

"DESIGNING ONBOARDING TOGETHER: INSIGHTS FROM HUMAN RESOURCES FOCUS GROUP"

Research Paper

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"Abstract"

This study investigates HR professionals' perspectives on designing a global onboarding programme in a complex, multi-site humanitarian organisation. Using a qualitative focus-group framework, five online sessions ($n = 32$) were conducted between July–October 2022 via Microsoft Teams and Miro to co-create onboarding requirements grounded in practitioner insight. Reflexive thematic analysis identified six domains: Social Inclusion, Onboarding Monitoring, Practices during Onboarding, Learning and Development, Onboarding Steps, and Organisational Culture, which informed a co-designed, four-phase model (Preparation; Social Inclusion; Learning and Development; Technical Role-Specific Training). Findings indicate that HR stakeholders conceptualise onboarding as a strategic, human-centred capability that requires standardised yet context-sensitive structures, digital artefacts, and participatory governance. Digital collaboration enabled global engagement, auditable outputs, and transparent design processes aligned with organisational values and sustainability goals. The study advances onboarding scholarship by centring HR practitioner voices and demonstrating how digitally enabled focus groups can produce actionable frameworks for cross-border contexts. Methodologically, it contributes to online qualitative practice; practically, it offers a replicable onboarding architecture for dispersed, mission-driven organisations.

Keywords: Onboarding; Human Resources; Digital Transformation; Digital Platforms; Humanitarian Organisations, Focus Group; Human-Centred Design; Design Thinking.

1 Introduction

Onboarding is the structured process that helps organizations support newcomers in transitioning from outsiders to integrated members, aligning them with their roles, teams, and organizational culture (Reichers, 1987; Bauer and Erdogan, 2011; Bauer, 2013b). It encompasses a series of steps designed to introduce employees to teams, practices, and responsibilities, with the aim of accelerating productivity, fostering socialization, and facilitating adjustment to the new environment (Snell, 2006; Dai and De Meuse, 2007; Bauer et al., 2007; Davila and Pina-Ramirez, 2018). The level of support provided during this process strongly influences job satisfaction, engagement, and the speed at which employees become effective contributors (Stein and Christiansen, 2010; Sharma and Stol, 2020). More broadly, onboarding represents a critical stage in organizational socialization, shaping long-term attitudes, performance, and retention (Bauer, 2013b).

The effectiveness of onboarding has been demonstrated across multiple dimensions, including newcomer adjustment, individual performance, team integration, and retention (Bauer and Erdogan, 2011). When poorly designed, however, it can result in dissatisfaction, turnover, low productivity, wasted resources, and negative impacts on both teams and organizational outcomes (Bauer and Erdogan, 2011; Klein, Polin and Sutton, 2015; Davila and Pina-Ramirez, 2018). Accordingly, effective onboarding is increasingly recognized as a strategic capability that accelerates time-to-productivity, strengthens engagement, and mitigates attrition risks, while aligning newcomers with

organizational culture and business priorities (Bauer, 2013b; Saks, Gruman and Cooper-Thomas, 2011). Evidence confirms this value, highlighting consistent improvements in satisfaction, commitment, and retention across diverse contexts (Saks, Gruman and Cooper-Thomas, 2011).

Despite its acknowledged significance, notable gaps still exist. Onboarding is often viewed as a series of separate activities rather than a cohesive design challenge that necessitates integrated structures and governance (Klein, Polin and Sutton, 2015; Saks and Gruman, 2012). Much of the research has focused on single-firm or private-sector contexts, limiting generalizability to complex, international and multi-site organizations (Saks, Gruman and Cooper-Thomas, 2011; Klein and Heuser, 2008). Moreover, there is limited evidence on which practices reliably deliver measurable outcomes at scale (Saks and Gruman, 2011; Klein, Polin and Sutton, 2015). As Klein, Polin and Sutton (2015, p. 263) observe, “relatively little is known about how organizations actually design and implement these practices or about the perspectives of those responsible for their delivery.” Similarly, Saks and Gruman (2012, p. 380) note that research has tended to privilege newcomer perspectives, with “far less attention given to the role and perspectives of HR professionals and managers who design and administer these processes.”

Addressing these gaps requires methodological approaches that explicitly capture HR stakeholders’ experiences and insights, ensuring that onboarding frameworks are both evidence-based and grounded in organizational realities (Bauer et al., 2007; Jokisaari and Nurmi, 2009). Such a route is provided by inclusive methods, which are increasingly linked with design thinking. HR stakeholders are equal partners in the creation of knowledge instead of seeing them as uninformed recipients. Digital platforms further enhance this process, enabling geographically dispersed collaboration while ensuring scalability, transparency, and reduced environmental impact (Tuttas, 2015; Woodyatt, Finneran and Stephenson, 2016).

This study adopts a qualitative methodology using online focus group sessions with HR professionals from the humanitarian sector to co-create requirements for a global onboarding framework. The central research question guiding the study is: “What are the perspectives of HR professionals on the design of a global onboarding programme?” The general objective is to examine how digitally enabled sessions can inform the development of effective onboarding frameworks. Specifically, the study aims to capture HR professionals’ views on current practices, identify gaps and opportunities for improvement, and co-develop actionable design requirements, while also demonstrating how digital platforms can support scalable and sustainable onboarding solutions.

2 Methodology

This qualitative study used online focus groups (appendix C), positioning HR stakeholders from the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) as active contributors to the development of a global onboarding programme. Focus groups originated in the “focused interview” tradition established during World War II and are now widely employed to elicit collective perspectives and co-design pragmatic solutions in organisational and evaluation settings (Glesner, 2016; Banister et al. 2011; Merton and Kendall, 1946; Powell and Single, 1996). The method was selected for its capacity to generate insights that are both evidence-informed and grounded in day-to-day practice, while fostering collaboration and problem-solving among HR stakeholders.

