

Five Steps to Effective Employee Orientations

Fair or unfair, our opinions about people are often informed by first impressions. Likewise, an employee's opinion about your firm will largely be shaped by what happens in their first few days there.

Many firms, even those with well established operating procedures, lack a comprehensive new employee orientation. Even fewer formalize the "ramp-up" process that explains day-to-day logistics and immerses the employee in the culture and spirit of the organization.

Most of us can recall an experience at a new job in which we were left to learn the ropes on our own, while feeling out of step with the organization. This experience can erode a new employee's initial enthusiasm for the position. And it may seem like "bait and switch" if they were lavished with attention during the interview process and then abandoned once they became employees.

A good introduction to your firm is never more important than with top talent - your most valuable human assets. Most high performers prefer a well-run and well-organized environment as a platform from which to do their best work. Is the "first week experience" you are providing to new employees conveying a well-oiled machine or, well, something less?

The impact of ineffective orientations is not limited to the new employee. Others are affected as the new employee seeks help from coworkers at inopportune times, or a client doesn't get a promised revision because the new employee was the last one in the office and nobody ever explained how to use FedEx.

To develop your own new employee orientation, start at the beginning with these basic steps:

Assemble a list

Make a list of all of the things that should be covered. This is the heart of the process so be sure it's comprehensive. It should include everything from how to use the copier and request supplies, to CAD standards and document naming and filing. The list will likely be longer than you think. I have helped companies of all sizes with this initiative and the list is never less than thirty items or so. Divide the list into categories such as logistics, HR, security, technology, etc. Use your list to develop a checklist that will be provided to new employees on their first day. This can be an impressive, tone-setting piece in itself, especially if the employee is coming from a less organized environment.

Divide the orientation into sections

Each category of the checklist becomes a different section or module of the orientation, and can be conducted by different members of your firm as appropriate based on the content of that section.

Budget the time

Assume that a thorough orientation will take a half-day or more – this includes everything from completing their regulatory forms and reviewing health insurance, to setting up their workstation and outgoing voicemail message. Don't expect much productivity from new employees on the first day. I have seen too many situations in which new employees are working on a project within an hour of their first day arrival – without even being introduced around. In a sense, these employees have had a valuable orientation of a different sort. In just the first hour they learned a lot about how the firm regards its employees.

□ **Do lunch**

Arrange for new employees to have lunch on their first day with their manager or a few coworkers. While they're out, show them the local lunch spots and other neighborhood highpoints. Make sure this is planned in advance and doesn't come off as an afterthought.

□ **Follow up**

There are two critical points at which managers should follow up with new employees. The first one is at the end of the first day. The hiring manager should be the one to kick off the orientation, but subsequent sections will likely be handled by others. This is fine, and a good division of labor, as long as the manager re-connects with the new employee at the end of the day. The second critical follow-up time is at the end of the first week. Managers should schedule this end-of-the-week meeting on the first day, so that new employees know that even if things get busy, there has been time set aside to address any issues that have come up.

If you do nothing more than these steps, you'll be ahead of most firms in shaping new employees' first impressions of your organizations. This is important for all new employees, but particularly so for your valuable, and more discerning, top talent.

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