ORGANIZATIONAL
Dynamics

Onboarding during COVID-19:
Create structure, connect people, and continue adapting

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Charles P.R. Scott, Tessly A. Dieguez, Pratibha Deepak, Siqi Gu, Jessica L. Wildman

Alex searched for, applied for, and excitedly started a new job during the COVID-19 pandemic. The organizational onboarding available to Alex included recordings of old onboarding classes, Zoom calls with their new supervisor, and virtual introductions to coworkers and key sponsors within the organization. Unfortunately, Alex was given few opportunities to socially engage and build meaningful connections. Because the pandemic had changed priorities, and because the organization's customers were reeling from the massive changes themselves, work expectations for Alex were vague, and many of their early days were spent doing busy work or "filling gaps" that felt disconnected from the stated purpose of the job. When more important work did finally occur, Alex lacked clarity on expectations, goals, workflows, and processes, because many of the previous ways of doing business had changed due to the ongoing crisis. Feedback, when offered, wasn't exactly constructive because Alex's supervisor didn't have a clear view of the efforts being made remotely. This lack of feedback made Alex anxious about job performance and job fit. Coupling that anxiety with the many other psychological and health challenges associated with the ongoing pandemic means that Alex has joined a "generation" of COVID-19 new hires who are struggling to find their footing in their new jobs and careers.

Alex's story, based loosely on a real-world experience, illuminates how crises like the COVID-19 pandemic can have many detrimental impacts on workplaces through damaging employees' physical and emotional health, decreasing productivity, and disrupting operations. The current pandemic is recognized as an ongoing crisis that is an international economic threat bearing unprecedented implications for workplaces and employees. One huge catalyst for change has been the varying requirements for social distancing. This has forced a large portion of the global workforce to work from home or work in relative isolation from others. For organizations, this means rethinking and redesigning all aspects of their workforce strategies to the extent possible. While the negative ramifications of isolation resulting from social distancing and virtual work apply to all employees impacted by the pandemic, it is even more pronounced for unfamiliar newcomers being onboarded in these unprecedented times.

The COVID-19 global pandemic has exacerbated existing issues and brought out a host of new ones for employees starting new jobs. The pandemic is affecting the nature of how work is being done, physical workplace environments, organizational cultures, and employee mental health and well-being. One of the most visible impacts has been the drastic increase of remote and virtual work. Studies conducted between March and May of 2020 found that approximately half of American employees were working from home during the pandemic, which effectively doubled the number of people who were working virtually compared to pre-pandemic numbers. And while some individuals have begun to return to working in physical office spaces, many jobs continue to be performed remotely. In some cases, new employees are being required to join their new organizations virtually, without ever entering their physical workplace or meeting coworkers, leaders, and stakeholders face-to-face. It is especially difficult to give new hires the support they require in an exclusively virtual environment, given how difficult virtual teams are to manage. For those employees beginning new jobs in person, the COVID-19 pandemic has

also affected physical workspaces and workplace culture. Even in the same office, employees may be more physically isolated from colleagues. Common areas, such as break rooms, may be closed or have limited accessibility. Employee welcome events and team socialization activities are also limited, socially distanced, virtual, or nonexistent due to the pandemic. These factors make social interaction and relationship-building with new colleagues difficult.

Finally, employees beginning jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic face unique situations that may lead to negative well-being outcomes. Recent research has found stress and anxiety levels, healthcare costs, and anti-anxiety medication use have all increased since the start of the pandemic. Additionally, there is evidence that some employees are using (and misusing) substances to help manage their stress and anxiety during this time of disconnection and uncertainty. Therefore, proper onboarding is not just an important step for ensuring the organization successfully navigates the crisis and emerges in a strong position. Effective onboarding is also a moral and ethical imperative that supports new employee mental health and well-being during a time of both global and personal challenge.

Luckily, there are research-based strategies that organizations can utilize to overcome the challenges of onboarding during crises such as the pandemic. Specifically, we advocate that organizations hiring during the current global pandemic, and organizations onboarding during any future crises, prioritize the three C's of onboarding to ensure effectiveness during crises: (1) Create structure, (2) Connect people, and (3) Continue adapting. Within these themes, we identify actionable steps organizations can take to achieve employee and organizational outcomes that are particularly important in crisis times. While this approach was developed to address employee onboarding challenges currently seen within the COVID-19 global pandemic context, its principles are broad enough to be applied across varied crisis scenarios.

