



Onboarding: Employee Orientation Beyond “Sink or Swim”

**Why current orientation programs are failing
corporate America, and what to do about it.**

Employee Orientation. Despite all efforts to the contrary, it often comes down to this: a recently overhauled employee orientation program makes use of the company’s high quality marketing handouts. The program’s knowledgeable, personable presenter uses good visuals like computer slides and is enthusiastic about what he writes on the easel. After the morning presentation, employees take a guided tour of the company, and go home at the end of Day One with their new (if somewhat wordy) employee handbook, securely tucked away for future reference. Yet these new employees go home and tell their families they’re not sure they made the right decision. They are apprehensive, overwhelmed, and feel dramatically like outsiders.

Of course, the orientation program described here was developed with great intentions, but in today’s hyper-competitive recruiting environment, intentions are not enough to maintain sought-after talent. There are 3 basic reasons that orientation programs fall short of their goals: lack of planning, disillusionment about the position itself and employees who feel that they simply “don’t fit” the company.

Today, attracting qualified workers includes offering higher salaries, better benefits, improved training, and advancement opportunities. With these increased costs, it’s no wonder retention has become the focus of so much attention lately. Indeed, orientation efforts have been elevated to a high priority in many companies in an effort to reduce turnover rates in excess of 25%. The effort has even been given a new name – employee onboarding – to encompass not just the first few days of a new employee’s career, but a mainstreaming process that can take up to a year to complete.

Unfortunately, this process is often neglected. Done poorly, the employee orientation program can leave new employees wondering what on earth they’ve done to themselves - and to their career. And with far more jobs available than employees to fill them, it’s likely that the poorly oriented new employee will be out the door in less time than it took to recruit and hire them.

So the solution is not as neat and simple as some would like, but there are answers. First, there are some basic, but commonly made mistakes that are easily avoided:

- bombarding the new hire with facts, figures, names, and faces, all packed into one eight-hour day
- showing boring or sorely out-of-date orientation videos
- providing lengthy front-of-the-room lectures
- failing to prepare for the new hire - providing no phone, no e-mail, no computer, and no meaningful work.

Companies that have effective orientation programs get new people up to speed faster, have better synergy between what employees consider productivity and what the company needs to produce, and they have higher retention rates. Just as importantly, the new employee will enjoy an accelerated learning curve in the new position, increased productivity and a smooth transition into the corporate culture.

“Forty percent of employers report that they currently have job openings for which they can’t find qualified candidates.”

-Matt Ferguson, CEO of Careerbuilder.com

The Rising Cost of Finding and Hiring the Right Employee for the Job

While the figure may seem high, The Employment Policy Foundation estimated in 2004 that it costs as much as \$13,000 to recruit and hire a single employee. Other sources estimate the cost from as little as 25% of the employee’s annual salary to an astronomical 14 times yearly pay for upper-level employees.

But it seems that very few companies have the ability or even the desire to track what it costs to hire an employee. Such a figure would have to include the cost of:

- advertising
- marketing materials
- job fairs
- background checks
- HR’s time screening resumes and candidates
- manager’s time interviewing
- trainer’s time training
- lost productivity and mistakes due to inexperienced new workers
- employee overtime to cover unfilled positions
- morale issues with existing employees
- customer dissatisfaction due to turnover
- the orientation process itself

So, without knowing the exact cost implications, companies may want to consider less tangible measures of the hiring challenge. The issues that are currently affecting our workforce are unprecedented, and there is no single, easy solution recruiters and Human Resource managers can turn to. And today’s workforce issues are rooted in the transition of what employees today believe work to be. So cost measurement comes instead with the relatively new concept of “human capital.” The management of that human capital is a vital component of how companies will remain viable, and profitable, in the new global economy.

Flex-time and temporary workers bring their own set of challenges.

To attract and retain highly qualified employees, more companies are implementing flexible scheduling options, which include telecommuting, job-sharing, part-time and temporary workers. One of the dilemmas becomes how to keep these non-traditional employees motivated and productive. Managers are also concerned about communicating with workers who are not in the office every day. It’s vital to bridge the complex communications gap that is created when employees are not in the office full-time, but this can be a daunting and costly objective.

Safety professionals know the importance of providing orientation training to recently-hired workers, but what about temporary workers? Given the fast pace of industry these days, providing training for large numbers of part-time and temporary workers can be an overwhelming prospect. But not only is safety training required by law, it addresses some very real concerns. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), workers with less than 90 days on the job have a far higher incident rate for injuries than experienced workers.

Our aging population plays a role, too.

The largest segment of the U.S. workforce – the huge Baby Boomer generation – is aging, with a greater number of employees transitioning into retirement each year.

Consulting Firm Watson Wyatt predicts that companies will feel the impact of these shifting demographics in six key areas:

Cost: The shortage of qualified workers is costing companies more – companies have found in recent years that they must offer better benefits and compensation than their competitors in order to attract and retain the top employees in their industry.

