

Onboarding New Employees

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At this point, you've hired the people who you think are well-suited to your organization and you look forward to working together happily ever after. Well done! But before you heave a big sigh of relief, you should know that a new hire's first few weeks on the job are absolutely critical to their success.¹ Now you'll need to shift your attention to the onboarding practices and activities that help your new employees adjust to the job, the organization, and their coworkers.

Your onboarding activities send an important signal to your new hires, a signal that can impact the long-term employment relationship. When employees see that you've thought carefully about onboarding and the best way to implement it, they are more likely to actively engage in the onboarding sessions and pay closer attention to the content.² Unfortunately, too many organizations leave their new hires to sink or swim; they give the employee the primary responsibility for learning the new job and learning about the company. In a 2018 survey of HR leaders in the United States, 24% reported that their organization had no onboarding program at all!³ Organizations that do offer onboarding have wildly different approaches. Some companies take an informal and unstructured approach to onboarding.⁴ Other companies offer a more formal and structured onboarding program. They might group newcomers together to engage in some scheduled activities, or pair newcomers with more senior employees who serve as role models and provide social support. L'Oréal, for example, designed an 18–24 month comprehensive (and highly structured) onboarding program

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called Follow-Up and Integration Track (FIT).⁵ Research consistently shows that when organizations deliver a formal, structured onboarding experience to new hires, the newcomers develop more positive job attitudes – so that formal, structured approach is what we’ll be emphasizing in this chapter.⁶

However, successful onboarding isn’t just about employee job satisfaction. Onboarding affects your bottom line too. Did you know that a third of new hires leave their jobs within 6 months, and 17% leave in the first week?⁷ That’s costly: A conservative estimate is that the recruiting and hiring activities associated with replacing a failed hire will cost the employer at least 30% of the lost employee’s salary.⁸ Losing a new hire also disrupts a team’s productivity and brings down morale – and those costs are harder to estimate. An effective onboarding program can make a big difference to employee retention. The Brandon Hall Group reports that even a minimal investment in onboarding can boost employee retention by 34%; companies that make big investments enjoy a 58% increase in employee retention.⁹

The good news is that onboarding best practices are not that hard to develop and implement. An effective onboarding program can be offered by small and large organizations alike. In this chapter we will highlight what managers can do to support employees as they adjust to the job and the company, so that you can reap the benefits in higher job satisfaction, better job performance, and greater retention.

Two Onboarding Goals: Information and Relationships

Let’s start with a little bit of vocabulary. HR practitioners most often talk about “onboarding,” but HR academics are more likely to talk about “socialization.” What’s the difference? The term *socialization* usually refers to a psychological process by which organizational newcomers are transformed into organizational insiders.¹⁰ Notice we said a psychological process, so the transformation is inside the person.¹¹ *Onboarding* describes organizational activities that are designed to support newcomers and facilitate their socialization.¹² As a manager, you are responsible for designing and delivering onboarding; socialization is an outcome of those onboarding activities. Importantly, the socialization process has multiple stages. You already started the socialization process while you were recruiting your new hires, and socialization will continue long after the onboarding activities are completed.¹³ What happens

to newcomers in their first 90–100 days is especially important, because those early experiences set the tone for the rest of their time in the company.¹⁴ Once the formal onboarding is complete, newcomers will continue to be socialized through their interactions with other organizational members.¹⁵

You can think of onboarding as having two interconnected goals: delivering information and developing relationships. First, you want to give your new hires the *information* they need to get started. New employees must understand what's expected of them: What tasks do I need to perform? What are my task priorities? How should I allocate my time?¹⁶ New employees must also understand the workplace culture and their fit with the job and the company: What are my company's values? How do those values guide behavior in the workplace? Do I share those values and know how to act on them?¹⁷ Your onboarding activities should ensure that newcomers have role clarity (a clear understanding of their own – and their colleagues' – tasks, responsibilities, and processes at work). You can't assume that employees will automatically learn what they need to know, because many of them don't. And confused employees can add up to a big organizational problem: A 2008 study of 400 companies conducted by Cognisco (an employee assessment firm) found that employees' misunderstanding of company policies, processes, and functions was costing UK and US businesses US\$37 billion every year.¹⁸

Second, you want to help your new hires establish the *relationships* they will need over the long haul. On a day-to-day basis, coworkers provide one another with information they need about the job and the company – and they provide one another with social support when the going gets tough. Managers sometimes focus exclusively on the informational content of onboarding and neglect relationship building, but that's a mistake.¹⁹ Good relationships maintain the flow of information to a newcomer, and they help the newcomer sift through an information overflow to identify what's really important. Your onboarding activities should lay the foundation for good working relationships.