EFFECTIVE EMPLOYEE ONBOARDING

Within the research on employee onboarding, organizational socialization is seen as essential for the newcomer's initiation and subsequent assimilation to the organizational culture. Simply stated, organizational socialization helps the newcomer transition from an organizational outsider to an insider. Research evidence indicates that *role clarit*y (i.e., understanding of the what and how of the job requirements), *self-efficacy* (i.e., confidence in performing one's new role), and *social acceptance* (i.e., feelings of being a part of an ingroup) are crucial to the newcomer adjustment process. When newcomers onboard into a virtual organization or team, they can miss out on developing deep social connections with the team and have fewer opportunities for learning social information (i.e., team normative behavior), which can have detrimental effects on adjustment to the job.

Walking into a new organization and a new team can be both an exciting and intimidating experience. Newcomers have the opportunity to contribute to an organization and learn new skill sets while also facing new social and professional challenges, an unknown work landscape, and personal stress. Effectively onboarding and welcoming new team

members is a critical part of both talent acquisition and talent management because it helps quickly orient new employees to the organization and the team. Effective onboarding and newcomer socialization can also help employees mitigate and manage the stress of entering a new workplace. Research shows that employees oriented into an organization with a well-structured onboarding program are 69% more likely to remain with the company. This structured approach has also been mirrored by several leading organizations, such as Zappos, *L'Oréal,* and Twitter, with results showing returns on investment in organizational development. The programs run by these companies have all been lauded as productive and welcoming by newcomers. The importance of effective onboarding is doubly important when newcomers join an organization during times of change and stress such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unfortunately, even in pre-pandemic times, only 12% of new employees strongly believed that their organizations did a good job with onboarding. Ineffective onboarding has been associated with decreased job satisfaction, impaired performance and effectiveness, organizational inefficiency, and eventual employee turnover. The negative outcomes of mishandled onboarding experiences cost companies 37 billion dollars annually in the U.S. and U.K. alone. Furthermore, according to the Society for Human Resource Management, each employee departure costs organizations approximately one-third of that employee's annual earnings due to factors such as interview time, lost knowledge, and time spent recruiting. While research into the outcomes of poor onboarding during the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing, crises have a way of amplifying existing issues and increasing the chance of systemic failures.

NEW EMPLOYEE SUCCESS DURING CRISIS

So how can organizations ensure successful employee onboarding and support new employees during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic? Organizations can do so by adapting the fundamentals of employee onboarding to changing circumstances. Three major factors provide the foundation for new employee success: (1) building knowledge and confidence, (2) creating social connection, and (3) supporting employee well-being. When otherwise highly capable new employees are not given a stable foundation, they will struggle to perform, to connect, and may potentially leave the organization. In times of crisis, the outcomes for new employees and for the organization may prove even more critical. During a crisis, creating a pathway to employee success for new hires is even harder because employees are experiencing extreme stress levels. Contributing to this stress are unclear organizational communication methods and employee roles that arise when organizations that are scrambling to change their own processes and structures in order to survive. Unless an onboarding program is being specifically updated or monitored to adapt to the changing tides of an organizational crisis, it is not going to serve new employees well. Therefore, if an onboarding program isn't supporting new hires by increasing their confidence, providing them with critical knowledge, reducing their stress and anxiety, enhancing their feelings of connection with others, and, if it isn't adapting to changing circumstances, then it is

not working properly. Therefore, we offer concrete steps and advice to create or update an onboarding program that focuses specifically on these foundational elements of employee success (Table 1).

In order to build the foundational elements for employee success and to overcome the barriers present during times of crisis, we put forth a simple and intuitive framework prioritizing the three C's of onboarding: (1) create structure, (2) connect people, and (3) continue adapting. This approach focuses on the fundamentals of building successful onboarding programs and includes some actions organizations should consider when adapting their onboarding programs to the unusual conditions created by COVID-19 and future crises in order to help set their employees on a pathway to job success. This model is flexible enough to be applied to most crises that can affect organizations, but for timeliness and illustration, we will frame these actions from the lens of adapting onboarding to the COVID-19 crisis.

Create structure

As soon as LinkedIn announced their workforce would be moving to a virtual workspace because of COVID-19, their onboarding team worked together and, in a week's time, implemented a completely virtual onboarding program that went over how best to work virtually in this context. In doing so, LinkedIn also redesigned and expanded the content of their one-day in-person onboarding program into a five-day virtual onboarding program, with the objectives of not overwhelming the new hires and allowing them greater flexibility in when and how to complete the onboarding. This is where the design elements of an onboarding program come in. Researchers have advocated that orientation programs can be made more

effective by incorporating elements of formal structure, creating sequential onboarding steps for learning important topics (e.g., company culture, task and process related information), and including elements of socialization activities.