The methodological specification followed the SPIDER tool, ensuring alignment with qualitative inquiry. The Sample (S) consisted of HR professionals and managers directly involved in onboarding practices across five global regions: the Americas, Africa, MENA, Europe, and Asia Pacific. The Phenomenon of Interest (PI) focused on participants’ experiences and requirements regarding the design and implementation of a global onboarding programme. The Design (D) adopted online focus groups conducted through Microsoft Teams, supported by collaborative Miro boards to facilitate interaction and co-construction of insights. The Evaluation (E) centred on identifying strengths, gaps, and opportunities to inform the development of a comprehensive global onboarding framework. The Research type (R) was qualitative, employing reflexive thematic analysis to describe findings.

Purposive sampling targeted HR staff involved in onboarding, HR operations or workforce development. Invitations were sent to 53 stakeholders across all regions; snowball referrals were permitted. In total, 32 HR professionals participated in five focus groups of 5–8 participants each, consistent with recommended ranges for interaction and depth (Krueger and Casey, 2015). Demographic variables (e.g., gender, age) were not collected to preserve confidentiality and maintain focus on professional expertise; the sample is characterised by role, seniority and regional function. Sessions were conducted between July and October 2022.

Data collection followed a semi-structured protocol informed by onboarding, including socialisation and role-clarity constructs (Bauer, 2010; Klein, Polin and Sutton, 2015). Miro boards scaffolded real-time dialogue and captured HR stakeholders insights. Thematic tables addressed best practices, socialisation, work environment and newcomer journeys; additional tasks included *Continue–Stop–Invent–Act* and brainstorming on trust, culture, Strategy 2030, Fundamental Principles, humanitarian work and onboarding structures. Operational dimensions (timing, resources, outcomes, social inclusion and wishlist) were also discussed. The dataset comprised Microsoft Teams transcripts, moderator/reflexive notes and Miro artefacts, including asynchronous contributions retained after the sessions to enhance transparency and traceability. Collaboration with the Human Resources Management Department supported recruitment and ensured alignment with organisational priorities. Figure 1 shows the Miro Board named: Onboarding Programme: Your Vision.

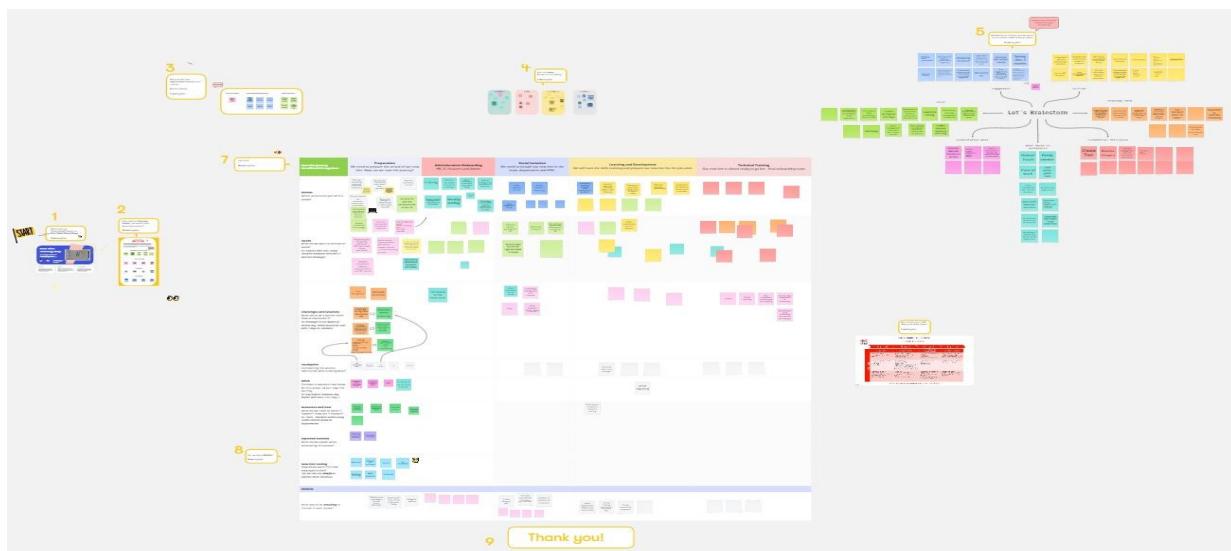


Figure 1. Miro Board – Onboarding Programme: Your Vision

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019) following a six-phase framework: familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, theme review, definition/naming and reporting. Verbatim transcripts, notes and artefacts were coded manually; codes were iteratively clustered into candidate themes and reviewed against the full corpus to ensure internal coherence and external distinctiveness. The analysis combined inductive coding to surface data-driven patterns with deductive mapping to onboarding domains (culture, social inclusion, learning and development, employee experience, and structure), thereby preserving insights while enabling theoretical alignment (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2019; Bauer, 2010; Klein, Polin and Sutton, 2015). In line with RTA, researcher subjectivity was treated as an analytic resource; inter-rater reliability was not computed, and a lightweight codebook was maintained solely for transparency and collaborator onboarding rather than as a reliability instrument (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

Themes were reviewed at corpus level with iterative refinement of scope and labels, supported by an audit trail (decision log and reflexive memos) and exemplar extracts to evidence the chain from data to claims (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Disconfirming evidence was actively sought by identifying deviant or negative cases that challenged emergent explanations; where warranted, themes

were split or merged, or justified exceptions were recorded to strengthen analytic robustness (Mays and Pope, 2000).

