



Welcome aboard!



Lars Hyland explains the role of communication in making the first few months in a new job successful and, thereby, increasing long-term engagement

"Engagement is about creating opportunities for employees to connect with their colleagues, managers and wider organisation. It's about creating an environment where employees are motivated to want to connect with their work and really care about doing a good job."

MacLeod Report Engaging for Success (2009)

First impressions

Do any of these scenarios sound familiar?

"On my first day I arrived and was immediately drowning in rules and policies, all apparently about what *not* to do. The HR person taking us through didn't seem that confident and just rushed through a seemingly endless PowerPoint presentation which sent most of us into a state of paralysis. I'm still not

clear what I am actually expected to do in my role."

"Our manager said we didn't have time for the usual induction and we got straight into the job. I had to learn by trial and error, but I got there in the end."

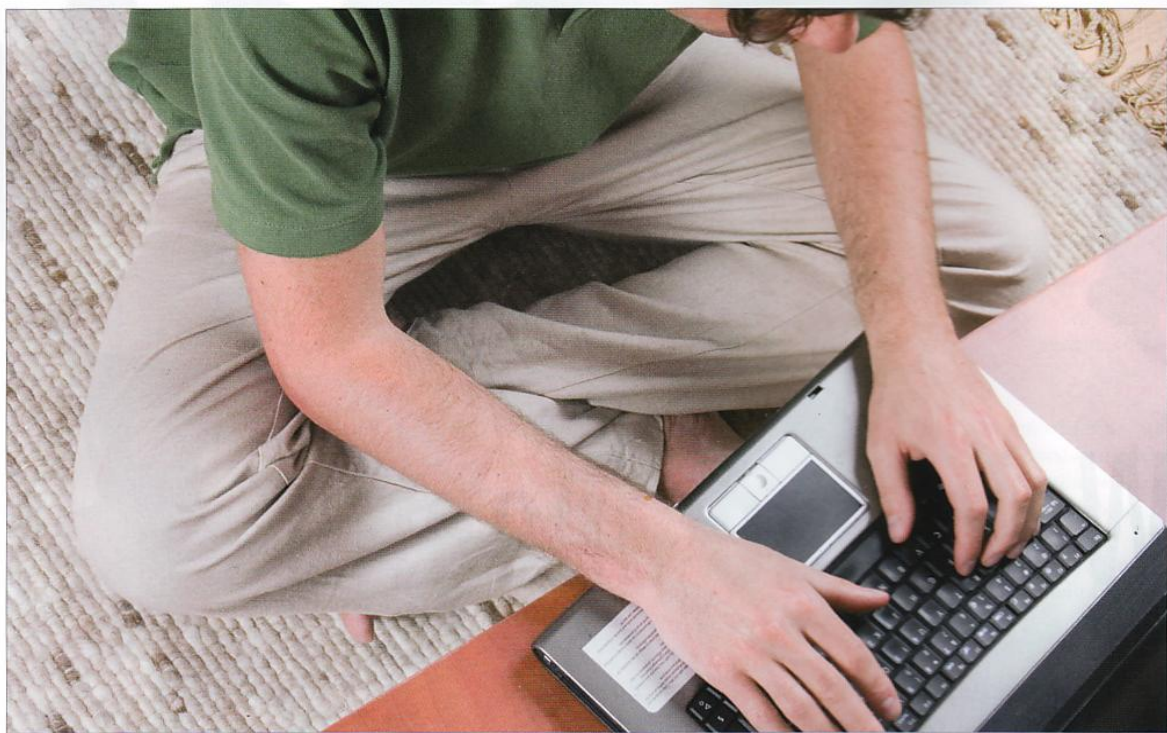
"Well I'm not sure whether that trainer just got out the wrong side of bed today, but I hope the other people I meet aren't as cynical and depressing. Otherwise I don't think I'll be able to last long. It's certainly not the impression I got from the interview."

On-boarding sets the tone for how employees perceive an organisation in terms of corporate culture, communication and values

As organisations, and as individuals, we never get a second chance to make a first impression. This is especially true when we find ourselves in a vulnerable position such as entering a new job role. We become hypersensitive to the information and actions we see around us. We are more likely to jump to hasty conclusions, real or imagined, in a desperate attempt to reach certainty of mind.

