers' career development, as professional relations, skills, and career expectations are shaped in the socialization process (Gardner et al., 2022). Regarding challenges associated with virtual work settings, research has emphasized how disrupted social relations can impede social and professional integration by complicating important aspects of newcomer socialization (Nelson & Quick, 1991; Woo et al., 2022), such as building relationships with co-workers and facilitating observational learning (Woo et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, considering the distinct role information systems (IS) play in the context of HW, a detailed elaboration of discontinuities in newcomer socialization is missing. Due to IS's central role in HW generally, this topic is also of interest to the IS field. Several IS studies have addressed newcomer socialization, investigating (e.g.) the affordances enterprise social media offers in this context (Leidner et al., 2018) or the importance of person-organization fit of IT-professionals (Wingreen & Blanton, 2018). Further, Asatiani et al. (2019) found the socialization of new employees to be a major challenge in virtual work settings, since conveying central aspects of an organization's culture to newcomers is not straightforward. Also, Asatiani et al. (2021) addressed the issue of anchoring organizational culture in virtual settings via creating, implementing, and subsequently analyzing a relevant culture handbook. In their study they repeatedly highlight the distinct role newcomers have in this context. However, a detailed elaboration of how discontinuities affect newcomer socialization in HW and of the role IS play, are missing in IS research too. Intrigued by this important, yet sparsely researched, topic we aim to improve our understanding of discontinuities that emerge for newcomer socialization in HW, as well as of the role IS play in this. Accordingly, we ask the following research question: *Which discontinuities emerge for newcomer socialization in hybrid work and how can IS help to bridge them?*

We build our study on organizational discontinuity theory (Chudoba et al., 2005; Watson-Manheim, 2019; Watson-Manheim et al., 2002, 2012) due to it being very helpful for understanding which discontinuities occur in HW, how they affect individuals and organizations, and how they can be bridged by constructing continuities. Further, the study considers extant literature on newcomer socialization and the role of IS in this context.

Methodology

To answer the research question, we chose an explorative qualitative study design. Therefore, we collected qualitative data using semi-structured interviews. Initially, we started with several interviews in a single IT-company, asking employees what they perceived as major challenges in relation to the widely introduced HW. Since the interviewees frequently emphasized newcomer socialization as a major challenge, we turned our focus to this intriguing issue. Analyzing literature from different relevant disciplines (e.g., IS, OB) we found that the phenomenon of newcomer socialization in HW is largely unexplored. Thus, we followed an inductive qualitative research approach in developing new theory to address our research topic by carefully analyzing the conducted interviews. Our approach involved continuous comparison between data and existing concepts, which allows for theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Urquhart et al., 2010), where data collection ends and a relevant theory starts to emerge.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

