

Workforce Strategies

Ensuring Employee Success Through Better Onboarding

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INTRODUCTION: ROLL OUT THE RED CARPET

Is the answer to the vexing problem of retaining an ever-more-restless workforce really just a proper welcome when they first come on board?

Essentially yes, HR professionals, consultants, and attorneys told Bloomberg Law, although the definition of “a proper welcome” may have to be extended backward into the recruiting process and forward to encompass much of the new employee’s career.

Do it wrong and your expensively acquired new hire will quickly start having second thoughts. “Have you ever made a large purchase and then had buyer’s remorse a few hours or days later? Then you understand why a meaningful onboarding program for newly hired employees is so important,” Cassie Whitlock, director of HR at Lindon, Utah-based HR software firm BambooHR, told Bloomberg Law.

Employers may have to go further if the new employee must move for the job and bring his or her family, according to Cheryl Hyatt, a founder of and principal at Hyatt-Fennell Executive Search. She told Bloomberg Law about an incident where she helped a college hire a new president, but the official’s spouse wasn’t extended the same warm welcome. Even finding where to get her hair done was a struggle, Hyatt said, to the point that “the spouse was ready to leave within three months.” The new college president salvaged the situation, but not every employer will be so lucky.

The general problems unsuccessful onboarding causes among new employees are starkly evident from research from Deloitte. “When it’s not successful, they leave, or are dramatically less productive, less engaged, and negative toward the culture,” Michael Gretczko, a principal at the consultancy, told Bloomberg Law. “They share that experience with colleagues and those outside the organization, which affects the brand.”

Likewise, iCIMS, a talent acquisition software provider based in Holmdel, N.J., found in a survey that “more than a quarter of Americans have quit a job specifically because they didn’t feel that they were onboarded properly,” Chief Marketing Officer Susan Vitale told Bloomberg Law. “Even scarier—44 percent of job candidates didn’t quit but considered it.”

By contrast, BambooHR found in a survey that employers that do onboarding well have 33 percent more employees who feel engaged than those with ineffective onboarding. Survey results were posted online in May.

Should employers avoid certain actions or attitudes when onboarding new employees? Whitlock thinks so. “Don’t take a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach,” she suggested. “You should look at each element in your onboarding process and consider how you can create personalization.”

Also, she said, don't design an onboarding program and assume it's done with no need for further modification; "don't overuse technology"; and don't lose sight of the bigger picture that requires continuing investment in the new hire's professional development and growth opportunities.

More broadly, Deloitte has found that employers that struggle with onboarding are those that "make it all about Day One or Week One," Gretczko said. "It's an HR-driven approach to set up the desk and computer and tell where the bathrooms are," and let it go at that.

Companies often focus too much on getting new employees up and running on the job but neglect getting them acclimated, Michael Rochelle, chief strategy officer at Delray Beach, Fla.-based consulting firm Brandon Hall, told Bloomberg Law. "That sends a very bad message, because it doesn't make people feel very special—and then it's hard to change the trajectory. It sets them off on the wrong path from the beginning, especially with the next-generation workforce coming in. They're all about relationships, intimacy, and their personal brand being aligned with where they're working."

Onboarding failures may be even more basic. An example is "bringing someone in, putting them in an office and saying we'll talk to you at lunch," Kristen T. Gallagher, a partner with management-side law firm McDonald Carano in Las Vegas, told Bloomberg Law. No one likes being left to sink or swim their first day on the job.

There's no complete onboarding checklist that could apply to all employers and workers, but professionals offer these tips:

Set expectations for what the process will look like from the outset, Gretczko said;

Do as much as possible in advance, said iCIMS's Vitale. Before a hire starts, employers should keep them engaged with regular communication and tasks they can complete before their first day, "so that they're feeling comfortable and prepared for the official onboarding process";

Use digital technology where possible, since nearly everyone is familiar with it. These methods are best used for necessities like I-9, W-4, and payroll forms, Bob DelPonte, general manager of the Workforce Ready Group at HR cloud software provider Kronos, told Bloomberg Law;

"Do something informal the first day—a breakfast, a lunch," Gallagher said;

Teach newbies about and connect them to your company mission, vision, values, and culture, said BambooHR's Whitlock. Similarly, Gretczko suggested viewing onboarding "as beyond the transactional—it's about culture, relationships, something bigger";

Draw on ideas from customer onboarding to make the new employee's process one that is "centered on their personal experience and the job they're going to do," Gretczko said;

Ask the hiring manager or the employee's supervisor to welcome the hire, provide him or her with a list of goals and resources, and offer help with any of those areas, Hyatt said. "Never assume they will be able to hit the ground running unless they know where they're running to";

Guide new employees with respect to the "policies, tools, and resources used within the organization," Whitlock said. This requires a human touch. "Make sure they are meeting people they can ask questions of, provide them resources, or just navigate a new office environment," Gallagher said;

More broadly, the employer should help newbies make connections with people who in turn will help them be successful in their jobs, Whitlock said; and

Track how well your organization is doing with onboarding to ensure continuous improvement, DelPonte said. This involves determining whether workers who have gone through your formal onboarding program stay longer and are more successful than others. "As you get better at it, use measurement and cohort to see what's working."

The process isn't necessarily cheap. Deloitte has found that the average onboarding costs about \$4,000 per hire, a "huge investment that isn't always factored into cost of acquisition," Gretczko said. And yet the company found in a survey earlier this year that only 47 percent of employers are studying the effectiveness of their onboarding programs.

But money isn't the main factor. "A positive onboarding experience is all about consistency and structure," Vitale said. At iCIMS, the onboarding program consists of workshops and training sessions to familiarize employees with the company culture as well as their respective roles, she said.

The process takes 90 days, she said, and is meant to ensure "that our new employees are provided with clear objectives and regular check-ins with management. And this doesn't stop after the onboarding experience is over—we support our employees' growth throughout their entire careers with iCIMS."

The following pages include further case studies of employers whose names were culled from employee review website Glassdoor's "2018 Best Places to Work: Employees' Choice."