



## Getting Onboard

### Integrating and Engaging New Employees

By Bob Lavigna

Many government agencies strive to make a good impression in recruiting but do not follow through during a new hire's first year on the job. Onboarding, a technique the private sector often uses to help new employees succeed, can make all the difference.

**T**wo dollars and 85 cents. That's how much change a brand-new government employee found in his desk on his first day on the job. How do we know this? Because this civil servant didn't have a computer at his desk and had nothing better to do than count loose change. Maybe the \$2.85 was a hiring bonus.

While he may have been lonely that morning, he is unfortunately not alone. Too often, new employees have bad experiences when they start their jobs. The new hire is ready for the job, but the job isn't ready for the new hire. Here's what two other new government hires had to say:

*"My first week was terrible. I didn't have any equipment, I wasn't given any assignments, there was nothing on my desk, and my supervisor did not even come see me for the first three days."*

*"I was sent to a conference room where someone from HR helped me complete a bunch of forms. I was not introduced to anyone, and no one had set up my computer access so I sat there and stared at the wall. By the end of the day I felt like I had made a terrible mistake in leaving my old job."*

While many government agencies understand that a good first impression is important in recruiting, this image is often not reinforced during a new hire's

first year on the job. That's where onboarding — integrating new employees into an organization and equipping them to succeed — comes in. The private sector uses onboarding to engage new employees, accelerate their path to productivity, and retain them. Government needs to share this focus.

Right now, interest in government jobs is high, in large part because of the economic crisis. And governments across the country are hiring talent in financial management and many other areas. Effective onboarding is critical to help new hires become productive and make long-term contributions. The hiring surge, plus the looming retirement wave, offers a rare opportunity for government to invest in comprehensive onboarding programs to engage this large new cohort. To determine how agencies onboard new employees and to identify best practices, the nonprofit, nonpartisan Partnership for Public Service teamed with a consulting firm on research that produced *Getting on Board: A Model for Integrating and Engaging New Employees*, which includes a comprehensive and strategic onboarding model. (The report can be downloaded at [www.ourpublicservice.org](http://www.ourpublicservice.org).)

#### ONBOARDING AND ITS IMPORTANCE

Many organizations focus on orientation during the new employee's first day

## Exhibit 1: Orientation versus Onboarding

Typical Orientation	Strategic Onboarding
Transactional focus and goals	Strategic focus and goals
Less than one week	Entire first year
Owned and executed by HR	Integrates multiple offices, functions, and people
Addresses some new employee needs	Addresses all new employee needs — information, equipment and accounts, training, and networking
Employee attends	Employee is actively engaged with vested interest in success
New hires complete paperwork and get some general information	New hires complete successful first year, maximizing engagement and retention

or two. In contrast, high-performing organizations, particularly in the private sector, use the more comprehensive and strategic onboarding approach — the process of integrating new employees into the organization and providing them with the tools, resources, and knowledge they need to become successful and productive. Exhibit 1 shows key ways in which onboarding differs from orientation.

Research shows that effective onboarding makes a difference. It is important for a number of reasons.

**Improved Performance.** Good onboarding can improve employee performance by up to 11.3 percent by clearly communicating performance expectations, providing feedback, involving co-workers and peers and providing training.<sup>1</sup> Onboarding also helps assess a new hire's strengths and weaknesses, and whether he or she is the right person for the job.

**Enhances Employee Engagement.** Companies that invested in onboarding enjoyed the highest levels of employee engagement, according to one study.<sup>2</sup>

**Increases Retention.** Another study found that 90 percent of employees decide whether to stay with the organization during their first six months.<sup>3</sup> Other research shows that effective onboarding programs can improve employee retention by 25 percent.<sup>4</sup> This can reduce the cost of turnover, which ranges from 50 percent of the annual salary of entry-level employees to 400 percent for specialized, high-level employees. And when a new employee quits, the time it takes recruit and train a replacement can create productivity and morale problems.

**Improves Time-to-Productivity Ratio.** New employees who go through comprehensive, structured onboarding become productive faster. One study found that a strong onboarding program helped employees reach full productivity an average of two months earlier than colleagues who did not receive similar onboarding attention.<sup>5</sup> This is especially true for jobs that require high levels of knowledge and expertise.

But onboarding is no silver bullet. A well-structured and comprehensive

onboarding program must be integrated with other HR programs and with strategic goals. Good onboarding will not compensate for a bad hiring process, weak managers, or poor human resource practices. Onboarding also will not work unless managers and supervisors are actively involved. The good news, however, is that a carefully planned and successful onboarding program can be inexpensive, yet generate short- and long-term benefits.

## ONBOARDING STRATEGICALLY

The strategic onboarding model is a foundation for agencies to develop or refine their onboarding programs. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach. The model in Exhibit 2 depicts the key aspects of a comprehensive onboarding program that apply to any organization and any new employee in that organization. Agencies can customize the model to meet their own needs, for specific groups of employees (e.g., employees new to government, transfers, and even contractors) or for specific employee needs (e.g., different generational learning styles).