Newcomers are generally anxious regarding the details of their new role (e.g., organizational culture, team culture, job role). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this situation of uncertainty by bringing in concerns of organizational values surrounding health and well-being. Creating structures around primary facets of the newcomers' work environment such as organizational culture, workflows and applications, team-communication, and organizational practices and accommodation on employee well-being, can mitigate newcomers' concerns. For example, relating back to Alex's story, if the organization had provided a brief training about how the current pandemic was unpredictably impacting workflows and client needs, or if their leader had spent more time setting expectations and giving feedback to remote employees, then Alex wouldn't have felt as uncertain about their expectations and role in the organization. Organizations should also be mindful of potential individual differences among employees that may affect their experience and comfort during onboarding. For instance, employees with ample technological experience may be more comfortable using virtual tools than those that have not, either due to interest or accessibility, and introverted new employees may be less likely to proactively reach out socially to others or to ask for help or admit confusion. Actions organizations should consider when working to provide a more robust structure for new hires, especially ones facing constant change and confusion during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, are presented in Table 2.

The action steps in Table 2 aim to create structure and certainty, and therefore can enhance employee knowledge

Table 1 The foundational elements of employee success and barriers to achieving them

Foundational element	
Knowledge and Confidence	Knowledge about an employee's role in the company, how to perform their job effectively, and what they need to do to successfully work with their coworkers and teams
Social Connection	A sense of social belongingness to a team and organization that can be used to support employee growth and well-being
Well-being	The happiness and health (i.e., physical and psychological) of employees

Barriers to achievement	
Employee stress and anxiety	New employees face uncertainty both at home and in the workplace and must navigate a dynamic and confusing new environment while also maintaining their own personal lives
Communication and role uncertainty	Lack of knowledge about how they should communicate, who they should be communicating with, and uncertainty about what their role within a team and organization will be
Changing task, team, and organizational processes and goals	The organization's crisis response requires significant and fast change to adapt to circumstances that result in confusion about the goals employees are pursuing and what processes best achieve those goals
Stagnant or old onboarding information or guidance	An organization's onboarding is out-of-date, already unsuccessful, and lacks the key information and structure new hires will need
Physical and social barriers	New employees and existing teams may need to work virtually or in socially distanced settings which make it difficult to quickly and efficiently communicate and build useful and supportive personal connections
Lack of tools and materials	New hires may lack the tools they will need to use to complete their tasks (e.g. computers, access to company servers, shared documents, or contacts)

Table 2 Actions that create structure when onboarding during crisis

Actions	Description
Provide a crisis (i.e., health and safety) management plan	Provide specific information about how the organization will address the health concerns of employees and support employee safety and wellness, instructions on how employees must engage with social distancing, personal protective equipment (PPE), sharing communal spaces, and what will happen if an employee tests positive for COVID-19
Communicate early, clearly, and often	Communicate information that employees should know, changes that have or will occur, the reasons why actions are being taken and/or how employees should react and change their own behavior
Provide appropriate and necessary tools and equipment	Provide a work system that can connect with organizational systems and is pre-loaded and activated with the tools an employee will need to perform their tasks and communicate with their team members
Train new hires on necessary tools and systems	Train new hires on what tools or processes should be used to complete tasks, especially any newer tools or processes put in place to manage or work around the crisis
Teach new hires how to socially interact and connect	Provide knowledge not just about the job, but also about how to communicate and collaborate with others. This includes knowledge about how to use online interaction tools and/or how to physically interact with co-workers, teammates, clients, and key stakeholders in a safe manner
Personalized coaching	Connect new hires with an HR representative or team member who is responsible for guiding an employee through setting up their workspace and preparing them for work. Give these personal onboarding coaches a structured list of topics to walk new hires through to help them get set up
Demonstrate organizational support employee health initiatives	Provide employees information about any well-being resources or initiatives available to them. For instance, the availability of employee assistance programs (EAPs) or COVID-19 support groups for employees and their families

and confidence, feelings of social connection, and well-being. Research has demonstrated that coaching and effective training may positively influence employee confidence, and employee training can have a positive effect on employee knowledge. Organizational socialization tactics have been found to positively affect social connections in the form of social acceptance, which supports employee engagement and well-being. Finally, uncertainty often leads to worry. It follows that reducing this uncertainty through creating structure may reduce worry and, in turn, positively affect employee well-being. Additionally, there is evidence that organizational support in the wake of crises can positively affect employee well-being.

