

Onboarding in Global Virtual Teams: The Case of a Global Financial Organization

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Abstract

We explore onboarding in the context of global virtual teams (GVTs) with our findings from a qualitative case study with a leading global organization in the financial services industry. Through interviews with GVT members and leaders, we contribute to the literature in three ways: (a) revealing that onboarding in GVTs with dynamic membership is an ongoing practice (instead of a one-off activity); (b) identifying two categories of practices (known onboarding practices from the traditional literature and GVT-specific practices); and (c) suggesting that onboarding in GVTs with dynamic membership is not the organization's and the leader's responsibility alone, but existing and incoming members have a role to play too. We discuss our theoretical and practical contributions, and close with our study's limitations and future research directions.

Keywords: Onboarding, socialization, new joiners, training, global virtual teams, remote working.

1. Introduction

Virtual teams (VTs) have been around for over two decades (e.g., Kayworth & Leidner, 2000) and continue to be an important form of work organization as a result of the recent pandemic (e.g., Chamakiotis et al., 2021). The VT literature—spanning the organizational, (team) management, and information systems (IS) fields—defines VTs as organizational groups of workers who are dispersed (in terms of geography, time, and relationship to the organization) and communicate and collaborate via information and communication technologies (ICTs) (e.g., Ebrahim et al., 2009). Researchers sometimes refer to VTs as a unique team configuration, juxtaposing them to face-to-face (F2F) teams. This is probably rooted in older literature that compared virtual with F2F teams. However, our premise in this paper is that not all VTs are the same, and therefore, their management differs significantly between different types. Based on their characteristics,

and the different types of dispersion, scholars have identified different types of VTs, varying from global to local (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000), from temporary to permanent (Chae et al., 2015), and from hybrid to pure virtual (Griffith et al., 2003), among others. In this paper, we are interested in global virtual teams (GVTs) which have dominated the existing literature and remain a popular form of work organization globally. GVTs, in particular, differ because of the global dispersion of their members, which may raise additional types of challenges due to the increased cultural heterogeneity and temporal dispersion, among others.

GVTs have attracted multidisciplinary interest. However, limited research exists on their implications for team functioning and overall team performance. Scholars have argued that dynamic groups, such as those whose members come and go frequently, are different to stable groups in fundamental ways, including their structure, process, and performance (Moon et al., 2004). Although existing literature has spoken about the importance of training and team formation as part of setting up a GVT (e.g., Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017), onboarding has been significantly under-studied. Onboarding is often seen as “*formal and informal practices, programs, and policies enacted or engaged in by an organization or its agents to facilitate newcomer adjustment*” (Klein & Polin, 2012, p. 268) which enable workers to “[...] learn the knowledge, skills, and behaviors they need to succeed in their new organizations” (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011, p. 51). Recently, we have seen an emerging interest in onboarding in virtual environments, including GVTs, both within the academic (e.g., Godinez, 2023) and the practitioner (e.g., Citrin & DeRosa, 2021) communities. Additionally, the rise of remote work as a result of the pandemic (e.g., Waizenegger et al., 2020), and the multi-teaming phenomenon (Ancona et al., 2020)—whereby team members come and go frequently while participating simultaneously in multiple teams—highlight the importance of this topic. Thus, we raise the following research question (RQ): What practices does onboarding involve in GVTs?

To address our RQ, we conducted a case study, involving 26 interviews, with a leading global organization in the financial services industry that has been employing GVTs for a long time. This is in line with recent research that explicitly encourages case studies that explore onboarding in virtual settings, such as GVTs (Godinez, 2023). Our findings contribute to the literature by: (a) revealing that onboarding is an ongoing practice (instead of a one-off activity); (b) identifying two categories of practices; and (c) suggesting that onboarding is not only the organization's or the leader's responsibility, but existing and incoming members' too. These contributions are novel and expand knowledge in the area while offering an improved (practical) understanding that may benefit organizations, GVT leaders, as well as existing and incoming GVT members.

