

Hiring

How to Re-Onboard Employees Who Started Remotely

by Rebecca Zucker

June 22, 2021



Illustration by koivo

Summary. While going back to the office will be an adjustment for everyone, it will be an entirely new experience for remote hires. The author offers six strategies to re-onboard employees who started remotely: 1) Allow remote hires to bond as a cohort. 2) Be... [**more**](#)

At the beginning of the pandemic, employers quickly shifted almost every aspect of their business, including the onboarding of new employees, to take place remotely. Research from Glassdoor shows

that organizations with strong onboarding practices improve employee retention by 82% and productivity by more than 70%. Yet, according to Gallup, only 12% of employees feel that their organization does a great job onboarding new employees — and this is under “normal” circumstances.

Now, as organizations look at returning to the office in some capacity during the months ahead, there is an opportunity to re-onboard employees who started remotely. Doing so will help create a continued positive employee experience and help further socialize them into the organization’s culture, given that this group of employees will likely not have met their fellow team members in person, nor likely have ever been to the organization’s physical offices.

In looking at the group of employees to be re-onboarded, you may also include employees who started a month or so before the sudden shift to work from home, as their full onboarding experience may have been cut short, as well as include internal hires into new roles or transfers to new offices. For brevity, I’ll call this combined group “remote hires.”

In addition to other onboarding best practices, here are six strategies to re-onboard employees who started remotely:

Allow remote hires to bond as a cohort.

This group shares a common, distinctive experience — starting a new job during what is, hopefully, a once-in-a-lifetime global pandemic. Laurie Tennant, VP of People at Norwest Venture Partners, shared that her firm has had about 20 people who started remotely, ranging in position from Executive Assistant to Partner, across all teams in the organization. She said, “You have an emotional resonance with your start-group that just kind of lasts” and shared that she is planning to do something special for remote hires where they all meet live to help form an affinity group of people who started during this time. Judy Parkman, Director of Human Resources at The William and Flora

Hewlett Foundation also plans to organize an additional in-person lunch for remote hires with the foundation president, which was previously held virtually.

During these events, consider creating structured opportunities for remote hires to interact and get to know each other, such as ice breakers or “speed networking” activities, especially when there are multiple levels of the organization represented or power differentials than can create feelings of awkwardness for individuals, regardless of their position.

Be thoughtful.

Make an extra effort to help these employees feel particularly welcome, as if it’s their first day at the office — because it is! Consider leaving something special at their desk, be it a personal note, company swag, or other small gift. This is a nice touch that will go a long way in making members of this group feel valued, cared for, and recognized for having started a new job during a uniquely challenging time. Also, be thoughtful in making sure remote hires’ desks are located in an area where they will be able to naturally interact with other colleagues.

Orient them to the facilities.

Being new to an office can feel awkward and intimidating when you don’t know your way around — sort of like joining a new gym and not knowing where specific equipment is located or how a new machine works (in this case, it might be trying to figure out where the espresso machine is and how it works or how to get a FedEx package sent). In orienting remote hires to the physical space, conduct these tours in small groups to provide additional opportunities for remote hires to meet and get to know others. Show them not only where the office pantry, break room, restrooms and fire exits are, but other things like security protocols, conference room sign up procedures, helpful short-cuts and specific potential hazards or things to avoid, such as getting locked in the stairwell like yours truly did the first week at work in a prior job.

Communicate with managers and check in regularly.

Managers of remote hires may take for granted that since these employees have already been on the job for some period of time that they're already part of the team and don't need assistance. Remind these managers that it's their job to help re-onboard remote hires to make sure they are adjusting well to the new environment and have everything they need. Encourage them to take their remote hires to lunch and conduct a one-on-one with them their first week in the office, as would have been the case if they had initially started their job at the office.

Make sure managers and/or someone from HR is checking in with remote hires in the weeks that follow. Judy Parkman said that her organization's employee experience manager also plans to check in regularly with remote hires, which account for about 10% of their total employees. In addition, they will also assess what initial onboarding experiences may need to be conducted again once back in the office based on what they hear from this group during these check ins. Parkman said her motto is "to be high-touch as much as we can."

Create a buddy system.

Creating a buddy system can increase employee productivity and satisfaction. Remote hires are not only working at a new company, but also will be working in a new situation once people go back to the office, which can make them feel insecure. Aim to pair remote hires with more tenured employees who are familiar not only with the physical office, but also the office culture, as this can be a key source of support for remote hires helping them to navigate new dynamics once they are back at the office, even if they only return onsite a few days a week.

Consider assigning them two buddies — one who is on their team who has a good understanding of the remote hire's role and manager, and one who is not on their team to help broaden their internal network and provide useful context outside their department. Ensure that these buddies understand how important their role is in the

remote hire's experience coming into the office and in helping them to understand how "in office" culture might be different than virtual culture.

Create informal team building opportunities.

Creating opportunities for people to get to know each other better will help all employees to reconnect after being remote for over a year but will also help remote hires, in particular, to socialize and get to know both new and tenured employees in a more relaxed and less intimidating environment. Norwest Venture Partners plans to do a summer picnic and a voluntary opening over the summer for anyone who would like to come back to the office before their official open date in September. This gives remote hires the option to get to know the office and other colleagues in a less hectic or intimidating environment. The firm also plans to hold open houses at their offices once they officially open to create more opportunities for employees to mingle and get to know each other. You may also plan other activities with your more immediate teams, such as team dinners or other activities.

While going back to the office will be an adjustment for everyone, it will be an entirely new experience for remote hires. Don't squander the opportunity to create a great employee experience and use the above-mentioned strategies to re-onboard your remotely hired employees.

Rebecca Zucker is an executive coach and a founding Partner at Next Step Partners, a boutique leadership development firm. Her clients include Amazon, Clorox, Morrison Foerster, the James Irvine Foundation, Skoll Foundation, and high-growth technology companies like DocuSign and Dropbox. You can follow her on Twitter: @rszucker.