

Features in learning paths for Indian and Swiss on-boarders

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Abstract

On-boarding of new employees with varying cultural backgrounds can lead to conflicts, disagreements, and frustrations, even to unequal levels of education and misunderstandings. To address these problems, the authors suggest a learning path focusing on cultural differences in learning features. A constructivist perspective was adopted to develop the learning paths. The research strategy was Design Science Research. Two interviews were conducted with the only two course leaders, one from each culture, at the case company, M&S Inc. The results demonstrate that the value systems in the two cultures differ in the areas of law, authority, and design. With features such as a checklist of learning objectives, a reminder that the learning content may differ from what onboarding employees are used to, a wiki for self-study, or discussion forums show especially variation in learning path in the introductory area and concluding area. These differences reflect the cultural differences between the Swiss and Indian participants. By addressing the differences in learning paths, the paper helps to improve learning outcomes and understanding. Thus, this paper contributes to the acceptance of two cultures by comparing the two cultures of Switzerland and India and considering the derived learning characteristics, which contributes to higher satisfaction and performance.

1 Introduction in Learning Across Cultures

The cultural differences between Switzerland and India are particularly evident in the value system, respect for the laws, and behavior toward authority (Budhwar et al., 2019; Chevrier, 2009; Gesteland & Gesteland, 2010). The accompanying cultural assumptions of trainees can lead to conflict, disagreement, and frustration (Uzuner, 2009). This is especially noted in the on-boarding of new employees with varying cultural backgrounds (Uzuner, 2009). Similarly, cultural differences between Switzerland and India and the relationships between culturally different trainers and trainees can lead to unequal training levels and misunderstandings (Apfelbaum et al., 2012; Budhwar et al.,

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2019; Chevrier, 2009; Gesteland & Gesteland, 2010; Schutte, 2016; Uzuner, 2009). To overcome cultural differences in learning in onboarding, it is suggested to design learning paths for onboarding employees where cultural differences are highly evident. The learning paths can show features, structures of learning goals, or a hierarchy (Muhammad et al., 2016; Uzuner, 2009; Walker et al., 2016). The suggested learning paths show how learning features used for communication, assessment, and collaboration, for example, can be integrated into culturally diverse learning paths.

1.1 Learning and Culture

Culture is a mindset that separates “members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede, 1994). In learning, it is found that it is difficult for the trainer to adapt to the culture of each learner when multiple cultures meet. Therefore, during onboarding employees are often expected to “step out of their own culture and temporarily enter the culture of the instructor” (Moore, 2006). But some guidelines can be used to address the issues and align the two mindsets of the clashing host and home cultures to perform similar tasks (Uzuner, 2009). However, as described earlier, the two mindsets need to be aligned on culturally different learning paths to achieve the same learning goal.

1.2 Cultural Differences Between India and Switzerland

Upon providing a better understanding of cultural differences in learning, two cultures, namely that of India and Switzerland, are investigated (Budhwar et al., 2019; Chevrier, 2009; Gesteland & Gesteland, 2010; Kulkarni et al., 2012).

Subject area	Indian culture	Swiss culture
Value System	Decisions are made according to the context and can therefore vary depending on the situation (Budhwar et al., 2019).	Decisions are always made in the same way. The context of the situation is not relevant (Chevrier, 2009).
Respect for the laws	A certain respect for civil and criminal laws. However, the judiciary is very sluggish, which is also exploited (Budhwar et al., 2019).	Culture and the legal system are strongly interwoven. Community norm is encouraged, deviation punished. Accordingly, the law is respected (Chevrier, 2009).
Authority	Is treated with respect. The boss is always right (Budhwar et al., 2019; Gesteland & Gesteland, 2010).	Compromise is encouraged, conflict is avoided as much as possible. The aim is to find solutions together (Chevrier, 2009).
Design	Bright colors in no fixed combination (Kulkarni et al., 2012).	Non-bright colors are used. White is mostly used as one of the colors (Kulkarni et al., 2012).

Table 1: Cultural differences

In Table 1 the cultural differences occur mainly in the areas of value system, respect for the laws, authority, and design. Since the aim is to understand and consider the other culture and thus address the issues arising from it, these insights should be considered in the learning path.

This means that the importance of the legal aspect needs to be demonstrated in the learning modules for Indian onboarding employees. While discussion needs to be encouraged in Swiss onboarding employees, an authoritarian training style should be adopted in the learning path for Indian onboarding employees, as the Indian trusts that the trainer is always right (Budhwar et al., 2019; Chevrier, 2009). In addition, there are also differences in design. The Indian culture tends to use

bright colors and people hardly stick to a color pattern, which is not the case in Western culture (Kulkarni et al., 2012).

