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MAKING NEW EMPLOYEES SUCCESSFUL IN ANY ECONOMY

The first 90 days are critical—especially in a downturn. Successful orientation calls for a dedicated team effort.

By Katharine Giacalone

To open a vacancy or not to open a vacancy—that is the question. While fiscal responsibility is in the hearts and minds of most organizations these days, they still have to run their businesses. So if there is a vacancy the organization can't live without, employers need to fill it.

That's why even in today's tough economic climate, companies are still hiring. It's true that organizations may have more talent to select from because the market is flooded with job seekers, but that should make their decisions easier.

The real problem is keeping successful employees during an economic downturn, and the answer lies in knowing what to do with them once you've hired them. Here's the secret: offer them an effective, robust, and meaningful orientation.

Many organizations struggle with "how much time" they need to spend on orientation or onboarding new hires. Instead of worrying about perfecting an employee orientation process, organizations can work on committing the time and resources to having an orientation process that is meaningful and has some staying power.

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Many employers miss this critical step and lose new hires within the first three to six months of employment. In many exit interviews I conduct, I'm told the same thing over and over, and it doesn't matter how long the employee has been with the company. They tell me, "Even on my first day or week, it didn't look like they were ready for my arrival," or, "I didn't feel supported, even on my first day!"

The orientation drill usually consists of human resources paperwork, tax forms, and confidentiality agreements. While these documents are necessary and important, the real orientation happens when the new hires meet with their supervisors on the first day. Add a "special touch"—either escort the new employees to their new supervisor's office or have the supervisor greet them at the front door when they arrive for the first time. It's all about first impressions.

By the way, whether your company hires one person each month or 10 new hires start every Monday, the orientation must contain the same elements. (The delivery, of course, would be different—one-on-one versus group training.)

It is imperative that HR, training, and supervisors partner with each other to ensure a smooth transition into the organization. Establish the roles and responsibilities of each department up front so that the employees' introduction into the organization will be smooth and

meaningful. A comprehensive orientation process gives new employees the feeling that the organization expects them, which in turn makes them glad they joined the company. Some topics to be divided among these three partners include

- talking about the history and culture of the organization
- discussing how things get done in the organization
- focusing on reviewing benefits, policies and procedures
- explaining the safety and security guidelines
- teaching employees how to access voice mail, email, and file systems
- reviewing the job description, department protocols, job expectations, and any job-related duties during the first 90 days and beyond.

Of course there are many more topics to cover depending on the nature of the work at the company; these sample topics will help springboard your thinking when putting the orientation together. They emerge when clearly communicated to new hires during their first week of employment. When deciding which department has which role, try aligning the topics with the duties of each department.

Perhaps HR covers policies, procedures, and safety; training is responsible for history, culture, and available training schedules; and the supervisor takes the lead on work-related topics. That makes it easy and natural. Having a variety of presenters always helps, too. Employees start to form networks with the people they meet during their orientation.

Here's the slippery slope—usually, by the time new hires start, the supervisors are already at their wits' end because the position was vacant for a number of weeks or months. They have been doing double duty all that time, and there's a backlog of work and perhaps a mountain of actionable emails. After all, people can only do so much when they're understaffed.

However, allowing employees to go to their new departments to "start

working" in the hopes that somehow they'll be able to participate in some future orientation program will never work. Supervisors may try to short-circuit the orientation process because they are in dire need of the help; but what usually happens is that the employees never really gel with the supervisor, the job duties, or the company.

You know what happens next. Either they quit, or we say "they aren't a good fit for the organization," and we ask them to leave. Much of this can be avoided by pacts made between HR, training, and supervisors stating that the orientation must go on, no matter what.

Whether your organization has fully staffed HR and training departments or consists of a department of one, partnering with supervisors will give you the muscle you need to make orientations powerful without costing a lot of money. Here are six key strategies to make sure your new employees stick:

1| Schedule an employee's first day when the boss is in the office.

