

# Personal experience in the onboarding process: A reflective analysis through autoethnography

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## Abstract

This paper investigates an onboarding process from the perspective of a new employee, using an autoethnographic approach. Through daily reflection, notes and analysis of personal experience during the period of adaptation in a software company, the first author has identified the key steps, entities and relationships that shape the process of integration into the company's work environment. This study offers a structured representation of onboarding through two visual models: initial and final that show how elements such as mentoring, access to resources and reflection complement each other in adaptation. The reflection not only contributed to the first author's professional development but also provided insights that are very useful for designing an effective onboarding process.

## Keywords

Onboarding process, IT Company, Personal experience, Reflection, Autoethnography

## 1. Introduction

Onboarding represents a key process in the integration of new employees in the company, which includes not only the transfer of technical knowledge but also socialization in the organizational culture. Contemporary research points out that a quality onboarding process significantly affects employee retention. A study from 2025 shows that a well-structured onboarding program, which includes a welcome from managers and colleagues, positively affects the identification of employees with the organization and reduces the intention to leave the position and the job [1]. In the context of digital transformation and remote work, companies are faced with challenges in adapting the onboarding process. A qualitative study conducted in a higher education institution in the Netherlands during the COVID-19 pandemic identified four key factors influencing the adjustment of new employees: relationship building, responsibility for adjustment, managing well-being and sense of belonging, information seeking [2].

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that combines autobiographical storytelling with ethnographic analysis to explore the cultural and social dimensions of personal experience [3]. This method allows researchers to provide a deeper understanding of organizational phenomena through introspective analysis through their own experience [4]. In the contemporary work environment, autoethnography has been used to examine how individuals navigate inclusion and collaboration, particularly as it relates to virtual or hybrid organizational environments. This approach allows researchers to uncover the emotional and cultural dynamics related to power within an organization through first-person and reflective perspective [3]. Also, works from the field of autoethnography methodology emphasize the importance of ethical aspects of research, especially in situations where the personal narrative includes other actors from the organizational context [5, 6].

Reflection is a key component of professional development that allows individuals to analyze their own actions and experiences with the aim of improving everyday practice [7]. In a business and organizational environment, reflection allows employees to better understand their roles, identify

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challenges and develop strategies to overcome obstacles [8]. Reflective practice is increasingly used in technical fields such as software engineering. Barr et al. [9] analyzed the longitudinal development of reflective skills in students in a work-based software engineering program and indicated clear patterns of progress through academic and professional experience.

The aim of this paper is to present the onboarding process through the first author's personal experience and reflection and how specific elements of the new employee integration model are developed through it.

Based on this aim, autoethnographic method was selected as a valid approach for analyzing professional practice. Autoethnography allows deep interpretation of individual experience and supports the structured development of a general onboarding model.

## **2. Methodology**

In this work, a qualitative methodology that relies on an autoethnographic approach was applied, which allows the researcher to use his own experience as a source of data for understanding and modeling the onboarding process. Autoethnography is at the crossroads between autobiography and enography because it interprets the researcher's personal narratives in a broader cultural and organizational context [10].

This approach is particularly suitable in situations where the first author is a direct participant in the process, and the goal is to discover patterns and meanings through reflective practice [3, 4]. According to Ellis [11] and Given [10], autoethnography often includes taking reflective notes that simultaneously represent data and the basis for analysis.

In this research, the onboarding process was documented through daily reflections, notes, internal documentation, and procedural monitoring, and data collection was conducted during the onboarding process, followed by analysis and model development. Analysis process didn't use formal thematic coding, but it was conducted through iterative reflection and categorization. Written and digital notes were reviewed and grouped according to concepts. Entities, (e.g. Mentor, Manager, Resources) and other key steps were identified through process and visually represented.

## **3. Description of Experience**

The experience that served as the basis for reflective analysis was gained in a software company that develops integration solutions in software tools, electronic stores, in tools related to bookkeeping, design, music, communication, etc. The company specializes in the implementation of soft and hard integrations that are designed to connect with different platforms, applications, and tools that clients use in their business processes.

