

All Aboard!

Does Your Onboarding Process Lead to Employee Engagement or Buyer's Remorse?

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Research by Hewitt Associates revealed that companies who invested the most time and resources in onboarding, enjoyed the highest levels of employee engagement.¹

Both research and common sense tell us it's wise to invest in preparing employees to be successful at their jobs. If you want your new hires to become productive as quickly as possible, why wouldn't you do what it took to make that happen? If you're going to spend all that money on acquiring employees, why wouldn't you prepare them to succeed?

Despite the obviousness of this, many organizations approach the onboarding process with a level of professionalism and quality they would never tolerate in their daily operations.

In this article, you will find a series of questions that highlight key "differences that make a difference" in the onboarding process. These key factors are framed as questions rather than statements, because the goal is for you to look at whether you are **doing** these things, not whether you **know** they're important. Borrowing from business sage Jim Rohn: "It's not what you **know**, it's what you **do** with what you know that makes a difference."

Because many of the practices that bring out the best in employees – whether related to onboarding or other aspects of managing employees – are commonsense,

the goal isn't to surprise you with their complexity or novelty, but to challenge you to take an honest look at whether you are actually doing them. Your answers will help illuminate whether your onboarding process is the kind that leads to high employee engagement or buyer's remorse.

1. **Do You Make Your New Hires Feel Welcome?** – Are your new hires greeted and treated like they are valued new team members or just a warm body hired to fill a slot? Are they shuffled through an impersonal process, sometimes falling through the cracks, or are they graciously shepherded through the onboarding process?
2. **Do You Make It Easy For New Hires to Ask For What They Need?** – Does your process and culture make it uncomfortable for new hires to ask for the information and support they need to navigate this new territory or does it communicate "Whatever you need to know, just ask"? The more comfortable new employees feel asking questions, the less time and energy will be siphoned off by wondering and worry. Time spent wondering whether its OK to ask a particular question or make a request is time not spent learning their new job. Energy wasted on worrying about all the things they don't know and are afraid to ask is energy not fueling productivity.

¹ Best Employer to Work for in Australia, Hewitt Associates, 2003

3. **Do You Inspire Pride?** – Does the way you run your orientation program and the onboarding process as a whole warrant pride? The honest answer for many organizations would be “Not really.” Which perception do you think your onboarding process creates: “What a slipshod, messed up place this is...what was I thinking when I took this job?” or “This is a place that does things right.”

When you explore this question, consider every aspect of the onboarding process, including the logistical aspects of preparing the new hire, such as their work area, technology, voice mail, etc. Finding their new workspace covered with boxes and being without voice mail for a week doesn't send a very impressive message.

“Just as poor orientation programs can sour a new employee's view of their new employer, delays in providing essential work technology can produce the same initial employee dissatisfaction,” notes Reid Birdsall of One Notion Consulting, a West Hartford, CT-based firm specializing in the logistical aspects of onboarding.

4. **Do You Help New Hires See the Big Picture and How They Make it Happen?** – One of the most important objectives of your onboarding process is to get new employees engaged – i.e. to feel part of your company and care about helping your company succeed. Employees are more likely to feel engaged if they know exactly what they're engaged in. It's hard to get excited about an endeavor one knows virtually nothing about.

When describing your mission and vision, communicate like a photographer, not an impressionistic painter. Give them a crystal clear image of your mission and vision – not in BusinessSpeak -- but in real, everyday language. Show them how your company works, how it makes money, and how the different parts fit together.

Employees also need to know explicitly how their jobs -- and how doing their

jobs well -- makes the mission and vision possible. Do you do this in more than a cursory manner? Do you show how their “Little Picture” directly makes the “Big Picture” possible? Do you share examples of employees making a difference?

This is a critical component of your onboarding process because the desire for meaning and purpose, the need to know one's life matters, is one of the most powerful human drives. When you show new employees -- and remind current employees -- how they matter, you tap into a deep well of passion and productivity.

5. **Do You Share Stories About What Makes Your Company Great?** –

Stories are among the most captivating and memorable ways of teaching and influencing. Telling new hires stories that capture your company's mission and vision, your culture, and how employees make it all possible, make your orientation program more engaging and inspirational. Such stories also help strengthen your culture because they paint a vivid picture of your organization's values and norms in action.

Are you using inspiring stories in your orientation program? Do you capture teaching stories as they unfold? Do you ask current employees for examples of what makes your company great? Does your management team stay alert for Moments of Truth that can be Teachable Moments for new hires? Are you cataloging these?

6. **Do You Make Your Orientation Program Interactive and Interesting?** – Besides helping

employees learn and retain information more effectively, making your orientation program interactive and interesting also communicates “We do things right here.” High quality organizations don't run sloppy, boring orientation programs.

