Accelerating New-Hire Success with Social Onboarding

ePillars

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Good onboarding is a lot less expensive than high turnover. Yet we still see statistics such as 46% of new hires don't last 18 months and 39% didn't complete their first milestone on time. And the cost of a new employee who doesn't make it can be as much as three times their annual salary. In reality, "good onboarding" is so much more than making sure the I-9 is filled out correctly and the new hires have all the info they need to complete their benefit elections. It's your chance to make a first and lasting impression on your new colleagues, make them feel part of your company, and make sure they know where they can find the information and experts they need to be successful. Successful onboarding is critical, because at some point soon after starting, your new colleague may feel lost and may reconsider their decision to join your firm. If they've been properly onboarded, they'll know where they can get help. If not, they may start looking for their next job.

This brief gives an overview of modern social onboarding technologies with the goal of helping your new hires feel connected at work and accelerate their time to productivity. It is divided into three sections: the first suggests what you should emphasize in the first week, the second section discusses the importance social communities can play in a new hire's success, and the third is all about ensuring success and transitioning from new hire to outstanding employee.
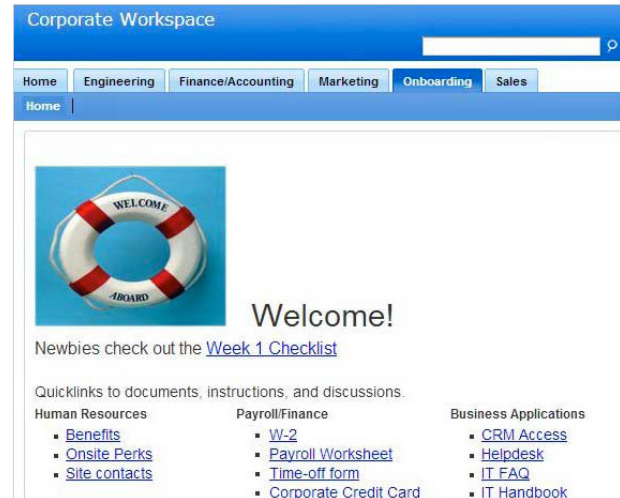

Figure 1: A new hire resource page is the one place to find forms and instructions

Week 1: Less Paperwork, More Connections

For many companies the real purpose of new-hire orientation is the distribution and collection of paperwork for benefits, payroll, facilities, and other departments. There is no doubt paperwork is necessary — of course people need to be paid, choose an appropriate medical plan, have a computer set up, and so on. But this is the snow cone on the tip of the iceberg.
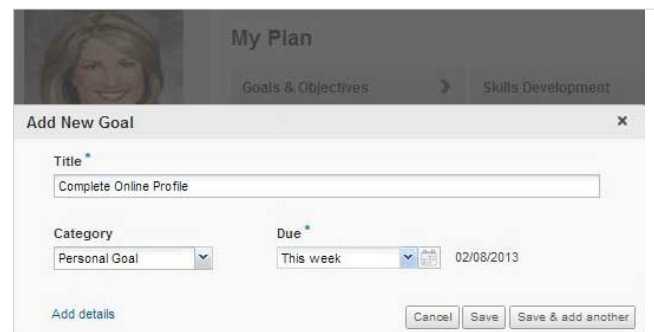

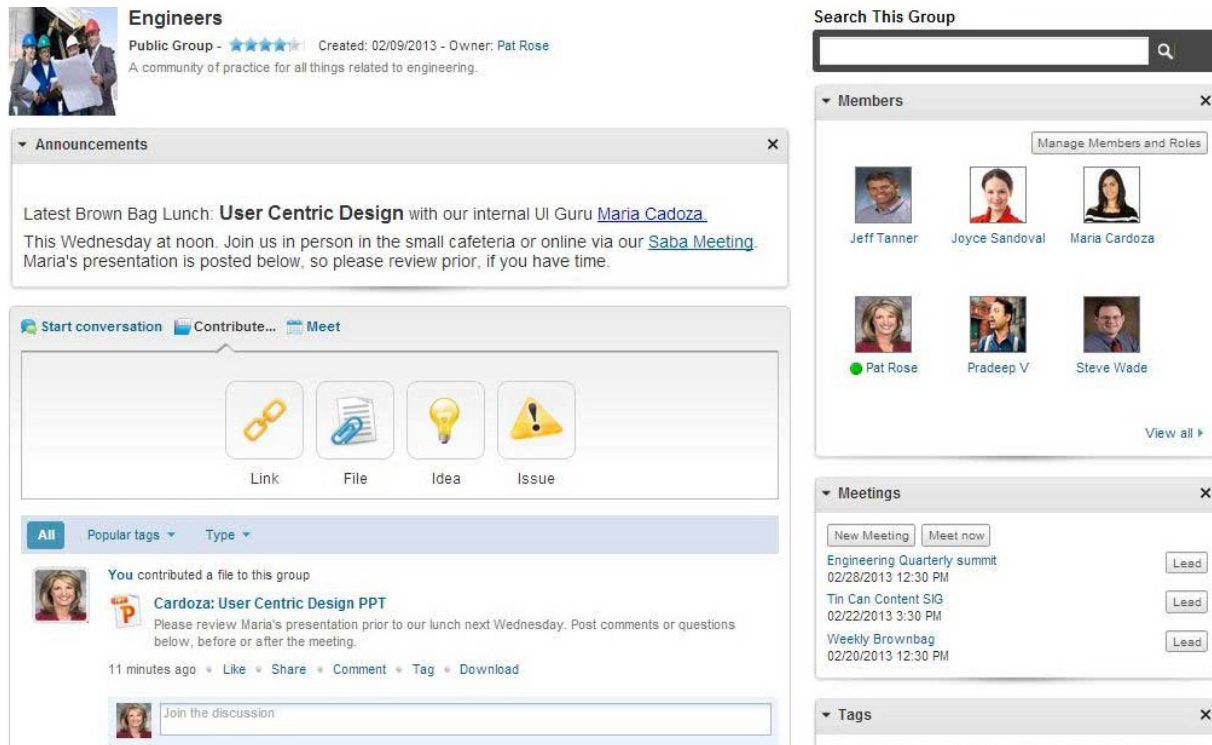*Figure 2: Setting goals is easy and leads to a sense of accomplishment*