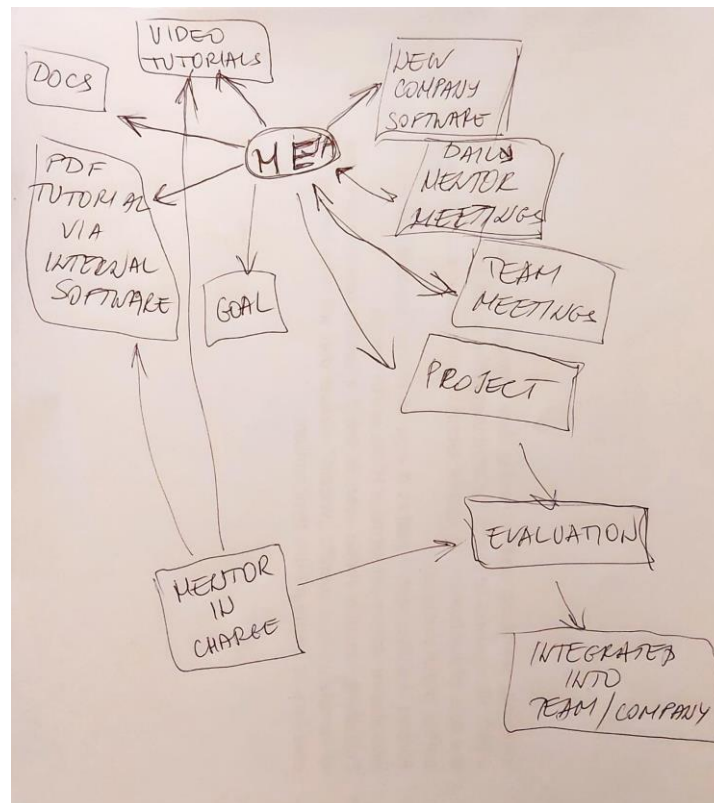
The first author's work was focused on soft integrations, which were realized using software integration solutions developed within the company. Unlike complex hard integrations that include deeper changes in existing systems, development of new functionalities within existing and new integrations, inclusion of hardware components, soft integrations imply faster and more flexible connection of systems/software, most often available via API. The use of documentation and existing API interfaces enables a simple implementation that does not require complex technical interventions or changes in the infrastructure.

During the period of one year and ten months, when the first author worked as an Integration Specialist, the emphasis was on understanding client requirements, analyzing technical documentation, configuring connections, developing integrations, as well as testing functionality after implementation. The role of a mentor, cooperation with the team and constant exchange of knowledge contributed to the development of professional and social skills, but also to a deeper understanding of the process of inclusion in team dynamics through daily work.

This kind of work environment represented a context for considering and recording the process of personal and professional inclusion in the new work environment, as well as reflecting on the importance of defining goals, mentoring and informal learning within the onboarding phase.

## 4. Reflective Analysis and Model Development

During onboarding process, first author was engaged with various internal company materials such as documentation, internal tutorials, internal software and other onboarding resources that was granted in period. Also, daily communication with a mentor and attendance at team meetings as a participant/observer occurred. Reflections included technical insights and emotional reactions such as confusion, huge burst moments of clarity and motivation and questions about environment, integrations, APIs, etc. Through whole process of communication and working, first author was thinking about gained experiences, about progress, potential challenges, ignorance and based on that, notes were created both in paper form and in digital form. The notes that were created during that period and the reflections that accompanied first author, represents the basis for the analysis. Notes were recorded on daily basis, both on separate papers, notebooks, and digital tool (MS Word) usually during meeting with Mentor and while working and studying processes of creating integration. Figure 1 shows authentic note of the onboarding process that was illustrated during period of integrating into company. This reflects mapping daily mentor and weekly team meetings, internal software and documentation usage, resource access. These notes were base ground for creating initial onboarding model. The identification of entities and steps is based on the analysis of daily activities and reflective observations during the process. Entities are identified as functional components in onboarding while steps are derived from the logical flow of recorded events.

