A Learning Paths Whitepaper

Rapid Onboarding
3 Keys to Success

The Importance of Rapid Onboarding

How soon would you be confident assigning a new employee to work with your most valued customers? When do you know a new employee is likely to stay and be a productive member of your team? When do you know a new employee can be trusted to work without constant supervision?

New employees are still a gamble. Even with the best hiring process, there's no guarantee of success. There are plenty of downsides to employees who are slow to fit in or who never really fit in. Therefore, the goal of any successful onboarding process or program should be to get new employees up-to-speed and working with their team as fast as possible.

While there are a lot of ways to speed up onboarding pre-hire including making good hiring decisions for the purposes of this discussion, let's limit onboarding from day one until you comfortably feel a new employee is fitting in and well on the way to hitting performance targets. This is different than time to proficiency or time to productivity which, for many jobs, is months if not years away. Think of onboarding more in terms of making a big impact in the critical first 30 to 90 days.

Often when companies start to build onboarding programs, they start by asking the questions: "What does the employee need to know?" and "Who does the employee need to meet?" As a result, there is brief orientation followed by either visits or presentations by department heads. While all of this may eventually be important, it's often confusing, boring and not directly related to their job. When there is a formal new hire training program that can last weeks or months, it can be a very long time before the new employee becomes integrated with the job.

This chart shows how orientation lasts only a few hours or weeks, while onboarding is more in depth but not a full Learning Path. A Learning Path goes all the way to proficiency and includes all of the necessary training, coaching and experience. Think of onboarding as an important piece of a larger learning path.
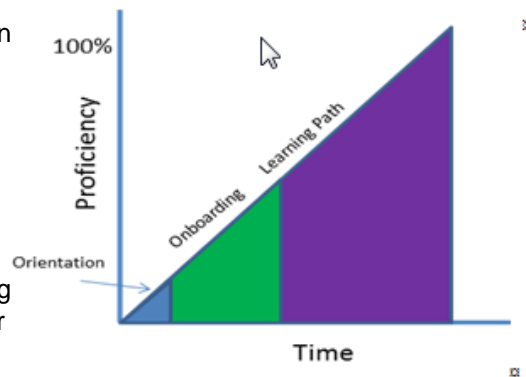
To build an effective onboarding process, let's start by looking at the first few weeks on the job from a new employee's point of view. Fortunately most employees start work highly motivated an eager to work. However, they are also apprehensive because this is a new situation with new people. This is true even when employees have done the same or similar job before. The success and speed of their onboarding will now depend on how well three questions are answered for this new employee. Can I really do this job? Do I really want this job? Will I fit in?

Interestingly, the employer will almost always share these three doubts. Imagine hiring a new manager. There are always concerns that this new manager will fit in with the team and begin to make rapid improvements. They may have been successful in their old company but that was then. This is now. If you're hiring

salespeople, the clock is ticking until they can generate enough in sales to break even on your investment in them. For front line employees in call centers or on the manufacturing floor, there are concerns about production, safety, errors and more.

So let's take each of these questions one at a time and explore what they mean and what to do about them.

Can I Really Do this Job?

I've done a lot of onboarding in call centers which provides great examples because of the large numbers of employees that come and go. Here is an interesting story of how this question affects new employees. In this call center, customer service agents take orders, answer questions and process billing. Traditionally they spent about 6 weeks in training, taking their first live calls in week 4. Because of everything that new employees need to learn, even experienced agents had questions about whether they could do the job when they went live.

We discovered that these new agents didn't need to know everything about all calls, all the products and the complete computer system to take a simple order call. We rearranged their training so that they learned only about a simple order so that they could begin taking basic calls by day 3. On day 3, they spent a half day taking real calls with the help of a coach.

When they returned to class on day 4, there was a collective sigh of relief. They all felt that the job wasn't as hard as they thought and that they could do this job. Compared to a similar class on the old method, they finished 2 weeks earlier and had significantly lower turnover. Those in the old method class, carried their anxiety all the way into week 4.

With salespeople, the sink or swim method is very popular. With a little bit or no training, salespeople are sent out cold calling on their own. Here's your phone and the phone book. Good luck! Unfortunately, the result of this method is that it producers more sinkers than swimmers. Unprepared a new salesperson is dumped into the deep end. This means that anyone who would have survived with a little help or training fails or quits. It's a tough way to answer the question, "Can I do this job?"

New managers are faced with these doubts as well. The work team can have all sorts of issues and problems. They can even openly challenge the new managers. Can the manager establish a position of leadership quickly or not? That's the big question. In these cases, sometimes the manager quits or ends up replacing all the team members. Either way it's an expensive proposition.

While there are a number of effective strategies for handling this question, here are the top three:

1. **Get to work early**

    You will never know how well new employees will perform until they start working. While they may not be able to do the entire job for some time, there is always something they can work on.

