

# ONBOARDING

Getting New Hires off to a  
Flying Start

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## Getting New Hires off to a Flying Start

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan  
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# INTRODUCTION

Many of us have probably tried to convey the good news to the applicant who made it through the net. A small sentence of enormous importance: ‘We have decided that we would like to offer you the position!’

And it is a pleasure. Some employment bureaux and job centres even send champagne or flowers to the candidate to celebrate the occasion. The decision is the culmination of a lengthy process, and it not only delights the applicant, but also those of us who have made the final choice from the applicants for the position. We have often involved many colleagues along the way, maybe used a battery of tests and even used internal or external recruitment experts. But now we’ve achieved our objective. We can now enjoy having our new hire in place and begin to reap the fruits of the commitment they bring to the organisation.

That’s the way it is supposed to be, anyway. In the real world, however, it is almost naive to consider this to be the culmination of the process. Let us illustrate the point with some numbers:

- Twenty-five percent of all new hires leave their positions before completing their first year of service. Forty-six percent of first-time job seekers who take up employment leave the job in the first 18 months.<sup>1</sup>
- Twenty-two percent of new hires who leave their jobs do so in the first 45 days of employment.<sup>2</sup>
- Four percent of new hires never return after their first day on the job.<sup>3</sup>

These are figures that should alert every leader. In all these cases, the delight which accompanies the initial offer of employment is neither necessarily carried through into a meaningful career experience nor significant value to the organisation. The situation is not improved by the fact that although we have experienced this problem for many years, we in the

recruitment industry have not yet been able to come up with an effective solution. Our response has instead been to offer more of the same: extra and more complicated personality tests, multiple interviews and so on. Not that there is anything wrong with these. We do need to continually improve the recruitment process. But if we want to halt the trend of these discouraging figures, then management and HR need to look beyond their current perceptions and objectives and focus on what happens after recruitment.<sup>4</sup>

The code word, as the attentive reader might already have guessed, is onboarding. And that is exactly what this book is all about. It involves everything that happens once we have chosen our candidates and includes how we should begin to welcome them and help them to get going with the job. Onboarding is about controlling what happens when new hires are appointed. It is about controlling the way in which their perception of the company culture is established<sup>5</sup>; ensuring that they build the right relationships with colleagues; and that from day one – or even before that – the efforts and results required of them are clear, so that they perform optimally. It is about leaving as little as possible to chance. Part of it is about the more basic needs: a chair to sit on, a phone to call from, a colleague to talk to, business cards, access cards and so on. But taking care of these aspects is nowhere near enough to reap the rewards that a thoroughly designed onboarding programme offers. And these rewards are considerable, let us assure you.

Research shows that proper onboarding increases new hire commitment,<sup>6</sup> reduces the delay before full performance is reached,<sup>7</sup> reduces stress<sup>8</sup> and increases job satisfaction<sup>9</sup> and retention rates.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the returns for allocating resources to a sophisticated onboarding programme are enormous, and in many organisations are much higher than one could achieve by increasing investment in the recruitment.

One might ask: Won't onboarding always happen as people get into their job? Yes, and all organisations have 'an onboarding process' whether or not they have ever given it any thought or effort. Doing nothing to welcome, introduce or support new hires is also 'an onboarding process'. It's just not necessarily an onboarding process that does what it is supposed to do. And a bad onboarding process is not in any way a neutral thing. Very few organisations do nothing though and many have some sort of program to supply their new hires with information and the practical remedies they need to get started with their job. However, as we will argue throughout this book, these introduction activities rarely cover the needs of the onboarding process.

An onboarding programme is designed to ensure staff retention, increase productivity and, not least of all, to strengthen and maintain engagement and motivation. An onboarding programme should create both direction and expectations. This is achieved if, from day one, new colleagues get to understand what role the new hire will play in our plans for the future of the company and what we expect from them to ensure success in the job.<sup>11</sup> The user manual to the forklift, the last two issues of the staff magazine or a link to a collection of websites with ‘information-you-need’, won’t do the job. Of course, it is crucial that all practical aspects are in place, so that time and energy is not wasted on unnecessary struggling: for example, trying to connect to the company’s IP telephone, etc. These things are expected to work as a baseline in onboarding. This might sound ambitious, and it is. Typical introduction programmes are scheduled to last on average about 14 days. As you will read, we propose that for most new hires, this should be stretched out to last at least three to six months.<sup>12</sup>

If you ask the Finance Department in your company whether a budget for an onboarding programme exists, you will probably get a negative answer. According to an American study of 500 companies, only 13 percent have set aside funds for onboarding.<sup>13</sup> Compare that to the resources allocated to the recruitment – it does not make sense. This could be compared to spending a year and several thousand euros planning your wedding and all that it entails – with guest lists, invitations, clothing, venue, etc. – and then, only when the guests arrive, starting to think about what food to serve them. Clearly not a recipe for success.