Onboarding that achieves the two goals (delivering information and developing relationships) is associated with lots of positive socialization outcomes, including strong organizational commitment, high job satisfaction, low turnover, and high job performance.²⁰ Now let's consider what you can do, in a formal and structured way, to ease your new employees into the organization and help them adjust as quickly and painlessly as possible.

Delivering Information (the What and How)

Newcomers have a lot to learn! Let's divide that information into two big baskets. In the first basket, there's the basic information that every employee needs, no matter what job they are doing. Your new hires probably need to file employment paperwork, obtain company identification, get email accounts, and learn their way around their new workplace. And they need to learn your company policies and the legal requirements that apply to their role. These bits of information are routine, but they are absolutely essential. Much of this basic information can be delivered using technology,²¹ some of it can be delivered even before the employee starts work, and some of the content can be self-paced.²² Deloitte moved almost all of the administrative bits of its onboarding process into activities that could be performed on a secure server.²³ Now new hires can complete those activities in advance, so on their first day onsite, they are ready to do real work on their actual jobs.

The second basket contains the trickier stuff – the information that can't be completely automated, and information that might need more customization. New hires need a lot of information about their own particular jobs. They need to understand the job requirements and be fully aware of the organization's expectations about how the work gets done. When employees are clear about their roles, they are more likely to ask questions and take risks. That means employees learn more, and they end up being more effective in their jobs.²⁴ Further, new hires have to understand the larger context in which they are working – they need to know where their jobs fit in the big picture.²⁵ They need to learn the company's overall culture and the subcultures within it.²⁶ Every company has its own goals and values, and every company has its own language and acronyms.

You've probably already delivered some of this information while you were recruiting your new hires. For example, maybe you took our advice from Chapter 2 (Recruiting Employees) and gave applicants a realistic job preview. If so, your new hires already have accurate information that will help them adapt more quickly. Now you can build on that base during onboarding. There are several different information delivery strategies to consider. As you'll soon see, companies can choose the strategy that best meets their needs. Let's see *What* information organizations deliver to newcomers during onboarding, and *How* they deliver it.

Training Programs

Training programs usually focus on the knowledge and skills that employees need to perform their particular job. Training programs help new employees acquire the knowledge and the hard and soft skills necessary to perform particular tasks or jobs. Front-end training is especially important when an employee will be working independently, and in those situations, newcomers find it helpful when a coworker models how the work should be done.²⁷ Here's a practical example of on-the-job training and role modeling: At Nordstrom department stores, employees are empowered to err on the side of the customer. Nordstrom's entire employee handbook is compressed into a single rule: Use good judgment in all situations. But before Nordstrom turns employees loose on customers, they want to make sure that the employee understands what good judgment looks like. So every new salesperson is matched up with an experienced staff member for a full day of observation and practice. Together, they work through a checklist of selling concepts and roleplaying scenarios.²⁸

Orientation Programs

Orientations are a specific type of onboarding program that occur on or near the new employee's start date. They are usually formal, well-organized affairs that can last anywhere from a few hours to several days or, in the case of Zappos, four full weeks. You'll remember Zappos from Chapter 4 (Interviewing Job Applicants) – the online shoe retailer with a holacracy structure and a culture based on teamwork. During orientation, new Zappos employees learn about the company's history and core values, experience the importance of customer service by taking phone calls (even if the new hire's job doesn't have a customer service component), and forge connections with coworkers through organized games, activities, and projects. Three days are devoted to holacracy education, and each new hire has to practice facilitating a team meeting two or three times during orientation. A typical orientation cohort has about 65 new hires, so that means participating in 130–195 meetings over the course of the month. There's a final exam, and new hires have to answer at least 90% of the questions correctly. And here's the kicker: If, at the end of orientation, new hires aren't feeling the vibe, Zappos offers them a buyout (sometimes as much as

