Employee onboarding and satisfaction in US manufacturing companies

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this study was to identify primary issues related to employee onboarding and satisfaction in US-based manufacturing companies.*

Design/methodology/approach – *In total, 19 focus groups using semi-structured interviews with senior management, middle management, tenured employees and new employees were conducted with personnel from five manufacturing companies located in the Midwest USA. Onboarding procedures, training manuals, employee satisfaction surveys and performance evaluations were subsequently reviewed.*

Findings – *Insufficient onboarding, poor communication and a perceived lack of support were reported as satisfaction concerns by manufacturing employees. In addition, management had vastly differing perspectives regarding the work environment when responses were contrasted with those from new or tenured employees.*

Originality/value – *This paper reveals contributing factors that influence satisfaction early and throughout an employee's tenure with small- to medium-sized US manufacturing companies.*

Keywords *Training, Retention, Manufacturing, Communication, Qualitative research, Human resources, Focus groups, Onboarding, Satisfaction*

Paper type *Research paper*

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Introduction

Employee onboarding across many industries influences employee satisfaction, which closely correlates with retention. Manufacturing companies in the USA frequently experience higher turnover compared with other industries, which limits organizational outcomes including profitability (Upadhayay and Vrat, 2016). As such, employee retention is a frequent concern of human resource development (HRD) professionals in manufacturing though limited research has explored the potential role of onboarding in new employee satisfaction. This paper presents focus group findings from employees of five small- to medium-sized manufacturing companies located in the Midwest USA. More specifically, 19 focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured interview format with a total of 67 new employees, tenured employees, middle management and senior management to gain their perspective on current employee onboarding and satisfaction issues. The paper begins with a discussion about the significance of examining employee onboarding and satisfaction in US-based manufacturing companies before transitioning into the methodology. From there, themes are reported and discussed with implications for practice and future research being offered.

This study contributes to industrial and commercial training literature by revealing predominant concerns US-based manufacturing employees have about their onboarding experience and subsequent job satisfaction. Although research on turnover intentions in manufacturing has been examined (Skelton *et al.*, 2020), as well as numerous studies on employee job satisfaction (Huang and Su, 2016) and job embeddedness (Marasi *et al.*, 2016; Mitchell *et al.*, 2001) in other industries, the onboarding experience of manufacturing

employees in organizations with employee satisfaction and retention issues has been mostly overlooked. First, an introduction to the manufacturing industry and corresponding need for the study is offered. Subsequently, the research methodology is offered along with the study's findings. Implications for practice and research are then shared. By examining employee perspectives, readers may gain clarity into how HRD and training professionals can improve in employee onboarding and overall satisfaction.

Significance

US manufacturing plays a vital role in employment and economic contributions of the country. More than 12 million employees work in manufacturing in the USA, which contributes to nearly 9% of the overall economy (Skelton *et al.*, 2020). Each year, roughly $24bn of gross output within the USA comes from manufacturing (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021), which may be the best measure of the overall manufacturing impact on the economy (Scott, 2015). Scott (2015) went further by arguing that manufacturing is by the most important sector of the US economy based on total output and employment. The sheer employment numbers and overall output make it especially important to understand influences in employee turnover within the industry.

Employee retention in US-based manufacturing companies has long been a costly issue for HRD and training professionals. Hancock *et al.* (2013) noted that financial performance in manufacturing is inversely correlated with employee turnover. Upadhayay and Vrat (2016) pointed out that high turnover directly influences profits as a result of higher hiring costs and reduced employee performance. In fact, more than two in five of manufacturing companies have turnover rates exceeding 20% (Kunz, 2019). These rates may in fact be higher for frontline employees and those who are new to their position (ToolingU, 2019). Cost estimates for what organizations incur when an employee leaves range greatly from $3,000 to $18,000 upward of replacement costs equaling a year or more of their annual wages (Baumann, 2018; Skelton *et al.*, 2020). Expenses related to hiring and training costs, as well as lost production, directly tie-in to the financial impact of high employee turnover (Hayward *et al.*, 2016). In essence, organizations with low turnover outperform their counterparts (Hancock *et al.*, 2013). On a larger and more concerning level, higher turnover within the manufacturing industry could inadvertently lead toward a global decline in production (Skelton *et al.*, 2020; Vasquez, 2014).