Figure 4: Communities of practice let new employees connect with experts and keep with the latest industry news

If you attend the orientation session run at most companies, you might confuse it with a college exam, except people are typically a little older and fill out forms with pens and not #2 pencils. The orientation session could be used to help employees learn about the company and the other new hires. Connecting employees is the critical first step to developing an engaged workforce, and there is no better time to do this than when they are together.

As for the paperwork, the great bulk of that can be shifted online; simply post it in your social intranet on the onboarding resources pages , complete with videos on how to fill out these forms correctly. If the new hire has a question, they can ask in the public forum and the expert from benefits, payroll, HR, facilities, etc., can answer it. The advantage to having a public forum for questions is that they are asked once, answered once, and then seen by everyone. If you are using email for all Q&A, then your subject-matter experts are answering the same question over and over. Of course, you'll need to have email or private messaging for questions that deal with personal matters.

Specific and challenging goals lead to higher performance. Research has told us that for decades, so are you setting goals for your new employees? It's critical to set some goals in the first week, as it sets the tone for achievement. These initial goals can be as simple as passing basic product training and completing their online profile , easy to do, so why not do them sooner rather than later? While you don't want to overwhelm the new hires, adding in medium or longer-term goals makes sense, too, as long as you explain the context to them. They'll be seeing a lot of information and meeting a lot of people in their first few days, and a couple of goals will help them see where their efforts fit in. Letting employees know what is expected of them helps your company meets its objectives while also helping the employee. Knowing what is expected plays a critical role in workforce engagement.

Communities for Success

Most college students meet their roommate weeks before they arrive at college. Schools are getting them connected over Facebook, and not only does this help with practical matters, such as avoiding duplicate coffee makers, but also makes those first few days at school more fun and productive. Leading-edge companies are creating new-hire communities so these employees can connect and learn from each other. Through online interactions, the new hires can find people with similar responsibilities and interests, developing their personal network starting on day one. Many companies are spread over multiple locations, and even countries or continents, and the online social community lets the remote employee learn and discuss the company news.

Start dates tend to vary, and many companies will bring remote new hires in on a monthly or quarterly basis. Orientation leaders can use the new-hire community to start discussions, answer questions, and even assign individual and group tasks. This way, like the college students, the new hires know a lot about each other when they do get together for the in-person onboarding activities.

Soon after the first day, it makes sense to induct the new employees into communities of practice or interests that relate to their job-specific responsibilities. This way they can find information and connect with experts, and this will help them hit their milestones in a timely fashion. These communities are a great place to share the latest innovations, crowd source problems, evolve best practices, and help each other keep up to date in an informal learning environment.

