



Book Onboarding

How to Get Your New Employees Up to Speed in Half the Time

George Bradt and Mary Vonnegut
Wiley, 2009
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Recommendation

Many new hires do not last longer than six months. One out of two new employees fails to meet the organization’s expectations. Why? Often, employers make little or no effort to acclimate these staffers to the job. Thus, their employees start off on the wrong foot, and many find it hard to “change course.” However, George Bradt and Mary Vonnegut deliver a proven program you can use to help new workers become immediately productive. Bradt, founder and director of the executive-transition consultancy PrimeGenesis, and Vonnegut, a partner at the firm, bring considerable experience to the topic. *BooksInShort* recommends their book’s thoughtful approach to onboarding. Though the guide is poorly structured in parts, it provides easy-to-follow, practical advice for bringing people on board and keeping them there.

Take-Aways

- Implement the “Total Onboarding Program” (TOP) to help new and existing workers adapt to fresh roles, so they perform well from the outset.
- For effective onboarding, people and departments must work together and communicate consistent messages to prospective employees.
- Hiring managers must prepare for and support staffers in four stages of onboarding:
- First, clarify the business objectives for the new position, and get pivotal colleagues to agree upon the responsibilities and purpose of the role.
- Create an initial onboarding plan, including a time line and a “recruitment brief.”
- Second, market the organization to attract the best candidates. Plan and implement a formal “selling campaign” that culminates in an offer.
- Third, help the new hire craft a personal onboarding plan that he or she will direct.
- Fourth, groom the employee and the company to ensure that both “constituencies” take away positive impressions from the newcomer’s first day.
- Continue providing the “resources, support and follow-through” the employee needs.
- If you follow the TOP, you can boost employee productivity and retention at your firm.

Summary

Why Effective Onboarding Matters

Does your organization have a cohesive, strategic onboarding program? Many companies do not. For example, one firm annually hired seven or eight salespeople who all showed the potential and desire to become managers. However, the company had room to promote only one or two of them each year, so those who weren’t promoted often left the firm. This inefficient hiring approach meant that the majority of sales recruits the company employed would eventually be disappointed.

“Most people understand or can quickly figure out the basics of acquiring, accommodating, assimilating and accelerating new employees. Our core premise is that things work better when all efforts point in the same direction, integrated into one Total Onboarding Program (TOP).”

Fortunately for this firm, the recruiter recognized the problem and implemented a fresh strategy. She divided the positions equally into managerial and sales functions. Each year, the company employed three or four people who competed for the sales manager slots, but it also hired three or four staffers who were career salespeople. Following this approach enabled the firm to reduce turnover and decrease the number of hires. It also boosted employee satisfaction: Staffers who pursued the management track had a better chance of succeeding, and professional salespeople could focus on their true passion – selling.

“Getting new employees up to speed is one of the toughest jobs hiring managers face.”

Always examine why you are employing someone, and consider how a new hire may affect other staffers in your company. To help ensure the success of your new hires and internal recruits, implement an onboarding program that includes five main steps. The first, “aligning,” involves achieving companywide consensus about the need for a new employee, as well as his or her purpose in the organization. The second is “acquiring,” or finding and hiring the best candidate. The third is “accommodating,” providing the new hire with the necessary resources for the job. The fourth is “assimilating,” or integrating the individual into the team, and the fifth is “accelerating,” or helping the staffer and the team raise productivity.

“A total onboarding program can dramatically improve the performance, fit and readiness for the job of every person who takes on a new role.”

Many companies find that their hiring systems flounder because the various departments and individuals involved don’t coordinate effectively. For successful onboarding, hiring personnel, managers and human resources staff must view the five steps as unified components of the onboarding process, not as separate, distinct tasks and responsibilities. These people must work together to ensure the employee’s smooth, continuous progress throughout the program. This is the basis for the “Total Onboarding Program” (TOP).

“Don’t begin to recruit anyone until you understand how their role is going to help deliver results that move the organization forward in line with its purposes and priorities.”