Cognitive psychologists call this behaviour 'premature cognitive commitment' and it is very difficult to shake these initial impressions once they are set. From an organisational perspective, this means we run big risks if new staff's on-boarding experience is poor and open to interpretation.

On-boarding sets the tone for how employees perceive an organisation in terms of corporate culture, communication and values. However, for many staff



entering a new workplace, it can be an inconsistent, sobering and unnerving affair.

It is no great surprise, then, that many new joiners don't stay the course. It has been recorded that 90 per cent of employees decide whether to leave their new employer within the first six months (recently voiced by Gretchen Alarcon at Oracle).

Measuring time to full productivity of new staff reveals it can take anything between six and 12 months to reach the required performance levels. Such high levels of staff attrition are extremely costly to an organisation. Then, when a staff member leaves, all of that early investment in him – from recruitment, selection and induction to salary – is lost before he can add any real value.

There are many reasons why these on-boarding problems occur. However, at its heart usually sits the tumbleweed of absent or poor communication. This can undermine efforts at each key stage of an employee's journey into a new

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organisation. Any mismanagement of messaging, inconsistencies or simply an absence of support can derail a new joiner.

These first few months are a particularly delicate time yet, when handled well, can provide a superior foundation for long-term employee engagement, more than any subsequent corporate cultural change programme.

Communication, communication, communication

In general, you can't communicate too much. Yet it is far more common for us to stay silent for

long periods and allow perceptions to stray. Communication is the golden thread on which all engagement activities hang.

In on-boarding terms, successful communication will produce three key outcomes for each individual:

- **Congruence** Aligned messages are easier to assimilate and understand in the minds of those new to your organisation
- **Competence** Building the skills and knowledge of new joiners throughout their on-boarding experience reduces the overall time it takes for them to reach full productivity
- **Confidence** A new joiner that feels well informed, knowledgeable and ready to apply his skills is well motivated to perform at high levels at the earliest opportunity.

Achieving these outcomes will help reduce, if not remove, those premature cognitive commitments. But how can we structure an on-boarding experience that is both effective and cost-efficient?

Technology as a catalyst

In designing a successful on-boarding strategy, it is essential to harness technology to deliver an experience that is aligned with, and supportive of, an organisation's values and culture. It must also deliver more productive employees, quickly and at lower overall cost.

Not only can technology help communicate more information in a timely and accessible fashion, but it can also be used to avoid information overload – another common problem for new staff. Technology genuinely offers a win-win opportunity to have a positive impact on your staff, your top-line productivity and your bottom line.

Let's take a look at some of the key stages of on-boarding and explore how improved communication through an appropriate application of technology can achieve a more effective experience for your new employees.

1 Attract

This stage covers all recruitment and selection activities, including the public presentation of the organisation's 'employer brand'. Communication needs to accurately represent the organisational culture, the nature of the job roles available and the working conditions.

There is also a clear need to positively position the organisation to attract talent that may be in short supply. However, the organisation's story must be authentic – a new joiner will soon discover if the brand doesn't match his actual experience. Here are a few tips to ensure this doesn't happen in your organisation:

- Offer a *careers portal* giving visibility to employee practice, a summary of your organisation's activities, the range and variety of job roles available and (through job board functionality) access to vacancies and the application process
- Applications can be *filtered* through immediate exercises that

Sky case study

Sky, one of the UK's most recognised brands and a leading global media company, employs a large number of staff, many of whom work in its customer service and contact centre departments. To get this expanding base of new staff quickly up to speed with Sky's products and services, Brightwave devised a fun and entertaining on-boarding learning portal.

New staff can get access to this portal from home (or anywhere via the Internet) to build knowledge before their start date. This has ensured new-starters are competent faster, leading to increased sales, a better customer experience and a reduction in early staff attrition.

Engaging design

The Get Up To Speed portal incorporates a variety of media and interactive tools to engage new starters and maximise learning, including games, social learning (for example, blogs connect existing staff to new recruits), a video belt and simulated customer scenarios.

