

HOW YOU TREAT NEW EMPLOYEES SAYS A LOT ABOUT THE COMPANY

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Does your organization have a good onboarding process?

"Onboarding" refers to how an employer orients and integrates new hires, from their first day on the job.

A smart onboarding process can save costs, increase productivity, and make your organization a better place to work through increased employee morale and retention.

A personal story: I remember my first day at a new employer, early in my career. I had pursued the company for months, and I was excited to be starting there. It was a large, leading company in its industry and I was joining a new startup business unit.

I arrived, and there was no desk, no chair, no computer, no phone, no business cards nothing. They found me a vacant place to sit and somebody's computer to share. It was three weeks before I had a computer.

Think about the wasteful cost to the employer of having a new employee sit unproductively for three weeks without a computer.

Now think about the first impression it creates, and the message it sends to the employee. In my case, the first impression was that the company was disorganized and did not value new employees. A broader cultural message dawned on me more slowly.

I was joining a new business unit that shared office space with the parent company's core business. It soon became clear that the staff of the core business disliked and distrusted the new unit, and restricted its access to company resources. A new hire in the core business would have had a workspace with a computer and a phone on her first day of work. But my new-business-unit colleagues and I were considered second-class citizens.

Bruised feelings aside, this cultural dynamic was a serious problem for the company. To recoup its investment in creating a new business unit, the company needed collaboration and cross-sales between the new unit and the core business.

I survived. The point is, first impressions matter. The first impressions your organization creates for its new employees will be the ones they remember, the reasons they grow loyal or cynical, the stories they tell to co-workers and outsiders, the revealing truths that come to define your organization's brand as an employer.

That's onboarding done wrong. How is it done right?

First, the basics: someone needs to be responsible for the new employee pre-start process. In an organization with a human resources group, this would typically fall to an HR team member. That person needs to be informed of new-hire start dates with sufficient lead time to arrange for all the things a new hire needs: workspace, computer, phone, equipment, office supplies, business cards, nameplate, parking space, building and systems access, ID badge, whatever is standard at the organization. If everyone has a team jacket, mug or bag, have one ready to give to new employees when they arrive.

That's just the preparation part before a new hire shows up. It's the first of three elements in a good onboarding process: pre-start preparation, first-day orientation, and first-year integration.

When someone shows up on his first day of work, he isn't ready to sit down and put a dent in the team's workload just yet. A new hire's first day should be about orientation, not production. It's hard for someone to start contributing when he doesn't know how to log onto his computer, and probably wishes he brought bread crumbs to find his way back to his workspace, the restroom, and his car.

A good first-day orientation might include a welcome at arrival from an HR team member and the hiring manager; a session with the HR team member to complete any necessary forms; a tour of the facility highlighting basics like restrooms, coffee, supplies, printers and copiers; a one-on-one meeting with the hiring manager; a team lunch; peer meetings with team members; and tutorials on how to get started using the computer and phone systems.

Organizations that are serious about reaping the benefits of onboarding treat it as a yearlong process. Perhaps with assistance from human resources, the hiring manager should brainstorm: for a new employee to be the most effective contributor possible, what and whom in the organization does she need to know in the first week, first month, first quarter, and first year? Then a series of introductory meetings and training sessions, either formal or conversational, can be scheduled. Ideally, an HR team member or other advisor from outside the new employee's work group stays involved, to invite confidential questions and feedback from the new hire.

Done right, this yearlong onboarding process delivers multiple benefits. It vests new employees with an understanding of the organization's mission, operations, history and culture. It gives them a helpful network of contacts across the organization. And it fosters a feeling of belonging that translates to long-term career loyalty, desire to attract others to work at the organization, and eagerness to welcome later new hires as they come on board.