For the TOP to work, hiring managers must guide employees through the “onboarding experience” from start to finish. These managers are responsible for developing an initial onboarding plan for each individual, and for ensuring the support of important stakeholders – that is, the people who can most influence the employee’s success. The TOP has four main stages:

1. “Prepare for Your New Employee’s Success Before You Start Recruiting” (Align)

Approach hiring as a “strategic opportunity,” not a “transactional event.” Don’t rush to fill open jobs. First, look hard at each available position, and confirm that filling it makes sense for your firm. If it doesn’t, redefine the role so it better supports your business goals. Clarify the skills or aptitudes that describe your ideal candidate. Be specific. Find out what other stakeholders expect from the role. Identify your firm’s “purpose and priorities,” and then focus on the specific job and how it fits into the broader organizational context. Determine your business objective for hiring, and decide how you will quantify your return on investment (ROI).

“Having a powerful slate of potential candidates relieves you from feeling you have to close the sale with your lead candidate when a nagging voice is telling you something is not 100% right.”

During recruiting and onboarding, you and your organization will convey messages about the company. Make sure the messages you send are clear, deliberate and consistent by planning ahead. Develop a “set of messages and communication points” that your stakeholders approve and support, and use them as the basis for all your interactions, including the job announcement. To begin framing your Total Onboarding Program, construct a time line for the process and distribute it among the stakeholders. Include these important mileposts:

- **“Plan ready”** – Create a plan, incorporating your completed time line and a “recruiting brief,” which identifies the “job title, department, compensation grade and target start date.” This document also clarifies the purpose and duties of the new job, defines what success looks like, and specifies the ideal candidate’s “strengths, motivation and fit.”
- **“Stakeholders aligned”** – Contact all your stakeholders directly to secure their support of your plan, the time line and the recruiting brief.
- **“Recruiter selected”** – Find a consultant or appoint an in-house recruiter, or do the recruiting yourself.
- **“Recruiter briefed [and] job posted”** – If you appoint a recruiter, help him or her grasp the brief’s “nuances.”
- **“Candidates sourced”** – Avoid “sequential job searches,” which tend to be inefficient. Instead, do one search, inside and outside the company, to find all your candidates. Then winnow them down to a select few for the first interviews.
- **“Candidates presented”** – Similarly, ask the recruiter to present all your candidates at once. That way, you can compare them easily and choose the ones to interview.
- **“Initial interviews complete”** – Use open-ended questions to screen candidates and uncover their strengths, motivation and fit. But don’t spend too much time on the first interviews. Conduct them in a single day, or spread them over a few days.
- **“Final interviews complete”** – Move quickly so you don’t lose the opportunity to hire a candidate because someone else steals that person away.
- **“Post-interview follow-ups”** – Confirm all the lead candidates’ references and background details, and pose any additional questions you may have.
- **“Selection made and offer extended”** – Personalize your offer. First deliver it face-to-face or, if that’s not possible, by phone. Then send a detailed written offer.
- **“Follow-up campaign”** – Give the candidate a week to consider. Call after a few days to emphasize your interest, but don’t hound him or her.
- **“Offer accepted”** – Now your job is to ensure that “the sale stays closed.”
- **“Personal onboarding plan prework”** – Give the new employee his or her tailored onboarding guidelines, the job description and other relevant information.
- **“Personal onboarding plan meeting”** – Schedule a one-on-one meeting, possibly off-site, to create the staffer’s individual onboarding plan.
- **“Personal onboarding plan handoff”** – Encourage the employee to take charge of his or her onboarding, but continue to play a supporting role.
- **“New employee announced”** – Share news of the hire companywide.

- **“New employee accommodations”** – Set up the new person to succeed.
- **“New employee welcomed”** – Carefully plan the staffer’s first day on the job.
- **“Assimilation efforts”** – Begin integrating the employee into the firm immediately.
- **“Personal onboarding plan: key events”** – Be prepared to provide additional assistance for at least the “first 100 days.”
- **“Feedback”** – Ask for the employee’s feedback often, so you can address any issues.

2. “Recruit in a Way That Reinforces Your Messages” (Acquire)

Recruiting quality employees requires salesmanship. To attract the best staffers, market your organization to them. Make your company’s “employment brand” more compelling by showing that your firm is “a great place to work.” Search broadly for candidates, including “different industries, generations, nationalities and cultures.” Pitch your organization directly to top employees who work for other firms. Engage a large “slate” of strong candidates who are highly qualified and who fit comfortably within your organization’s culture.