Onboarding is the first opportunity HRD professionals have to indoctrinating new employees into the organization. However, onboarding is often focused on topics the organization deems most important (Kirchner and Akdere, 2019) or entirely overlooked. In fact, Maurer (2018) and Baumann (2018), respectively, reported that approximately 25%–35% of companies in the USA do not commit any resources to employee onboarding. For organizations which do orient employees, rather than offer a comprehensive experience, employers sometimes complete required paperwork, offer a short tour and briefly explain the job before handing the employee off to a shift lead (Srimannarayana, 2016). The shift lead subsequently offers a condensed training demonstration with intent on having the new employee performing on their own within a short period of time (Dunn and Jasinski, 2009). This compressed format requires little from employers, which reduces training costs but introduces corresponding consequences. For one, new employees who have not been introduced to the organization's culture, been properly acclimated or begun the process of being socialized with their new coworkers retain a high level of uncertainty (Bauer *et al.*, 2007; Little, 2015). At the same time, newcomers miss out on comprehensive job training, which would sufficiently prepare them for their new role. These oversights may cause new employee's frustration, confusion and uncertainty early on, potentially influencing their satisfaction and retention (Bauer *et al.*, 2007; Skelton *et al.*, 2020). As companies with a standardized onboarding process experience greater employee productivity early on as

well as higher retention, manufacturing companies would benefit by better understanding onboarding and recurring retention issues within the industry (Baumann, 2018).

Job satisfaction is one of the – if not the top – indicators of employee intent to leave (Leonard, 2006; Rust et al., 1996; Skelton et al., 2020; Umamaheswari and Krishnan, 2015). Even before leaving, employees with low job satisfaction and motivation negatively impact organization performance and are less productive (Ali, 2016). Because millennials are becoming one of the largest employee groups in the USA, understanding their needs can allow organizations to adapt new policies and practices, which would improve their overall job satisfaction (Skelton et al., 2020). Additionally, the manufacturing industry is comprised primarily of hourly workers who tend to turnover at higher rates than salaried employees – sometimes nearing 50% annually (Baumann, 2018; Krauss, 2010).

New employees need to be properly trained how to do their job before being ready to take responsibility for performing all of the corresponding job tasks. Despite the need, manufacturing companies often do not exist in standardized training and development programs, which can directly influence turnover lead to poor overall performance including decreased performance, reduced customer satisfaction and lower employee satisfaction (Huang and Su, 2016; Kunz, 2019). Similarly, training newcomers to perform in low-skilled positions requires unique attention to the experience as these employees may be especially hesitant to engage and have particularly negative views of a learning environment (Maxwell, 2006; Yong et al., 2019).

These onboarding and satisfaction issues in US-based manufacturing companies present opportunities to explore factors frequently influencing employee retention. As such, a qualitative research study using focus groups with employees across five manufacturing companies located in the Midwest USA, where employee retention is an issue, was conducted to improve understanding related to onboarding experiences and employee satisfaction. The following research questions guided data collection and analysis.

RQ1. How do manufacturing employees describe their most recent onboarding experience?

RQ2. What factors contribute to dissatisfaction amongst employees in small- to medium-sized manufacturing companies?

Methodology

The purpose of this Institutional Review Board-approved phenomenological study was to understand manufacturing employees' onboarding experiences and identify trends influencing employee satisfaction in the workplace. Phenomenological studies offer researchers an opportunity to explore participants' thoughts, perceptions and emotions from lived experiences (Klenke, 2008). Between March 2019 and September 2020, employees from five small- to medium-sized manufacturing companies currently experiencing employee retention issues participated in one of 19 different focus groups. Organizations self-selected in by soliciting consulting services of the lead author regarding their onboarding and employee retention procedures. Through the project, focus groups ranging in size from one to nine participants, with 67 employees (senior management, middle management, tenured employees and new employees), were conducted. Tenured employees had been employed with the company for at least six months while new employees had less than six months of employment. Subsequently, depending on the size of the company, three or four focus groups were conducted with each organization. Table 1 breaks down the composition of each focus group for the five companies.