The reporting adhered to the established qualitative standards. The 32-item checklist of the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) and the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guided the documentation of design decisions and transparency (see Appendices A and B). Rigour was supported through triangulation of multiple data sources, member checking via sharing of preliminary findings, maintenance of an audit trail, reflexive engagement through internal reports and memos, and continuation of analysis until thematic saturation was achieved (O'Brien et al., 2014; Tong, Sainsbury and Craig, 2007; Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006). Peer debriefs with the onboarding team complemented member checks and supported credibility, dependability and confirmability.

Ethical clearance was granted by the organisation's legal and data-protection authorities. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent embedded in the invitation process such that joining signified agreement to recording and research use. Data were stored in encrypted, access-restricted repositories. Facilitation emphasised respectful exchange to enable candid reflection without risk of repercussion.

3 Results

The five focus group sessions were structured around nine sequential activities in the Miro board, designed to progressively build a shared understanding of onboarding requirements. The sessions included: (1) Introduction: presentation of the study objectives and the importance of HR stakeholders' perspectives, alongside encouragement for collaboration, learning, and idea sharing; (2) Review of interview findings: participants examined prior interview results and defined best practices to retain, such as welcome emails, meetings with line managers, mandatory training, and the creation of a comfortable work environment; (3) Discussion of improvement areas: stakeholders identified challenges in communication, learning and development, administrative processes, IT preparation, and cross-departmental collaboration; (4) Expansion of improvement ideas: participants proposed solutions such as avoiding information overload, providing relocation support, sending contracts earlier, and ensuring line managers' accountability; (5) Brainstorming on organizational themes: exploration of humanitarian work, trust, engagement, organizational culture, Strategy 2030, and the Fundamental Principles, with emphasis on inclusiveness, leadership engagement, and positive communication; (6) Co-design of a structured onboarding model: development of a framework with four phases: Preparation, Social Inclusion, Learning and Development, and Technical Training; (7) Building the new hire journey map: visualization of actions, needs, challenges, solutions, touchpoints, and expected newcomer feelings (e.g., reassurance, motivation, safety); (8) Wishlist: envisioning aspirational additions to onboarding, such as mentorship, cross-training, symbolic gestures like museum visits, and innovative welcome kits; (9) Collective review and validation: participants analyzed the Miro board together, refined contributions, and confirmed the collaborative outputs.

Following Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis, the dataset was examined through an iterative process that moved from transcription and close reading of the focus group material to systematic coding, clustering, refinement, and final reporting (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2022). Codes were generated line by line and then grouped into broader patterns (clusters), which were reviewed and redefined to ensure both coherence and distinctiveness.

This reflexive approach provided an audit trail from raw data to interpretation, supporting transparency and analytical rigour. The process yielded six overarching domains with multiple themes: Social Inclusion (N=84) emerged as the most prominent domain, highlighting the importance of social activities, team building, mentoring, and cultural orientation, with participants also expressing *personal opinions* (N=9) such as feeling lost or emphasising onboarding as a priority. Onboarding Monitoring (N=57) captured the perceived lack of measurement systems, the need for structured follow-up, and both formal and informal feedback mechanisms. Practices during Onboarding (N=52) emphasised innovation, the improvement of newcomer experience, and early access to IFRC systems

and tools, with particular focus on opportunities to meet colleagues and departments. Learning and Development (N=51) centred on differentiated learning activities, linking performance to onboarding, mandatory courses, and follow-up on learning curves and role responsibilities. Onboarding Steps (N=40) underscored training, integration, preparation, and meetings, with an embedded second-order subtheme of *Administrative and Technical* (N=31), which included common logistical issues, departmental inclusion, and procedural clarity. Finally, Organisational Culture (N=34) reflected the relevance of humanitarian values, Strategy 2030, leadership visibility, and symbolic elements such as visits or newsletters in reinforcing cultural identity. Across domains, stakeholders consistently highlighted the need for a structured, measurable, and human-centred onboarding journey that balances technical preparation with cultural and social integration. Table 1 summarizes these findings.

Themes (N=)	Subthemes (N=)	Quotes (from Miro boards and reviews)
Social Inclusion (84)	Social Activities (19) Socialization tactics (17) Team building activities (13) Adjustments to onboarding (12) Friendly mentors/Buddies (11) Process of introducing newcomers (6) Organizational culture (6) Embedded second-order subtheme: Personal Opinions (9) Feeling lost (6) Onboarding as a priority (3)	“Buddy/mentoring systems help new hires integrate faster.” · “Team building and informal rituals create belonging from day one.” · “Focus on the experience of the new hire.” “Treat onboarding as a governed journey, not a task list.” · “Plan the first day/week, link the line manager and the colleagues” “add the person to essential mailing lists so they feel included” · “Use checkpoints for feedback and ramp-up metrics.”
Onboarding Monitoring (57)	Lack of measurement (21) Follow-up (19) Informal feedback (14) Formal feedback (3)	“Onboarding must be monitored”; “We should implement feedback during onboarding”; “Informal conversations about newcomer experience”; “System to provide feedback”
Practices during Onboarding (52)	Innovation during onboarding (20) Need to improve experience (14) IFRC systems and tools (7) Meeting colleagues as priority (6) Meetings with departments (3) Behaviours and conduct (2)	“Training on systems must come earlier, new hires can’t perform without access to digital platforms.” “Short rotations or digital briefings with key departments accelerate understanding.” “They need a map of who does what across IFRC”
Learning and Development (51)	Need for different learning activities (12) Performance and onboarding (11) Mandatory courses (10) Follow-up on courses/learning curve (9) Review of duties / responsibilities (9)	“Mandatory training during onboarding” “Do not overwhelm the new hire with training”; “Ensure role clarity and weekly follow-up.” · “Quick access to the learning platform”
Onboarding Steps (40)	Training (18) Integration of the newcomer (15) Preparation for the position (4) Meetings and briefings (3) Embedded second-order subtheme: Administrative and Technical (31) Common issues (17) Department inclusion (10) Administrative and information (4)	“Without IT preparation before Day 1, we lose traction in Week 1 if they don’t have email.” · “Send contracts and access earlier.” · “HR should be the focal point.”
Organisational Culture (34)	Fundamental Principles and humanitarian mission (18) Strategy 2030 (8) Leadership visibility (5) Museum/visits to National Societies (2) Newsletter (1)	“Treat onboarding as a governed journey, not a task list.” · “Plan the first day/week, link the line manager, and add the person to essential mailing lists.” · “Use checkpoints for feedback and ramp-up metrics.”

