

A Manager's Guide to Employee Orientation

By Dr. John Sullivan

The first week on the job can play a crucial role in motivating and retaining new employees. We often spend lots of time and money recruiting and wooing new employees, and as soon as they start we turn around and treat them like barely welcome strangers. We need to begin looking at recruiting as only half of the task of hiring. Orientation is the other, often ignored element.

I've designed quite a few orientation programs, and in my view responsibility for the first day and the first week on the job are too important to delegate to human resources or to devote to "reading the manual." Managers need to take control of the process of bringing a new employee on board. Just like a parent adopting a new child, the role a manager plays during the first week is of critical importance if the employee-manager relationship is to progress rapidly.

To begin with it is important for you, as a manager, to know why the orientation has so much impact. Following is a checklist of the reasons why you need to focus on orientation.

Goals of Great Orientation Programs

Most orientation programs entail little more than putting a tape in the VCR. But if you really want to do a great "on boarding" process, you must first understand its goals and potential impacts. Some of them include:

- Time to productivity. Any delay in providing new hires with the guidance, equipment and training they need can slow the time it takes for a new employee to reach their minimum expected level of productivity. Each day of delay can frustrate the employee and may also mean the loss of thousands of dollars in revenue if product development or sales are impacted.
- Continuous recruiting. It is important to use the new hire as a source for identifying other potential hires. By asking the new hire on their first day who else is good at their former firm, managers can easily increase their supply of talent. New hires can also be asked (when appropriate) to directly help in recruiting their former colleagues.
- Competitive intelligence. By asking new hires about the best practices of their last firm, their new managers can gather some new benchmark ideas.
- Your image as "the best place to work." New hires can get dozens of calls from their friends during the first week on the job. How the new hire is treated during this crucial period has a direct impact on what they say when colleagues ask what it is like to work there. If they say positive things about your firm and their new job, it might mean that their friends will also want to join your firm. Negative comments can also impact the overall image of the firm and even future product sales.
- Setting a manager's expectations. On the first day, it is important for the manager to make sure that the new employee knows the manager's expectations, the departmental goals and what important contributions the employee can make to the product and the firm.
- Understanding the employee's expectations. It is equally important for the manager to find out what expectations the new employee has in the areas of training, promotion and preferred management and communication styles.
- Explaining the employee's "shared responsibility." It is important to educate each employee that they share in the responsibility of making themselves productive members of the team. This can begin by communicating to the new employee that they must take a proactive role in "helping" their manager understand what it is that motivates and frustrates them.

- Reinforce their decision. A manager needs to reinforce the sale by wowing the new employee and reinforcing their decision to take the job. You also need to answer their questions, eliminate their fears and give them something to tell their friends.

Every manager needs to approach orientation using his or her own style, but there are some things that most managers should include. The following list is a "toolkit" of possible things that a manager can do to improve orientation, increase productivity and eventually increase the retention probabilities of new hire.

Helping the Employee Understand the Big Picture

1. Provide the new hire with a brief overview of the departmental objectives, the business plan, and how their job contributes to both.
2. Provide them with a brief overview of the corporate culture and your mission/vision statement and values.
3. Give them a copy of the organizational charts.
4. Give them a copy of the performance assessment tool/form as well as the reward system so that they can understand how they will be assessed and rewarded.

Making the New Employee Part of the Team

5. Make sure that their direct manager greets them early on in their first day and introduces them personally to all key team members.
6. Assign them at least one temporary mentor (preferably someone who is a top performer and/or recent hire).
7. Plan an hour of uninterrupted time with the manager on their first day.
8. Pre-schedule a series of "no cancel" meetings with the boss and key team members during the first month.
9. Have the CEO/GM do the orientation presentation to show the new hires how important they are to the organization.
10. Give the new hire \$25 certificates to give to the top five mentors that help them the most during their first month on the job.
11. Give them five "free lunch coupons" to use on co-workers so that they will rapidly get to know them and the local restaurants as well.
12. Put a "rouges gallery" (pictures of the whole team) on the group's intranet (or post the pictures on a bulletin board) so it will be easier for them to put names with the faces they meet.
13. Ask them who they would like to meet during their first week and have the meetings already scheduled.

Develop Plans and Goals for the New Employee

14. Develop an individual learning plan with the new hire to ensure that they will have the necessary skills and that they will remain on the cutting edge of knowledge. Provide opportunities to benchmark, take "rotational assignments," work on projects and acquire mentors as part of the plan to make them a "learning individual" and to give them a "learning network."
15. Explain the employee's "shared responsibility." It is important to educate each employee on their first day that they "share" in the responsibility of making them productive members of the team. Two-way communications needs to be established at the very start. Start by explaining that the employee has a responsibility to help their new manager understand both what it takes to motivate them and what frustrates them. Employees can also be asked to continually share with their manager their career aspirations and the key aspects that can turn a good job into their "dream" job.

16. Pre-assess the training needs of the candidate and schedule the required development before the candidate starts.
17. Pre-schedule a series of one-on-one meetings with the new hire to identify their frustrations and problems before they get out of hand.
18. Prepare an "exposure" plan to ensure new hires get to meet and work with the best managers, workers and customers.
19. Make sure that the training they require in order to do their new job is immediately available to them.

Gathering Information From the New Hire (Competitive Intelligence)

20. Ask them to identify former co-workers to hire and solicit their help in recruiting them. Also ask them about best practices at their former firm.
21. Ask them to fill out a satisfaction questionnaire at the end of their first week.