In two of the five organizations, focus groups were conducted separately between tenured employees, mid-management and senior management to go along with the new employee

Table 1 Focus group breakdown

	Employee range	Management FG	Mid-management FG	Long-term FG	New employee FG
Company A	25–50	5 w/two meetings	3	X	2
Company B	25–50	2	1	2	2
Company C	150–200	6	X	7	4
Company D	50–75	9	5	3	3
Company E	<25	5 w/two meetings	3	X	6

Notes: Key: employee range: average full time, part time and contract workers annually; management FG: number of management who participated in focus group; mid-management FG: number of middle-management employees who participated in focus group; long-term FG: number of long-term employees (approximately more than six months) who participated in focus group; new employee FG: number of new employees (approximately less than six months) who participated in focus group

focus groups. The decision to separate focus groups by tenure and job level was justified based on two factors (turnover is higher early in tenure and focus groups with employees of similar level were anticipated to be more comfortable sharing their concerns). Similarly, it was expected that frontline employees would have diverging perspectives regarding employee satisfaction, though this could verified until data analysis was complete. Finally, the separate focus groups were intended to help reduce potential power-difference concerns between new employees and middle management, senior management or tenured employees.

Focus group sessions lasted between 45 and 90 min and were semi-structured with nine pre-written questions related to employee onboarding and retention. Follow-up questions were asked throughout the sessions where clarity or expansion of ideas was necessary. The semi-structured format allowed for further probing in areas where concerns, challenges or themes were emerging. Though the majority of focus group sessions were audio recorded three were not because of the loud environment where recording devices were unable to accurately pick up all comments. Extensive notes were taken during each focus group and were subsequently reviewed within 72 hours. At the conclusion of each focus group, participants provided an email address, which the researchers used to send a follow-up email. The follow-up emails invited additional feedback from participants who would like to share privately regarding their onboarding and employment experience. Participants were notified that any information shared via email would remain confidential and could not be traced back to them by senior management and/or the owner. Still, only about a third of participants responded to follow-up emails, which could suggest employees felt nothing else was needed to be shared or they were still uncomfortable sharing concerns that could be tied back to them. Regardless, those who did respond expanded on what was discussed during the focus groups and information received corroborated the in-person discussions.

Triangulation of findings using multiple data sources helped increase the study's reliability, rigor, validity, and depth (Guba, 1990; Seale, 1999) by collecting and analyzing existing documentation such as position descriptions, training procedures, onboarding paperwork, evaluation methods, satisfaction surveys and safety manuals from each organization were collected when available. The supporting documentation was contrasted with focus group discussions and email responses from each organization before further diagnosis of trends across organizations. Through analyzing the documents, support for claims made during the focus groups and interviews regarding onboarding experiences and satisfaction issues were identified. Although the existing documentation ranged greatly depending on company, employee handbooks, training manuals and performance evaluations support the findings as documents were often incomplete, inconsistent or non-existent. Similarly, feedback provided in the satisfaction surveys aligned with information provided in the focus groups and follow-up emails.

Data analysis proceeded with listening to the focus group audio recordings, reviewing notes and generating a coding dictionary formulated from recurring terms, examples, concerns, frustrations, particularly insightful comments or contradictory statements. At the conclusion of the coding process, 18 codes were identified and defined, which were used to code the transcripts. Through coding and a period of reflection and further scrutinization of the research questions (Steinhoff, 2021), four overarching themes pertaining to the onboarding and retention research questions were identified. Individual reports were provided to company management and the findings were subsequently reviewed as part of improving the study's trustworthiness.

Findings

The four emergent themes from data analysis, insufficient onboarding, poor communication, lack of support and divergent perspectives, address the study's two guiding research

questions. The themes provide insight into employees' onboarding experience and overall feelings of satisfaction. The findings also add to our understanding of retention issues in US-based manufacturing companies.