Table 1. Themes, Subthemes, and Illustrative Quotes from Focus Group Sessions

Social Inclusion was the most prominent category. Stakeholders emphasised teamwork, social activities, mentoring, and buddy systems as mechanisms to foster integration. Informal practices, such as shared meals and office tours, were described as essential to building a welcoming and collaborative environment.

Organisational Culture was highlighted as central to effective onboarding. Participants stressed alignment with the Fundamental Principles, humanitarian values, and Strategy 2030, identifying peer support, leadership visibility, and reinforcement of organisational values as critical practices.

Learning and Development reflected the need for structured training and knowledge management tools. E-learning modules, onboarding manuals, and checklists were regarded as crucial for consistency, while targeted training for managers and leadership guidance were identified as necessary to sustain quality practices.

The onboarding experience was consistently described as decisive for both engagement and retention. Participants emphasised that newcomers should feel safe, motivated, and supported rather than overwhelmed. Strategies such as personalised support, role clarification, and buddy systems were considered effective in building confidence and reducing anxiety.

Improvement areas were linked to administrative and technical aspects. Stakeholders noted the need for clearer communication, IT preparation and logistical support before arrival, and consolidation of onboarding resources into accessible platforms. They also emphasised avoiding information overload, providing relocation support, and ensuring timely communication such as sending contracts in advance.

Finally, stakeholders proposed a Structured Model with four phases: (1) Preparation: contracts, IT activities, welcome message by email, welcome kit, and onboarding agenda; (2) Social Inclusion: meetings with managers and teams, departmental briefings, office tours, and informal activities; (3) Learning and Development: introduction to the organization, completion of mandatory courses, clarification of responsibilities, and implementation of a buddy system; (4) Technical Role-Specific Training: job-specific tasks, objective-setting, feedback, performance monitoring, and KPIs.

The new hire journey map linked actions, needs, challenges, solutions, and touchpoints with expected emotional outcomes, such as reassurance, comfort, and motivation. The wishlist exercise extended this design by encouraging aspirational thinking, including mentorship, cross-training, and symbolic cultural gestures.

In response to the research question "*What are the perspectives of HR professionals on the design of a global onboarding programme?*" the findings show that HR stakeholders conceive onboarding not as a set of discrete administrative steps but as an integrated, participatory journey. Their emphasis on social connection, cultural alignment, structured learning, and systematic processes highlights onboarding's role as both a human-centred and strategically governed practice capable of fostering belonging, building trust, and accelerating productivity.

4 Discussion

This study examined HR professionals' perspectives on the design of a global onboarding programme through online, focus groups. The findings consolidate six requirements: Social Inclusion, Onboarding Monitoring, Practices during Onboarding, Learning and Development, Onboarding Steps, and Organisational Culture. These findings position onboarding as an integrated, human-centred capability with clear business implications for ramp-up, engagement and retention, in line with prior evidence (Bauer, 2010; Saks, Gruman and Cooper-Thomas, 2011).

Participants' emphasis on early peer connection, buddy systems, mentoring and informal interactions converges with research showing that social ties and perceived fit drive newcomer adjustment and commitment. The explicit linkage to humanitarian values, the Fundamental Principles and Strategy 2030 extends the literature by indicating that, in mission-driven and multi-site contexts, onboarding

must simultaneously embed cultural identity and orient newcomers to strategic priorities (Meyer, 2016; Bauer et al., 2007; Bauer and Erdogan, 2011).

HR stakeholders validated the value of standardised artefacts such as e-learning, manuals and checklists to reduce variance and ensure clarity, supporting calls to move beyond ad hoc activities toward designed building blocks with clear ownership. They also elevated manager capability (training and guidance) as a first-order requirement, addressing a persistent gap where research has privileged the newcomer lens over the perspectives of those who design and deliver onboarding (Dai and De Meuse, 2007; Klein, Polin and Sutton, 2015; Saks and Gruman, 2012).

Operational enablers clustered under Onboarding Steps, with the embedded Administrative and Technical subtheme underscoring pre-arrival IT and logistics, streamlined communications, timely access and contracts, and consolidation of resources into accessible platforms, factors that materially affect time-to-productivity rather than functioning as peripheral hygiene (Stein and Christiansen, 2010; Krasman, 2015; Davila and Pina-Ramirez, 2018). In Learning and Development, stakeholders highlighted differentiated learning pathways, mandatory courses, role clarity, and follow-up on learning curves and responsibilities, aligning with evidence that early experiences set the trajectory for engagement and retention (Bauer, 2010; Saks, Gruman and Cooper-Thomas, 2011).

The insistence on personalised support, role clarity and newcomer experience aligns with evidence that early experiences set the trajectory for engagement and retention. Operationally, pre-arrival readiness in IT and logistics, streamlined communications and the consolidation of resources emerged as core enablers of time-to-productivity rather than peripheral factors (Saks, Gruman and Cooper-Thomas, 2011; Stein and Christiansen, 2010; Krasman, 2015; Davila and Pina-Ramirez, 2018).

