

Creating a Successful Onboarding Program

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In last month's issue, we discussed the concept of onboarding and why it represents a solid investment both in terms of reducing your turnover ratio and increasing your overall productivity. But what does a comprehensive onboarding program include? And when and how should you implement such a program? These are two of the questions we're going to tackle in this month's issue.

The type of onboarding program each company creates and implements ultimately depends upon how much time and energy the company is willing to spend. For the purposes of this article, we're going to analyze a fully comprehensive program, focusing on how it should be implemented and when you should do so.

Create Your Program

At its essence, an onboarding program has three main components—the people involved, the content involved, and the timeframe involved.

People

It's important to identify who's going to be part of the process, since they will also be part of the planning the creation of the onboarding program. Typically, it should include the new hire, an HR professional, and the manager or person to whom the new hire will report. That's in a literal sense. In a general sense, the entire organization should have a working knowledge of the company's onboarding philosophy so that every member can deliver a strong and consistent message to every new hire, reinforcing the program and enhancing its effectiveness.

Content

This can be broken down into three areas: the administrative details, the job duties and specifications, and the company culture. The **administrative details** are the easiest to tackle, and they should be completed as soon as possible, so that you can focus on the other two areas, which are more important in terms of success and productivity. The new employee should not have to worry about voice mail, email, or even gaining access to the building, not to mention all the necessary paperwork that must be in place prior to the first day on the job. Be pro-active about these administrative details so they don't evolve into distractions later on. I heard a horror story regarding a computer programmer who quit his new job after only two weeks because the company had not provided a *computer* for him to work on!

Make certain your new hire feels welcome from Day One. Below are a few basic ideas:

- Order business cards in advance so you can provide them on the first day.
- Have the workstation and (working) computer ready with a working email address.
- Schedule someone to take the new hire to lunch on their first day.

Job duties and specifications are just that—the job description for the new hire, the things they'll be expected to accomplish. Prior to the employee's first day, they should talk with their immediate supervisor and discuss those duties and expectations, including project deadlines and timetables. The two should also discuss the employee's initial orientation and training schedule, which should take no more than a week. The key is effective communication and exchange of knowledge beforehand, which will help to speed up the process once employment begins. There should be milestones for the first few months and you should schedule meetings to assess progress and discuss obstacles.

Company culture is sometimes overlooked, but is extremely crucial. The new hire should know as much as they can about the culture before they start. (Keep in mind that culture embodies many criteria, including language, methodologies, mission statement, ways of interacting, traditions, etc.) A good idea would be for the hire to meet informally with a few members of the current team and talk about how things worked at the hire's previous company and the way in which they operate at their soon-to-be present place of employment.

Timeframe

The beginning of the onboarding process is easy to identify—it's the moment that the candidate accepts your offer. Between then and the first day of the new hire's employment, the steps we've discussed to this point should be completed, especially the administrative matters. However, the onboarding process doesn't stop there. Once the hire begins work, their progress should be tracked and there should be almost constant communication between the employee and their supervisor. The more quickly potential problems can be identified, the faster they can be solved—or avoided altogether. And remember, the first 30 days are vitally important because it's during this time that the new hire makes a subconscious decision regarding whether or not joining your company was the right move. After 90 days, it's recommended that all parties involved meet to discuss progress, solicit feedback, and plan for the future.

Customize Your Program

As you can see, onboarding is a multi-faceted endeavor. However, it's one that can pay huge dividends for your company and its employees. What's important to remember is that onboarding programs should be **individualized** to the needs of the company creating and implementing them. There isn't just one model for everybody. There's a basic framework and formula, to be sure, but in order for the program to be the most effective, you and your team must create and implement a version that you can incorporate easily and seamlessly into your company's business model.