Theme one: insufficient onboarding

Insufficient onboarding of new employees was reported across all of the focus groups, regardless of company or participant group. Codes corresponding with insufficient onboarding included *poor employee integration, recruiting issues, improper training and lack of integration*. While senior and middle management, tenured employees and new employees each acknowledged onboarding issues, new employees across each of the five focus groups were most emphatic about the lack of orientation, structured training and socialization that occurred. As several new employees highlighted, there is no set training; instead, there are brief explanations and demonstrations before, as one put it, "you are thrown to the wolves." One went so far as to describe employee training as a "train wreck." New employees also expressed concern about the lack of information they were provided about the company or their job. This included focus group participants reporting that they "never received a handbook" and "never saw a job description." These issues may also have contributed to why new employees were periodically surprised with the job requirements once they started working. Unanticipated challenges discussed included physically and mentally demanding/dirty/hazardous work environments, being required to learn the job on their own, unclear work expectations and highly monotonous job tasks. Perhaps a prelude to their experience interacting with management, insufficient onboarding was new employee's introduction to ongoing communication concerns with management.

Theme two: poor communication

As is the case in many organizations and other industries, communication issues were frequently discussed among new and tenured employees who were not in management roles. Codes corresponding with this theme included *poor communication, unclear policies, unclear procedures* and *disconnect between management and employees*. More specifically, communication issues ranged from new employees reporting inconsistent policies, procedures and expectations to unclear pay structures. Further discussions revealed feelings that management was simply unaware of how production lines in their company actually operate. As one participant shared, "there are few conversations between management and employees." He went on to say, "I wouldn't ask management a question [...] that would be dumb." Participants from a second focus group similarly shared that management is rarely on the floor, and generally only do go on the shop floor "when something is wrong." A third focus group highlighted frustration with not having met or seen the business owner for the first two months of employment despite the company's small size and the owner regularly working on site. Related discussions regarding a non-existent chain of command because of friendships and relationships between employees and management further contributed to the perceived communication issues. Yet another discussion revolved around a perceived, "secret society" where employees at all levels would gossip and exchange information about the organization but would not disclose the information to others who were not "in the secret society." Each of these communication issues was shared by all other participants of the same focus group and most were reported in at least two or more focus group sessions.

Theme three: lack of support

Participants from four of the new employee focus groups frequently discussed feeling unsupported by their supervisors and management. Codes which fell under this theme included *production over people, perceptions of unfair/unequal treatment, lack of trust* and

low morale. Participants from one focus group discussed frustration with expected production rates, which they described as "unattainable." They went on to highlight that production rate requirements can change daily and between supervisors, which negatively impacted the likelihood of employees attempting to achieve any production rates. Another focus group simply shared, "we are not machines, we are people [...] everything is about production." When treated poorly and "belittling us for not knowing," it can "make employees lash out." A third and fourth focus group discussed their experiences with nepotism and the negative outcomes. One new employee focus group asked themselves, "is there anyone in management [a team of eight] who isn't related?" The discussion spurred a conversation regarding the lack of trust in some management because employees were related and, as such, would play favorites. Further, new employees from three of the focus groups discussed frustration with an inconsistent pay/raise structure, promotion opportunities and/or overtime procedures. New employees from the fifth focus group, outside of reporting rarely ever seeing management, believed they were supported and able to go to management if they had a problem. Still, with each of the remaining focus groups reporting a consequential perceived lack of management support, this finding supports potential reasons why manufacturing employees may not be retained.

Theme four: divergent perspectives

Throughout the focus groups, senior management often spoke favorably about the organization's mission and work environment. Codes related to *safety perspectives*, *perceptions of the organization's culture*, *unfair practices*, *employee morale* and *employee recognition* all represent areas where perspectives differed based on role and time in the organization. When describing the environment, each of the five focus groups with senior management shared descriptors such as being "like family," a "home away from home" and a place "employees are valued," In contrast, new employees often struggled with identifying positives and frequently shared "receiving a paycheck," "overtime opportunities" or "no mandatory overtime" as positives. Less discussed but still reported in two of the groups, items such as "people seemed cool" or "laid back" were shared by new employees. Unexpectedly, employees began describing the negatives of employment rather than the positives when responding to this question. At times, new employees even acknowledged it was difficult to think of positives. Similarly, across all management focus groups, negatives of employment were more difficult to ascertain than from employees who were not in a senior leadership position.

