

ESSENTIAL GUIDE
TO CONDUCTING

ONBOARDING STUDIES

A Voice-of-Employee Research Tool

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INTRODUCTION

Leaders have come to realize the importance of asking employees for feedback at multiple points in time, and across the various stages of employment, versus asking for feedback only one time per year through an annual engagement survey.^{1,2,3} In addition to the annual survey, feedback from employees at various stages of employment helps leaders understand what employees like, what they don't like, and what can be improved, to inform organizational policies and processes that lead to increased engagement and retention.^{3,4,5,6,7,8}

The first stage of employment is onboarding, and it is vital for the employee, as it sets the stage for his or her employment with the company.⁹ Moreover, it's proven that effective onboarding leads to increased engagement and retention.^{14,15} However, in one study, less than half of companies surveyed (48%), believe that their onboarding is somewhat successful, and less than one third (28%), believe their onboarding is highly successful.¹¹ Furthermore, in today's employee-in-control marketplace, first-year turnover accounted for 34% of all turnover in 2016, which underscores the importance of the onboarding process in the new hire experience.¹²

The onboarding process for most companies is not effective. An effective onboarding process must be important to leaders as it impacts engagement and retention. Additionally, leaders can let new hires know from the start that they have a voice, and can influence organizational practices, by asking for feedback throughout the onboarding process using onboarding studies.¹⁷

Onboarding studies are included in voice-of-employee strategies. Conducted in the right way, onboarding studies can let new hires know that they have a voice, provide data to help improve the onboarding process and increase engagement and retention.

In this Essential Guide to Onboarding Studies, we will answer the following questions:

- What is Onboarding?
- Why is Onboarding Important?
- What is an Onboarding Study?
- What are the Objectives of an Onboarding Study?
- How do I Conduct an Onboarding Study?
- What Questions Should I Ask in an Onboarding Study?
- What are the Benefits of Conducting an Onboarding Study?

What is Onboarding?

Employee onboarding is the process by which new employees acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and behaviors to become effective, engaged members of their teams, departments and the organization.¹³ The goals of onboarding are to socialize new hires within the organization, shorten new hire time to productivity and encourage long-term retention.

Typically comprised of multiple stages, onboarding should be strategic, comprehensive, consistent and measured.¹⁵ A few onboarding best practices include continuous training, structured orientation, established job expectations and assignment of a mentor.¹¹ The onboarding process varies in length and should be tailored to the needs of the organization and job. For example, some organizations may have a 90-day onboarding process, while others may require 12 months or more.⁷

Why is Onboarding Important?

Effective onboarding has been proven to impact key organizational outcomes and positively influence organizational culture. A few benefits of effective onboarding include:

- **Effective onboarding increases retention.**
Research links effective onboarding to reduced turnover and increased retention.¹⁵ In one study, employees were 60% more likely to remain with the organization for more than three years when there is a structured onboarding program.²⁰ In another study, 15% of respondents decided to leave their current position simply due to an ineffective or no onboarding process.²¹ This is important, as increased retention impacts organizational characteristics including culture, morale and productivity.²²
- **Effective onboarding reduces employee ramp-up time.**
Studies show that effective onboarding reduces the time it takes a new employee to effectively contribute to the organization.¹⁰ Additional benefits of a shortened ramp-up time include, a reduced time to reach optimized productivity, achieve better performance and build workplace relationships.¹⁰
- **Effective onboarding increases the likelihood of employee engagement.**
Multiple studies reveal that effective onboarding programs increase the likelihood that employees will be engaged in the workplace.^{6,10,14} A study on driving performance and engagement showed that effective onboarding increases employees' "discretionary effort" by as much as 20%.²³ Other studies link effective onboarding to improved employee perceptions of workplace conditions where engagement is most likely to happen.^{10,6}

The immediate benefit of effective onboarding is a productive new-hire and the longer-term benefits are improved productivity, engagement, and retention.

ORIENTATION Vs. ONBOARDING

Orientation is not the same as onboarding.

Orientation is typically a one-day event that is included in onboarding, which involves multiple steps.