## GUIDING ONBOARDING PRINCIPLES

Four fundamental principles ensure that onboarding is comprehensive, integrated, reflects the organization's needs and, most importantly, leads to positive outcomes. These principles are:

### ■ Align to Mission and Vision.

Onboarding should highlight how new hires' jobs contribute to the organization's mission.

### ■ Connect to Culture, Mission, and Strategic Priorities.

Onboarding must paint a realistic picture of cul-

**Figure 2: Onboarding Model**

PRINCIPLES

**Align** to Mission and Vision   **Connect** to Culture, Strategic Goals, and Priorities   **Integrate** across Process Owners   **Apply** to All Employees

ROLES

+ Process Owners

+ Process Champions

+ Employee

PROCESS PHASES AND KEY ACTIVITIES

Before First Day	First Day/Orientation	First Week	First 90 Days	First Year
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Extend personal welcome to employee</li> <li>Communicate first day logistics to employee</li> <li>Send paperwork in advance and/or online portal access</li> <li>Prepare for employee</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on sharing the mission and values</li> <li>Incorporate senior leadership</li> <li>Orient employee to organization and office norms</li> <li>Introduce employee sponsor</li> <li>Meet immediate requirements for employment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure direct managerial involvement</li> <li>Set performance expectations and job scope</li> <li>Assign meaningful work</li> <li>Communicate resources or networks required for work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide essential training</li> <li>Monitor performance and provide feedback</li> <li>Obtain feedback through new hire survey and other means</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognize positive employee contributions</li> <li>Provide formal and informal feedback on performance</li> <li>Create employee development plan</li> </ul>

OUTCOMES

High Employee Job Satisfaction Level • Retention of High-Performing Employees • Continued Employee Engagement and Commitment • Quicker Productivity

ture so that employees understand what they’re getting into. And onboarding goals should be built around organizational priorities. If a goal is to reduce turnover, for example, the onboarding program should reflect this — in a measurable way.

- **Integrate Activities.** While HR is traditionally the key onboarding process owner, other key players include security, information technology (IT), and facilities — and managers and supervisors. All must be accountable for performance and for meeting shared onboarding goals.
- **Apply to All Employees,** regardless of location and level, and also tailor to specific types of employees. New

hires entering the world of work for the first time have different needs than experienced professionals who are switching jobs.

**ROLES**

The three key roles in onboarding are process owners, process champions, and the new employee. “Process champions” (senior leaders, managers, and sponsors); along with the new employee, all have critical roles:

- Senior leaders communicate and reinforce the mission and values of the organization by speaking to new hires, stopping by their desks, or sending signed welcome letters.
- The importance of the manager or supervisor can’t be overstated.

All managers need to:

- Welcome new employees and meet with them as early as possible
- Clearly communicate job responsibilities
- Explain and set cultural expectations (e.g., when to copy the manager on e-mails, decisions that can be made without manager approval, communication styles)
- Develop individual performance plans with performance expectations
- Assign meaningful work as soon as possible
- Discuss career development
- Monitor performance and provide frequent formal and informal feed-

back throughout the employee's first year

- New employees should have a sponsor (or “buddy”), a peer who can help integrate and understand the organizational culture by helping the new hire:
  - Understand the written and unwritten elements of the organizational culture
  - Learn how to navigate the organization
  - Meet colleagues
  - Answer questions

Onboarding is a two-way process that requires new employees to actively participate. The organization provides information, resources, and equipment, and the new employee needs to be engaged and ready to contribute. New employees also need to complete all required paperwork and attend training, as well as develop relationships and seek the resources and information they need to do their jobs.

## ONBOARDING ACTIVITIES

Onboarding is not just the first day or two of orientation. Good onboarding has five phases, beginning when the employee accepts the job offer and continuing through the end of the first year.

**Phase 1: Before the Employee Starts the Job.** HR notifies other areas such as IT, sends paperwork to the new employee, and communicates logistical information. Employers can use this time to complete a series of activities before a new employee's first day:

- Send a welcome letter or packet that is signed by a senior official, and maybe a small token welcoming them to the agency.

- Provide information about the agency and the job.
- Arrange for paperwork to be completed (ideally electronically and before the first day).
- Contact the new employee to answer questions and set expectations.
- Assign a sponsor.
- Ensure that the new employee's workspace and office essentials (e.g., computer, telephone, and e-mail) are in place.

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The Comptroller of the Currency sends a gift basket to welcome new bank examiners.

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**Phase 2: The First Day.** You only get one chance to make a first impression. During orientation, an employer needs to:

- Personalize the experience by using labeled tent cards in the orientation, providing small agency-related gifts, etc.
- Describe the organization's vision and mission and culture, especially the link between the new employee's job and this mission.
- Have a senior leader welcome new employees (even if it is with a recorded message).
- Introduce the new employee to his or her sponsor.
- Complete paperwork and security requirements — but do not make this the focus of the day.
- Explain the benefit package.

- Arrange for new employees to eat together or for someone from each employee's office to eat lunch with him or her on the first day.