The co-created four-phase model (Preparation, Social Inclusion, Learning and Development, Technical Role-Specific Training) operationalises the call to treat onboarding as a governed journey rather than a list of tasks, while directly addressing the long-noted gap on how organisations actually design and implement onboarding at scale. HR practitioners were co-producers of actionable design knowledge, consistent with participatory and design-thinking traditions that balance contextual validity with implementability (Klein, Polin and Sutton, 2015; Saks and Gruman, 2012; Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995; Spinuzzi, 2005).

Digitally enabled collaboration underpinned both reach and rigour. Build via Microsoft Teams with Miro board artefacts enabled inclusive, cross-region participation and generated durable, auditable outputs that support governance and iteration. Evidence indicates that online focus groups can match in-person data quality while improving access and cost profiles, which is strategically material for dispersed organisations seeking speed to alignment and traceability from insight to implementation (Tuttas, 2015; Woodyatt, Finneran and Stephenson, 2016; Reisner et al., 2018).

These results also illustrate how HR and digital transformation advance together. Digital platforms scale co-creation, standardise content and enable data-rich feedback loops; HR provides the governance, domain expertise and change stewardship required to translate technology into reliable employee outcomes. Systematic-review evidence links digital transformation to sustainability and organisational resilience, reinforcing the business case for low-travel, high-inclusion HR operating models that are measurable, repeatable and continuously improved. In practice, onboarding's digital pathway, remote co-design of their onboarding experiences, expectations, requirements with standardised artefacts and iterative measurement, positions HR as a pivotal orchestrator of enterprise-level transformation, ensuring that human-centred design and digital enablement progress in lockstep to deliver scalable, sustainable and performance-relevant onboarding.

At the same time, digital formats reshape relational dynamics. Online sessions compress informal moments that typically build rapport and trust, which requires moderators to engineer connection deliberately through structured warm-ups, explicit turn-taking, clear netiquette and brief tool onboarding to reduce cognitive load. The literature on virtual qualitative work notes both feasibility and risks, including reduced spontaneous side-talk, variable rapport and technology fatigue, which

underscores the value of camera-on segments where feasible, psychological safety practices and concise walkthroughs of collaborative tools, in this case, Miro. (Tuttas, 2015; Archibald et al., 2019; Woodyatt, Finneran and Stephenson, 2016; Falter, 2022; Poliandri, 2023).

There are also environmental considerations. Virtual formats substantially reduce emissions relative to in-person travel, but they are not impact-free and their footprint varies with bandwidth, video use and session duration. Pragmatic mitigations include shorter high-engagement camera-on intervals, bandwidth options and asynchronous pre-tasks, which preserve interaction quality while minimising ICT-related impacts (Tao et al., 2021). In practice, balancing these trade-offs during the sessions required sensitivity to connectivity constraints and varied levels of digital literacy; inclusion was facilitated by active listening, by capturing spoken contributions directly on the shared board when needed, and by scheduling across time zones to maximise equitable participation.

This study demonstrates that digitally mediated focus groups with HR stakeholders provide an effective, scalable, and auditable mechanism for designing onboarding while cutting travel and supporting organisational sustainability and resilience. It offers an actionable blueprint for HR-led, digitally enabled onboarding that integrates culture, inclusion, and learning with data-ready artefacts and continuous improvement loops, yielding a replicable model for cross-border organisations aligned with core pillars of technology and innovation, workforce development and education, and risk and ethics. Critically, systematic engagement with the HR practitioners who steward onboarding grounds design choices in people's needs, translating frontline insight into a pragmatic, human-centred architecture that can be governed, measured, and scaled.

The proposed onboarding model has policy-level ramifications for organisational governance, learning culture, and HR accountability in post-pandemic, hybrid contexts. Treating onboarding as a governed journey formalises ownership, decision rights, and audit trails for artefacts, metrics, and hand-offs across HR, line management, and Information and Technology Departments. A durable learning culture requires psychological safety to enable early voice, error reporting, and rapid iteration of onboarding assets, conditions consistently associated with team learning and performance (Edmondson, 1999).

5 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should validate the impact of the onboarding programme build based on HR stakeholders experiences, multi-site pilots, tracking 30/60/90/180-day indicators such as time-to-productivity, role clarity, social acceptance, early retention and engagement, using mixed methods to illuminate mechanisms of effect (Bauer, 2010; Bauer et al., 2007; Saks, Gruman and Cooper-Thomas, 2011). Where randomisation can be impractical, stepped-wedge or difference-in-differences designs can isolate impacts by comparing early adopters to matched controls, with a specific focus on variance reduction across regions and functions (Klein, Polin and Sutton, 2015).

Comparative studies should assess digital-only, hybrid and in-person delivery on equivalent cohorts, examining adjustment, engagement and retention alongside facilitation quality and participant experience, building on evidence that online focus groups can match in-person data quality while improving reach and cost profiles (Tuttas, 2015; Woodyatt, Finneran and Stephenson, 2016).

Research on digital facilitation should systematically vary levers such as camera policies, warm-ups and tool onboarding to quantify effects on participation, idea quality and fatigue in large, multi-time-zone settings (Tuttas, 2015; Archibald et al., 2019; Reisner et al., 2018).

Although Artificial Intelligence (AI) was not raised in the sessions, it can pragmatically strengthen onboarding today. Copilots and chatbots can streamline policy look-ups and tier-1 requests, while adaptive learning paths in the LMS can tailor training by role and region. Privacy-preserving signals can further enable supportive outreach (Jobin et al., 2019; Floridi et al., 2018). Realising these gains requires clear guardrails: fairness, accountability, transparency, and human oversight, supported by

basic documentation (model cards, datasheets), purpose limitation, ongoing performance checks across subgroups, and avenues for contestation.