In fact, employees who were employed at the organization for less than six months often had little trouble identifying issues they had experienced. At the same time, the positives of employment were more difficult to identify through the focus groups. Though new employees were generally able to share positive aspects of the organization, the list was always shorter than the discussed challenges or frustrations. For example, safety was mentioned in each of the focus groups as a matter of importance. However, frontline employees shared specific examples of how safety training was virtually non-existent, whereas management consistently reported safety as a top priority. These contrasting viewpoints may reflect not only the frequently reported communication issues but also point to reasons why US-based manufacturing companies experience higher turnover than other industries.

Discussion

The four reported themes directly address the two research questions and are important for HRD and training professionals in US manufacturing companies to consider. In particular, four reasons are revealed, which challenge scholars and practitioners to consider the contributing factors to employee dissatisfaction and turnover. In doing so, training professionals may be better apt to respond.

Insufficient onboarding was a universally significant issue across focus groups, highlighting a particularly important program HRD professionals can improve. This finding aligns with prior research on employee onboarding across industries. As scholars and practitioners have reported, organizations often do not sufficiently invest in employee onboarding (Baumann, 2018; Bauer and Erdogan, 2011; Stein and Christiansen, 2010). Instead, a haphazard approach is used, which appears to impede new employees' job readiness and socialization experience. New employees were especially expressive regarding their training experience, at times seemingly surprised by the lack of structure or depth to learning their first job. Kim and Park (2020) found that the organizational learning environment is a significant contributor toward employee learning. As revealed through the study, employees who participated in the study outlined their frustration with a lack of training. Because each organization was experiencing a concerning amount of turnover, there appears to be support of prior research findings that onboarding remains an issue in manufacturing companies.

New employees equally felt underappreciated by management across four of the five organizations. While a supportive work environment has been shown to correspond with favorable organization outcomes (Arasanmi and Krishna, 2019; Mishra and McDonald, 2017), the finding is one of the first to be garnered from small- to medium-sized manufacturing companies in the USA. At the same time, the finding regarding a lack of support from management suggests that manufacturing employers similarly could benefit from demonstrating their support for new employees. Though support can be demonstrated in myriad ways, it appears that HRD professionals in manufacturing need to consider how they can best support their employees through both the onboarding experience offered and through the duration of employment. Perhaps most important, prior to considering support strategies, management needs to understand their employees' needs.

The finding "divergent perspectives" suggests management is not aware of the issues and frustrations employees face in the workplace, of which HRD professionals may be able to play a supporting role. Skelton *et al.* (2020) highlighted that job satisfaction is complex and influenced by cultural differences and various related job components. Pan (2015) added that job satisfaction is subjective and differs by individual. Regardless, perceptions of support correlate with employee job satisfaction (Arasanmi and Krishna, 2019). As poor communication was frequently discussed in focus groups, it should not come as a surprise that management and frontline workers differed, at times drastically, in their perceptions of the work environment. Concern regarding management's limited time on the shop floor may serve as a starting point for HRD professionals in better understanding prevailing challenges in the workplace.

Implications for practice and research

These findings offer implications for HRD and training professionals to consider. The expressed onboarding concern from all focus groups reveals that organizations may not know how to properly onboarding their employees, which makes it less of a priority. Despite periodically being used interchangeably, employee orientation is only one aspect of employee onboarding and at a minimum should include a socialization component (Kirchner and Stull, 2021; Saks and Gruman, 2014; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). Bauer and Erdogan (2011) added that realistic job previews are an important aspect of the onboarding process, which was a concern highlighted by new employees through this study, and thus should be included for new manufacturing employees. Organizations would benefit by having HRD professionals provide their own training to management regarding the purpose and procedures for onboarding new employees, which could include discussions on realistic job previews and employee socialization. These sessions should also incorporate training related to developing and offering comprehensive job training for new employees, which ensure job readiness.