2. **Find an early opportunity for success**

   Confidence is built by success. Try to find a part of the job that can be mastered quickly, the sooner the better. For salespeople this might be calling on certain types of customers that are less complicated and friendlier. For managers this might be holding well structured meetings with their team.

3. **Make training just-in-time**

   Don't overload new employees with a lot of training especially if they won't need it immediately. Try to schedule training as close to the time it will be used as possible. When new employees go through weeks of initial training, a lot of it doesn't stick because it isn't immediately used. It becomes overwhelming and creates a loss of confidence and morale.

Having the capability to do something isn't the same as actually performing a task, in all key situations, under pressure. As Mike Tyson said, "Everyone's got a plan until they get hit in the face." Good hiring practices will yield employees with a high likelihood of success and not a guarantee. Let's go on to the second question.

Do I Really Want to Do this Job?

Human resources often does a great job selling potential new employees on the job and the company. However, when the realities of the job set in, these new employees can be disillusioned. Here are two examples of common situations that occur.

I did a lot of work in collections call centers. At some point in the initial training, the lights went on for many agents and they'd say, "So what you're saying is, you want me to call people at home during dinner and ask them for money, is that right?" A predictable percentage would say, "I'm not going to do that and quit." The realization didn't really hit them until they had a phone in their hand and were told to call. Having this epiphany after six weeks of training wasted a lot of time and effort.

Here's the other example. A lot of people go into customer service thinking it's a job to help customers. After taking a call or two, you often hear, "All these customers do is call and complain. I don't want to do this." In the old days, customer service used to be the complaint department and attracted a little different type of person.

The bottom line is this. The sooner employees do real work with real customers, the sooner they can answer the question, "Do I really want to do this job?" The longer you wait the more expensive it gets.

Here are the top three strategies for dealing with the question, "Do I really want this job?"

1. **Preview a Day in the Life**

   As early as possible, even pre-hire, let the new employee see what actually happens on the job. A day of job shadowing is not a bad idea.

2. **Establish the Daily Routine**

    Get the new employee into the routine of the job on the first day if possible. If the new employee will be working on the second or third shift, then that's when the training should happen. If you're in a manufacturing plant, start wearing personal protective equipment immediately.

3. **Experience the Challenge**

    If the job requires taking calls from angry customers, new employees need to see and feel how they would react in those situations. If the new employee is providing care for disabled or sick patients they need to meet and begin working with these patients.

Most turnover still happens in the first 90 days on the job. Just because people really need a job or think they really want to work for your company, it doesn't mean that they won't change their minds. It can be a real emotional roller coaster as employees view themselves in this new role. And finally don't forget what can happen when they start to explain what they do every day to their friends and family. What they thought was a good idea can quickly be shot down. Be ready and deal with this question as fast as you can. Now let's go on to the final question.

Will I Fit In?

Working in a new company or work team is like being dropped into a new family. Not everyone is accepted immediately and not everyone will fit in. There can be a lot of resistance and even hostility from current employees. This is especially true when a work team gets a new manager or supervisor.

I found an interesting slant to this issue when I was working with a company that provided residential care for severely disabled. They talked about one of the biggest obstacles new employees had was gaining enough acceptance from the team so that the team would be willing to invest time training that person. What they talked about was not a date of being fully up-to-speed but rather a date at which a new employee became useful. So in their onboarding plan they teach new employees some basic "helping hand" tasks that are valuable to the team.

Here are a couple of common situations that you might want to avoid. The new employee is sent off for weeks of training. They won't get a desk, phone or even place to sit until they get back. In addition, it will be some time before they meet their coworkers and supervisor. As a result, all through training, the question, "will I fit it?" doesn't get answered.

It also happens that there is no real plan for new employee training. I've seen new employees assigned to read policy books or proposals for two to three weeks with little interaction with anyone. The message is that everyone else is too busy and when they get time, they will start training the new person.

Managers have a very short time to become assimilated or assume their leadership position. Everyone else is on pins and needles until this happens. Some of the best onboarding includes early team sessions where the new manager tries to hear, understand and respond to the questions and concerns of the team.

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I think all too often the method for getting people to work with each other is to put them together and see what happens. It's a form of sink or swim. Here are three quick suggestions for answering, "Will I fit in?"

1. **Early Introductions**

   Make sure new employees meet and spend time with their managers and team members in the first few days.

2. **Establish a Home Base**

   Give new employees their phones, desks, emails or other start up essentials of their job immediately.

3. **Structure Early Interactions**

   Don't leave it to chance. Create activities that make the new person valuable to the team members and alleviates any doubts they have about the new person.

Successful onboarding requires a lot of structure for the first 30 to 90 days. Doing a better job onboarding dramatically reduces turnover and helps to build a more productive work environment. Getting down to real work and the routine of the job early can make a big difference.

About LPI

Learning Paths International is a performance improvement consulting firm with partners in the U.S., China, Canada, U.K. and Europe. In addition to the Learning Path Methodology, LPI also offers a wide range of consulting and learning development services including: strategic planning, change management and leadership development

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