Onboarding

A talent acquisition and retention strategy

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You've had a position open for months. It's a strategic role – one critical to the company's overall success.

Over the past six months, you've interviewed 10 promising candidates, but none has made the cut. Then in walks candidate number 11, who's clearly the perfect match. He has all of the critical competencies and capabilities, and his values align perfectly with the company culture.

You've hit the jackpot. You extend an offer and the candidate accepts.

Eight months later, with strong results represented on the year-to-date charts, the manager walks into your office and submits his resignation letter. You're surprised, but not shocked. During your last few conversations, you sensed something wasn't quite right, but when you inquired, he said, "Things are fine."

What happened?

Human Resources handles the exit interview. It seems that the manager felt "alone" and not part of the team. "I had to figure out how to do most things on my own. I didn't feel that anyone had my back. Working here just isn't fun," are some of the comments he shared with HR.

You calculate the cost of this turnover to be roughly half a million dollars – probably more. It's difficult to swallow, but this further validates your argument for a formal onboarding program (not to be confused with employee orientation, which is usually a week or two in length and involves a lot of paperwork).

A Gallup study showed that one of the top reasons employees leave a company is because they lack strong interpersonal relationships. You know that a well-designed onboarding program could have eliminated this loss.

The study, State of the American Manager: Analytics and Advice for Leaders, quantified results. A good onboarding program can:

» Fast-track new hire productivity (up to 60 percent better and faster).
» Improve cultural assimilation.
» Build important and lasting connections/relationships.
» Reduce overall turnover (up to 69 percent by year three).
» Increase efficiency in how people work, leading to higher career effectiveness (up to 288 percent).
» Improve service levels.
» Lower job stress.

Five elements of a successful onboarding process:

1. **Self-efficacy** – the employee's belief that he or she can succeed.
2. **Role clarity** – having a clear understanding of desired expectations and deliverables.
3. **Social integration** – feeling connected to others and having meaningful relationships.
4. **Cultural integration** – aligning acceptable behaviors, values and norms.
5. **Training** – expanding competencies that are needed to succeed.

During the first few days at work, be sure to let the new team member know how he or she can make a meaningful difference in the company's success. For example, if you hired a front receptionist desk employee, be sure to explain that he or she carries the responsibility of projecting the corporate brand to guests and employees. How that person dresses, what he or she says, how he or she says it and how he or she engages with others directly influences visitors' first impressions of the company. Then, be clear with your expectations.

Onboarding guru George Bradt recommends incorporating plans for addressing what he calls the three A's:

Accommodate: Make new hires feel welcomed and comfortable when they arrive. Show them around, introduce them to people, set them up with a readied workspace – don't make them wait for a computer and phone. Create a welcome package that includes little extras like company apparel, personal notes or a card signed by team members, and some local restaurant gift cards so they can take people to lunch to get to know them. Bundling things together conveys intention and demonstrates you're excited they decided to join the company.

Assimilate: Critical to both engagement and retention are the relationships new hires form with others. Beginning on day one, host a welcoming luncheon and/or end-of-day celebration with cake. When people leave the company, they are given a party; how about throwing one the day they join? Have someone present to facilitate introductions and help the new person make connections. Forward-thinking companies often assign a "buddy" to each new employee. "Buddies" are often relatively new employees who work outside the chain of command and remember what it was like to be new to the

company. The "buddy" provides a safe place where the new employee can go to connect or when they need help.

Accelerate: New employees want to prove to you that you've made the right decision by contributing as soon as possible, but onboarding should be paced so learning and integration happens without exhausting or overwhelming the new hire. Instead, think of onboarding as a series of building blocks that, when systematically timed, create a solid infrastructure that supports high performance.

At the end of the first week and then at the close of each of the employee's first three months, survey the team member regarding his or her experiences, challenges, what would help the person be more productive or efficient, and what would improve his or her overall work experience. This ensures the team member has the necessary tools and support to succeed.

Finally, measure productivity through metrics. Make sure new hires are becoming productive and, if they are not, figure out what is going wrong. This will give you added insights about how to fine-tune the onboarding process. ■

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