In what follows, we present relevant literature on the issue of onboarding in general (2.1) and in the (G)Vt context in particular (2.2), and then present our research design and our data collection/analysis methods (3). We continue with our research findings (4) and our theoretical and practical contributions (5), before presenting our study's limitations and our directions for future research (6).

2. Relevant literature

2.1. Onboarding: existing theories and practices

Available definitions of “onboarding” refer to the process a newcomer needs to go through in order to adapt and integrate into a new organization, often understood as a process that entails socialization and orientation practices (Klein & Polin, 2012). Elembilassery et al. (2021) highlight that, contrary to orientation, onboarding is about defining roles, creating work relationships and ensuring access to information. With onboarding, an organizational outsider becomes an organizational insider knowing organizational goals, values, rules, responsibilities, and procedures (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Chillakuri, 2020).

Onboarding is important for a number of reasons: First, it is linked to fostering employee satisfaction early on. It has been reported by Kumar and Pandey (2017) that new employees' satisfaction is quite high from the moment they accept an offer through to their first day at work when their satisfaction levels drop dramatically from a 70% to a 30%. It was posited by the same study that an effective onboarding program can help to reverse such trends. Second, the faster a new hire is integrated into the organization, the sooner they would be able to yield a valuable contribution to the organization. A well-defined onboarding program should help newcomers reduce their anxiety and uncertainty and help clarify

their new role (Chillakuri, 2020). Newcomer adjustment is associated with important employee and organizational outcomes, such as satisfaction, commitment, turnover, and performance (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). Further, as current turnover rates keep increasing, having the best onboarding practices can be a very valuable competitive advantage. According to Stein and Christiansen (2010), onboarding is a beneficial strategic tool for organizations as well as employees to increase engagement and adjustment outcomes, in exchange for increased performance. High levels of engagement have been shown to relate to lower absenteeism, increased sales, and higher profitability. Given that desirable outcomes for organizations relate to good onboarding practices, there is a need to understand the features of those “good” practices and the mechanisms that make them work.

Two types of onboarding practices have been identified (Bauer, 2010; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011): *formal* and *informal*. Formal onboarding refers to a set of written and coordinated procedures that aid in new employees' adjustment to their job roles (e.g., sharing organizational charts), while informal onboarding involves flexibility around learning about their job roles in a highly unstructured fashion. Similarly, two dimensions have been identified in onboarding programs: *institutionalized* (tactics implemented in formal onboarding programs) and *individualized* (when the newcomer joins the organization and needs to proactively learn on-the-fly norms, values, and expectations) (Jones, 1986). As we can see, research has distinguished these two types of practices (formal vs. informal, institutionalized vs. individualized, administrative vs. social), highlighting that it is not only what the organization establishes by itself, but also the activities in which individuals engage following their own criteria and initiative. Further, a review by Byford et al. (2017) summarized that organizations are quite competent at the administrative levels of onboarding; however, that level of onboarding has little impact to prevent the issues that arise involving employee expectation misfit and adjusting to organizational norms. With the consequences of high employee turnover, in terms of expenditure and cost, it is advised that all organizations should have an orientation program that helps retain new employees, as well as prepares them for their employment experience within the organization. The administrative level of onboarding is about formal onboarding practices, such as rules, procedures, and compliance information (Bauer, 2010), but, according to Byford et al. (2017), knowing the rules alone does not necessarily imply a better fit. Therefore, including room for “informal onboarding” and creating social contexts may be critical for avoiding negative

consequences associated with a misadjusted or incomplete onboarding process.