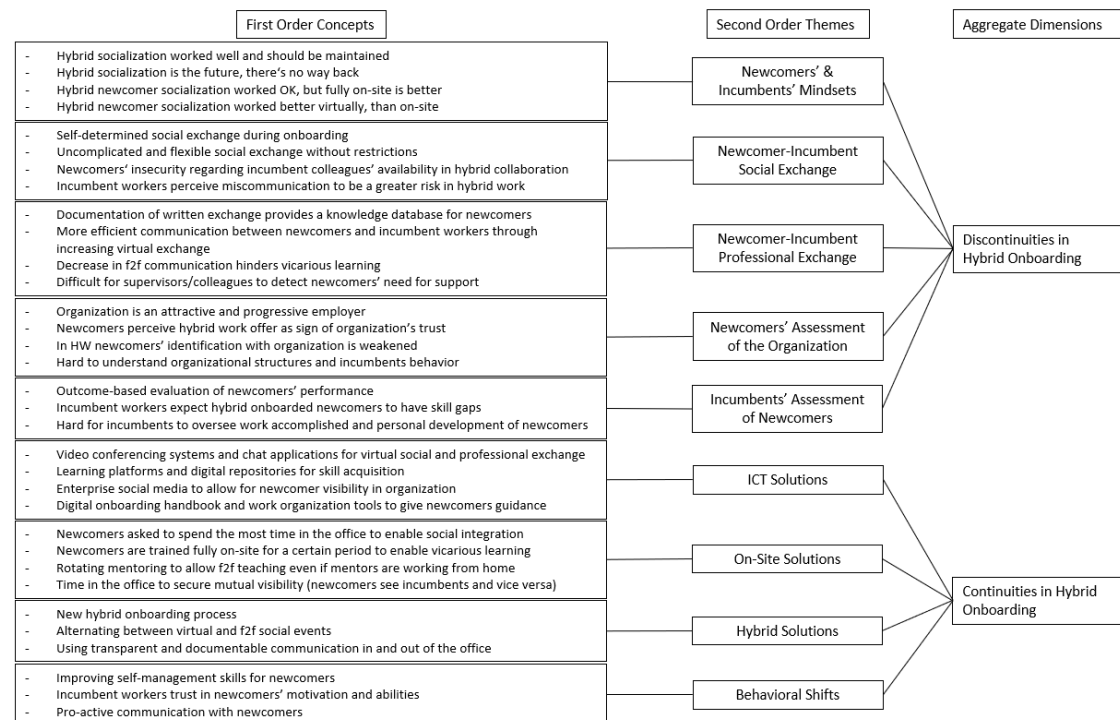
From November 2021 to August 2022, we conducted a total of 60 interviews with IT-professionals from 6 internationally operating IT-companies based in Europe and active across different industries. We selected our interview partners carefully to ensure their ability to contribute in a meaningful and reasonable manner. To ensure the heterogeneity of our sample, we chose interviewees that occupy different positions on different hierarchical levels. We interviewed newcomers who joined the particular companies in a hybrid setting, as well as incumbent workers and (HR-)managers who had experienced a shift in how newcomers were integrated, as they had also experienced newcomer socialization before the large-scale introduction of HW. We focused on IT-professionals because they represent a population of workers that is not bound to a specific work location and therefore, in general, should be able to work in a hybrid mode. In accordance with Gioia et al. (2013), we followed a semi-structured interview guide to ensure a similar focus in all interviews, while simultaneously allowing the interviewees to introduce different topics. The guide comprised general questions on HW, the role of ICT, and major shifts perceived since the introduction of HW. We soon adapted our guide (Gioia et al., 2013) to explicitly ask questions on newcomer socialization and onboarding in HW, because the interviewees frequently raised this as a prominent issue. To enable individual dialogues and to allow a relaxed discussion with our informants, we asked them to spontaneously expand on interesting subjects and provide as much additional details as they could so that we could gather rich individual narratives intricately covering their experiences.

To analyze the data, we followed Gioia et al. (2013) in choosing an iterative qualitative coding process. First, researchers separately performed open coding to capture the variety of relevant topics (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and to account for the depth of provided information. As a first step, we openly marked and condensed raw textual data into a brief summary format (Gioia et al., 2013) to get an initial overview of all interviews, using the software MAXQDA. Second, we paraphrased the identified text passages in compliance with the original tone, while no categorization was made (Gioia et al., 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In addition, we structured the paraphrased first-order concepts and iteratively compared our findings and our provisional theory to existing literature (Gioia et al., 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Third, we defined second-order themes with the goal of identifying relevant categories in accordance with our research question (Gioia et al., 2013). Subsequently, as a last step, we combined the second-order themes into aggregated dimensions, which ensured a consistent analytic procedure. Together, the first-order concepts and the second-order themes form the basis for our data structure.

Findings and Contribution (envisioned)

With this research-in-progress, we aim to identify discontinuities that emerge in HW, hampering the socialization of newcomers in IT-professions (1), to map these discontinuities onto their IS and non-IS triggers (2), and especially to uncover how different ISs, like learning platforms or collaboration platforms, bridge these discontinuities (3). Thereby, we aim to contribute to the literature on newcomer socialization, enhancing our understanding of HW as the new normal, and of ODT in the context of newcomer socialization.

Preliminary Data Structure



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