BENEFITS OF ONBOARDING

- Increased Employee Retention¹⁵
- Reduced Employee Ramp-Up Time¹⁰
- Increased Employee Engagement^{6,10,14}

What is an Onboarding Study?

Onboarding studies, often referred to as new hire surveys, are tools through which leaders request feedback from new employees about the onboarding process, with the intent of using the information to improve the new employee experience. Specifically, onboarding studies help organizations understand what can be improved about the onboarding process to help new hires become more productive in their role and better assimilate to the organization.

What are the Objectives of an Onboarding Study?

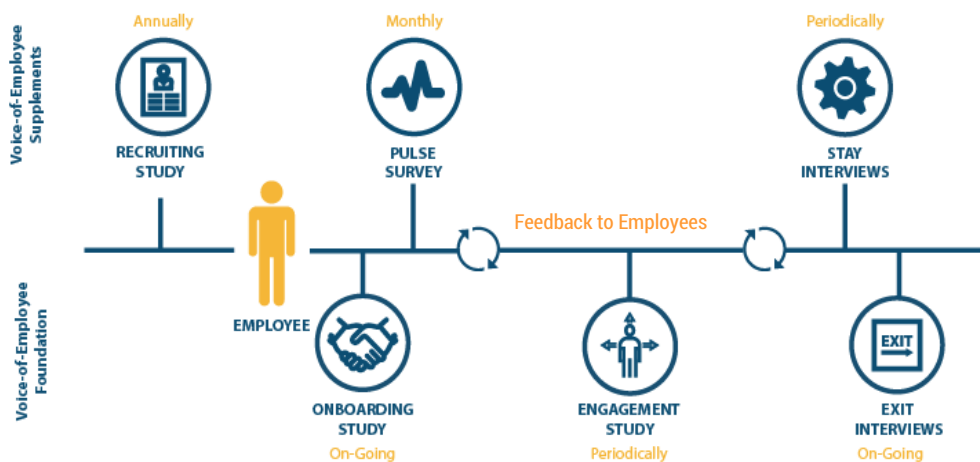
Onboarding studies should assess the onboarding process and how effective that process is in assimilating new hires to the workplace conditions proven to drive engagement and retention.¹⁸

The objectives of onboarding studies are to:

- Obtain feedback on the effectiveness of each stage of onboarding.⁶
- Uncover insights to improve each stage of onboarding.⁶
- Understand attitudes around workplace conditions that drive engagement and retention.¹⁸
- Evaluate the effectiveness of job training elements.
- Communicate to employees that their feedback is valued.
- Gauge intent to stay with the company.
- Reveal potential compliance issues.

The Role of Onboarding Studies in a Voice-of-Employee Strategy to Increase Retention

You must provide employees multiple opportunities and channels to provide feedback about working conditions and the business to drive retention.⁹ It's also critical to communicate back to employees. This is accomplished with a voice-of-employee research foundation that includes, consistent Exit Interviews, an annual Engagement Study and an on-going Onboarding Studies. In addition to periodic Feedback to Employees, you should supplement the foundation with Stay Interviews and Pulse Surveys where necessary.



How do I Conduct an Onboarding Study?

It's critical that leaders collect feedback in a way that allows employees to provide open-ended feedback to uncover all possible opportunities at each stage of the onboarding process, in order to make meaningful improvements.¹⁹

Effective onboarding studies should be conducted using the following criteria:

1. Ask for Feedback at Key Stages of the Process

To ensure effectiveness, leaders should tailor onboarding surveys to each organization's unique needs and at the key stage of the onboarding process.^{4,6} For example, feedback could be requested from new hires after orientation, after the first day on the job, after 30 days on the job or after 90 days on the job.⁶ There are companies that consider the employee's entire first year on the job part of the onboarding process. The bottom line is that all companies are unique in their onboarding process and feedback must be timed where it's most impactful to the process and the organization.

2. Select an External Partner

To ensure accuracy, onboarding studies should be conducted through an independent third-party to remove biases and remove barriers to employees feeling they can express their true perceptions related to the onboarding process. When conducted internally, it's likely that true intents and root causes of perceptions aren't revealed because employees aren't being honest with the organization. Employees may not want to risk burning a bridge or disappointing a manager. Additionally, when conducted externally, data from onboarding studies is systematically collected and thoroughly reported.