7. **Have You Broken Your Orientation Program Down Into Digestible, Bite Sized Chunks?** – Doing this has the same effect as making your orientation program interactive and interesting. It makes it far more effective and it communicates that you're a company that does things right. Conversely, subjecting new hires to the blatantly ineffective practice of cramming 20 hours of material into 8 hours of non-stop presentation, communicates a less than impressive message.

At Concord, NH's Northeast Delta Dental, new hires found the amount of information covered in their one day orientation program overwhelming, so HR extended it to a two day format. Feedback on this format revealed it was experienced as just too long, resulting in the current iteration: four half-day modules. Is your orientation program broken down into digestible chunks or do you choke new employees on information?

8. **Are You Designing Your Onboarding Process From the Employee's Perspective?** – Do you consciously think about what each step of the way is like from the new hire's perspective? Do you ask them for feedback and input? Doing this is one of the reasons why Northeast Delta Dental is a perennial member of the "Best Places to Work in NH" list and was recently ranked as the fourth best small company to work for in America by the Great Place to Work® Institute.

They continually ask new hires for feedback about every step of the orientation and onboarding process. Information gleaned from their surveys and informal meetings has allowed them to refine their process. By doing so, they not only get employees up and running more quickly, they communicate "we care about you" and "we're a company that cares about excellence" – two critical messages your onboarding process should communicate to your new employees.

9. **Are You Offloading As Much Information As Possible To Your Intranet?** – One of the hallmarks of intelligent training design is providing information when it's needed. Rather than doing a data dump on new employees -- 95% of which they'll have forgotten when they stagger out of the conference room – examine how much you can offload to your company's intranet, or paper equivalent. The more you can make information self-serve when it's needed, the more comfortable and secure employees will feel. They know that they don't have to remember everything. Their answer is just a click away.

10. **Do You Have an Effective Mentoring Program?** – An effective mentoring program will not only increase the effectiveness of your onboarding process, it will also provide recognition and professional development opportunities for current employees. Since recognition and opportunities for professional development are both key drivers of employee engagement, an effective mentoring program also helps keep your current employees motivated and productive.

To be effective, your mentoring program cannot be a slapdash on-the-fly replacement for orientation and training. Carelessly thrusting a new employee onto just any old employee – including those with negative attitudes or mediocre work standards – not only hinders the new hire's learning process and integration, it also sends a message that their new employer lacks discernment and high standards. For your mentoring program to be effective you need to: 1) Make it an honor to be selected as a mentor and 2) Provide mentors with coaching skills training.

11. **Are You Making It Easy For New Employees to Help You Help Them?** – The easier you make it for your new hires to give you honest feedback, the better job you'll do retaining them. In addition to telling new hires explicitly that you want and

value their input, you do this by integrating feedback interviews into your process. At Designer Blinds in Omaha, NE; HR Manager Deb Franklin discovered a major spike in turnover between months two and six of a new hires employment.

"Rather than wait for the exit interview to find out what went wrong, we decided to conduct 'Entrance Interviews'," says Ms. Franklin. Adding the Entrance Interview along with some other adjustments resulted in a 96% drop in turnover.

When new employees reach the 90-day mark at Northeast Delta Dental, they participate in what is affectionately known as "20 Questions With Connie." Connie Roy-Czyzowski, VP of Human Resources sits down with each new hire to find out how they are doing, ferret out potential obstacles to be addressed, and surface suggestions they may have to improve the process.

As with some of the other practices discussed, doing this doesn't just yield important information. The fact that it is done, shows that the company cares about its employees and it cares about doing things well.

12. **Do You Help Your Supervisors and Managers Do Their Part Well?** – As Gallup's research has shown so clearly: "People join companies, but they leave managers." Because your new employee's boss can make or break the onboarding process, make sure you help your supervisors execute their part well. Do you invest in training and development so your managers know how to engage employees and how to coach?

Do you send clear messages about how important it is for managers to do the "people side" of their jobs? Do you hold your supervisors and managers accountable? At Designer Blinds, HR Manager Deb Franklin sites their investment in their supervisors and managers as *the* most critical factor in reducing their turnover from 200% to 8%.

Summary

If you answered a number of the above questions with less than a confident "Yes!", I highly recommend you work with your managers and your employees to design a more effective onboarding process. If you do, you will help your new hires become productive more quickly, you will lay the foundation for a more engaged, committed workforce, and you will increase your ability to attract and retain the cream of the crop from the labor pool.

Note: To reprint this in an association or corporate newsletter, please contact the author first at David@HumanNatureAtWork.com

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