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"A Head Start: How To Keep the People You Hire and Promote Retention at the Same Time"

A Head Start: How To Keep the People You Hire and Promote Retention at the Same Time (by Kevin Wheeler)

Turnover is growing slowly but will explode as the economy picks up. Word over the past few weeks is that things are actually — for the first time in three years — getting better. As employees choose to leave and new employees come on board, assimilating the new people becomes a major chore.

Most organizations do a fair job at giving new employees the basics. They teach them how to access the email systems, use voicemail, get office supplies, and so forth. But it's not very often new hires get a thorough grounding in what the company is all about, in who's who, and in what's really what. And giving them that can make all the difference.

In many of the organizations that win best-place-to-work awards, orientation, assimilation, or induction programs play a major role in getting new employees up-to-speed quickly.

In fact, employees who have gone through some sort of assimilation process — one that is more than the usual paper-processing administrivia — report feeling better connected to corporate strategy and to the company culture. This translates years later into a loyalty that keeps the employee and makes it easier for them to turn down offers that tempt by simply offering more dollars.

There at least three reasons that orientation or assimilation programs are necessary.

First of all, they help new hires feel that they are part of a larger organization and that they are important. By introducing new employees to senior management and by spending time to build in them an appreciation of the organization's past and future direction, these programs create a sense of security and comfort.

Secondly, orientation programs help convey the culture of the organization, so that decisions get made that are more in line with accepted practices and help the organization function more smoothly.

Thirdly, they expedite getting the new hires up to speed and productive. Some new hires take as long as a year to reach full productivity, especially if their jobs depend on interacting with many other employees or in linking work from different parts of the firm. Inexperienced employees, especially college hires, can have long learning curves that can be significantly shortened with good upfront education.

Here are some tips on designing your own world-class on-boarding experience:

1. Make the on-boarding process formal but fun.

Don't assume that employees are just going to "pick up" all the things they need to know to be successful in your firm. What is obvious to you may be very obscure to someone just walking in the door.

Make sure you develop a program that has substance and that addresses serious issues effectively. Content might include sessions on the history of the organization, the values of the firm, an overview of its strategy and fiscal goals, and perhaps even an overview of the finances by the CFO and a greeting from a senior-level executive. There could be explanations and examples of performance reviews and, with the manager present, the initial expectations of the employee could be discussed, agreed to and written down.

One of the tests of success is when a new employee can tell you the company strategy or general direction and knows the sales level and stock price of the firm. While you may know this and feel it is second nature, new employees most likely won't have any of this knowledge unless you take the time to make sure they learn it. All of these activities set a stage for productive, aligned, and focused work.

2. Good on-boarding programs may extend over several months.

After an intensive one or two day session upfront to start things off, subsequent activities may extend over several months at periodic intervals. Some programs include rotational assignments; others may include special projects that are designed to expose the new employee to parts of the company he would not normally have any contact with.

For example, an executive could be given as assignment to find out something about the manufacturing operations that would require her to actually go to the factory and gather data. This way she sees how other employees work and begins to get a feel for the culture in action. Scheduling events out several months gives you the opportunity to get into topics in an in-depth way that short programs cannot.

Other events might be a get together of all the employees hired in a particular month or quarter, with activities designed to introduced them to one another. This helps new employees build a network that they can utilize to get work done and to learn about other parts of the organization. There might be a tour or, if you firm has numerous locations, you might be able to have a tour of one of the sites the employee does not work at.

3. Use e-learning and the Internet extensively.

Today, bits and bytes are the linga franca of most firms. Every employee needs to get used to using the corporate Intranet and become familiar with how to get things done using these tools.

A portion of many on-boarding programs is now developed as e-learning modules and can be offered to new employees and their families before they even start. New employees can get their spouses involved in choosing benefits and in learning about the firm and its history. The more spouses are part of work life, the less chance that someone will leave on a whim. Usually when a spouse feels connected to the workplace as well, decisions will not be made hastily but only after some conversation and discussion.

Topics that can be covered best in e-learning modules include the history of the firm, organization structure, and of course, the benefits offered. Some on-boarding programs have as much as 40% of the total content delivered over the Internet.

4. Educate managers deeply about the need to provide meaningful discussion and reflective work experiences.

Many recent surveys show that the relationship with the manager is one of the most significant in an employee's work life. Most employee turnover is ultimately caused by that relationship (or lack thereof), which makes the ability to assimilate new employees a core competence of managers.

An employee's immediate manager controls all career progression, educational opportunities, and the assignment of projects. So a manager who takes time to discuss issues with a new employee, who shows concern over that person's assimilation, and who knows what the employee can do and wants to do, will make wiser decisions and build loyalty over time.

The manager should be included as part of the on-boarding process. Some firms have the managers attend a session designed to provide the employee with an initial set of goals — perhaps for the first 30 to 60 days. Others include the manager in team-building exercises or have a luncheon where the manager sits with the new employee. At the executive level, the CEO can invite new hires to dinner at his or her home or set up a special quarterly new executive dinner and reception.

The key is to make sure the manager has a real role in both the formal process of on boarding as well as in the informal one that happens every day.

5. Assign mentors or coaches to each new employee for the first 90 days of employment.

Research shows very clearly that providing a mentor who can offer insights into the corporate culture, who can explain the organizational structure and help the new employee understand why things get done in the way they do, is a major contributor to increased productivity and lower turnover.

These mentors should be individuals who are exemplars of the kind of behavior and results orientation your firm would like all its employees to exhibit. The role of these mentors can be very simple — as simple as going to lunch once a week with the new hire to show them the ropes and transmit some of the tacit culture that is never articulated or often even acknowledged in formal sessions. These mentors are the vehicles to educate the new hire, and they should be trained to serve as listeners who can intervene quietly with a manager if an issue arises. They need to be respected and well networked in the organization.

Assimilation can lead to smoother operating functions, lower turnover, and better employee satisfaction. And assimilation programs cost only a fraction of what turnover and recruiting costs your firm each year. A good program will help you weather both the coming turnover and subsequent hiring boom.

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