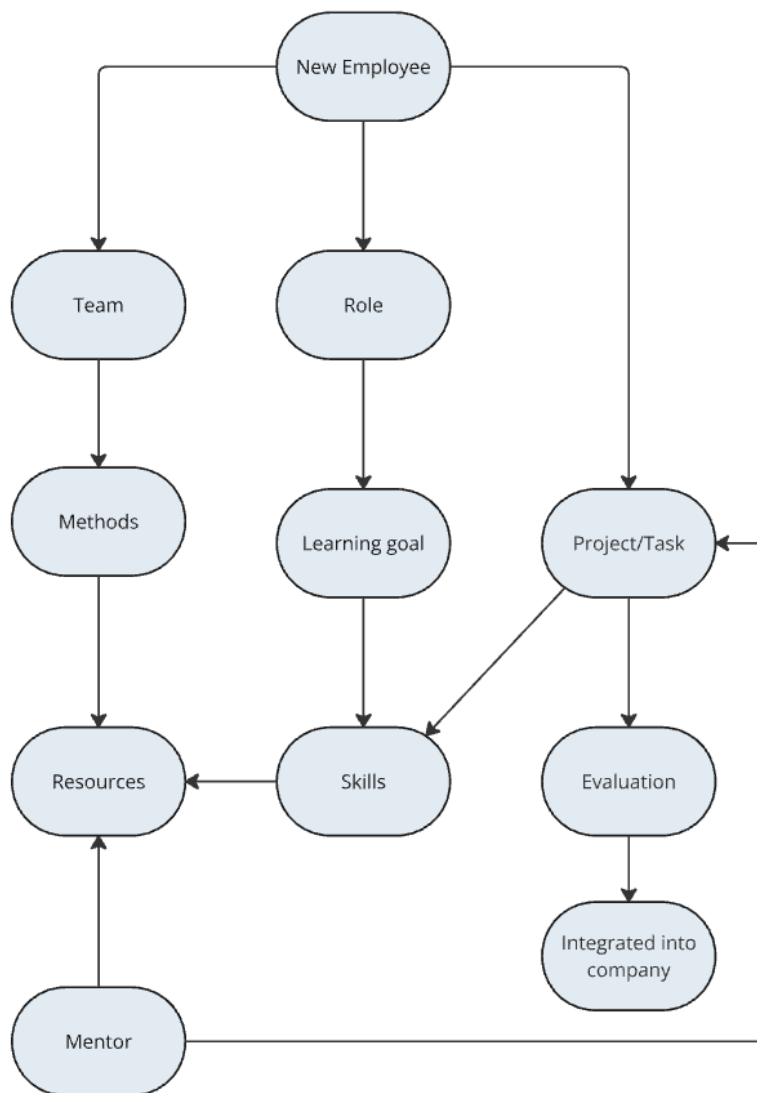


**Figure 1:** Example of written notes during integrating into company

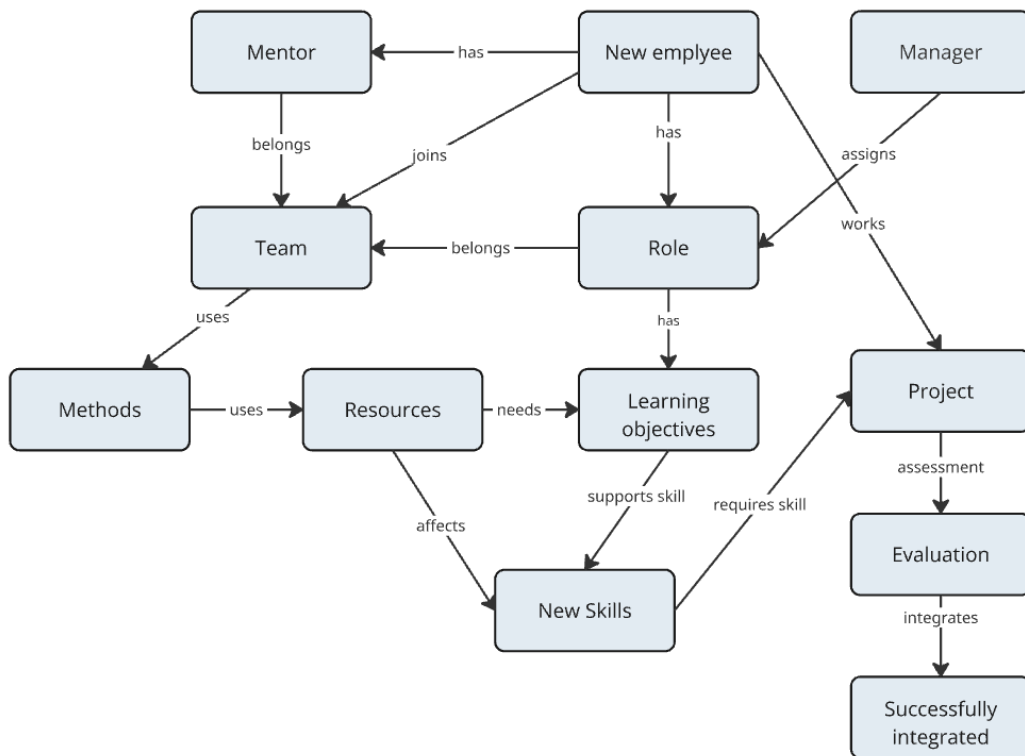
Based on notes, first author developed a structured initial onboarding model that is shown in Figure 2. This model visualize the most essential entities and relationships between them such as mentor, team, resources, method, learning goal, etc. The main focus of the model version was to interpret personal logic that was gained through experimental learning into visual representation. It emerged from introspective practice of writing and recording daily activities and personal insights (reflection) and serves as first semantic representation of the onboarding process from participant's perspective.