US\$4,000) to leave!²⁹ Zappos is an extreme example, but even shorter orientation periods can help newcomers learn about the company, reduce their stress, and boost their commitment to the employer. For example, new employees who went through a structured orientation program at Corning Glassware were 69% more likely to be with the company up to 3 years later.³⁰

Technological Support Systems

The information that you deliver to new hires through your training and orientation programs can be supported by technology. Try to create a one-stop shop where newcomers can find the information they need without a lot of fumbling around.³¹ We mentioned L'Oréal's long-run commitment to onboarding earlier in this chapter. L'Oréal prides itself on a "culture of confrontation" in which employees are encouraged to ask one another "in-your-face" questions to help one another learn.³² It's a culture that takes some getting used to, and so L'Oréal has developed a comprehensive onboarding program that involves on-the-job learning, site visits, job shadowing, and online videos. One of the most innovative elements of L'Oréal's program is a Fit Culture App that uses text, video, testimonials, quizzes, games, and real-life missions to teach newcomers about the company's culture in an engaging way. New hires are greeted in their own language (L'Oréal is an international company operating in more than 30 countries) and guided through the seven most critical aspects of the L'Oréal culture they need to master; those seven aspects were identified by current and past L'Oréal employees. Employees are encouraged to engage with the app 5–10 minutes every day. Along the way, they discover "insider secrets" (facts, stories, and legends known only to company insiders) and earn points to become a #CultureGuru.³³

L'Oréal's app is a fresh, fun alternative to sitting through a series of PowerPoint presentations in a traditional orientation program. But notice the way L'Oréal uses it to support their other onboarding activities, rather than replacing their formal, structured onboarding activities. Technology does a great job of communicating information to newcomers, but it can miss out on some of the social elements that contribute to a successful socialization process.³⁴ We'll have more to say about the importance of relationships later in this chapter.



Manager's Checkpoint 5.1

Use the following questions to identify the kinds of onboarding activities that might be most useful for your new hires.

- Am I hiring people to perform complex jobs that require some creativity? Will employees be working independently in unpredictable situations? (If employees have to make individual choices about managing unanticipated situations, it's not possible to train people in the "one best way" to achieve high performance. New hires will develop confidence and a broad range of behavioral skills by observing how seasoned coworkers perform the job.)
 - Will I be hiring groups of individuals as a cohort of new hires? (Orientation programs are a formal, structured form of onboarding, and sometimes require an investment in staff time, technology, and other resources, so you may get the most value from implementing them with groups of employees.)
 - Does my company have a strong culture with clear norms and expectations? (In strong culture organizations, the company's core values create a shared understanding among employees about what is important and how things should be done. If you work in a strong culture organization, the content of your onboarding program should clearly reflect your organization's core values and help the new hire to understand them.)
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Establishing Relationships (the Who and How)

Now let's turn our attention to your new hires' relationships. You've given your new hires some important information as they started their new jobs, but the learning doesn't end there. Employees will continue to fine-tune their early lessons as they work alongside other organizational members.³⁵ Remember how, in Chapter 1 (The Non-HR Manager), we identified your employees as your most important stakeholder group? If onboarding is done well, your relationship with a new hire will start off on the right foot³⁶ – we'll talk more about that later in this chapter.

But you won't always be there to answer the newcomer's questions. So, during the onboarding process, you want to lay the foundation for high-quality relationships between your new hires and other organizational insiders – team members, support staff, other managers, and senior executives. Don't underestimate the importance of these newcomer–insider relationships: they can have a bigger impact on a newcomer's socialization than your organization's formal onboarding program.³⁷

Why are relationships such a big deal? First, they open information channels: When newcomers need information, they will know where to find it, and they will be more comfortable asking for help from people they already know.³⁸ Second, they create a support system.³⁹ The social and emotional support a new hire receives from supervisors and coworkers at organizational entry affects their organizational commitment and social integration several months later.⁴⁰ Even more importantly, if new hires have established high-quality relationships with supervisors and coworkers, they will have support when they need it most – after the initial excitement of the new job wears off.⁴¹ Many organizational relationships will develop organically, as your new hire finds people with common interests. But there's a lot you can do to make sure that newcomers set off in the right direction.

