

Five Tips to Ensure a World-class Onboarding Experience

Onboarding is the key to retention

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How people are treated when they join your organization determines whether they become productive quickly, whether they become engaged and participate in decisions and innovation, and how long they stay with your firm.

Most large organizations do a fair job at giving new employees the basics. They teach them how to access the email systems, use voice mail, get office supplies, and so forth. But in conversations with many (ex) employees of smaller firms I find that not even this is organized in any formal way. Mostly new hires learn by asking others, as well as by trial-and-error. Even rarer is the new hire who gets a thorough grounding in what the company is all about, who's who, and what's really what. Giving them that can make all the difference.

In many of the organizations who win the best-place-to-work-in-America awards, orientation, assimilation, or induction programs play a major role in getting new employees up to speed quickly and in adding months and years to retention.

In fact, employees who have gone through some sort of assimilation process — one that is more than the usual paper-processing administrivia — report feeling better connected to corporate strategy and to the company culture. This translates years later into a loyalty that keeps the employee and makes it easier for them to turn down tempting offers that simply offer more dollars.

There are at least three reasons that orientation or assimilation programs are necessary.

First of all, they help new hires feel that they are part of a larger organization and that they are important. By introducing new employees to senior management and by spending time to build in them an appreciation of the organization's past and future direction, these programs create a sense of security and comfort.

Also, they help convey the culture of the organization so that decisions get made that are more in line with accepted practices and that help the organization function more smoothly.

Lastly, they expedite getting the new hires up to speed and productive. Some new hires take as long as a year to reach full productivity, especially if their jobs depend on interacting with many other employees or in linking work from different parts of the firm. Inexperienced employees, especially college hires, can have long learning curves that can be significantly shortened with good upfront education.

Here are some tips on designing your own world-class onboarding experience:

1. Make the onboarding process formal but fun.

Don't assume that employees are just going to "pick up" all the things they need to know to be successful in your firm. What is obvious to you may be very obscure to someone just

walking in the door. Make sure you develop a program that has substance and that addresses serious issues effectively. Content might include sessions on the corporate history, the values of the firm, an overview of the strategy and fiscal goals, perhaps an overview of the finances by the CFO, and a greeting from some senior-level executive.

There could be explanations and examples of performance reviews and, with the manager present, the initial expectations of the employee could be discussed, agreed to, and written down. One of the tests of success is when a new employee can tell you the company strategy or general direction and knows the sales level and stock price of the firm. While you may know this and feel it is second nature, new employees most likely won't have any of this knowledge unless you take the time to make sure they learn it. All of these activities set a stage for productive work that's consistent with business goals.

2. Good onboarding programs may extend over several months.

After an intensive one- or two-day session upfront to start things off, subsequent activities may extend over several months at periodic intervals. Some programs include rotational assignments; others may include special projects that are designed to expose the new employee to parts of the company he would not normally have any contact with.

An executive, for example, could be given as assignment to find out something about the manufacturing operations that would require her to actually go to the factory and gather data. This way she sees how other employees work, and begins to get a feel for the culture in action. Scheduling events several months' out gives you the opportunity to get into topics in an in-depth way that short programs cannot.

Another idea: A get-together of all the employees hired in a particular month or quarter, with activities designed to introduce them to one another. This helps new employees build a network that they can use to get work done and to learn about other parts of the organization. There might be a tour or, if you firm has numerous locations, you might be able to have a tour of one of the sites the employee does not work at.

3. Use e-learning and the Internet extensively.

Today, bits and bytes are the lingua franca of most firms. Every employee needs to get used to using the corporate intranet and become familiar with how to get things done using these tools. A portion of many onboarding programs is now developed as e-learning modules and can be offered to the employee and their family before they even start. New employees can get their spouse involved in choosing benefits and in learning about the firm and its history. The more that spouses are part of the work life, the less chance that someone will leave on a whim.

Usually, when a spouse feels connected to the workplace as well, decisions will not be made hastily, but only after some conversation and discussion. Topics that can be covered best in e-learning modules include the history of the firm, organization structure, and of course, the benefits offered. Some onboarding programs have as much as 40 percent of the total content delivered over the Internet. Recruitmax offers its award-winning [Aloha program](#) to automate and improve the onboarding process

There are other tools from [Futuretech](#) and from [Cornerstone](#) that also offer the ability to automate a significant part of the onboarding process.

4. Educate managers about the need to provide meaningful discussion and reflective work experiences.

Many recent surveys show that the relationship with the manager is one of the most significant in an employee's work life. Most employee turnover is ultimately caused by that relationship (or lack of it), which makes the ability to assimilate new employees a core competency of managers. An employee's immediate manager controls all career progression, educational opportunities, and the assignment of projects.

So a manager who takes time to discuss issues with a new employee, who shows concern over that person's assimilation and who knows what the employee can do and wants to do, will make wiser decisions and build loyalty over time. The manager should be included in the onboarding process. Some firms have the managers attend a session designed to provide the employee with an initial set of goals — perhaps for the first 30 to 60 days. Others include the manager in team-building exercises or have a luncheon during which the manager sits with the new employee. At the executive level, the CEO can invite new hires to dinner at his or her home or set up a special quarterly new executive dinner and reception. The key is to make sure the manager has a real role in both the formal process of onboarding as well as in the informal one that happens every day.

5. Assign mentors or coaches to each new employee for the first 90 days of employment.

Research shows very clearly that providing a mentor who can offer insights into the corporate culture, who can explain the organizational structure and help the new employee understand why things get done in the way they do, is a major contributor to increased productivity and lower turnover. These mentors should be individuals who are exemplars of the kind of behavior and results-orientation that your firm would like all its employees to exhibit.

The role of these mentors can be very simple — as simple as going to lunch once a week with the new hire to show her the ropes and transmit some of the tacit culture that is never articulated or often even acknowledged in formal sessions. These mentors are the vehicles to educate the new hire, and they should be trained to serve as listeners who can intervene quietly with a manager if an issue arises. They need to be respected and well-networked in the organization.

Assimilation can lead to smoother operating functions, lower turnover, and better employee satisfaction. And, they cost only a fraction of what turnover and recruiting costs your firm each year. A good program will help you weather both the coming turnover and subsequent hiring boom.