Connect people

As the COVID-19 pandemic has swept across the world, it has brought into focus the crippling effects of social isolation brought about by necessary measures of social distancing and work from home requirements. While virtual work arrangements have been generally seen as enablers of work-life balance, those same arrangements are now negatively impacting employees' emotional health. Gallup research findings indicate that employees are reporting more loneliness as an emotional reaction to the lack of workplace connection. Social isolation and feelings of loneliness have been linked to many physical and mental ailments such as heart disease, anxiety, and depression. In a survey conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 53% of adults in the United States reported having issues with their mental health as a result of COVID-19. For newcomers, the

situation is likely to be even worse considering their lack of existing organizational connections.

One of the solutions to the issue of newcomer isolation is finding creative ways to build social connections. For newcomers, this can be in the form of structured social onboarding programs. Social onboarding shifts the focus away from providing informational and structural support and toward developing new hires' sense of identification with their team, department, and/or organization, and their knowledge of the organizational culture through events that allow organizational members to connect. This allows newcomers to feel more attached and cohesive with their team or other work units and results in more commitment, which leads to positive job performance and reduced turnover. For Alex, who mostly interacts with coworkers in goal-directed meetings and spends the remainder of their time working alone, having opportunities like weekly group happy hours or a chat channel open for social chatter among team members would help cement a feeling of belonging and reinforce everyone's sense of team spirit. Social connections also help to improve organizational awareness about how new hires fit into the organization and helps them better navigate organizational politics and structures to manage internal stakeholders and points of contact. Connecting people formally through organizational support is one effective way to mitigate feelings of isolation, reduce stress, and improve well-being. Research shows that organizational support has a strong and positive effect on employee job satisfaction and that sharing personal struggles with pandemic-related anxieties humanizes employers, which may make new employees feel like it's "not just them". Specific actions organizations can

take to encourage newcomers to create social connections during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic are presented in Table 3.

The action steps in Table 3 can also positively impact employee knowledge and confidence, social outcomes, and well-being. Research evidence supports a formal institutionalized program over an informal orientation program to improve newcomer adjustment. Structured social onboarding programs provide a platform for newcomers to build relationships with their supervisor(s) and peers and to create social networks for feedback seeking. These social onboarding tactics result in well-rounded newcomer adjustment reflected in newcomers' states of better role clarity, increased self-efficacy, and acceptance by organizational insiders. Ultimately, better newcomer adjustment translates into desirable beneficial workplace outcomes such as increased job satisfaction, increased organizational commitment, and improved job performance.

Continue adapting

No onboarding program is perfect, and ineffective onboarding is a great way to lose valuable employees. Therefore, it is critical that organizations periodically assess the effectiveness of the onboarding process, especially in times of crisis when outdated systems may not be functioning very effectively. Organizations should look for opportunities to make improvements in onboarding programs for future hires. If possible, organizations should reflect on and address gaps in past onboarding and share improvements with previous cohorts of newly hired employees. Organizations are also interested in the effectiveness of onboarding programs to assess their return on investment (ROI) of programs and to identify key issues for improvement as well as prepare for the future. Evaluation of onboarding programs should be designed to assess the performance of the program and performance of new hires.

Organizations will need to make quick and time-sensitive adjustments to a new onboarding program to ensure it serves new hires effectively, especially when the onboarding program is being built and implemented in uncertain times. Given the stress and confusion of the current pandemic and the strain employees are facing, human resources and team leaders should focus on monitoring onboarding program performance and new hire stress, well-being, feelings of connection, and knowledge, rather than strictly on new hire

