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How Remote Work Changes What We Think About Onboarding

by Boris Groysberg

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COVID-19 has turned many companies into federations of remote workplaces, but without guidance on how their onboarding of new employees must change, says **Boris Groysberg**.



Author's note: Over the past few weeks, I have been asking CEOs attending programs I teach at Harvard Business School a simple question: What is keeping you awake at night during this global pandemic? They've mentioned numerous complicated challenges that I have aggregated into broad topics ranging from virtual onboarding to managing anxiety and stress. Over the next few months, I will try to tackle them one by one in this space.

COVID-19 has turned many companies into federations of remote workplaces, but without much guidance on how this new virtual reality can affect the once routine HR practice of onboarding new employees.

Although hiring is already a forgotten luxury for many firms, at least for the time being, others are still bringing aboard new people, such as those who made hiring commitments before the outbreak worsened. And then there are others—Amazon, Walmart, online service providers—that are hiring to fill new demand.

Also, remote work will quickly become more the norm than the exception on the other side of the pandemic, so organizations should start learning now how to prepare for the Work from Anywhere future.

Remote onboarding requires new skills, capabilities, and processes. For example, companies must onboard employees remotely in a way that addresses competing tensions. Because the onboarding process must take place remotely, it will typically take longer than the in-person experience; yet the COVID-19 crisis requires everyone operate at peak efficiency to address ever-changing challenges.

"COMPANIES STRUGGLE TO ONBOARD EMPLOYEES EVEN WHEN TIMES ARE GOOD AND RELATIVELY PREDICTABLE."

The only way to fast track onboarding and enable those workers to reach peak performance as soon as possible is to be *very deliberate* in developing a remote onboarding strategy and to *dedicate twice as much effort and time* to executing that strategy as compared to an in-person process.

According to our research, when executives are asked to score their companies on the seven steps of the recruiting and hiring process in good times, integration falls third to last, with a score of 3.4 on a 1-5 scale. In other words, companies struggle to onboard employees even when times are good and relatively predictable.

Outlined below are practices for managing remote onboarding, broken into two broad categories: addressing logistical issues and building relationships with the right people. This crisis presents an opportunity for the CEO to communicate to all employees, including new hires, that the company cares about them and is prioritizing their health and safety during the pandemic.

Address logistical issues and support

Equipment: Before a new employee begins, the hiring company must consider logistical equipment issues. For example, not only is the new employee working from home, but the company's IT team is, too. Should equipment be shipped to an IT team member's home for set-up and configuration before then being shipped on to the employee? Are those steps even possible to do remotely? What should the protocol be for disinfecting equipment as it changes hands? If such a solution is not possible, can the employee access important company resources from their personal devices, and, what steps would be needed to ensure security? Before an employee can start to be remotely onboarded, they need to have the physical tools required to access important programs, resources and people.

Access: Before a new employee begins, the company must determine what access they will need to resources such as the intranet and company programs and systems. If possible, it is advisable to assign an IT team member to the new employee, someone who will be responsible for ensuring they have quick, seamless access to all the resources they need as soon as they start (for example, by establishing and sharing passwords in advance) and introducing them to the new tools at their disposal.

Orientation and training: Hiring managers should provide employees with electronic versions of important company documents that will help orient them to the company's culture, as well as its policies and procedures, such as the employee handbook and code of conduct. Furthermore, hiring managers should provide virtual sessions to replace orientations or mandatory training sessions that the employee cannot attend in person in the early days of their employment.

Build relationships with the right people quickly

Hiring manager: The hiring manager should be in close contact with the employee throughout the hiring and onboarding process, as opposed to outsourcing most of these processes to HR. Once the staffer is hired, the hiring manager should communicate the news to the rest of the organization so their new colleagues can welcome them virtually. As soon as the employee begins, the hiring manager should provide a list of all the key people the employee should connect with in their early days on the job, including direct reports, a mentor, key peers, and representatives from other key functions. The hiring manager should see to it that videoconferencing meetings with all these parties are scheduled early on. The hiring manager should v-meet (virtual meeting) daily with the new hire at first, and then move these check-ins to two or three times per week once a relationship is established. The hiring manager should also perform a more formal check-in at the end of the first week and at the end of the first month.

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Direct reports: The new employee should start meeting with their direct reports via videoconferencing during their first days on the job. These meetings can take place as a group, one-on-one, or some combination of the two formats. Similar to their daily v-meetings with the hiring manager, the new employee should also schedule daily check-ins with direct reports before moving to two or three times per week once deemed appropriate.

Mentor: The new hire should be assigned a mentor, a veteran of the company and a “culture carrier” who has an ongoing relationship with the employee—albeit, a virtual one. Regularly scheduled conversations would give the employee opportunities to ask questions they might not otherwise ask and the mentor a chance to offer guidance or coaching when needed.

Peers: In addition to contacts identified by the manager, the company should do its best to provide virtual opportunities for the employee to connect with other peers. Informal virtual gatherings, such as social hours, can be opportunities not only for new employees to “meet” their colleagues, but also for all employees to maintain a sense of connectedness to one another in a time of social distancing.

Representatives in key functions: The new employee should be required to v-meet with a representative from three key functions: HR, finance, and IT. Similar to having an IT team member assigned to the employee, it is advisable to have an HR team member assigned to the employee as well. This HR team member would track the employee, particularly in the first 45 days, to ensure they do not fall between the cracks. At 30 days, the HR team member should conduct a formal check-in with the employee.

The payoff

Onboarding employees well in a time of crisis take a great deal more effort. The effort will pay off, however, when the integration strategy works and people are performing at peak efficiency at a time when every dollar and every minute counts for the company. Plus, managers will be well on their way to learning new skills that will serve their organization well when remote work becomes more the norm.

About the Author

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