Depending on the levels of integration between your social network, employee profile, and Learning Management System, it may also be possible to create personalized learning plans. Once the new hire has self-assessed their skills and competencies, you can create a learning plan so they are ready to meet the challenges of their new position. The plan can be automated, depending on the degree of integration between the learning system, course catalog, and profile data. Normally, though, there is a strong degree of customization by the employee and their manager, choosing and prioritizing development activities based on the immediate challenges. These activities can be formal and informal, as noted above, and the communities of practice, particularly the discussions and knowledge sharing contained within, also play a key role in employee development.
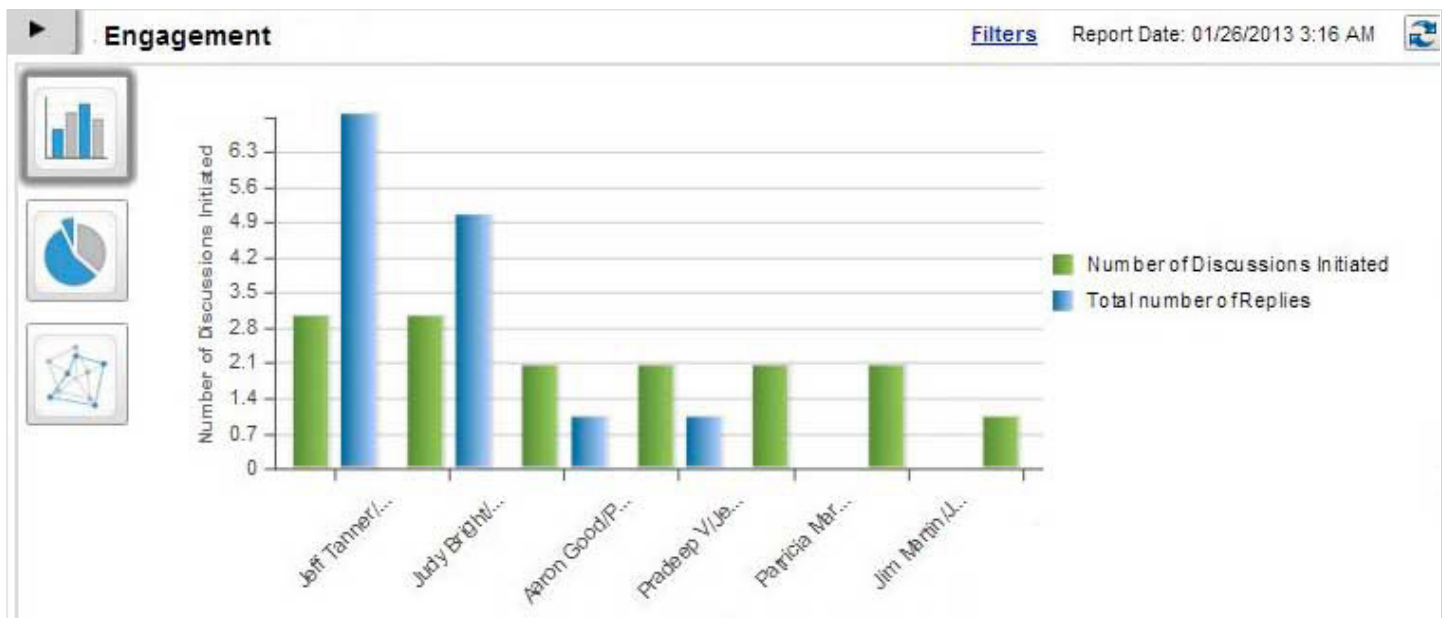

Figure 5: Tracking user engagement helps identify new employees that may need a little extra attention

From New Hires to Outstanding Employees

As new employees achieve with respect to their goals and learning plans, they will probably outgrow the onboarding community. However, in the communities of practice, they will transition from rookies to experienced employees and hopefully become key contributors as the sharing of their new experiences brings benefit to others in the community. At this point, connecting the new employee with a mentor or two can be very helpful in maximizing their growth rate and speeding up their contribution to the company. While traditional mentoring programs are excellent, many companies are moving away from those as they place a large burden on leaders who just don't have the time. Replacing these programs are social mentoring programs, which are comprised of micro communities or mentoring circles with two or three employees for each mentor. In the online group, the mentor can share ideas and plans and answer questions, at a fraction of the time traditional mentoring takes. The mentoring circles are often private, allowing for the groups to work through formal and informal issues. The new employees benefit from a direct connection to a leader in the organization. Of course, the pair or groups can meet in person from time to time, but get much of the value of mentoring without the difficulty of connecting face to face.

Having all these interactions online offers one more significant benefit: the ability to monitor progress and intervene if an employee is showing a lack of engagement. Clearly the goals and learning plans will track milestones, and when these go missed, a manager can and should reach out to the employee to find out what is going on. However, long before there is a miss, the manager can gauge the employee's engagement through participation and contributions in the social communities. The social network can track which items have been viewed and also track contributions. In fact, the contributions — links, documents, videos, or just ideas — can be rated by other users, and some networks can also score the contribution, taking into account the ratings as well as how often the contribution is viewed and then recommended to others. The point here is that the social network can easily track an employee's engagement and if it is below a certain threshold, the manager can intervene and address any issues long before they impact performance.

Conclusion

This brief has covered several areas where social technologies, particularly social communities, can play a substantial role in helping new hires accelerate not only their acclimation to their new company and new role, but also their contributions. It should be noted, while a comprehensive social onboarding program will pay the largest dividends, each of the topics discussed above can be implemented on its own, so an incremental approach prioritized to your business needs is entirely possible. Of course, some of the concepts discussed, such as the communities of practice and the mentoring circles, apply to your entire company, not just the newest employees. The main point is to get started with social technologies to help your new hires and more seasoned employees be more successful. This will help them meet their commitments and help your company retain them.