Attraction & Retention: With the next generation of workers, companies are learning that they must accept new ideas about people and work, motivation and reward, personal growth and advancement. The rewards valued by the previous generation mean little to today’s employee, who may easily choose an employer based on eco-friendliness and social consciousness over pay and benefits.

Productivity: When a company’s most skilled and experienced workers leave before replacement workers are fully trained and engaged, productivity and customer satisfaction often suffers. This brings about the need to train incoming employees more quickly and more effectively than ever before. In fact, exceptional training in the future

will capture existing “tribal knowledge,” and allow for a generational transfer of that experience.

Culture: Establishing and maintaining a credible corporate culture is vital to the integrity of the operation. But today’s culture must engage people and motivate performance, regardless of age, or geography.

Innovation: It’s been said that the only true functions of business are marketing and innovation. Without inspiring innovative thought in employees (regardless of age), a company cannot move toward a profitable future.

Competitiveness: Companies that see their ‘human capital’ going through constant turmoil will also see a decline in productivity. When the higher costs of retention are figured in, these companies will fail in the face of more advanced competitors.

These six concerns are a large part of the reason companies are choosing to start at the beginning – with the early indoctrination of employees playing a large role in the proactive fight to recruit and retain the best ‘human capital’ that can be acquired.

And the supply of young, qualified workers is shrinking every year. These factors threaten a company’s ability to create new products and services – to innovate, and as innovation is the lifeblood of so many companies, this presents a crucial issue that must be addressed.

The Solution Requires Another Shift in Thinking.

Today’s most frequent complaints about new employee orientations play right into the concept of human capital – the employee is often left to sink or swim, or, in contrast, the orientation is overwhelming, boring, or simply, a chore. But the answer to these complaints is potentially more simple than it seems. Welcoming the whole person, rather than just a set of job functions, allows people to assimilate into the corporate culture, become inspired and productive almost immediately.

What does “welcoming the whole person” entail? The immediate supervisor or manager should review a copy of the employee’s application or resume. They should be familiar with the employee’s experience, training and education.

At the outset, the manager or HR representative should review the job description with the employee, including the duties, responsibilities, and working relationships.

It’s important to also discuss with the employee how the company is organized, as well as the organization of the department or division and how the new employee fits in to that structure. After the employee has settled in a bit, the immediate supervisor or manager should find out the employee’s career goals and objectives, and be able to help the employee relate those goals to the goals and objectives of their department and the company as a whole.

This changed approach requires a company to determine the objectives of the new employee orientation program at the outset, basing their measures of success on the idea of the value of human capital. Then, the company must meet those objectives honestly and positively for each and every new hire. Successful integration will happen only if the new employee decides he or she has made a wise decision to join the organization.

The best new employee orientation:

- Has attainable goals and meets them
- Makes Day One a welcoming celebration
- Involves the new employee’s family as well as co-workers
- Makes the new employee productive on Day One
- Is not boring, cumbersome, rushed or ineffective
- Uses feedback to continuously improve

“Evidence of a significant relationship between employee engagement and financial performance is undeniable.”

-Towers Perin HR Services

Whatever orientation materials are included in the process, they should encourage participation in creative and entertaining activities that reinforce the necessary skills and information. New employees must also have guidance and assistance throughout the process from a mentor or buddy, as well as their manager.

Video – The answer for many companies.

Orientation videos of the past that re-hash policies, procedures and paperwork ad nauseam were bad then, and today with a much younger, more media-savvy audience, they're even worse. Today's orientation videos provide new employees with a glimpse of what the company does best, and why customers choose them over their competitors. The best videos even make use of contributions from front-line employees and in doing so, create a story that embodies how the company works together to provide solutions to customers.

At the Birmingham, Alabama YMCA, it had become apparent that the challenges of bringing new employees on board had become too numerous to

address on an individual basis. With the majority of their staff comprised of part time and seasonal positions, the Y was unable to provide consistent training, and was losing their grip on the productivity and culture they prided themselves on. What's more, they needed to raise retention rates and show the value of positive employee relations to their stakeholders.

Velma Williams, in charge of new employee orientation for the YMCA, chose to address these objectives with a video presentation. The video allows all employees to find out about YMCA history, traditions, and values, and how they fit into the "big picture." It provides thorough explanations of policies and processes, and is highly cost effective – the time and money spent today per new employee is dramatically reduced. Beyond that, showing the new video to current employees helped Williams close gaps in knowledge, even for long-term employees. "We captured the essence of the YMCA, and brought it to life," said Williams. "I am proud of the product, and even prouder that we won a Telly Award for it's production." In the end, Williams also chose to post the video online with a feedback form and printable certificate, available after the employee completed the training. This tracking allowed Williams to insure compliance among all employees.