Team Member Introductions

Stating the obvious: Your new hire can't have a relationship with coworkers they haven't met. Start by ensuring that your new hire gets to know the team members they will be working with most closely. Someone (maybe you, maybe a team member) should be available on Day 1 – with a clear plan about who will take the new hire to lunch and introduce the new hire to the entire team.⁴² Better still, make those introductions *before* Day 1. Send the new hire a brief itinerary about what their first day will be like – and maybe even schedule a celebration at the end of the day.⁴³

Cohort Orientations

In the previous section, we talked about orientation programs, and we suggested that designing these programs for cohorts of newcomers was a good strategy for delivering information. Those same orientation

programs are opportunities for relationship building. New hires who participate in onboarding programs as a cohort are able to develop wider social networks, because they start their jobs knowing people in other parts of the company.⁴⁴ Limit the cohort size so that new hires get to know one another on a personal level. Google, for example, hires thousands of employees every year. They've learned that orientation cohorts of about a dozen people forge stronger social connections than larger groups.⁴⁵ And keep the cohorts stable, so that new hires have multiple opportunities to connect with the same people. LinkedIn uses Zoom-facilitated breakout rooms during their onboarding and ensures that new hires participate in the same breakout cohort for the entire onboarding experience.⁴⁶

Peer Mentors

One of the best ways to ensure that your new hire starts their employment with at least one relationship is to make it somebody's job to be "on call" for the newcomer. Percolate, a content marketing platform operating in the United States and the United Kingdom, assigns new hires a "Percolator" to help them get settled into the new role. Percolators answer all the newbie questions ("Uh, where do I find pens?") and take the new hire on a tour of the office to personally introduce them to each of their 100 coworkers.⁴⁷ Clear Channel Communications in San Antonio pairs new staffers with "peer coaches" who are available to answer questions ("What time do I need to be at work?") before their first day on the job.⁴⁸ Landed, a San Francisco personal finance company, gives every new hire a "culture buddy"; it's the buddy's job to answer questions about local norms ("How do people usually dress for Zoom meetings?").⁴⁹ Whatever your company chooses to call them, these peer mentors can provide a safe haven for employees to ask questions (including the "dumb" questions that new hires might be reluctant to ask their managers) and learn the ropes. But choose them wisely. The peer mentors will link new hires to their own social networks, so you want to select mentors who are familiar with the company culture and centrally connected to other organizational members.⁵⁰ A good mentor can keep the new hire's socialization process on track; employees who are assigned mentors at organizational entry ultimately learn more,⁵¹ develop better person-organization fit,⁵² and are better able to cope with stress than employees without mentors.⁵³



Manager's Checkpoint 5.2

Use the following questions to identify opportunities to help new hires develop relationships at work.

- Who will my new hires work with most closely? (Focus on these relationships first, even before the new hire's first day. Coworkers can introduce themselves and begin to get to know the new employee by phone, video, or email.)
 - Who else is joining the company around the same time? (Use this information to identify cohorts of new hires that cross team and departmental lines. These cohorts can be onboarded together, so that your new hires get a big picture view of how their role fits within the company.)
 - Who are the best people to mentor my new hires and answer their questions? (Don't limit your thinking to senior mentors. Peers can make great mentors. Identify coworkers who are enthusiastic ambassadors for your company, so that they will provide new hires with information about the company culture along with nuts-and-bolts information about who does what.)
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By the way, as you plan relationship-building activities, don't assume that they all have to be face to face. During the COVID-19 pandemic, managers had to pivot a lot of their onboarding activities to virtual delivery. Many of these options will remain useful long after the pandemic as a way of onboarding a geographically dispersed workforce or supplementing local team onboarding with virtual components. See Box 5.1 for examples of virtual onboarding activities designed to nurture relationships and create a sense of belonging even when employees can't meet face to face.