When we review the theories used to approach the reality of onboarding, we find a dispersed, atomized use of theories from different knowledge domains. For example, research exists on onboarding process as comprising four levels, known as the 4Cs model: compliance, clarification, culture, and connection (Bauer & Fard, 2021). Also, researchers have drawn on management theories in order to explain the effectiveness of onboarding practices, like the anchoring theory, change management models or the (un)learning theory. For example, anchoring theory, which argues that socioemotional exchange relationships can develop quickly in response to highly salient “anchoring events”, was adopted by Smith et al. (2021) who conceptualized onboarding as a positive anchoring event. As such, it can quickly and durably drive contingent workers’ socioemotional exchange in the form of work engagement, self-reported task performance, and intent to return to the employing organization. Others have used change management models to study onboarding (Karambelkar & Bhattacharya, 2017) due to the fact that onboarding can be understood mainly as a change. This perspective sees onboarding as a change management process, with established starting and end points. That approach understands onboarding as a finite process. Moreover, Becker and Bish (2021) talk about the importance of (un)learning in onboarding. This approach implies that the new workers come with their own learnt lessons from previous experiences and that should be taken into consideration when onboarding them. That is in line with the tendency to highlight the importance of the individual’s needs as opposed to only centering research on organizational requirements. According to these authors, good onboarding should also be an individual–centric onboarding. Becker and Bish (2021) propose three types of unlearning that should be designed by the organization during the onboarding design process. This approach puts the burden of onboarding on the organization whilst ignoring employees’ role in onboarding as well as newcomers’ initiatives.

2.2. Onboarding in GVTs

GVTs are known for their unprecedented benefits and challenges (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998), and scholars have sought to examine how management should be practiced to address the unique challenges characterizing virtual teamwork (Chamakiotis & Panteli, 2017; Larson & DeChurch, 2020). Discontinuities, such as geography, time-zone, culture, work practices, organization and technology are often cited as challenges (Chudoba et al., 2005) and

leadership is often shared in order to address GVT discontinuities (e.g., Chamakiotis & Panteli, 2017; Hoegl & Muethel, 2016).

Within this context, onboarding employees who work virtually has been recognized as a challenging task (Britto et al., 2018; Moe et al., 2020). Challenges that may be faced when onboarding in the virtual work context are often linked to the limited F2F contact which may reduce familiarity with other employees and the wider organization, thus limiting opportunities for newcomers to build strong social connections with their teams (Rodeghero et al., 2021). Moe et al. (2020) studied the onboarding process in distributed software GVTs involving incoming Portuguese members and existing Norwegian members, and found that the following challenges influenced the onboarding process: missing domain knowledge (about the coding) (76%), the use of communication tools (47%), unclear tasks (41%) and language barriers (35%). Other authors have found similar results related to coordination challenges (Driskell et al., 2003), low levels of team trust and engagement and cultural challenges in terms of language, norms, and communication (Gibson et al., 2014).

Rodeghero et al. (2021) offer some recommendations for remote onboarding of programming engineers like promoting communication and asking for help, encouraging teams to turn cameras on, assigning an onboarding buddy or providing information about the organization. Others, studying software developers in globally distributed legacy projects, have recommended explaining expectations to candidates during recruitment, mirroring and coordinating the onboarding program if it needs to be implemented in different projects or sites, clarify key roles and make connections, invest in traveling, provide extensive coaching and use tools to give feedback during the onboarding process to the newcomers (Britto et al., 2018). Research has compared F2F group onboarding with virtual individual onboarding practices (Wesson & Gogus, 2005) studying an organization where the work was mainly developed in a F2F format. They found that, during onboarding, the biggest differences in socialization content dimensions between online and F2F orientation were in understanding the politics of the organization, creating relationships with other people and the understanding of organizational goals or values, being all higher for the onsite orientation program than for the online program (Wesson & Gogus, 2005).