New employees need standardized, comprehensive job training before being ready to take responsibility for performing required job tasks. Whether from the reported inconsistent training procedures or entire lack of training, the study's participants reaffirmed existing research regarding the lack of well-designed and executed training in US manufacturing settings (Huang and Su, 2016). HRD professionals in manufacturing can likely reduce employee turnover by investing in standardized job training programs for new employees by either developing their own or by hiring an external consultant to assist in the training's development. While current training procedures may be all that is required for some employees to successfully learn a position, standardization would help ensure all newcomers receive similar job training and are uniformly evaluated for acquisition of the required knowledge and skills.

At the same time, HRD professionals can encourage management in manufacturing to increase their investments into developing relationships with their employees, as part of improving communication and overall support of the workforce. As reported earlier, employees who feel supported by management are more likely to be engaged and satisfied with their work and ultimately more productive (Arasanmi and Krishna, 2019; Ghosh and Sahney, 2011; Kundu and Lata, 2017). Strategies for increasing perceived support could include scheduled one-on-one meetings with employees to hear their concerns, offering suggestion boxes where employees can confidentially share their ideas or frustrations and increasing individual recognition of employees on an ongoing basis.

The findings also provide scholars with research opportunities, which may further inform HRD professionals in manufacturing settings with strategies to improve onboarding and employment outcomes. First, despite research on correlations between employee onboarding, perceived support and organizational outcomes, few studies have been published which specifically examine these experiences within the small- to medium-sized manufacturing companies. Questions such as "how much does an increased investment in improved onboarding have on organizational and employment outcomes?" and "how can organization leaders improve their support of new manufacturing employees?" would go a long way toward both building buy-in for the need to invest in robust onboarding as well as guide direction for enhancing perceived support for employees. Research on examining how new employees in manufacturing prefer to be trained and which are most impactful may offer insight into crafting and enhancing job training. Although unstructured on-the-job training was the predominant training method used across companies, other methods exist, which may be beneficial in terms of enhancing knowledge transfer and reducing safety hazards including case studies, business games, simulations and group discussion. Finally, the findings reveal opportunities to explore why employees in manufacturing have diverging perspectives about work culture and how the perspectives subsequently may influence employee satisfaction.

Limitations

This study has several limitations, which need to be considered with the findings. Although 67 employees across five manufacturing companies participated in at least one focus group, findings should not be generalized across all manufacturing companies. The companies who participated in the study were experiencing retention issues, which may have inflated the frequency at which employee onboarding, communication and support concerns were discussed. Similarly, the companies were all located within two hours of each other, potentially revealing consistent retention issues within the region but perhaps not representative of retention issues across the country or manufacturing industry. Dominant personalities and group think can influence what is ultimately shared in focus groups. In response, the researchers offered participants the opportunity to respond to the questions via a separate follow-up email and encouraged active participation from all during the focus group sessions, employees may have still had concerns about sharing

information that could potentially be traced back and lead to repercussions. As such, replication of the study using alternative collection strategies such as surveys and one-on-one interviews to check for consistency would be beneficial.

Conclusion

This paper explored employee onboarding and retention issues from the perspective of senior management, mid-level managers, long-term employees and new employees in the manufacturing industry. In total, feedback from 67 employees from five manufacturing companies located in the Midwest USA offered insight into their company's onboarding experience and satisfaction issues. The findings revealed that onboarding remains an overlooked and underused tool for manufacturing organizations. At the same time, new employees frequently expressed frustrations related to communication and support from management, which negatively impacted their job satisfaction. Finally, senior management generally had a drastically different perspective of the work environment from that of new employees. The findings fill an existing gap related to turnover of new employees in the manufacturing industry and offer opportunities for HRD professionals to explore. By revealing or reaffirming prominent issues related to employee satisfaction in manufacturing companies, HRD professionals and training professionals can devise research-supported programs, which better address the identified challenges.

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