2 Methodology

The study aimed to demonstrate how onboarding employees of culturally different mindsets can achieve similar learning outcomes in a work environment, in this case at M&S Inc. M&S Inc. is a company that is in a growth phase due to the strongly changing legal requirements and the advancement of the innovations of the compensation funds and pension funds. M&S is headquartered in Switzerland with approximately 120 employees, but also has a division in Chennai, India, with about 30 employees. To this end, a constructivist perspective (Magirius, 2018) was adopted, firstly to develop an artifact that shows the differences between learning paths in different cultures, and secondly to assess the extent to which the two learning paths can be established in the organization. The research strategy was therefore that of Design Science Research (Kuechler & Vaishnavi, 2008).

2.1 Research Design

In the following, it is described how the four phases of the design cycle (Kuechler & Vaishnavi, 2008) were applied.

Problem Awareness

In addition to bringing together the literature and the practice environment of M&S Inc., the requirements for the artifact were worked out with the corresponding cultural differences. The requirements were mapped to the focus areas of learning path, learning, or culture. Likewise, the requirements were completed with the recommendations of the literature and the characteristics created from them so that the feedback of the course leaders could be classified.

Suggestion

Possible design options for the artifact have been presented that address the problem that the cultural differences between Switzerland and India and the relationships between culturally different trainers and onboarding employees can lead to unequal training levels and misunderstanding and cultural assumptions of onboarding employees can lead to conflict, disagreement, and frustration (Apfelbaum et al., 2012; Budhwar et al., 2019; Chevrier, 2009; Gesteland & Gesteland, 2010; Schutte, 2016; Uzuner, 2009). Thus, there was the possibility to work out the respective learning paths based on cultural differences or to create a complete LMS with its basic functions but without the modules contained in it or the possibility to develop self-contained modules which the onboarding employees can then select themselves.

Development

Two learning paths were developed one for the Swiss and one for the Indian culture. They include those learning features that are indicated in each of the cultures.

Evaluation

The artifact was presented to the course leaders for review. The course leaders' feedback is compared with the recommendations in the literature to evaluate the artifact and allow for adjustments.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

During the problem awareness phase, a preliminary interview is conducted with two course leaders per culture to review the cultural differences identified in the literature and the features used for this purpose. Another interview with the same course leaders with predefined interview questions is conducted based on the artifact created according to the requirements identified in the literature.

Through the course leaders' interviews, data is obtained utilizing open and dialogue-oriented communication. Accordingly, behavior and perception are scrutinized with the help of the interviews. Thus, a qualitative methodology is applied (Hyde, 2000).

2.3 Quality Criteria

The course leaders' feedback from the interview is compared with the learning paths created based on the requirements analyzed in the literature. This is done based on characteristics developed from the recommendations in the literature. This ensures quality through triangulation (Flick, 2018). Thus, a comparison is made between the statements in the literature, the created artifact, and the statements of the course leaders' interview.

The expected quality criteria refer to intersubjectivity, and transparency (Mayring, 2000). For intersubjectivity, the interviews with the course leaders were conducted based on a prepared questionnaire. This paper will mainly discuss the contradictions that emerge from the interviews with the course leaders and their interpretation will lead to a proposal for implementation. For the further elaboration of this paper, the general cultural differences as listed in section 2.1 will again serve as a basis. For transparency, the steps of this paper have been documented in detail. Nevertheless, in terms of outreach, feedback from more course instructors could lead to different results.

The general cultural differences between Indian and Swiss cultures can be generalized (Budhwar et al., 2019; Chevrier, 2009; Gesteland & Gesteland, 2010; Kulkarni et al., 2012). Also, that the cultural differences should be considered in the learning paths (Apfelbaum et al., 2012; Moore, 2006; Saks & Belcourt, 2006; Schutte, 2016; Uzuner, 2009).

3 Results on Cultural Diversity in Learning Paths

Based on the requirements, a learning path was created that is applicable to both cultures before considering cultural specifics. Figure 1 shows the learning path, which can be roughly divided into five parts. The introduction, which gives the background of the company and introduces the overall course structure, a lesson on Swiss law, a lesson on cultural differences, which includes a workshop, the already practiced M&S training modules, and a final section.