To evidence value and manage risk, organisations should run pragmatic pilots with comparison groups and mixed-methods evaluation. These pilots should track time-to-productivity, learning completion, and perceived fairness or psychological safety, alongside routine bias monitoring (Hemming et al., 2015; Callaway and Sant'Anna, 2021).

A complementary stream should examine both the integration of AI in onboarding and the digital literacy of HR stakeholders and newcomers. Pragmatic pilots can assess AI copilots for pre-boarding FAQs and workflow navigation, AI-driven personalisation of learning paths in the LMS, and predictive signals for early attrition or adjustment. All use cases should operate under human-in-the-loop governance, supported by bias audits, data minimisation, explainability, and consent. Causal impacts should be estimated through stepped-wedge or difference-in-differences comparisons and underpinned by cost–benefit models linking compute and licensing to ramp-time and turnover avoidance (Marler and Boudreau, 2017; Bondarouk and Brewster, 2016).

In parallel, HR's digital literacy agenda should define baseline and target competencies in data analysis, platform fluency, virtual facilitation, and privacy or ethics. Capability-building sprints, communities of practice, and reusable playbooks can accelerate proficiency, with adoption and skill KPIs linked to onboarding outcomes. Change stewardship should be anchored in psychological safety and accessibility across bandwidths and languages (Bondarouk and Brewster, 2016; Marler and Boudreau, 2017). Embedding sustainability by design in digital assets and session choices further aligns this agenda with emerging evidence connecting digital transformation to resilience and environmental performance. This integration reinforces a low-travel, high-inclusion operating model for global HR programmes (Tao et al., 2021).

This qualitative, focus-group study was intentionally scoped to surface HR stakeholders' requirements rather than to test causal impact. Its sector-anchored lens (humanitarian, multi-site) privileges contextual validity and design relevance; accordingly, effects on engagement, retention, or productivity were outside scope. To protect confidentiality, we did not collect demographics, which limits equity- and subgroup-level analyses; purposive/snowball sampling of actors directly involved in onboarding may also have introduced positive reporting. These design choices are offset by multi-region participation, artefact-based co-design, and explicit prompts for critique, strengthening credibility and practical utility.

Future work should build on (not replace) these insights via mixed-methods, longitudinal tracking (e.g., 30/60/90/180 days), and optional, ethical demographics to examine heterogeneous experiences. Pragmatic quasi-experimental pilots (e.g., stepped-wedge/DID) can estimate impact; parallel operational studies should model cost, resourcing, and change-readiness to de-risk scale-up. Given the online, cross-regional format, systematic assessment of facilitation variables (camera norms, warm-ups, tool onboarding, bandwidth accommodations) and digital-equity considerations will further enhance replicability in distributed, resource-constrained settings.

6 Conclusion

This study explored the perspectives of HR professionals on the design of a global onboarding programme in a complex, multi-site humanitarian organization. By leveraging online focus groups supported by collaborative digital tools (Microsoft Teams and Miro), it demonstrated that HR stakeholders view onboarding not as a linear administrative sequence, but as an integrated, human-centred capability with strategic implications for engagement, retention, and organisational alignment.

Findings clustered into six thematic categories: Social Inclusion, Onboarding Monitoring, Practices during Onboarding, Learning and Development, Onboarding Steps and Organisational Culture, culminating in a co-designed four-phase onboarding model (Preparation, Social Inclusion, Learning and Development and Technical Role-Specific Training). These results substantiate existing research

on the value of early social integration, structured learning, and culture-building artefacts (Bauer, 2010; Saks and Gruman, 2012), while extending the literature through the active inclusion of HR voices and real-time digital collaboration across geographically dispersed teams.

The study contributes methodologically by confirming the viability of online focus group sessions to design onboarding for HR strategy, aligning with evidence that digitally mediated focus groups can produce robust, auditable outputs (Tuttas, 2015; Woodyatt et al., 2016). It also frames onboarding as a governance challenge, where standardisation, stakeholder ownership, and digital enablement interact to create scalable and sustainable solutions.

In practical terms, this research offers a replicable onboarding framework tailored to cross-border contexts, underpinned by human-centred design and co-creation. It positions HR professionals not only as executors of onboarding, but as strategic architects of inclusive, data-informed, and mission-aligned onboarding ecosystems. Future work should test the implementation of this model using mixed methods and longitudinal designs, to further evaluate its impact on key performance indicators and organisational resilience.

Finally, the findings position digital onboarding and online focus group sessions as a strategic lever for sustainability and organisational trust. By front-loading socialisation, learning, and support through well-designed hybrid/virtual journeys, organisations can cut travel-related emissions dramatically, life-cycle assessments indicate ~94% lower CO₂e and ~90% lower energy use for virtual formats versus in-person events (Tao et al., 2021; Toscani et al., 2023). In parallel, onboarding is a locus for integral security (of people, data, and processes) when governed by recognised frameworks and documentation practices, including the NIST AI Risk Management Framework 1.0 and Model Cards for AI-enabled learning analytics (NIST, 2023; Mitchell et al., 2019). We recommend tracking avoided travel (kilometres and CO₂e) per cohort, geolinguistic inclusion rates, and privacy/security controls (privacy-by-design, least-privilege access, bias monitoring) across each step; these metrics align the programme with International Conference on Business and Integral Security (IBIS 2025) priorities at the nexus of digital transformation, green economy, and resilient, trustworthy operations. Estimated environmental gains will vary by context (e.g., grid mix, ICT efficiency), but the direction and order of magnitude are consistent (Tao et al., 2021; Toscani et al., 2023).