Table 3   Actions for connecting people when onboarding during crisis

Action	Description
Institute regular COVID-19 check-in meetings and one-on-ones	Ensure that managers and organizational leaders check-in with teams and new hires to help them navigate their anxiety and concerns about the COVID-19 crisis
Host online socials	Host online or socially distanced social hours or meet ups so that employees can get to know their new colleagues. Employees may be more likely to participate if they have a specific purpose or structure (e.g. game night, celebrating a new hire, an employee's birthday, etc.)
Set up virtual lunch hours or coffee breaks	Set up smaller, more intimate virtual sessions for co-workers and teams to relax and chat virtually. Introverted new hires may enjoy a chance to meet people in smaller groups, or structured activities around which to center conversation
Incentivize frequent communication with new hires	Ensure that existing employees are incentivized to welcome and engage with new hires in meaningful ways. The more team members reach out to get to know their new co-worker, the more they will learn and connect
Establish virtual open door policies	Incentivize team leaders and managers to ensure that new hires know that there are no "stupid questions" and that they can reach out to them for any issues or questions that they may have
Leverage new technologies to create digital water coolers and social spaces	Use communication technology like Slack, Microsoft Teams, Discord, Yammer, and other tools to create pages and spots for employees to connect informally over hobbies, interests, job functions, etc.
Assign new hires a long term mentor or "friendly coworker" to help them during their onboarding	Enact a formal mentoring program so that established employees can act as guides and mentors to new hires helping them learn the ropes and get connected. Sometimes reaching out to a leader for advice or help can be anxiety-inducing whereas reaching out to a co-worker may not be
Provide socially distant or virtual tours	Provide new hires with a virtual, or socially distant, tour of their new workplace
Schedule one-on-ones between co-workers, key stakeholders, and new hires	Provide a social schedule to new hires to talk with teammates and key stakeholders. Ensure that current employees are given some structure to guide discussion (e.g., their role, how they connect with the new hire, how they will be working together, anything personal that they want to share) and then allow the new hire to share about themselves and ask questions
Re-introduce employees through team building or events	As COVID-19 becomes less of a risk, ensure that coworkers and teams come together to re-socialize in more normal circumstances. This helps people reconnect and put a "face to the name" of people they've been working with in virtual or socially distanced (e.g., masked) settings

Table 4 Actions for continuous adaptation in onboarding during crisis

Action	Description
Use an iterative approach to refining onboarding processes	Take the information gained about the success of onboarded cohorts, their feedback, and the feedback of key stakeholders, to create an ongoing improvement process that focuses on improving the outcomes of the onboarding process itself
Schedule regular onboarding check-ins	Ensure that managers and organizational leaders check-in with teams and new hires to assess the onboarding program
Use pulse survey techniques	Check in often using confidential pulse surveys to ensure that new hires feel that their onboarding process is supporting their feelings of well-being, knowledge, and confidence, and developing their social connections within their teams and the organization. Use that information to guide future changes or developments to the onboarding system or to fix issues that occur during that onboarding
Broadcast the goals of check-ins	The goals of onboarding check-ins should be about supporting a new hire's onboarding process and not about their personal performance, productivity, or job fit. Keeping conversations focused on the onboarding experience will help get the best information organizations need to make decisions about onboarding improvements
Organize feedback focus groups	Bring in cohorts of new hires after they've completed onboarding to ask for anonymous or confidential feedback on the onboarding process and ask these groups to discuss their onboarding experiences to crowdsource the strengths and weaknesses of the onboarding process
Reward exceptional mentors and other key personnel	Ensure that people who step up to be mentors are assessed and rewarded for their success or removed as mentors if they are not taking their role seriously. Create a structured recognition system that helps to encourage key stakeholders in the onboarding system (HR professionals, hiring managers, etc.) who show the best outcomes to keep engaging with newly hired employees
Correct obvious mistakes or gaps	Don't wait until someone has "fully onboarded" before allowing them to report gaps in the onboarding process. Fix those gaps for that person and anyone else who may be affected by those gaps. Reacting quickly to new information helps reassure new hires that an organization is doing everything they can to set them up for success
Invest in objective ROI metrics	Use data such as engagement scores from newly hired cohorts, turnover rates for specific departments, teams, or hiring managers, absenteeism metrics, time-to-productivity analyses, etc. to assess effectiveness of the onboarding system

performance. The short-term benefits of putting a new hire's needs before the company's needs are cultivating a great employee experience and ensuring that new hires know the organization went above and beyond to support them during a stressful and chaotic time. These short term gains will eventually translate into long-term commitment and performance. The monitoring of newcomer onboarding programs will need to answer the following four major questions: (1) Is the onboarding program working as planned, especially given the current crisis context? (2) Is the duration of the onboarding program sufficient? (3) Is the onboarding program providing new hires the knowledge, tools, and connections they need to be successful? and (4) Is the team and the organization seeing tangible benefits from the onboarding program? Actions organizations can take to ensure that their onboarding programs are continuously improving, especially in times of crisis, are presented in Table 4. For example, over Alex's first few months in the new job, the organization started doing retrospective check-ins to answer questions and provide support for their newest employees. While initial onboarding was a somewhat frustrating and anxious experience, Alex is now able to report back about how their onboarding can be improved and get retroactive support and guidance to get back on track and start building confidence and connections.