Box 5.1 Remote Onboarding

- Employment Hero is an Australian company that develops HR payroll and benefits software. Concerned that new hires might be missing out on relationship-building when everyone was working remotely, the company established three virtual social groups that are completely voluntary: a 10AM coffee/tea catchup, a noon lunch catchup, and a sundown chat at the end of the day.⁵⁴

- Management consultancy Interchange used Coffee Roulette as a substitute for their usual face-to-face, one-on-one meetings with new hires. The new hire spins a virtual Wheel of Fortune labeled with team member names. The wheel lands on a name, and that coworker organizes a coffee chat with the new hire later in the week.⁵⁵
- New hires at Calendly (a software company based in Atlanta) usually have a first-day lunch with their managers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when employees worked remotely, the company had food delivered to employees' homes. Then small groups of 9 or 10 new hires and their managers logged on to a video conference and ate together.⁵⁶
- LinkedIn's traditional onboarding regimen was a one-day session. When the company went remote during the COVID-19 pandemic, LinkedIn expanded their onboarding to a weeklong virtual session that included daily check-ins and touchpoints that could be organized around the employee's other responsibilities (e.g., children's at-home learning). One day featured a scavenger hunt within the company's online resources.⁵⁷
- At Freeletics (a European company that delivers digital personal training), it's a first-day ritual for a new hire to have their photo taken in front of a wall bearing a giant company logo. During virtual onboarding, the tradition became a Zoom screenshot.⁵⁸
- To reduce the first-day jitters and the stress of seeing a screenful of unfamiliar faces, Washington DC-based conglomerate Siemens has all the new hire's team members send a short video introduction, sharing something about themselves. The new hire gets the videos before their first day, so the team members are familiar before the first Zoom meeting launches.⁵⁹
- Close designs customer relationship management systems for startups and small-to-medium size businesses. Every new employee completes a Guide to You where they answer questions about who they are and how they like to work (e.g., What are your quirks? How can people earn an extra gold star with you?). The Guide is stored in the company's wiki. The new hire will find all of their coworkers' Guides there too, so they can get to know people as they browse.⁶⁰

Mythbusting: What Onboarding Isn't

This is a good time to be clear on the role of fit in onboarding. In the last few pages, we've repeatedly mentioned the idea of culture and emphasized the importance of helping new hires understand (and fit) your company's culture. Back in Chapter 4 (Interviewing Job Applicants), we encouraged you to think about the applicant's cultural fit, but we also pointed out the value of building a diverse workforce. Those aren't incompatible goals – you want to hire employees who align with the company's core values while also bringing some unique skills and perspectives.⁶¹ In fact, the goals go hand in hand in creating environments in which diverse employees can thrive (Chapter 11, Creating an Inclusive Workplace).

Onboarding helps employees to “fit,” but that doesn't mean that your goal is assimilation. You don't need your new hires to be carbon copies of the employees you already have. In fact, if you are creating carbon copy employees, you may be missing some valuable opportunities to find better ways to meet your business objectives. When your employees strictly conform to a fixed set of normative behaviors and perspectives, the organization is going to become rigid and inflexible. You want employees to approach the work in a personalized way that reflects their unique selves. It makes the job more meaningful for the employee, and it makes the organization more agile.⁶²

Want an example? Look no further than Wipro, a business process outsourcing company based in Bangalore, India that provides telephone and chat support for its global customers. Call center jobs are notoriously challenging, with extremely high turnover.⁶³ That was true at Wipro, where more than half of its call center employees usually quit only a few months after training. A team of researchers designed an experiment that compared three kinds of onboarding.⁶⁴ One group of Wipro hires (the control group) went through the company's traditional onboarding program, where the focus was on describing the organization and the job requirements. A second group (the organization identity group) experienced an onboarding program that focused on creating pride in the organization. And the third group (the personal identity group) engaged in an onboarding program that focused on newcomers' unique perspectives and strengths and how they could leverage them on the job. In this third group, the new employees wore sweatshirts emblazoned with their own names, not the company's. They listened to a senior leader describe ways in which working at the company enabled employees to express their individuality. They participated in an exercise in which they

described a time when they acted authentically, when they felt “born to act.” Guess what? The employees who went through the personal identity onboarding program were more likely to stay with the company. In fact, over the next 3 months, the personal identity hires were 32% less likely to quit than the new hires who went through the company’s usual onboarding program, and 21% less likely to quit than the organizational identity hires.⁶⁵

