

Successful Onboarding

From “I do” to “happily ever after”



By Sue Nador

LAST YEAR, THOUSANDS of Canadian couples tied the knot. According to Statistics Canada, many will not make it past their first anniversary. Why? Because the promise of the courtship wasn't sustained after the couple said “I do.”

A successful work arrangement is a lot like a successful marriage. While courting is important (and HR professionals do devote considerable effort to the attraction and selection of talent), the honeymoon or on-boarding period in the first year should matter more to employers.

I speak to hundreds of employees every year, and what I hear is that companies are not reinforcing the new recruit's decision to come on board. A good on-boarding program can be easy to develop and become a valuable part of staff management, quickly connecting new employees to the organization. There are three priorities to keep in mind when new staff come on board.

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1. On-boarding programs must have a clear purpose. Smart organizations define goals at the outset and measure how well they are doing. Success depends on the organization's priorities: a manufacturing company may want to improve the safety record of its new employees, for instance, while a professional-services firm may want to increase the billings of its new consultants.

Once goals have been established, it's helpful to identify the practices within the organization that are adding value to the on-boarding process. These should be retained for the benefit of future recruits. In a workshop I conducted, most of the HR Professionals rated the effectiveness of their current on-boarding process as “worse than average.” Many recognized current activities that were working well, however. Even organizations that were revamping their programs typically found a gem in their on-boarding activities. A leading Canadian retailer, for example, had a fun contest that pitted teams of new staff members against each other to answer questions about the organization, creating a sense of camaraderie among recruits that lasted beyond orientation.

2. Roles in the process must be clearly defined. Successful on-boarding involves several key players, including the manager, peers, internal customers, HR, and the employees themselves. In many organizations, there is an opportunity to better define and communicate expectations for on-boarding.

The role of the employee (or even an expectation that they play an active role in their own on-boarding experience) is often not clear. The way employees develop presence and credibility in one organization may be different from what it takes to be successful in another. Employees I spoke with in one company described the on-boarding period as “sink or swim.” Employees had managers coach them to be assertive and form networks that were critical for success in their highly competitive cultures. This criteria was clear for some new employees but not for others, and a number of good people sunk.

Similarly, peers are often ignored in supporting a successful on-boarding process. Assuming the right peer is formally selected, there is an opportunity for the employee to get comfortable faster than if only their manager assumes responsibility for on-boarding. Peers can answer the questions that employees may be afraid to ask, and also provide a different perspective of the organization.

3. Tools support a consistent and effective process. HR can help create effective on-boarding by providing people with tools to perform their roles competently and consistently. These tools can minimize ad hoc approaches that lead to great on-boarding experiences for some and difficult experiences for others.

Tools should support every stage of the on-boarding process, from when the employee formally accepts the offer to the end of their first year. For example, an interview guide listing questions for the new employee to interview key internal customers will help them gain valuable insights into the organization and better understand how they can contribute. Or, an interview guide for the manager to formally “check in” with the employee after a few months may identify issues that can be addressed early on.

As in marriage, saying “I do” to a new job is the beginning of a potentially successful partnership. Effective on-boarding determines whether there will be a “happily ever after.” ♻️

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