This book will give the reader the necessary understanding and the proper tools to draw up an onboarding programme that addresses the problem of colleagues leaving too soon or taking too long to become fully productive. The tools and insight the book offers can also be used to work strategically on a wide range of other issues which are important to the business: for example, boosting integration between silos, strengthening the process of change, enhancing performance and reducing the delay between start and full performance. It’s a long list.

We, the authors, have worked intensively with recruitment, HR, learning and organisational development since the early 1990s. A decade ago we began to develop tools to support all the things that happen after the recruitment process. Throughout this decade, onboarding has increasingly become our focus of attention as a major Achilles-heel for many of our customers. We have collected our experiences in this book and coupled them with the research done by our own company, OnboardingGroup. We have built the

experiences into a model, we believe that is straightforward enough to apply in any organisation, while still showing respect for the local complexities of onboarding. Our objective has not been to develop a new, complicated theory. Quite the opposite – we have tried to create a structure for onboarding that draws from a selection of existing theories and practices.

We owe heartfelt thanks to numerous researchers, teachers and HR personnel, as well as the countless customers who have contributed to our onboarding project over the years. We also extend a warm ‘thank you’ to all the organisations we have spoken to in connection with our onboarding work. Our many dialogues have given us a great deal of inspiration for positive and effective actions which we would like to share with others. We can also say, without intending to be insulting, that we were also given ideas about what not to do.

The clear majority of new hires starting a new job are highly motivated. They almost fly in through the door. Some maintain their direction and speed without any outside influence. But far too many lose their altitude if we do not support them in the right way, early on – if we do not take their onboarding seriously. Our belief is that, with this book to hand, you will have both the knowledge and the tools required to get your new hires off to a flying start.

Good luck – and good onboarding!

Christian Harpelund, Morten T. Højberg and Kasper U. Nielsen

## NOTES

1. Twenty-five percent of all new hires leave the organisation within a year, according to Allied Workforce Mobility Survey (2012). Forty-six percent of first-time new hires leave the job within the first 18 months. Source: <http://hriq.allied.com/surveys> (2012).
2. Twenty-two percent of new hire turnover occurs within the first 45 days of employment. In HR areas, *new hire turnover* is a measure of how long people stay and how often you have to replace a new hire. Source: Bersin.com: *Talent acquisitions systems 2014: The definite guide to hiring management software* (2014).
3. Four percent of new appointments leave their jobs after an unpleasant experience on the first working day. Source: Moscato (2005).
4. A study of 5,700 new hires in 2006 shows that 1 out of 25 new hires choose to leave the job solely because of a poor or non-existent onboarding programme. Source: Owler (2007).

5. Fifty-seven percent of organisations surveyed in a study answered ‘no’ to the question on whether they measure the ‘culturalisation process’ in their organisation; 32.2 percent said they measure it to some extent, while only 11.3 percent said ‘yes’ to the measure. Culturalisation; 66.8 percent answered ‘no’ to the question of whether they measure their socialisation processes; 24.5 percent to some extent – and only 8.7 percent answered ‘yes’ to the question. Source: Laurano (2012d).
6. A research study shows that positive onboarding experiences leads to long-term positive effects on new hires’ commitment. Sources: Maier, Brown and Stein (2001); Meyer and Allen (1988).
7. Organisations with a standardised onboarding process enjoy 54 percent higher productivity from their new staff and twice as high a commitment level. Source: Lombardi (2011).
8. Onboarding is scientifically linked to lower stress levels for new hires. Sources: Ashford and Black (1996); Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo and Tucker (2007); Bauer and Green (1998); Fisher (1985); Liang and Hsieh (2008); Wanberg and Kammeyer-Mueller (2000).
9. Onboarding can increase new hire satisfaction, but studies show that it depends on the quality of the onboarding programme. Sources: Ashford and Black (1996); Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo and Tucker (2007); Bauer and Green (1998); Fisher (1985); Liang and Hsieh (2008); Wanberg and Kammeyer-Mueller (2000).
10. New hires who undergo a structured onboarding programme, are 69 percent more likely to stay in the organisation up to three years. Source: Ganzel (1998).
11. A low degree of role conflict for the new hire can be linked to better onboarding results. Sources: Adkins (1995); Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo and Tucker (2007); Kammeyer-Mueller and Wanberg (2003).
12. Fourteen percent of onboarding programmes last only one day. Sixteen percent last for up to one week. Twenty-one percent last between one week and up to one month. Source: Laurano (2013).
13. Only 13 percent of organisations have a dedicated budget for onboarding of new talents according to *Workforce Mobility Survey* (2013). Source: <http://hriq.allied.com/surveys> (2013).