And that’s not all! The personal identity employees also delivered better on-the-job-performance, receiving higher customer satisfaction scores than their coworkers in the other two groups. It’s definitely important for newcomers to adapt to an organization and fit with its culture. But the Wipro study demonstrates the benefits that emerge when an organization *also* encourages employees to express their personal identities and apply their personal strengths to the job. This holds for any organization, not just call centers. Remember our earlier discussion about Nordstrom’s employee handbook (with its one rule: Use good judgment in all situations)? After new hires finish their Nordstrom orientation and have a good sense of the company’s culture, goals, and systems, they are encouraged to find their own unique way of doing business and serving their customers.⁶⁶

Your Job as Manager

Let’s be clear about this: You, the manager, are absolutely critical to your new hire’s success. Depending on the size of the company and your role in it, you may have limited say in designing the organization’s formal onboarding activities. But one thing you do control is when and how you interact with your new hire, and these interactions can – really, we are not exaggerating! – make or break their socialization.⁶⁷

Meet Early and Often

The most important thing is to meet with your new hire. It’s not just us saying this – employees say it too. The number one thing that new employees say they want during onboarding is one-on-one time with their manager (selected by a whopping 72% of survey respondents).⁶⁸ You’re probably thinking: “Duh, of course I’ll meet with my new hire!” But managers are busy people. They have good intentions. You might

intend to welcome your new hire on their first day, and suddenly be called away to manage a crisis. Or maybe you are on a business trip during the new hire's first week and leave the meet-and-greet to a colleague. Don't let that happen. Put the new hire's start date in your calendar and give it the highest priority. Schedule reminders to check with the new hire at the end of each day for a few weeks.⁶⁹ Learn from Microsoft's experience.

Microsoft hires thousands of people every year; they survey their new hires after their first week and then again after 90 days.⁷⁰ Microsoft looked closely at 3,000 new hires and matched the hires' calendar and email activities with their survey responses (paying particular attention to how the new hires answered questions like, "I feel proud to work for Microsoft" and "I expect to work for Microsoft for several years"). The new hires who had a one-on-one with their managers in the first week were more engaged than new hires who hadn't had a one-on-one. That's because these new hires had very different experiences. During their first week, they grew larger internal networks (12% larger than new hires who didn't have a one-on-one) and felt more connected with their teams. They had higher quality meetings (i.e., meetings that were shorter in duration, and attended by fewer but more engaged members). And they were more involved in team collaborations (collaborating three times more than new hires who hadn't had the one-on-one).

Use one-on-ones to help your new hire achieve role clarity. Your new hire might be drowning in information acquired during your company's formal onboarding, and you can highlight what's most important (and what can be safely put on the back burner). You might provide guidance, give advice, and do some role modeling.⁷¹ You can tell the new hire when they are doing a good job, and provide some constructive feedback when they need to do a better job. You can also use the one-on-ones to identify other people in the organization who your new hire should get to know. Then find opportunities to connect them. As the linking pin between your new hire and organizational insiders, you can encourage the new hire to reach out, but you also need to encourage coworkers to respond positively to the new hires' efforts.⁷²

Eventually the content of your one-on-ones might expand to discussing the new hire's long-run career goals and their advancement opportunities within the company.⁷³ And in a future chapter (Chapter 10, Retaining Employees), we'll talk about how you can continue these conversations throughout the employee's career. But in the early days, stay focused on the short term: What does your new hire need to know right now? What resources do they need? Who do they need to meet?