Anticipating and Answering Their Questions

Under traditional orientation programs, the candidate asks most questions while they are in HR and generally they are asked only on the first day. Through focus groups and surveys, possible questions can be anticipated and answered before the candidate garners the courage to actually ask the question. By expanding the time for questions, providing assimilation help over several weeks and making it easier to get answers, you will improve a new hire's productivity and lower a new hire's frustration level.

22. Assign a "welcome coordinator" or concierge who they can call before they start their job.
23. Give them access to the company intranet or call center so they can learn about the firm and its benefits before they start.
24. Give them "Silly/Dumb" question "coupons" to give to people. The coupons can help ease their fear of asking dumb questions.
25. Identify questions specific to their particular job through interviews with previous hires in their job class.
26. Designate the recruiter as the HR person responsible for helping the candidate get answers to most of their questions before they start as well as after their beginning date.
27. Put up a frequently-asked question (and answers) website so they don't have to embarrass themselves by asking too many "dumb" questions. Consider an anonymous feature to allow them to ask "blind" questions and get answers.

Celebration Tools for Making the New Hire Feel Welcome

Managers should consider using one or more of the following "celebration tools" to raise the enthusiasm of and for the new hire:

28. Send a small gift, a fruit basket or flowers to the employee's home (for them and/ or for their family). Send their spouse/kids first-day welcome gifts, T-shirts, corporate products or cards to make them feel they are part of the team and to build support for the new company.
29. Give them a company t-shirt or something else with a company logo to help them to begin identifying with the firm.
30. Mail their new business cards to their home before they start in order to reinforce the fact that they are important and that they have made a good decision.
31. Hold a small party to celebrate them joining the team or hold a new hire luncheon (breakfast/ dinner) on the first day to meet the team.

32. Place a welcome banner on their cubical signed by the CEO/GM and all staff, or give them a plaque celebrating their first day.
33. Take a team picture on the first day and have it signed by all or give them a T-shirt signed by all.
34. Give them a "two for dinner" certificate so they can tell their spouse or friend about their new job.
35. Place a welcome note/picture on your corporate website.
36. Give them a "new hire" pin/hat to let all know they deserve special help. The pin/hat also entitles them to ask "dumb questions." Or consider giving them a "pre-dated" five-year pin to show them you expect them to be part of the team for a long time.
37. Give them a "meet everyone card" that requires (rewards) them to get the initials of all key team members on the card during the first few days.
38. Arrange a phone call (or a letter) from the CEO/GM welcoming them to the organization or arrange an invitation by the CEO/ GM to visit their office on their first day (or have the CEO/GM stop by their workspace).
39. Place a notice/ad in the local paper or lobby welcoming them and to let everyone know of your new team member (like consulting/law firms do).

Things To Avoid

40. Don't force them to read the manual, benefit packages, or view dull orientation videotapes.
41. Do not require them to spend the morning filling out confusing benefits forms until it hurts. Let them do it later in the week.

Additional Assimilation/Orientation Tools

42. Change the manager's and the team's metrics and reward systems to include time to deal with productivity and satisfaction for new hires.
43. Do a frustration (barriers to productivity) survey among the new hires at the end of the first, third and sixth month. Ask them to write down any new ideas or solutions they have on how to improve orientation and then manage to the results of the survey.
44. Ask them why they took the job and why they rejected other firms. Feed that information back to the recruiters to help improve your recruiting process and to managers so you can improve on how you recruit.
45. If you relocated the employee, give them a list of the "best" restaurants, schools, childcare etc. in the neighborhood to help them feel comfortable with their new neighborhood. Consider getting the spouses and kids of your current employees to help orient them to the "cool things" in the community.
46. Develop a new-hire electronic chat room, listserver, or Web page to help them help each other.
47. Consider forming a new hire affinity group and pay for their meetings.
48. Develop the capability to do orientation "remotely" using the Intranet and teleconferencing.
49. Vary your orientation with the country and culture. Use technology like teleconferencing to do worldwide orientation to make non-US hires feel part of the team.
50. Provide them a glossary of acronyms, buzzwords and on-line FAQs so they don't have to ask uncomfortable questions about these buzzwords (they are afraid to ask because it might make them seem like a dumb hire). Knowing these words might also decrease the number of errors on the job.
51. Give them links to other answers to make orientation a continuous process.
52. Develop a process so that orientation and or training can start before they start (on the Web).

Use Technology Wherever Possible

In global firms centralized orientation is difficult at best. The same is true with the increasing number of remote workers. Personalized Intranets, list servers and emails can help make remote orientations as powerful as "on site" ones.

53. Email messages from the CEO/top management are powerful.
54. If managers/team members can't be present on the first-day video conferences, conference calls can serve as a backup.
55. List servers and chat rooms for new hires can add to the process. Family members can also have connections with the families of other employees.
56. A variety of video messages on the firm's Intranet can give employees choices of what and when to watch (from home).
57. Computerized surveys can help you tweak the orientation process.
58. Email (virtual) mentors can expand the amount and type of advice people can get.
59. Email counseling can aid in avoiding "buyer's regret."
60. An email newsletter can connect new hires.
61. An Intranet-based orientation program can allow for regional variations in the message sent.
62. Time on the orientation website can be tracked to see how much time new hires spend learning about the firm.
63. A "find the information... win a prize" system can encourage employees to search the company's Intranet right away.
64. Live orientation presentations can be videotaped and made available on the Intranet for those who missed the live event.

Most benefit enrollment and questions can begin before the employee begins work if the information is available at a password-protected site (or call center) that can be accessed by at home. In a follow-up article, I'll cover a day-of-hire employee questionnaire.

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