**Phase 3: The Rest of the First Week.** One of the least-attended baseball games of the year is usually the second game of the season, after opening day excitement has worn off. Agencies should make sure new employees do not experience a similar letdown after the initial excitement of orientation. Colleagues, especially the manager or supervisor, now play a key role. The new employee should be able to spend some or all of this week on purposeful work. During the rest of a new employee's first week, an employer needs to:

- Ensure that job roles and responsibilities are clearly communicated.
- Introduce the new employee to other employees and senior staff.
- Provide meaningful work.
- Review organizational structure and key staff.
- Provide a list of contacts who can answer the new employee's questions.
- Gather feedback about the orientation program from new employees.

**Phase 4: The First 90 Days.** New employees should begin to have a full workload while managers monitor performance and provide early feedback. During this period, managers and supervisors should:

- Review performance objectives and set individual development goals.
- Give feedback, early and often.
- Arrange or provide training.
- Arrange for the new employee to meet key people from other departments.

- Check with new employees regularly to ensure that they continue to assimilate and develop.

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The U.S. Controller of the Currency has a culture of measurement: It conducts focus groups with new employees after six and twelve months, and exit interviews and surveys to measure return on investment and employee success.

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#### Phase 5: The rest of the first year.

Many agencies do not consider this to be part of onboarding, but it is. For the employee, the feeling of newness — and the accompanying learning curve — linger. During this phase, employers need to:

- Provide training to build competencies and fill skill gaps.
- Conduct a new employee survey.
- Provide performance feedback (i.e., regular informal manager check-ins plus formal performance assessments after six months and one year).
- Send a congratulatory e-mail or letter from a senior executive on the employee's one-year anniversary.

### ESSENTIAL ONBOARDING ELEMENTS

Two essential elements of onboarding should be embedded across all phases: technology and measurement.

**Technology.** Although onboarding is a distinctly person-to-person activity,

technology can improve the process, including:

- **New Employee Paperwork.** New employees must complete a sea of forms and paperwork. This can take hours and is often done on the new employee's first day. Automation can allow employees to complete forms before their first day.
- **Onboarding Portals.** Web portals with onboarding information and tools can enhance the onboarding process. These portals can contain a few pieces of helpful information, or they can be robust repositories of information and tools. Examples of resources frequently included are checklists, timelines, talking points, contact lists, and training guides.
- **Case Management.** Automated case management systems streamline and track all onboarding activities, ensuring they're completed before the new employee shows up.

**Measurement:** Metrics can be operational (e.g., percentage of employees with e-mail on their first day, percentage of new employees who are satisfied with the orientation program) or strategic (e.g., performance, satisfaction, and attrition of new employees).

### YOUR OWN ONBOARDING PROGRAM

The onboarding model provides a framework, but individual onboarding programs must be adapted. There are five points to keep in mind:

**I. Know Where You Want to Be.** Define the goals and attributes for your onboarding programs. Strategic onboarding programs help integrate new employees into their jobs and the

organizational culture. Beyond these universal goals, onboarding programs should build on specific goals that map directly to organizational goals (e.g., reduce turnover, change culture, improve employee engagement).

**2. Know Where You Are.** Before making changes, it is important to understand and document current practices and responsibilities (i.e., assess the approach, scope, and effectiveness of current onboarding practices).

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The Government Accountability Office has an online system that notifies all stakeholders, in advance of each new hire's reporting date, to get ready for the new employee (e.g., prepare IT equipment and establish accounts, set the new office up, etc.).

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**3. Seek Quick Wins.** For many organizations, small improvements can pay off big. Activities that can be implemented quickly and inexpensively include:

- Sending out welcome e-mails to new employees after they accept job offers
- Assigning a sponsor to help the new employee before he or she starts, and in the first days and weeks
- Developing new employee checklists, for new employees, managers and supervisors, and posting them electronically
- Ensuring that orientation programs contain information about organizational history, mission, and core values

- Involving senior leadership in orientation and subsequent onboarding activities

**4. Tailor Onboarding to Type of Employee.** Organizations that have the basics down can move on to tailor onboarding to specific new employee groups (e.g., executives, mid-level managers, more junior employees, and transfers).

**5. Don't Reinvent the Wheel — Borrow It.** Every organization, public or private, onboards new employees. Look to best practices from others and make use of them. Commercially available tools and technologies can also support onboarding. These tools

can be purchased and used as-is, customized, or created internally.

### CONCLUSIONS

As the nation and our communities face increasingly complex challenges, government employees need to be fully productive and engaged as quickly as possible. The strategic onboarding model provides a framework for agencies to integrate their new employees to maximize employee productivity, engagement, and retention. ■

#### Notes

1. *Recruiting Roundtable Survey 2005* (Arlington, Virginia: The Corporate Executive Board, 2005).
2. *Best Employers to Work for in Australia Study 2003*, study summary, Hewitt Associates,

available at <http://was7.hewitt.com/bestemployers/anz/pdfs/bereport2003e.pdf>.

3. *2006 Onboarding Benchmark Report* (Boston: Aberdeen Group), August 2006.
4. *All Aboard: Effective Onboarding Techniques and Strategies* (Boston: Aberdeen Group), January 2008.
5. *Onboarding Benchmark Report: Technology Drivers Help Improve the New Hire Experience* (Boston: Aberdeen Group), August 2006.

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