These one-on-one meetings with your new hire don't need to be lengthy or formal, they just need to be regular. Product Hunt is the company behind a website that shares new product information. They are small (about 20 people, mostly engineers) and they are fully remote. They've been unusually successful at retaining their high-skill employees, and they attribute that success to a "sync up" meeting strategy.⁷⁴ New employees have a daily 30-minute sync up with their hiring manager. Once the new hire is comfortable, meetings might slow down to twice a week, then weekly, and after a couple of months maybe the meetings don't happen at all. But because the sync ups are frequent and predictable, a new hire has lots of opportunities to ask questions and share what's on their mind – without having to wonder whether their question is important enough to initiate a meeting.

Encourage New Hires to Be Proactive

Onboarding activities are designed by the organization, but socialization is definitely a two-way process. New hires receive information from their employers, but a lot of the information they get during the onboarding process is rather generic. In order to figure out how to apply that generic information to the specific situations they face at work, newcomers ask questions, they observe, they test their knowledge in conversations, and they seek feedback on how they are doing. Researchers often describe those as *proactive* behaviors. Proactivity helps employees to adjust more quickly and become better performers.⁷⁵ Proactivity is partly a function of personality (some people are naturally more proactive than others).⁷⁶ But it's also a function of the organizational context. Your one-on-one meetings with your new hires create opportunities for them to demonstrate proactivity (by asking questions, testing their knowledge, and seeking feedback) and be rewarded for doing so.

In your one-on-one meetings, you will be able to answer new hires' questions directly, helping them to understand the job they have to perform (role clarity) and the organization's values and politics (organizational culture). But you will also be able to point them to other sources of information in the company (both people and online sources). Your support will encourage the new hire to put in more effort toward proactively fitting in. Supportive managers encourage their employees to be more vulnerable – to admit gaps in their knowledge and know that it is OK to ask questions.⁷⁷ You may need to explicitly give the new hire

permission to ask questions, so that they focus on learning (not just performance).⁷⁸ Fan the flames of newcomers who are spontaneously proactive and encourage reticent newcomers to be more proactive (and celebrate their first proactive steps).⁷⁹

Maintain Momentum

Organizations usually pay the most attention to employees during their first few weeks of employment,⁸⁰ that's also when employees receive the most support from their coworkers.⁸¹ That initial "honeymoon" period can be followed by a very long "hangover." In fact, polls suggest that employees' engagement levels peak during the first 6 months of employment and decline steadily thereafter.⁸² But you didn't hire a short-term employee. You followed our advice in the last few chapters and identified an employee who would be valuable over the long haul. This means that you need to maintain your onboarding efforts over the long haul too. How long? Well, the first 90 days are especially critical,⁸³ and it can take 6 months for professional employees to get up to speed,⁸⁴ but the socialization process continues for about 2 full years.⁸⁵

Therefore, you want to make onboarding new hires a continuing part of your own job. Table 5.1 is a good place to start. We've suggested some activities that you can build into your calendar, to ensure that your new hire is onboarded successfully. You can create personalized reminders to "nudge" you to complete them. That's the approach that Google took in improving its onboarding activities. The Sunday before a new hire is due to start, the manager receives a "just-in-time" checklist for activities over the next 6 months. The checklist reminds managers to discuss roles and responsibilities with new hires, schedule a series of check-in meetings within the first 6 months, and match the new employee with a peer buddy. Nudges work: When Google managers received that nudge, their new hires became fully effective 25% faster than their peers.⁸⁶

What's Next?

Onboarding is an important but often neglected organizational activity. Many organizations have informal and unstructured onboarding programs, despite evidence that formal and structured programs are most effective.⁸⁷ Effective onboarding programs and activities provide