The Covid-19 pandemic led to an unprecedented uptake of virtual work, including VTs. Switching to virtual working overnight affected how organizations onboard new members, needing to transform any previous process into a virtual one. Carlos and Murallas

(2022) emphasize the need to include opportunities for formal and informal socialization when onboarding takes place solely in a virtual form. In their study, virtual onboarding could not be executed serendipitously as it previously was; many activities needed to become intentional (e.g., having the organization send a lunch box to newcomers' homes and organizing virtual lunches with coworkers was not found to have the same results as a F2F lunch whereby coworkers can interact in a more natural fashion). Newcomers did not have access to the unspoken physical clues from colleagues that helped in previous F2F onboardings at former positions.

This focus on best practices during Covid-19 has also been studied by Scott et al. (2022) who expand Bauer's (2010) three of the 4Cs to suggest the following principles: (a) creating structure; (b) connecting people; and (c) continuously adapting, into specific practices and actions that the organizations can take when they are forced to virtually onboard newcomers. Some practical examples include organizing feedback focus groups, allocating budget to online bonding activities, using an iterative approach to refining onboarding processes or scheduling regular onboarding check-ins, all in the spirit of continuous adaptation (Prince, 2021; Scott et al., 2022). Similarly, Alexander (2021) points to investing time in one-to-one and F2F communications even in an online format, making explicit formalized liaisons or key colleagues to be addressed, and simplifying information flow. Similarly, Godinez (2023) found that institutionalized socialization tactics created better newcomer adjustment and work friendships compared to non-institutionalized tactics.

The research dealing with GVT onboarding is still scarce and basically focused on describing and advising on what has worked better in different empirical settings. That reflects an incipient approach to the matter with no established theoretical body behind. With increased post-pandemic preference for remote and hybrid work arrangements, the popularity of GVTs is expected to grow (e.g., Chamakiotis et al., 2021; Elembilassery et al., 2021) and understanding onboarding in GVTs is essential. Our study responds to this call and to the need to study teams which are heterogenous, globally dispersed and ICT-mediated simultaneously (Gibson et al., 2014), by drawing on an empirical study which was carried in a global (with several physical locations involved), multinational organization (with several cultural backgrounds involved) with increased reliance on GVTs (which are ICT-mediated) to run its operations. Having reviewed the onboarding literature in both traditional, F2F, and (G)VT environments, we now turn to present our research design approach and methods.

3. Research design and methods

We adopted a case study approach (Yin, 2008) with a single organization in the financial services industry following an interpretive qualitative approach. Case studies are suitable when aiming for in-depth investigation of a phenomenon, as we do here, based on participants' stories and perceptions (Cavaye, 1996). The organization, which is referred to here as Gama (a pseudonym), operates internationally with offices around the globe and is headquartered in London. Due to its global presence, the financial services sector is a suitable one for this study. As a global and leading organization, Gama has employed GVTs for a long time and was thus seen as a suitable case organization for studying GVTs and onboarding in particular. Thus, our research participants were experienced in GVTs.

Following methodological literature that sees 15 participants as an adequate sample size for this type of research (Saunders & Townsend, 2016), we collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with 26 GVT members and leaders from different locations in the UK (UK1, UK2 and UK3), two in South Asia (SA1 and SA2), and one in Australasia (AUS), all within the same organization, between 2015 and 2016. We interviewed a diverse group of participants with GVT experience in terms of seniority, business unit and location to ensure we captured as many views as possible within our selected population. Interviews lasted approximately one hour each and included questions such as "how are incoming members integrated?" and "what did the leader do to ensure they settled in well?". The first eight interviews were conducted with participants from location UK1 and were exploratory in character, aiming to understand the GVT context at Gama. Our experience from the first eight interviews enabled us to refine our interview questions and be more specific about onboarding. Analysis of those interviews led us to realize that onboarding of new members is a significant issue at Gama as members come and go during the GVT lifecycle and we therefore conducted an additional 18 more focused interviews. These interviews were conducted with participants from all different locations (F2F in Gama's offices in location UK 1 and online with participants based in the other locations) and were semi-structured in character.