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the researcher and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the IFRC.

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APPENDIX A

CONSOLIDATED CRITERIA FOR REPORTING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH (COREQ) 32-ITEM CHECKLIST

Interviewer/facilitator. Who conducted the focus groups? The researcher (author) moderated all sessions; HR personnel involved in the onboarding programme supported facilitation.

Credentials. What were the researcher's credentials? Dr. Bethânia Monteforte Sasseron; affiliated with Swiss School of Business and Management (SSBM), Geneva.

Occupation. What was their occupation/role at the time? Doctoral Student at SSBM; Advanced Intern and Consultant at International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies at Human Resources Management Department; session moderator.

Gender. Was the researcher's gender reported? Female.

Experience and training. What experience/training did the researcher have? 13 years Licensed Clinical and Organisational Psychologist, MSc and Doctoral Student. Academic rigor supported by SRQR adherence, audit trail, and reflexivity notes.

Relationship established. Was a relationship established prior to study commencement? Sessions convened with the HR (collaborative setup/recruitment), indicating a professional relationship.

Participant knowledge of the interviewer. What did participants know about the researcher? Participants were briefed on study objectives and collaboration goals first by email and at session start.

Interviewer characteristics. Reported biases/assumptions/interests? Reflexivity through internal reports and researcher notes; audit trail maintained. Specific personal characteristics not detailed.

Methodological orientation? Reflexive thematic analysis per Braun and Clarke (2006); Focus Group (Glesne, 2016).

Sampling. How were participants selected? Purposive sampling targeting HR stakeholders directly involved in onboarding; snowball referrals permitted.

Method of approach. How were they approached? Invitations sent by email to 53 stakeholders across all regions; the HR Department supported recruitment.

Sample size. How many participants? Reported: n = 32 HR professionals across five focus groups (5–8 per group).

Non-participation. Numbers/reasons. 53 invited; 32 participated (21 non-participants). Reasons not reported.

Setting of data collection. Where were data collected? Online via Microsoft Teams recorded meetings with collaborative Miro boards.

Presence of non-participants. Anyone else present? HR personnel supporting the onboarding programme development.

Description of sample. Key sample characteristics? HR professionals engaged in onboarding/HR ops/workforce development; characterized by roles, seniority, regional functions; demographics (e.g., gender/age) intentionally not collected.

Data collection

Interview/FG guide. Were questions/prompts provided? Semi-structured protocol informed by onboarding literature; discussion categories developed in advance (interviews, director consultations, benchmarking).

Repeat interviews. Any repeat sessions? Reported: NR (five online sessions total; no repeats per participant).

Audio/visual recording. Was recording used? Yes. Microsoft Teams recordings transcribed; consent to recording embedded in invitation.

Field notes. Were notes made? Yes, researcher/group reflections captured alongside transcripts and Miro artefacts.

Duration. Session length. 60–90 minutes per session.

Data saturation. Was saturation discussed? Yes, analysis continued until thematic saturation; approach described under rigor.

Transcripts returned. Were transcripts returned to participants? They will have access once they have Microsoft Office organisational accounts. Preliminary findings have been shared with members for checking and posted on the IFRC intranet and the Global Onboarding Programme portal.

Number of data coders. How many coders? One primary coder (the researcher) conducted manual coding; coding decisions/themes peer-debriefed/validated with the onboarding team.

Description of coding tree. Is a coding tree provided? Partial - themes/subthemes and illustrative quotes summarised (Table 1); full coding tree not reproduced.

Derivation of themes. How were themes identified? Combined inductive coding with deductive mapping to established onboarding domains; iterative review for coherence/distinctiveness.

Software. What software supported analysis? Manual coding using transcripts, field notes, and Miro artefacts; Teams for sessions; no CAQDAS packages specified.

Participant checking. Did participants verify findings? Yes. Member checking via sharing preliminary findings.

Quotations presented. Are participant quotations used? Yes. Illustrative excerpts from Miro boards/review meetings; not linked to participant IDs.

Data and findings consistent. Is there consistency between data and findings? Yes. Triangulation across transcripts, reflections, and Miro artefacts; audit trail maintained.

Clarity of major themes. Are major themes clearly presented? Yes, six thematic domains with definitions and outputs; blueprint described.

Clarity of minor themes. Are minor/less-common themes described? Subtheme clusters and quotes provided; negative/contradictory cases not explicitly detailed (NR).

APPENDIX B

STANDARDS FOR REPORTING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH (SRQR) COMPLIANCE

S1 Title: Designing Onboarding Together: Insights from Human Resources Focus Groups.

S2 Abstract: This study investigates HR professionals' perspectives on designing a global onboarding programme in a complex, multi-site humanitarian organisation. Using a qualitative focus-group framework, five online sessions ($n = 32$) were conducted between July–October 2022 via Microsoft Teams and Miro to co-create onboarding requirements grounded in practitioner insight. Reflexive thematic analysis identified six domains: Social Inclusion, Onboarding Monitoring, Practices during Onboarding, Learning and Development, Onboarding Steps, and Organisational Culture, which informed a co-designed, four-phase model (Preparation; Social Inclusion; Learning and Development; Technical Role-Specific Training). Findings indicate that HR stakeholders conceptualise onboarding as a strategic, human-centred capability that requires standardised yet context-sensitive structures, digital artefacts, and participatory governance. Digital collaboration enabled global engagement, auditable outputs, and transparent design processes aligned with organisational values and sustainability goals. The study advances onboarding scholarship by centring HR practitioner voices and demonstrating how digitally enabled focus groups can produce actionable frameworks for cross-border contexts. Methodologically, it contributes to online qualitative practice; practically, it offers a replicable onboarding architecture for dispersed, mission-driven organisations.