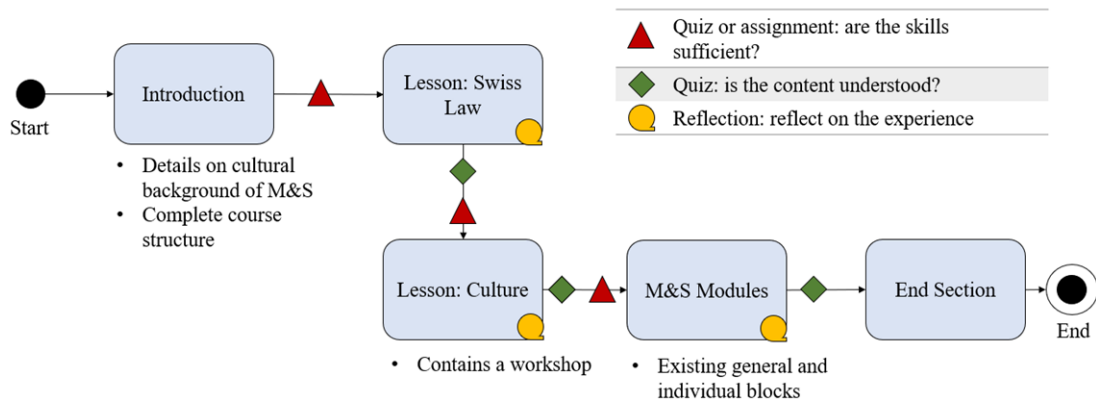


Figure 1: Basic learning path

M&S Inc, the company referenced in this paper, currently divides training for new employees into several areas, listed as M&S modules in Figure 1. The training blocks are divided into two sections. Those that everyone goes through and those that are individualized and depend on the future readiness of the employees. For example, in the section of the modules that everyone goes through, the infrastructure is trained, which includes training on the test center, the company's partners, how to process helpdesk tickets, or training on release management. In the area of individual training blocks, for example, training about the development environment is deepened for those who work as developers, or specialized knowledge about the subarea in which the employee works, especially if he or she is in the consulting function.

There is a learning path that every onboarding employee must go through. The learning path is set by the trainer and is lengthened or shortened or the sequence changed depending on the level of knowledge.

3.1 Requirements in Learning Paths

Table 2 shows the most important requirements for learning paths. The requirements were expanded to include the recommendations from the literature and assigned to the respective focus areas. Thus, the division of requirements into focus areas such as learning path, learning, or culture was done. Based on the recommendations from the literature and the characteristics created from them, the feedback from the course leader can be classified.

Focus areas	Requirements	Recommendation from literature	Characteristics
Learning Path	The learning path must enable the onboarding employees to achieve the learning objectives (Moore, 2006).	The learning objectives must be achievable for the onboarding employees (Moore, 2006).	The learning objectives are listed.
Learning	The structure of the learning path must allow the instructor to interact with the onboarding employees before and after training (Saks & Belcourt, 2006).	The trainer should discuss the training program, its content, and the learning objectives with the onboarding employees at the beginning and the end (Saks & Belcourt, 2006).	The training program and its content are discussed at the beginning and the end.

Culture	Opportunities need to be created to accommodate cultural differences in learning modules (Budhwar et al., 2019; Chevrier, 2009; Uzuner, 2009).	Learning modules should be offered that make the other culture visible (Apfelbaum et al., 2012). Typical Indian web design uses bright colors in no fixed combination (Kulkarni et al., 2012).	A learning module about the other culture is offered. Indian web design uses bright colors that are not fixedly combined.
	The onboarding employees should be taught the legal basics of Swiss law (Budhwar et al., 2019; Chevrier, 2009; Gesteland & Gesteland, 2010).	Due to the cultural differences between Switzerland and India, differences or knowledge gaps need to be trained (Budhwar et al., 2019; Chevrier, 2009; Gesteland & Gesteland, 2010)	Knowledge gaps about cultural differences are trained.

Table 2: Requirements and characteristics

3.2 Design Options in Learning Paths

The options available were those listed in section 2.1, to build learning paths based on cultural differences, or to create a complete LMS with its basic functions but without the modules included in it, or the option to develop self-contained modules that can then be selected by the on-boarders themselves. The possibilities were compared with the requirements and the possibility "developing a learning path" fulfilled all the requirements and was therefore pursued.

Once it was clear that a learning path should be developed, three options for its development were again explored. The first option included all the cultural differences worked out in the form of the characteristics. The second option focuses mainly on the interaction between the trainer and the onboarding employees, and the third option does not consider any of the differences, the same learning path would apply to both cultures.