In creating a video such as the one Williams did, it's vital not to cut corners. Quality is a value today's companies cannot choose to sacrifice, especially when it comes to employee communications. A company cannot expect a new employee to believe that quality goes into everything the company produces if they receive anything less than exceptional quality in their own training. It sends a message that the company believes in the value of its human capital.

Creating an effective orientation video should involve examples of quality, focusing on attention to detail. Wherever possible, show real solutions, as they are provided to actual customers or clients. Mention the nuts and bolts of the workplace, but also talk about your employer brand - the integrity and honesty that allow the company and its customers to succeed.

In the end, the cost of producing a orientation video can be amortized across the hiring expectations during a 3 to 5 year shelf-life, and in that time, should:

- Reduce New Employee Anxiety
- Reduce Employee Turnover
- Save Time for the Supervisor and HR
- Develop Positive Attitudes
- Improve Productivity

“Prior to the installation of the orientation video, 50 to 60% of our turnover was comprised of employees who terminated within their first three months of employment. Those numbers have now been reduced by nearly half.”

**- Leo T. Tatum, Director of Personnel,
Manufacturing Division, The VanHeusen Company**

Forward-Thinking: The New Hire Employee-Centric Website & E-Learning

A web-based employee onboarding program is one that combines many otherwise disparate elements and resources to provide the new hire, HR and even existing employees with the tools they need. Such a tool can in fact bring families and co-workers into the process, making your company's most recent hires feel valued and supported.

First, an employee-centric website creates a pre-Orientation process. With password-protection, such sites often allow the new employee to read the employee handbook, review orientation schedules, materials, fill out and submit benefits forms, and can often provide an extensive FAQ section about the company. HR representatives simply send a welcome email before the employee's first day on the job, ideally up to a week in advance. Providing some information prior to the employee's arrival will eliminate a common source of new hire stress, and give them a better chance to start off on the right foot.

Similar to an orientation video, the website saves time and money, and offers a 'safety net' if the new hire misses some piece of information. Verbal mentions during a marathon new employee orientation session can easily go unheard, especially on Day One. Similarly, a stack of papers and reminders can easily get lost in the shuffle. An online resource that is regularly updated, and always accessible, is the best practice when it comes to information sharing.

Incorporating interactive e-learning features into the website can also draw family and co-workers into the process. Companies today are including self-directed features such as:

- **Interactive photo match** – match names with faces at the company - will help familiarize new hires with the corporate family tree, increasing productivity and helping to avoid embarrassing situations such as the new hire who asks a stranger for help with the coffee maker machine, only to discover later that the "stranger" was the CEO.
- **Benefits Calculators** – shows the true value of company-provided benefits
- **Interactive Dress code exercises** that humorously but effectively demonstrate what is and isn't appropriate
- **Countdown to their first day**, building anticipation
- **Printable map** showing nearby retail and restaurant locations
- Mechanism so new hires can offer **feedback** for making improvements
- **Searchable glossary** of company acronyms, buzzwords with which a new employee might not be familiar. This is also a boost to productivity when new employees don't or won't ask what is meant.
- **A printable "Help Source"** card that provides the names and email addresses of people who are pre-designated for questions.

These fun, engaging interactive tools reinforce the belief that the company values every new employee and has dedicated the resources it takes to help them succeed.

Used together, a video and website allow the company to prepare for instant productivity. These tools help the Human Resources team refrain from asking supervisors to play games to orient new employees. The tools also let current employees know how important their productivity is, taking the burden of instruction off their shoulders. Instead, forward-thinking companies free up supervisors to give the departmental and job-specific information that will help the new employee become productive as soon as possible.

Full Circle

As with any training, follow through is vital to making sure an orientation meets the company's progressing needs. The website can be used to offer a brief, five question survey focused on the Day One orientation.

Ten days later, the new hire can receive a link to a follow up survey that focuses on the depth, breadth and content of the orientation process. As a part of this measured feedback, the survey should allow ample space for the new hire to provide information on what he or she would have liked to receive during the new employee orientation program. This is also a key instrument to discover what information was overlooked or what was unneeded. And of course, to make sure the program comes full circle, this feedback must then be incorporated to improve the employee onboarding program.

Finally, use of the website can be extended as long as the employee needs those resources. Ideally, the company can send a reminder email to all recent hires that certain materials are available online, and encourage them to frequently visit the site for information.

Companies today can reflect on the employee onboarding process by evaluating what a new hire will go home and tell their family about their new employer. This means that the orientation process must be fun, interesting, exciting, painless and simple. Additionally, new hires should take home a clear mental picture of the organization - its challenges, its goals and their opportunity to assist with progress. This of course, has little if anything to do with filling out paperwork, but instead, clearly focuses the energy and enthusiasm every new hire brings to the company.

As you consider solutions for your evolving orientation program, keep in mind that companies like Projections, with nearly 30 years helping employers communicate with employees, can assist in creating the solutions that will help you meet your goals.

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