3. Use a Mixed Methodology – Ask “Why?”

To obtain detailed reasons for new hire perceptions of the onboarding process, it's critical to use a mixed methods research instrument that asks “Why” in an open-ended, qualitative manner to avoid limiting the scope of what can be learned from each individual employee.²⁴ Third-party researchers can offer high-quality telephonic interviews and web-interviews that capture in-depth qualitative responses in a systematic manner. In asking fewer open-ended questions, specifically following up to ask why the participant rated the aspect of the onboarding process they did, you obtain in-depth data and reveal the root causes of attitudes.²⁵ This also helps identify critical action items that must be implemented in the organization to improve engagement.

4. Gathering Suggestions to Improve the Process & Workplace

To understand specific actions that could move new hires to perceive the onboarding process as “excellent,” it's critical to ask. It's essential to double-probe and solicit multiple responses to understand the most important reasons for rating aspects of the process and know what it would take for the organization to get a top rating, such as “excellent.”²⁵ This type of questioning will provide details on opportunities to improve the onboarding process and positively impact the organization.

5. Using Quantitative Analysis of Qualitative Data:

To collect and analyze high-quality onboarding study data, qualitative information must be collected systematically, categorized into themes and quantitatively analyzed. The quantitative analysis is an effective means to reduce bias and maximize causal understanding.²⁶ Additionally, this allows you to conduct and analyze high-quality onboarding study data on a large scale. This allows the organization to identify the most common themes that they can responsibly act on to make the most impact.

6. Collect Data Systematically

To analyze data reliably, onboarding study data should systematically capture ratings for use in subsequent data analysis. External onboarding studies use a consistent process, data collection technology and a dependable methodology to capture responses in a reliable system to facilitate future reporting and analyses. This information can then be analyzed to identify issues that might exist in specific phases of the onboarding process, employee segments, departments, job groups or even certain supervisors and trainers.

7. Communicate Expectations & Results to Employees

To ensure participation, trust and actionability, ensure an effective plan is in place to communicate the importance of onboarding study in advance and to communicate the results of the onboarding study after completion. Leaders of the organization should communicate the goal of the onboarding study, timing and when to expect communication of results. Then, leaders must establish a plan to communicate feedback and next steps to employees.

What Questions Should I Ask in an Onboarding Survey?

Questions in an onboarding study should be tailored to the activities and desired outcomes of that specific stage. Furthermore, the onboarding study should ask open-ended questions about key conditions that impact socialization, engagement and retention.

Onboarding Studies should ask open-ended questions to assess the following:

- How the new employee feels about the organization
- How the new employee feels about their team
- How the new employee feels about their manager
- How the new employee feels about their job
- How the new employee feels about the onboarding process
- How the new employee feels about the training received
- What it will take to get excellent ratings
- Employee intent to stay
- Awareness of compliance issues

Additionally, it's acceptable to ask open-ended questions about specific elements of the onboarding process. Specific training events, orientation events, mentoring programs or on the job training sessions that need specific evaluation in relation to the overall onboarding process.



What are the Benefits of Conducting an Onboarding Study?

Onboarding studies provide organizations multiple benefits as a core element of a voice-of-employee research strategy.

The benefits of onboarding studies include the following:

- Know specific opportunities that require change to improve the onboarding process
- Assess each of the workplace conditions that are key drivers of engagement & retention: Organization, Manager, Team & Job
- Uncover the most important issues surrounding each of the workplace conditions that are key drivers of new hire engagement & retention
- Understand the strengths and opportunities of the onboarding process
- Get specific suggestions for improvements to drive new hire engagement & retention
- Identify the strengths & opportunities of new hire training
- Obtain suggestions for improving new hire training to drive engagement & retention
- Learn of potential compliance issues

SUMMARY

Organizations that are committed to improving engagement and retention by capturing the voice of the employee should send a message to new hires from the beginning of the employee experience that their feedback is valued and that they can influence organizational practices for the better, by conducting onboarding studies.¹⁷ Onboarding studies capture employee feedback to improve the onboarding process for new hires and increase engagement and retention.



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