Since the cultural differences should be considered in the learning path, but also the interaction between trainer and onboarding employees is very relevant, the first two options were chosen, and both were considered in the learning path.

3.3 Building Learning Paths Featuring Cultural Differences

The choices made in the suggestion phase, that is, the cultural differences and the interaction between the instructor and the on-boarder were implemented. Two learning paths are developed one for the Swiss and one for the Indian culture. They include those learning features that are indicated in each of the cultures.

Cultural subject area	Features for the Indian culture	Features for the Swiss culture
Authority	Focus on lessons that teach the content. A forum at the end of the last part for questions and answers.	A forum for discussions on all topics at the beginning of the course. A wiki for further self-study information.
Respect for the laws	A lesson on Swiss law. A quiz in the end of the course to check whether the content has been understood.	A knowledge check with a quiz on Swiss law. Get additional information for self-study if not enough.

Further differences based on the interviews	A checklist of learning objectives at the beginning of the course.	The learning objectives listed at the beginning of the course.
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Table 3: Development of the learning path based on the indicated features

Table 3 shows three examples of the different features that were considered depending on the cultural characteristics. Thus, a different feature had to be considered due to the respective specifics of the home culture. The first two examples result came from the analysis of the literature, the third example is from the interviews with the course leaders.

Cultural Differences as Established in User Interface Designs

Cultural differences play a role in the design of user interfaces in learning paths. The differences can already be observed in web design. Figure 2 illustrates cultural differences at the example of web designs on the federal level and shows on the left an Indian government website with bright colors in no fixed combination. Different colors were chosen in all areas of the website. On the right, is a Swiss government website with only three colors following a clear principle. White as the background color. Red has been combined in various areas of the website, for example above the menu and in the Swiss cross at the top left. Blue is used in the submenu, links, and the only graphic listed. These differences in colors should be considered in the learning paths user interfaces.

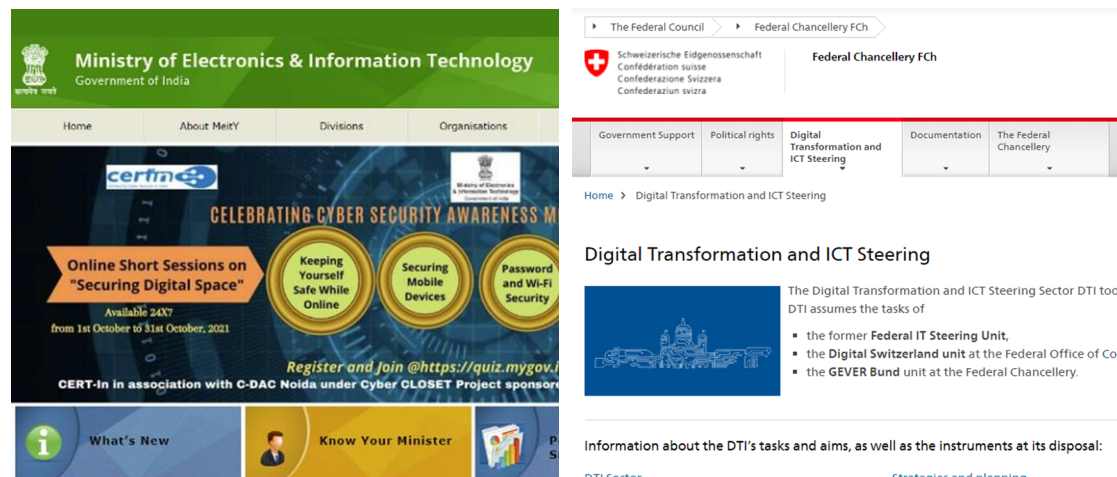


Figure 2: Comparison India Ministry of Electronic & Information Technology Page (<https://www.meity.gov.in/home>, 4/11/2021) and Portal of the Swiss government page for Digital Transformation and ICT Steering (<https://www.bk.admin.ch/bk/en/home/digitale-transforma>)

Cultural differences in the Learning Paths between Indian and Swiss Onboarding employees