The data from all 26 interviews were analyzed on NVivo, following a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The unit of analysis was the individual as we sought to gain insights on members' attitude and experiences on onboarding within dynamic GVTs. Our thematic analysis involved a top-down, literature-driven (latent) coding resulting in the elicitation of ten broad themes (conflict, culture, dispersion, member

integration, relationships, knowledge sharing, leadership, new members, subgroups, well-being). These represent issues that have been studied in the GVT literature and we used these to organize our dataset. In other words, this first step was performed in order to understand the bigger picture of our data. The rest of our coding was purely inductive; we selected the codes within the “member integration” and “new members” themes and conducted open (semantic), bottom-up coding with the aim of understanding what our data were telling us about new members and member integration at large. This open coding resulted in numerous codes, including, “onboarding failure”, “welcoming new members”, “informal training”, and “training asynchronously” among many others. This process led to the discovery of numerous interesting findings including an understanding of when onboarding is necessary, what problems the lack of onboarding is associated with, and how onboarding is managed. Through this process, discussion among the co-authors, and review of relevant literature, we refined these coded excerpts and grouped them into bigger themes which we have used to structure the next section. Given the interpretive character of our study, we ensured that our study satisfied relevant criteria that refer specifically to *interpretive* qualitative research (Pratt et al., 2020). These include *transparency*, which we have provided through our detailed descriptions above; *authenticity*, which we satisfied by adopting an open (semantic) coding approach; and *plausibility* and *criticality*, which we ensured through systematic documentation and use of clear interview guides.

4. Research findings

Findings show that there is an awareness that onboarding plays a crucial role in GVTs. Participants recognized that the significance of onboarding is best captured with reference to its absence. This is because lack of onboarding may lead to problems for both the new joiners themselves, but also the GVT stable members and the team’s overall dynamics and performance. The most cited challenge with new member onboarding—which is linked to the dispersed character of GVTs—was new joiners’ lack of visibility of the wider team, including the “bigger picture” of the roles of the geographically dispersed members. The quote from one of the participants encapsulates well the impact of the lack of onboarding:

“I think it was a bit difficult in that context because while I was told that I do have other members at these sites that I will be working with, I had not really interacted with them extensively, either over the phone or on VC, I had a very brief conversation with probably just one person and at the time I

wasn't even aware that we had someone located in [country in Southeast Asia], whom I would be working with. So, I probably wasn't really aware of [...] the entire structure and how I was going to go ahead.” (P21)

4.1. Onboarding as a continuous process

Within Gama, the dynamic nature of GVT membership was viewed as “business as usual”, showing that, among staff there was a widely accepted view that this was a common characteristic of the teams they worked for. GVT members came and went frequently at different stages of the GVT lifecycle, generating needs for onboarding practices on a frequent and ongoing basis. Reasons for onboarding included mergers of existing teams, employee rotations (especially for junior employees in graduate programs), maternity (or other) leaves, new employees at Gama, and project new joiners (instead of GVT new joiners). For example, given the number of junior employees on graduate schemes at Gama, rotation between different functional areas and different GVTs takes place every six months in some cases, resulting in frequent changes to GVT membership involving new members without prior working experience in the area of their new post. Another example was offered by P9 below who shared her experience of the merger of two teams which was the result of the fact that the two teams’ work was similar, and it was decided that they should be merged:

“... we recently merged two teams up in [Region A]. So we had like a team that was consisted of four people, and we merged it within the [other sub-division at Gama], because what they are doing is similar but not the same, so, because of that, we had to train them and hand over some of the processes that we were doing, and at the same time because a couple of people left I had to assign the responsibility to someone else. So... we are in a constant training period.” (P9)

Further, having a new member was potentially seen as a problem for GVT leaders and the organization. This was the case when multiple new members had to join a new GVT simultaneously which was found to lead to losing control and making tasks more burdensome:

“One of our stakeholders, they moved their whole function out to [country in East Asia], there are quite a lot of those people who are new to the business, and as inducers to the information that they are using and the communication that they are doing, it's challenging [...] suddenly you have a team that are completely new [...] you have that language barrier, you then have the whole in person barrier, you are not there in person, so you could spend you know I've had cases where I've had

to spend ten minutes to just to try and get someone to click on one small thing, which if I was there in person I could point to the screen and say: "here, this is what you want to click" but because either, the [...] meeting place which is the virtual desktop may not be working and it's just on the phone, you are having to go to every single detail: "ok, go to File, go to here, ok see half way down the screen on the left hand side...", you know so there's that sort of that's a barrier." (P15)

P15 talks about the inter-organizational aspect of her GVT whereby external stakeholders form part of her GVT. The problems P15 identifies in the above quote—such as the lack of F2F communication and the inter-organizational aspect of some GVTs—are known GVT challenges in the literature. However, her argument is that while these are generally manageable, they may lead to larger issues when there are more drastic changes to GVT membership on one go.

4.2. Transferring traditional onboarding practices into the GVT context

Onboarding within our case organization was understood as a form of training, involving a set of organizational practices. In this section, we present standard organizational practices we identified as part of new member of onboarding, including welcoming new members, and creating a landing period, among others, which were transferred and replicated within the GVT context. These practices apply to all new joiners and were found to form part of established organizational procedures for onboarding new employees at Gama as these were commonly adopted in the organization as well as often been cited in the literature.

As part of onboarding, there is a need for newcomers to understand commonly used practices and to get to know existing organizational systems and procedures:

"For the last new joiners, I organized sessions with different teams for a few weeks, and a lot of sessions with us within the team to familiarize themselves with the systems that we use, and the applications we used so they would be more up to speed, confident what they are meant to be doing in their—you know in their new job." (P14)

Newcomers are given a period of training and socialization before they are fully integrated into organizational and project activities. This was known as the "landing period" indicating that there was low expectation for these new members to know everything:

"So, from a new person's perspective there's always a kind of let's say a period when the person would come up the curve, the expectations are put far far lower for the new individual. And that sort of low

expectations for the initial few months is also something that is shared with the London and New York teams, everybody is aware that this person joining is new" (P20)

Another established organizational practice which can be adopted both in person and online was that of job-shadowing; in this case, the newcomer job shadows an existing member in their process of familiarization and learning:

"You give them like say a buddy. So, you know what they are going to work on, you assign them to a piece of work (P: yeah) then you basically assign them a person's job shadow." (P11)

4.3. GVT-specific onboarding practices

In addition to the implementation of established onboarding practices, our analysis identified onboarding activities that were explicitly linked to the GVT characteristics. These practices relate to some of the unique characteristics of GVTs in the literature, such as that of dispersion and high dependency on technology-mediated communication. In our case, having dispersed individuals meant that a challenge for new joiners was to be able to identify "pockets of knowledge" so that they know whom to contact for different purposes:

"[We first] found some pockets of strength everywhere, somebody waiting with the policies, somebody with the applications, someone is perhaps better at writing something in a particular way. So, then these new members are joining today, we are trying to have these training sessions not from one individual, but from different pockets of strength if I may say that (P: mmmm), so that's how we are training them today, so when they send support from London [...]." (P20)

The importance of increased familiarity with other GVT member was evident in attempts made to create opportunities for socialization and thus build relations with others in a social context:

"I'm the sort of person that is [...] naturally quite able to establish friendly relationships with people, you know, "how was your weekend" that sort of thing... when you are in town you take people out for a drink. But there isn't really any device other than phoning them from time to time to build a uniform relationship in an offsite location, you know almost nothing." (P10)

There was the recognition that newcomers may come with experiences that may not align with the organization's own practices. Consequently, there was evidence of adopting practices that help new members to unlearn what they had learnt in previous employment and projects:

"You hire people on their experience, you know if someone's comes and say FX at XYZ (pseudonym) Bank, the way that the processes work at [Gama] will be different, they'll understand the concept of foreign exchange but, say the one thing is getting people up to speed really with the structure that we have, then obviously what we try to implement. So, when you are basically on a tight deadline, so you've got three months to complete but you really have to allow that person one month to get up to speed to become familiar." (P11)

Creating opportunities for knowledge sharing was seen as paramount within the GVT context. Findings shown evidence of the need for creating knowledge hubs:

"...on a weekly basis, we have half an hour knowledge share by someone in the team that talks about a specific subject, and has you know a presentation [...] the other members of the team and things like that, which is really helpful for people that maybe don't really know that specific subject so it kind of brings a bit more light into what's happening." (P14)

Communication media were found to play a key role in onboarding new GVT members. The organization appreciated the role of F2F communication in creating a social context and aimed to increase F2F (or alternatively, videoconferencing-based) encounters when onboarding new members. As a result, F2F visits were organized whenever possible but when these were not possible, the GVT would make increased use of synchronous communication while onboarding new members:

"We would have increased levels of video conferencing and conference calls, rather than emails when somebody joins in... So, the number of trainings that we have in the first three months is more than what we would have if we were collocated." (P16)

Further, asynchronous communication media were found to be particularly useful for documenting information and storing knowledge which could then be disseminated and shared with new members who joined at various stages of the GVT:

"Since we started building up the team in [Region A] we've been looking at much better documenting ... we created a document library that allows us to get much more, because things now are shared interested between [Region A] and [Region B] ... that's not only being driven by me not being in the office, it's driven by the fact that we are now one team based in two locations." (P26)

There were also frequent updates using the efficiencies that technology-mediated communication

provides, contributing to continuous onboarding through ICTs:

"Emails, e-newsletters, videoconferencing, well what really helps is having a weekly or biweekly VC, like the F2F time really helps, as part of that as well it's finding ways of positively engage in those meetings." (P17)

Although onboarding involved specific organizational practices, it was also seen as the GVT members' role to support newcomers and help them integrate to the project. Thus, onboarding was seen as a collective responsibility, whereby everyone could contribute to new members' onboarding in one way or another (knowledge- or socialization-related):

"It's not always that one person is assigned trainer in the team who will train the new joiner, it is a shared responsibility of existing team members to onboard the new colleague." (P16)

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical contributions

Our study makes three theoretical contributions, discussed in detail in the following three paragraphs.

First, while onboarding in the existing literature is seen as a collection of formal and informal practices (Klein & Polin, 2012) which may have clear start and end points as part of a change management process (Karambelkar & Bhattacharya, 2017), in our study, we found that onboarding was an ongoing process with several practices adopted to support the different aspects of incoming members' integration. The ongoing character of onboarding was linked to the dynamic aspect of the GVTs we studied due to the constant coming and going of members. Consequently, our findings contradict existing research that sees onboarding as a finite process; "change" never ends in dynamic GVTs, according to our research.

Our second contribution is about the types of practices that constitute onboarding in GVTs. We identified two categories of practices: (a) known onboarding practices, such as familiarity with existing systems, training, socialization and job shadowing; and also (b) GVT-specific practices. While onboarding has been seen as a process of socialization (Carlos & Muralles, 2022; Klein et al., 2015), our findings here confirm existing GVT literature which highlights that creating opportunities for socialization is vital in GVTs (Chamakiotis et al., 2021; Godinez, 2023; Zander et al., 2013). Due to the technology-mediated nature of GVT interactions, including the geographical dispersion of GVT members, communication was online (members' dispersion is an embedded feature GVTs). It can take different forms—geographical (i.e., different locations),