Table 5.1 Onboarding Your New Hire: When to Do What

<i>When</i>	<i>What</i>
Before the employee's first day	Send essential job and organization information to the new hire, and complete as much administrative paperwork as possible. Encourage new hires to follow the company on social media. Share a Day 1 agenda so they know what to expect. Make virtual introductions to team members. Prepare the new hire's workstation and make sure critical equipment is delivered before they arrive.
On Day 1	Make Day 1 special! Ensure that the new hire meets coworkers and have a plan for lunch. Identify a peer mentor to be available during the day. Check in with the new hire at the beginning and end of the day.
During the first few weeks	Schedule regular one-on-ones with the new hire and lock them into your calendar. Together, identify key milestones (e.g., 30, 60, 90, 120, and 180 days on the job) to check progress. Use the first few meetings to ensure that the new hire has role clarity: prioritize tasks, explain performance expectations, and provide access to critical resources. Take the opportunity to make sure the new hire understands your company's culture (its goals, values, and politics).
During the first 3 months	As the company's formal onboarding activities come to an end, the new hire may receive less support from their coworkers. Encourage proactivity! Point the new hire to activities, resources, and people that they can consult to continue their learning.
Nearing the 6-month mark	As the new hire becomes more technically proficient in their role, they will have more opportunity to expand their social networks. Emphasize the importance of social connections and introduce the new hire to people in other units and at other organizational levels.
During the next 18 months	Continue to identify key milestones and check the employee's progress. The onboarding activities may be less formal and the adjustment progress less visible, but the socialization process is likely to continue for about 2 full years.

employees with important information about their jobs and the company culture; they help employees integrate into the company's social network. Onboarding is largely focused on organizational entry, but employee learning continues throughout their career. In the next chapter

we address training and consider how you can help employees continue to develop their knowledge and skills. You're aiming for a seamless transition between front-end onboarding activities and the developmental activities that follow.

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Manager's Knot 5.1

My company has developed a terrific, well-structured, formal onboarding program. But lately I've noticed something about my new hires. After they complete the onboarding, my new employees are technically very proficient, and they seem to enjoy their work. However, they rarely come up with new ideas. They seem content to follow the rules without bringing any creativity to their roles. This is starting to worry me because we operate in a very competitive industry, and only innovation will keep us profitable.

Ah, you've touched on a fundamental onboarding paradox. Intense front-end socialization activities that focus on assimilating new hires into specific roles can positively influence newcomer adjustment, but they can also inadvertently stifle employee creativity.⁸⁸ When your organization's onboarding program gives new hires very specific and uniform guidelines, newcomers will achieve role clarity. Unfortunately, they might also think that their role is so clear that there is no room for individual innovation. In this situation, you need to offset the conformity signals sent by your company's onboarding program. In your one-on-one interactions with your new hires, be very explicit that you *want* them to innovate. Encourage them to experiment, and design "sandboxes" or "pilots" where they can test their ideas on a small (and safe) scale. Find opportunities to praise their creativity, even if their first innovations are very small. Innovative behavior is, by nature, risky behavior. Your new hires need to know that you expect – and value – creativity so they feel confident about taking risks.



Manager's Knot 5.2

My company is planning to move away from a classroom-based orientation program for staff to an online orientation. New staff members will sit at their workstations and watch animated characters provide information about company culture and history. Is this a good idea?

There are a lot of good reasons to move some of your onboarding content online: low cost, global access, consistent delivery. A self-paced computer-delivered introduction to your company can be a valuable component of a larger onboarding program if you recognize its limitations. Your online program is designed to deliver the basics of your company culture. But to be successful, employees also need to understand your company's subtle norms, unwritten rules, and unspoken politics. A more interactive and interpersonal mode of delivery may be better suited to these subtle or sensitive elements. Consider supplementing your computerized orientation program with some small group discussions or roleplays with more senior coworkers to ensure that your new employees gain a deep understanding of the company culture.



Manager's Knot 5.3

My company has never provided a formal onboarding process, but we would like to start now. We are planning a 2-day orientation program. On the first day, new staffers would complete paperwork and learn about our company's history. On the second day, we would pair each new staffer with a current employee who would help answer any questions they have. Sound good?

That's definitely a good start. Remember, though, orientation programs are only one specific component of a larger onboarding process. Formal orientation programs may run for only a few days, but the new hire's onboarding should begin even before their start date and continue for several months. The key is to think about onboarding as an ongoing process. Now that the paperwork is finished, what kinds of training and support will the new hire need to get up to speed? Now that you've paired the new hire with a "buddy," how can you help them expand their social network and get to know other organizational members? The first 90–100 days can be critical, so don't neglect your new hires after the two days of orientation are completed.

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