Two of the most important additional differences is that Indian onboarding employees have a checklist of learning objectives in the introduction so they can see exactly what is required of them and a note that the learning activities may be different from what they are used to. Thus, Indian course leader Venkatachalam (personal communication, 9/11/2021 13:00) says on this issue: “The checklist would be useful for us”. In contrast, the Swiss onboarding employees have a forum in the introduction where they can get rid of questions that arise, as well as a wiki for further self-study information. As shown in Figure 3 the lesson on Swiss law is always done by the Indian onboarding employees, the Swiss onboarding employees only get additional information if it is needed at all. When asked if the module on Swiss law is important for Indians, Venkatachalam (personal communication, 9/11/2021 10:30) responded: “This looks good yes. This is needed. It is like a must”. In the end section, the

Indian onboarding employees have a forum for questions and answers that have arisen, as well as documentation on projects carried out by the Indian department. Thus, Venkatachalam (personal communication, 07/27/2021): “We look at projects that have been done before to learn our lessons.” The Swiss onboarding employees have a link to the internal M&S wiki in the end section for further detailed information for self-study.

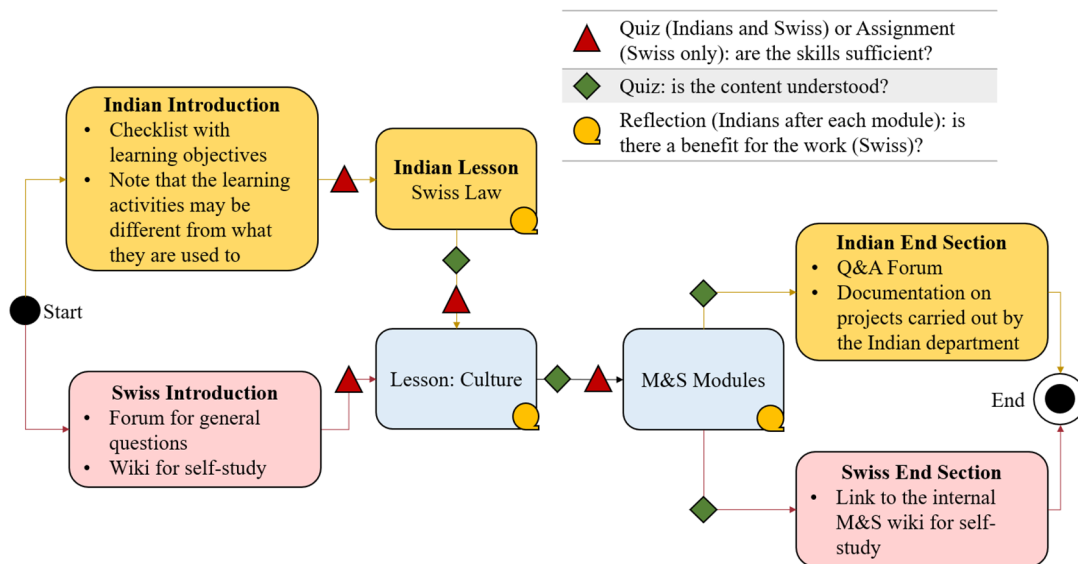


Figure 3: Learning path with consideration of cultural differences

Figure 3 shows the differences between Swiss and Indian onboarding employees. The learning path for the Indian onboarding employees is shown in yellow, the learning path for the Swiss onboarding employees in red, and the modules that apply to both are shown in light blue. Before each module, a quiz or assignment is given to check whether the knowledge is sufficient. The quiz can be used with the Indian and the Swiss onboarding employees, but the assignment can only be used with the Swiss onboarding employees. Venkatachalam (personal communication, 09/11/2021 13:00) says: “Only quizzes should be used”. This is represented by a red triangle. After each module, a quiz is given to check if the content has been understood. This is represented by a green diamond. After each module, a reflection is performed, which is represented by a yellow round shape. Reflection is done for the Swiss onboarding employees only for modules that have practical relevance. Accordingly, the Swiss course leader Kaser (personal communication, 9/11/2021 13:00) says: “Reflection is probably not needed everywhere. Reflection is needed where you have a benefit for your work”.

3.4 Evaluation of Features in Culturally Differenced Learning Paths

The feedback of the course leaders is structured across characteristics according to the requirements providing an evaluation and compared with the characteristics from the literature, but also with the developed learning paths.