S3 Problem formulation: The organisational problem concerns the need for global onboarding across a multiregional humanitarian field, as well as the need for an evidence-based and digitally enabled framework that is theoretically anchored in socialisation, organisational values and role clarity.

S4 Purpose or research question: The aim is to elicit HR stakeholders' requirements and effective practices across regions to inform the design of a global onboarding programme.

S5 Qualitative approach and research paradigm: The study adopts reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) in an interpretivist/constructivist tradition, combining inductive patterning with deductive alignment to established onboarding domains.

S6 Researcher characteristics and reflexivity: The moderator served as session facilitator within a collaborative arrangement with the HR department. Reflexive engagement was maintained via memos and a decision log; potential positionality and organisational proximity were considered and addressed through peer debriefs and transparent audit trails.

S7 Context: Data collection occurred online via Microsoft Teams with collaborative Miro whiteboards in a global humanitarian organisation spanning the Americas, Africa, MENA, Europe and Asia Pacific during July–October 2022.

S8 Sampling strategy: Purposive sampling targeted HR professionals and managers involved in onboarding, HR operations or workforce development. Invitations were issued to 53 stakeholders; 32 participated in five groups of 5–8.

S9 Ethical issues pertaining to human participants: Organisational Legal and Data-protection approval was obtained. Participation was voluntary; informed consent was embedded in the invitation, with entry to the session indicating consent to recording and research use. Confidentiality and respectful exchange were emphasised.

S10 Data collection methods: Five semi-structured online focus groups (60–90 minutes) used prompts informed by onboarding and design tasks (e.g., Continue–Stop–Invent–Act). Discussion covered best practices, socialisation, work environment, newcomer journeys, trust, culture, Strategy 2030, Fundamental Principles, and onboarding structures.

S11 Data collection instruments and technologies: The protocol, prompt guide and Miro task boards structured discussion were captured. Microsoft Teams recordings were transcribed; Miro artefacts preserved real-time and asynchronous inputs.

S12 Units of study: Thirty-two HR professionals/managers participated. Demographic variables (e.g., gender, age) were intentionally not collected to protect confidentiality and foreground professional expertise; the sample is characterised by role, seniority and regional function.

S13 Data processing: Recordings were transcribed; files were de-identified and stored in encrypted, access-restricted repositories. Data integrity was supported through version control, systematic file naming and retention of artefacts and memos.

S14 Data analysis: Analysis followed the six phases of RTA: familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, theme review, definition/naming and reporting (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Verbatim transcripts, field notes and Miro artefacts were coded manually; codes were iteratively clustered and reviewed at corpus level for internal coherence and external distinctiveness. Inter-rater reliability was not computed; a lightweight codebook served transparency and onboarding of collaborators rather than reliability estimation (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

S15 Techniques to enhance trustworthiness: Credibility and dependability were supported through triangulation (transcripts, memos, artefacts), member checking of preliminary findings, an audit trail (decision log, reflexive memos), peer debriefs with the onboarding team, and an explicit saturation criterion (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

S16 Synthesis and interpretation: Analysis identified needs and actionable practices across four sequential onboarding phases (preparation; social inclusion; learning and development; technical role-specific training) and across cross-cutting domains (culture, employee experience, enablement), informing a blueprint and governance artefacts for scalable implementation (Bauer, 2010; Klein, Polin and Sutton, 2015).

S17 Links to empirical data: Representative verbatim extracts (short, de-identified) accompany each subtheme in the Results to substantiate claims and demonstrate the chain of evidence from data to interpretation.

S18 Integration with prior work, implications, transferability and contributions: Findings are situated against onboarding and socialisation literature, with implications for HR governance, digital enablement and learning pathways. Transferability is discussed with regard to humanitarian mandate, organisational size and digital maturity.

S19 Limitations: Reported limitations include the HR-centric perspective, absence of demographic variables, and affordances/constraints of online focus groups; causal claims are not made, and longitudinal outcomes are beyond scope.

S20 Conflicts of interest: Any potential organisational dual roles are disclosed along with safeguards; otherwise, no competing interests are declared.

S21 Funding : the researcher was hired as intern, advanced intern and consultant to develop the global onboarding programme at International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies while was a doctoral student at Swiss School of Business and Management.

APPENDIX C:

FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS STRUCTURE

Hello, I'm Bethânia Monteforte Sasseron from the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies consultant at Human Resources Management Department, and I'll be conducting this focus group session.

Our goal is to learn about your experiences as HR stakeholders during the onboarding process. Your participation is valuable to us, and you should have received an informed consent form with your meeting invitation via email.

We will start working on these themes on the Miro Board. The themes came from previous interviews with stakeholders and global leadership. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers or expectations of how you should respond – we are interested in hearing your views on how global onboarding at the IFRC should be structured around different themes. The session will take around 1 hour. You can stop at any time. Feel free to edit the board and discuss your ideas with the other participants. Thank you for your participation.

- 1) Introduction to the Miro board and the New Hire Journey Map video.
- 2) The newcomers' journey: best practices to keep, work environment, socialisation and the job itself.
- 3) The main areas for improvement: communication, learning and development, administration.

What should we continue doing (because it helps us move forward), stop doing (because it can hold us back), invent (new things and do things differently) and act on (what should we do next)?

Let's brainstorm how we could include the following actions during onboarding: engagement; culture; Strategy 2030; Fundamental Principles; and what makes us different. Humanitarian work; trust.

- 6) Structure: Which activities should be included in each onboarding phase?
- 7) What actions, needs, challenges, solutions, touchpoints, timings, resources, expected outcomes and new hire feelings do we want to foster?
- 8) Our wish list.
- 9) Thank you.