In this model, onboarding process begins with assignment of a role and access to resources that is followed by mentoring and task involvement. This model captures flow of communication, learning and reflection.

After that notes were categorized, grouped, this part is about organizing with aim of creating a structure for further development of model. Through data organization and analysis process, new procedures/steps, processes and entities were detected. After reorganizing data, initial semantic visualization of the entities and their mutual relations was created. Figure 3 presents the result of analytical effort, a final onboarding model. This model introduced more refined visual representation with better and clearer picture with expanded entities such as “Manager“ and “Learning objectives“, and semantic text between entities. Existing ones were linked with semantically more precise relationships and entities such as “Learning objectives“ instead of “Learning goal“. This model still relies on first author’s experience but with this version, it moves toward systematical generalization and usability in different aspects of process. The model shows how onboarding begins, i.e. by communicating with the manager, it then includes intensive communication with the mentor, use of resources and work methods, setting learning goals, as well as evaluation after the completion of a specific task or project. This ensures a clear flow of entry into the organization until full integration into the company’s team.

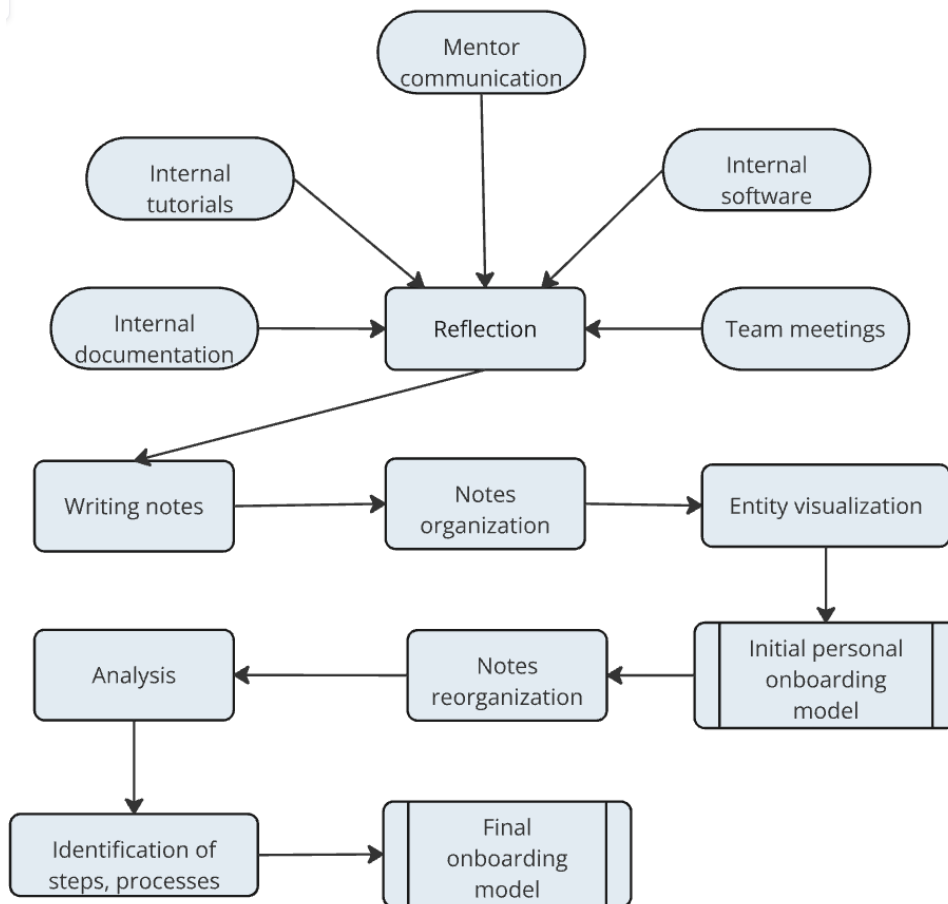


**Figure 2:** Initial Onboarding model created based on written notes



**Figure 3:** Final onboarding model

Figure 4 and represents the autoethnographic basis of the onboarding process model. It includes core elements that are based on personal experience and introspection, such as daily communication with the mentor and team, use of internal documentation and tutorials and interaction with internal software, but also the process of constructing and developing onboarding model. Through mentioned daily activities, the first author engaged in continuous reflection based on the emotional-cognitive process of personal learning and adaptation. Feelings such as confusion, motivation and moments of complete clarity emerged through continuous questioning such as: (1) "Will I succeed?" (2) "Do I understand this type of integration?" (3) "What specifically should I focus on?", etc.). These reflections were systematically documented in both physical and digital format, capturing personal insights, project goals and critical practical knowledge specific to the use of the software. This documenting process enabled the construction of an initial personal onboarding model that was directly derived from reflective note analysis.



**Figure 4:** Autoethnographic landmark of onboarding process model

## 5. Discussion

Reflection is a key element in a person's professional development process, especially during the onboarding period. Through continuous note-taking (paper and digital format) and analysis of his own experience, first author had the opportunity to identify certain patterns of behavior, challenges and success that shaped inclusion in the company. From the introspective analysis, it is possible to recognize reactions to specific situations, which contributes to a deeper understanding of the culture within the company and first author's role within the team. As Schon [12] points out, reflection allows professionals to learn from their experiences, which is important for adaptation in a new work environment.