Prioritizing the three C's described here can be an effective solution for navigating newcomer onboarding challenges during difficult times. However, to ensure that the onboarding programs are working as intended, leaders and key stakeholders must identify and establish key metrics that will determine the onboarding program's positive return on investment. Measuring the performance of onboarding based on these metrics can help identify issues that are impeding the onboarding program's performance, hence allowing the possibility of necessary intervention and correction. For instance, Zapier recently revamped their onboarding program, making it more streamlined, seamless, and less time consuming based on onboarding feedback surveys that indicated newcomer's frustration with lengthy paperwork. Given this, providing new hires with a way to voice their concerns or ideas to improve the system can help ensure employee well-being both for current employees and, if the concerns are addressed, will ensure that future cohorts of new hires won't face the same problems.

CONCLUSION

New hire onboarding is a process that has serious consequences for both talent acquisition and talent management. Without

the proper design and implementation, the onboarding process can be stressful and negatively impact the employee experience, and ultimately, employee and organization outcomes. The COVID-19 global pandemic has increased the complexity of the onboarding process, and it is an excellent example of a crisis that strongly affects organizations and could also strongly impact the experience of new hires and the quality of an onboarding system. For instance, organizations with little experience dealing with virtual onboarding have been left with no option but to virtually onboard during government mandated stay-at-home orders. The pandemic has also created new challenges for employees onboarding in person. While the current circumstances may appear to be an obstacle, this situation also serves as an opportunity for organizations to grow and develop new evidence-based tools and resources to improve the employee onboarding experience. These tools and resources can help to crisis-proof an onboarding process with some forethought and consideration.

The three C's of onboarding we outline offer concrete guidelines for organizations to navigate the turmoil of crisis by strengthening new hires' knowledge, confidence, well-being, and social connections, and by continuously adapting the onboarding experience to meet new and changing situations. We believe that organizations can use the three C's of onboarding to adjust and adapt to the new reality presented by this current COVID-19 crisis and can be broadly applied to future crises. Ultimately, by focusing on creating structure, connecting people, and continuously adapting, organizations can create an effective and flexible onboarding process in which employees are instilled with the knowledge, confidence, and well-being they need to start on their pathway to employee success.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Charles P.R. Scott: Conceptualization, Writing - original draft. **Tessly A. Dieguez:** Conceptualization, Writing - original draft. **Pratibha Deepak:** Conceptualization, Writing - original draft. **Siqi Gu:** Conceptualization, Writing - original draft. **Jessica L. Wildman:** Supervision, Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing.

Charles P.R. Scott, PhD, is a Researcher in the Center for Leadership and Ethics at the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin. He has worked as a talent consultant in multiple industries and his research interests include how diverse teams develop positive team cultures, collaborative behaviors, and self-leadership capacity, e-mail: scottc2012@my.fit.edu

Tessly A. Dieguez is a doctoral candidate in the Industrial Organizational (I/O) psychology program at the Florida Institute of Technology and a Leadership Associate at Kincentric. Her research areas focus on emotions at work and employee well-being, e-mail: tdieguez2015@my.fit.edu

Pratibha Deepak is a third-year doctoral student in the Industiral Organizational (I/O) psychology program at Florida Institute of Technology. Her research interests include workplace dynamics, organizational culture, employee engagement, and leadership. Her previous qualifications include a master's in I/O Psychology and an M.B.A in HRM. Pratibha has eight-plus years of experience as a Senior Consultant spanning across multiple sectors including experience in Fortune 500 organizations and international humanitarian organizations, e-mail: pdeepak2017@my.fit.edu

Siqi Gu is a master's student in the Industrial Organizational (I/O) psychology program at the Florida Institute of Technology. His research interests focus on selection, assessment, and culture, e-mail: sgu2019@my.fit.edu

Jessica L. Wildman, PhD, is a tenured Associate Professor in the Industrial Organizational (I/O) Psychology program and the Research Director of the Institute for Culture, Collaboration, and Management (ICCM) at the Florida Institute of Technology. Dr. Wildman has conducted organizational research for clients including the Office of Naval Research, the U.S. Army Research Institute, NASA, and large multinational companies. Her research interests focus on the intersections of trust, culture, diversity, and teams in the workplace. (Florida Institute of Technology, 150 W. University Blvd, Melbourne, FL, 32901, Tel. +1 321-674-7130) e-mail: jwildman@fit.edu (Corresponding author).