Characteristics	Course leaders answer
The learning objectives are listed (Moore, 2006).	<i>Confirmation</i> As in the literature: Both course leaders agree that learning objectives

	should be listed.
The training program and its content are discussed at the beginning and the end (Saks & Belcourt, 2006).	<i>Contradiction</i> Swiss course leader: Interaction only at the beginning and at the end. Indian course leader: Interaction is also necessary for between.
A learning module about the other culture is offered (Apfelbaum et al., 2012).	<i>Confirmation</i> As in the literature: Both course leaders agree that the learning module is offered about the other culture.
Indian web design uses bright colors that are not fixedly combined (Kulkarni et al., 2012).	<i>Contradiction</i> Swiss course leader: All should work in western design. Indian course leader: Indian design should be implemented.
Knowledge gaps about cultural differences are trained (Budhwar et al., 2019; Chevrier, 2009; Gesteland & Gesteland, 2010).	<i>Confirmation</i> As in the literature: Both course leaders agree that knowledge gaps on cultural differences can be closed by a module on Swiss law.

Table 4: Evaluation of features in learning paths

Table 4 shows the results based on the examples already mentioned in the awareness phase, based on the comparison of the course leaders' feedback and the recommendations from the literature.

4 Discussion of Features in Learning Paths

Confirmations and contradictions from literature are compared with interviews with the course leaders. The confirmations have already been considered in the learning paths. The contradictions give information's about further developments of the learning paths.

The first contradiction is the difference that for checking whether the skills of an onboarding employee is suitable for a course (Muhammad et al., 2016; Welch Bacon & Gaither, 2020), both a quiz and an assignment can be considered for the Swiss course leader, but only the quiz for the Indian course leader. This shows that in the learning path for the Swiss onboarding employees both offers can be made and for the Indian onboarding employees always a quiz is used.

The second contradiction is seen in the interaction between instructor and onboarding employees (Saks & Belcourt, 2006). For the Swiss course leader, an interaction at the beginning and the end is sufficient, but the Indian course leader also needs interactions in between. Therefore, for the Indian learning path, it is important to allow more interactions between the trainer and the onboarding employees in the modules.

The third contradiction is the difference that according to the Indian course leader there should be a reflection after each module (Jayalath et al., 2018), but according to the Swiss course leader, this should only happen in modules that have a practical reference. This difference should also be considered in the learning paths, and the definition of which module has a practical reference must be determined by the course leader.

The fourths contradiction shows up in the web design (Kulkarni et al., 2012). The Swiss course leader suggests that everyone in the company work with Western design. The Indian course leader suggests that Indian web design should be implemented for the Indian employees.

Regarding intersubjectivity, interviews with course leaders were conducted based on a prepared questionnaire. In the evaluation phase feedback was matched with the requirements from literature to allow comparison with the feedbacks, establishing validity through triangulation (Flick, 2018). The feedbacks were discussed and recorded to establish transparency (Mayring, 2000).

5 Conclusion and Contribution of Features in Learning Paths

We have demonstrated that there are differences between Indian and Swiss cultures in the areas of value systems, respect for the laws, authority, and design. In addition, this paper has shown that several features need to be considered in the learning path to consider the cultural differences between the two cultures. For example, the learning path for the Indian onboarding employees includes a checklist of learning objectives in the introduction and a note that the content may be different from what they are used to. The lesson on Swiss law must be completed in any case, and at the end, there is a forum for open questions and documentation of the projects that the Indian onboarding employees have already completed. In the learning path for the Swiss onboarding employees, on the other hand, there is a wiki in the introduction for further self-study information and a forum for any questions that arise. The lesson on Swiss law does not have to be completed, there is only additional information if the level of knowledge is not sufficient. In the end, there is a link to the M&S Wiki for further self-study.

This paper contributes to acceptance in the learning process of onboarding employees from two cultures by comparing the two cultures of Switzerland and India, making the differences visible, and considering the derived learning features in the two learning paths for the onboarding employees. This consideration contributes to higher satisfaction and performance, and the potential for conflict can be reduced (Apfelbaum et al., 2012; Kassas et al., 2015; Schutte, 2016; Uzuner, 2009).

The findings in this paper imply for management that the trainer should interact with onboarding employees at the beginning and end of each lesson. Depending on the culture there should even be other interactions in between (Saks & Belcourt, 2006). It can also be said that when multiple cultures work together, cultural differences in learning paths should be considered (Schutte, 2016; Uzuner, 2009).

In this paper, the focus is on the features used in culturally diverse environments. Therefore, only two course leaders of the onboarding employees' courses were included, one from each culture was interviewed to evaluate the use of these features. The feedback received was then compared to the literature and learning paths. For future research, it is important to additionally include the onboarding employee's perspective, because the acceptance of the two learning paths, which considers the cultural differences through appropriate learning features, must be ensured by the onboarding employees.

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