temporal (i.e., different time zones), and organizational (i.e., different parent organizations) (e.g., Chamakiotis, 2020). Dispersion in our study was primarily geographical (temporal too, though this did not pose specific challenges for onboarding) and it was linked to the new joiners' ability to identify local "pockets of knowledge". Different technologies are used in GVTs and relevant theory identifies technologies of varying degrees of synchronicity (DeLuca & Valacich, 2006; Dennis et al., 2008). While synchronous technologies allow for real-time communication (e.g., Zoom meetings), asynchronous technologies provide flexibility to work with others at one's own pace. In our study, we have found that asynchronicity is useful in terms of storing information and creating knowledge hubs, and thus effective for onboarding employees who join online. Becker and Bish (2021) argue that onboarding is not only about learning, but also about unlearning. This is particularly relevant in GVTs which are known to experience dynamic membership, with individuals joining for a specific period of time and then moving on to different projects. Evidence of unlearning practices was found in our study, reinforcing existing arguments in this area.

Further, Becker and Bish (2021) propose that unlearning practices should be embedded in institutional onboarding designs, being the organization the one in charge of making unlearning and onboarding happen. This brings us to our third and final contribution. Contrary to the above, we have found that onboarding in GVTs is a matter of proactivity of several actors; it is not only the organization's responsibility, but also the leader's and the existing and incoming members'. This contradicts earlier research on onboarding (e.g., Byford et al., 2017) which argues that onboarding is an organizational responsibility, not an individual one. However, our findings here corroborate earlier GVT research (e.g., Chamakiotis & Panteli, 2017) which argues that shared leadership and responsibility are required in GVTs, highlighting the collective character of work in GVTs.

5.2. Practical contributions

Among our study's strengths is the fact that—contrary to large part of the existing (G)VT literature that has focused on student-based GVTs—it was conducted in a business environment and drew on experienced GVT members in the financial services industry. Further to being able to generalize to theory with our case study (Cavaye, 1996), we are also able to extend the generalizability of our findings to other GVT environments that share similar characteristics to those at Gama. Additionally, the fact that our data were collected pre-pandemic means that they are relevant in

the contemporary workplace post-pandemic, in which we studied onboarding in the context of everyday life, without being influenced by the "enforced" character of the global lockdowns we saw during the pandemic. Our study offers recommendations for practitioners:

- Usage of synchronous communication for socialization activities and for creating team bonding and cohesion.
- Usage of asynchronous media for storing and sharing knowledge, thus creating a platform that can be easily accessible by new members regardless of when they join the GVT.
- Cultivating an ethos within the GVT where all members sense the responsibility to onboard newcomers and support them in their integration journey.
- Developing an ethos for onboarding as a continuous practice within both the GVT and the organizational setting.

6. Limitations and future research

Our study makes three important contributions advancing relevant literature and filling a gap as to how onboarding is practiced in dynamic GVTs. Undeniably, our study has conceptual and methodological limitations, and it is important that we define the boundaries of its value. Conceptually, we have focused on a specific type of VTs, GVTs, whose members are—by definition—globally dispersed. Consequently, onboarding may be experienced and managed differently in other types of (virtual) teams that we have not considered here. To address this limitation, future researchers could look at onboarding in different team contexts, including locally (nationally) dispersed teams and other teams, such as those whose members work in a hybrid format, as we have seen increasingly resulting from the pandemic. Although still virtual, these locally dispersed VTs that were formed due to the pandemic are typically lower in heterogeneity (Chamakiotis et al., 2021) and they do not have the difficulties, such as cultural and temporal ones, characterizing GVTs whose members are dispersed across countries and continents. Finally, although email constitutes a dominant ICT in organizations (Russell et al., 2023), future studies could focus on GVTs that use more sophisticated ICTs that may be available today. Methodologically, despite the richness of case study research, our single organizational focus does not allow us to generalize to population. While multiple case studies could add further value, surveys and questionnaire-based studies could assess the statistical significance of our findings in larger populations. Further research is also needed to study the effectiveness of the different onboarding practices within the VT context. Lastly, onboarding

within the increasingly popular hybrid project team context should form part of the agenda for future research.

7. References

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