This may seem elementary, but I have had many clients who were traveling when their new employee started work. That sends the wrong message to employees—that they are not important enough for their supervisors to be there on their first day.

I know travel happens, so to smooth things over, call the new employee ahead of time and explain that travel has come up and you won't be in the office on her first day of work. Tell her that you have planned an orientation for her, then, after her orientation, ask another department staff member to take the new employee "under his wing" for the time during which you are gone. Or, simply reschedule the start date for when you are next scheduled to be in the office.

2| Have their workstations ready for them when they arrive.

Make sure you have their workstations set up, including login information, computer equipment that works and is ready to be used, a phone line, office furniture, phone lists, and other necessities.

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Part of the orientation program is the IT orientation. It's best to conduct this type of training at the workstation in front of the equipment. This way, the employee gets a "hands-on" experience and is able to get feedback directly from the IT support staff. This requires some planning ahead with the facilities, IT, and HR staff, but it's important.

Staff members often spend a lot of wasted time "hunting and pecking" within a company's computer system to learn what is available online. One tip: Give the appropriate parties plenty of lead time so the IT folks aren't connecting wires while the new employees are trying to get acquainted with their jobs!

3| Give new employees the lay-of-the-land. Part of the orientation should be a "tour" of the office or in some instances the campus. If the campus layout is intricate, provide maps to the staff before you send them on their way to try and find an office. Physically walk new employees around; give them a tour of the office, talk about the company culture, and introduce them to everyone who walks by. If at all possible, introduce the new employees to everybody. Don't have them knocking on doors or cube walls introducing themselves. That puts everybody off.

In addition, let them know whether people eat in or go out for lunch, tell them about bagel mornings, monthly birthday cakes, or whatever is going to make them feel like this is their new work-home.

4| Get down to brass tacks. When the new hires finally get to their new departments, supervisors must spend time with them reviewing their job descriptions, setting expectations for both the supervisor and the organization; let them know the things that drive you nuts as the supervisor (for example, showing up late, not showing up at all and not calling, saying you didn't know something, not going the extra mile, or whatever else makes your teeth itch).

Talk about what can make the person successful in the organization and what things you want the department

to be associated with or known for, whether it's customer service, quick accurate responses, or recognition of issues. Make her a part of the team and the company.

5| Train new employees within the first few weeks. We hopefully don't expect new employees to have mastered all of their job duties within the first few weeks, so we have to provide some training to support them in learning. Organizations sometimes hesitate to make investments in unproven staff members; after all, what happens if the employee quits or doesn't work out?

What organizations don't understand is that one of the reasons there is turnover in the first 90 days is because people don't think there has been enough training. Absent of even talking about future training plans, employees aren't going to stick around and wait to see if there ever will be any training.

Learning should focus on the topics new hires need to know in order to be happy and productive in their jobs; for example, knowing how to access unique company software programs, learning how to order supplies through a financial management system or procurement for recruiting and evaluating staff, and other procedures. Most of these topics will depend on the type of position and industry the employees are in, but you get the idea.

6| Check in frequently during the first weeks, months, and beyond. There is nothing magical about the first 90 days of employment such that anything can't be carried out before the end of that period or beyond. In fact, I subscribe to conducting mini 30-day reviews so if there is an issue that needs to be addressed, 90 days don't go by with no acknowledgement or change in behavior.

You might think it's a little too soon to describe the company's philosophy on performance reviews, professional development, or career opportunities, but it's not. If your company has a formal development process, including formal performance evaluations

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with objectives, career rotations, or promotions, it's a great way to make the new employee think and feel that they have joined a company with some "staying power." Everyone likes to know that there are opportunities for growth and development.

Employees like to know their organization supports their success. That means staff department stakeholders, including their supervisors, should be checking in to ask them how they're doing and to give them feedback on things that have been going well or not so well. Don't wait to give them feedback on things that could be fixed immediately. It just causes problems in the future.

You are excited about the arrival of your new employee. Be prepared to show it. **T+D**

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