“Roles reverse at the moment of a job offer. The candidate moves from selling to buying. You move from buying to selling.”

Think and act strategically to sell your firm to a potential new hire. Plan and implement a formal “selling campaign” that culminates in an offer. Identify the people who can influence the candidate, including family members, mentors, and so on. Understand what motivates the candidate and uncover any concerns he or she may have. Hire the candidate for a good reason: He or she may ask you why you’re interested. Most important, “close the sale,” and then ensure that counteroffers don’t derail it.

3. “Give Your New Employee a Big Head Start Before Day One” (Accommodate)

Helping your new hire create an individual onboarding plan is a great way to build your relationship. First, complete the prework. The new hire’s prework is developing a draft of the onboarding plan; your prework is naming the stakeholders. Second, get the new staffer to verbalize his or her ideas for the onboarding process. Third, collaborate to develop a superior onboarding plan. Fourth, enable the employee to begin directing his or her onboarding program, but continue to offer support using the “EASE” method of “Encouraging, Aligning, Solving and Ending distractions.”

“Co-creating the personal onboarding plan is a powerful demonstration of your interest in your new employee’s success.”

The way you communicate a new hire’s arrival matters. As you plan the announcement, confirm that pivotal colleagues and managers will help you welcome the staffer. Determine how you will convey the message to various audiences, including the new hire and his or her stakeholders. Decide how and when you will broadcast the news companywide. Then identify whom you should speak to before and after the formal announcement to get your employee off to a good start. As the news spreads throughout your firm, monitor the “cascade” to adapt your announcement strategy and timing.

“Design your new employee’s experience as you would a customer experience.”

Arrange the new employee’s workspace in advance, so it’s fully operational from day one. Supply the staffer with organizational charts and directories, appropriate business plans, and so on, and make sure he or she has access to the company intranet. Consider assigning a coach or mentor to help the employee get over any initial rough spots.

4. “Inspire Your New Employee to Deliver Better Results” (Assimilate and Accelerate)

Think of your employee’s first day as “showtime.” As you plan for this day, consider two “constituencies”:

1. **Your organization** – Ideally, the employee will make a positive impression on the firm. At the day’s end, you want people saying, “You made absolutely the right hire.” Help the new employee succeed by explaining such basic matters as working hours, parking regulations, dress codes, and so on. Encourage the staffer to host a “meet and greet.”
2. **Your new employee** – Conversely, you want your company to make a great impression on the newcomer. The first day exposes this person to “broad, unmanaged contact” with the firm. To make it a “perfect validation” of the messages you communicated during recruitment, plan and prepare for the employee’s arrival. For instance, to gain insights about how a new employee might see your firm, have an outside observer, such as a colleague from a different department, walk through your workspace and report to you what he or she observes. Clean up any problems that surface.

“Your new employee is the lead player on day one, but you are the director.”

Help foster strong work relationships for the new employee. Introduce the staffer to important colleagues and to any special “behind-the-scenes networks.” Be sensitive to generational, socioeconomic and cultural differences that may affect how the employee responds to the onboarding experience. Tailor your approach accordingly. Most important, make sure that all new employees get the “resources, support and follow-through” they need. Remember that “enabling and inspiring is an ongoing effort.”

It’s Time to Get On Board with Onboarding

With existing employees routinely advancing or leaving, and new employees moving in to replace them, intelligent onboarding always matters. Embed the Total Onboarding Program in all your talent management and succession planning activities. The benefits of this program are manifold: Your firm will save time on recruiting, hiring and acclimating new employees. It will minimize hiring mistakes resulting from poorly communicated job requirements. And your new hires will be less likely to feel “buyer’s remorse” and more likely to align with the organization’s primary strategies. “Most people understand or can quickly figure out the basics of acquiring, accommodating, assimilating and accelerating new employees. Our core premise is that things work better when all efforts point in the same direction, integrated into one Total Onboarding Program (TOP).”

About the Authors

George Bradt is founder and managing director of PrimeGenesis, an executive-transition consultancy. **Mary Vonnegut**, a PrimeGenesis partner, formerly headed a retail company.
