

Retention

Onboarding Missteps Can Be Catastrophic For Employer Brand and Employee Retention

A carelessly approach to onboarding can make new hires feel unwanted, potentially driving them out and damaging the employer brand, consultants say.

An employer should ask itself what impact its onboarding process has on engagement and retention, Amy Hirsh Robinson, principal of the Interchange Group, said in a Feb. 25 webinar sponsored by the Cincinnati-based Human Capital Institute.

“Employees are at their most impressionable when they are new,” Robinson added. “They are vulnerable to making premature cognitive commitments—leaping to conclusions. They are likely to notice even the most minor examples of problems with an orientation or onboarding.” Employees often conclude that problems signal that the organization doesn’t care about its workers, she said. The Interchange Group is a consultancy based in Los Angeles.

Failed onboarding leads to diminished productivity and reduced engagement, with “tremendous financial implications,” Robinson said. Employees can end up with reduced respect for senior management, she said, and the company’s brand may be damaged.

‘Waiting for the HR Torture Chamber.’ That was a message echoed by Steve Cadigan, founder of Cadigan Talent Ventures and former vice president of talent at LinkedIn, in a March 2 webinar sponsored by San Francisco-based HR and business compliance engagement company Emtrain. At all costs, he warned, try to avoid a situation where new hires “are slumped in their chair, waiting for the HR torture chamber.”

On the other hand, Emtrain President Janine Yancey said, a strong onboarding program can have very positive effects. “As an organization, you’ve just incurred a lot of goodwill that is going to pay dividends,” she said.

Robinson said employers should begin by assessing what they have, what the organization’s onboarding process currently looks like, and what feelings and perceptions it leaves behind in new employees.

Robinson broke the onboarding process down into six steps: classifying new employees; identifying the competencies and skills required for each group; identifying resources needed at each level; identifying key

phases and activities of the onboarding process; implementing the program; and defining and tracking success.

Most organizations “at best” focus their new employee orientation on the company’s brand, and “at worst” on mere compliance, Robinson said. According to her, both of these approaches “backfire” because they don’t look at the new employee’s critical role. Instead, orientation should focus on the company, the new employee and the intersection between the two—where “us” comes in.

New hires need to learn about the organization’s mission and values first hand from the CEO or another executive leader, not a middle manager or HR, Cadigan said.

Yancey suggested that the talent and HR teams partner with compliance in communicating the importance of an ethical corporate culture. It’s also important to establish consistent processes for new hires to learn what they need to about the organization’s systems, she and Cadigan said.

Case Studies. Electric utility giant Southern California Edison recently overhauled its onboarding process, Angela Chang, a learning strategy project manager at the company, said during the Feb. 25 webinar.

Against a background of rapid technological change, a workplace shooting on Dec. 16, 2011, shocked Southern California Edison, which brought in consultants to analyze the company’s culture. They found elements like empathy, compassion, trust and connection missing from the corporate culture.

New employee orientation up to that point had been entirely focused on compliance to “not get the company sued,” Chang said. Employees remembered little of this orientation except, possibly, what not to do, she said.

After examining practices at “benchmark” companies like Apple, Google and Deloitte, Southern California Edison introduced a new orientation process dubbed “Navigate,” which has “no PowerPoint presentations, no talking heads,” Chang said.

New employees are issued a small handbook in which they can take notes, and are presented with case studies they can discuss, she said. Group activities and T-shirts at the end of the orientation are additional elements, she added.

Tips for new employee orientation that Chang offered included “build a sense of purpose,” “tell a story,” “value the individual”—especially challenging

in big organizations—and “empower them to take action.”

Avoid alienating employees by giving them reams of paperwork, Cadigan suggested. At LinkedIn, he said, the company had new hires fill out on paper only what was legally required, moving all other procedures online.

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