Using an autoethnographic approach made it possible to analyze and model the onboarding process through personal experience. This approach provided an authentic insight into the organization's processes, but it also carries its own challenges related to subjectivity. According to Ellis [11], autoethnography allows the researcher to connect personal experience with broader cultural, political and social meanings, thereby enriching the understanding of organizational phenomena.

The developed onboarding model is based on personal experience and analysis and can serve as a basis for improving existing practices in organizations that strive for more effective inclusion of new team members in the company. The model identifies the key entities and steps that shape the onboarding experience itself, providing a structure for effective onboarding of new hires. This structure can be especially useful for HR experts, mentors and managers in the IT sector where the speed and efficiency of the onboarding process is essential to the company.

## 5.1. Validity

In qualitative research, validity is often evaluated through the concept of trustworthiness, which includes four key criteria according to the authors of Lincoln & Guba [13] and Shenton [14]: (1) Credibility (2) Transferability (3) Dependability (4) Confirmability.

Credibility is achieved through detailed documentation of reflective notes and a transparent presentation of the analysis process and daily observations recorded during work in the company. These notes include technical and emotional reflections with certain questions that was in authors' mind, and they are shown in Figure 1 as evidence of an authentic documenting process.

Transferability is enabled through a detailed presentation of the work context. The first author worked as an Integration Specialist in a software company dealing with integrations. Given the ubiquity of very similar positions in the IT industry, the model has the potential to be adapted and applied in similar company structures.

Dependability is ensured through the description of the iterative process of reflection and categorization where, after writing notes, data organization, entity identification and model development were done. Although no thematic coding was used, the analytical procedure was documented and presented in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Confirmability was achieved through the use of authentic written and digital notes that served as the basis for the creation of the model. One of the notes is presented in Figure 1 and further explained in the section "Reflective Analysis and Model Evolution". Visual models represent the result of the analysis of the notes, which confirms the high transparency of the process.

## 6. Conclusion

Through an autoethnographic approach, the paper provided a detailed and deep insight into the onboarding process from the perspective of a new employee in the IT sector. With the help of reflection and analysis of personal notes, daily activities and interactions with the mentor and the team, key entities and steps that form the basis for the onboarding process were identified. Based on that, an initial and final model was developed that shows the structure and flow of successful integration of an employee into the organization.

The developed models can serve as a tool for HR experts, mentors, and managers in companies who want to systematize the onboarding process.

Future research can be directed in several directions, such as the improvement of the existing model based on the comparative analysis of a large number of onboarding experiences in different organizations, the theoretical validation of the model through white and gray literature, the development of a software tool that would implement the model in digital form and thus enable its application as part of the internal human resource management system.

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