It also has incentives to encourage repeated completion through a real-time leader board. There is also a series of documentary-style videos and blogs offering 'a day in the life' type experiences.

Business impact

The portal's content has enabled Sky to redefine and streamline the on-boarding process for new starters. It has resulted in a saving of 37.5 training hours for every new recruit during the pilot alone and has ensured that every new starter is now competent at least one week earlier – a significant saving. Staff attrition has been substantially reduced and sales conversions significantly improved amongst new joiners since using the portal.

This approach has fundamentally changed the induction process and helped Sky raise the bar in terms of the quality of the learning experience. It is now being rolled out nationally.

Effective communication was central to success

Stuart Coyle, curriculum design manager for Get Up To Speed, has this advice for organisations embarking on a major on-boarding programme: "Be really clear about what you want to achieve and set meaningful objectives. For Get Up To Speed, the objectives were crystal clear from the outset and remained unchanged throughout delivery and integration. This was critical to measuring success but also to getting buy-in from a diverse and extensive range of stakeholders.

"Set up a pilot or road test. This is absolutely invaluable. You can use a properly-evaluated pilot to gather early feedback, test the business case and quickly incorporate important changes into the final solution prior to formal launch.

"For Sky, the Beta trial was introduced during the production process, but it paid dividends by helping to counter technical issues and enabling us to understand better how it would be received by the end beneficiaries.

"Don't be afraid to do something different. Think creatively about how you engage new employees before they walk into their new role."

test applicants' basic abilities and attitudes to the job role. By ensuring that applicants fully understand the role and culture, there are fewer losses later in the recruitment/induction process

- Selection exercises at interview stage can *simulate* the working environment. They can provide valuable direction for both applicant and employer on the level of subsequent training and development required to reach the desired levels of competence and productivity.

2 Endorse/reinforce

Upon accepting the role, new joiners often experience a period of silence between receiving their offer letter and their first day at work. This can dent their confidence and lead to a reappraisal of their decision to join.

A pre-joiners portal (sometimes linked to the original careers portal with access to additional secure areas) can continue engagement and provide important stimulation and reinforcement as soon as the job offer is accepted.

A successful example of such a portal is being used by Sky, with significant business results (see case study on p39). It also won the most effective training programme award at the recent Customer Contact Association Global Awards.

3 Connect

Social media tools can be used to safely connect with existing employees and other new starters irrespective of their geographical location. These tools can be embedded within the portal and/or provide links to existing tools that may be linked to a recruitment strategy. Common social media services that may already be in use in the organisation include Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

Used correctly, social media can provide a mechanism for new employees to contribute and demonstrate their value to others already in the organisation. Likewise, existing employees and, critically, managers can reach out and engage with their incoming team members.

This approach can help new starters operate more effectively as they'll have an increased understanding of current projects on which they will be working. It will also help them understand commonly-used jargon and start to

expose them directly to the culture of the organisation.

4 Induct

Induction from the first day onwards can be radically re-designed and shortened if pre-joining learning activities are put in place. There can be significant savings in overall training time, of 50 per cent or more, where the induction experience focuses on application of knowledge and skills already acquired.

By extending the use of an online portal to include additional learning activities, the induction experience can be even more flexible and personalised. This allows those able and willing to fast-track themselves to a proven level of competency while those needing additional support can be given the attention they need from trainers and coaches.

5 Support

Since communication is more effective when spaced over time, providing ongoing access to learning and performance support via the online portal will help cement new knowledge and skills. It will also increase accuracy on the job and accelerate the acquisition of practical and positive work experience.

6 Retain

The cumulative effect of aligning all these stages is to give the employee a highly congruent, contextualised and personalised entry into the organisation, which will build confidence, competence and loyalty.

While many factors affect an employee's motivation and loyalty, clear, regular communication and clarity of purpose will keep his focus through the initial months until he is fully embedded in his new company.

On-boarding directs the conversation

Communication has always been about a conversation rather than a one-way transmission. In today's highly inter-connected world, we are all becoming used to, indeed expect, a two-way interaction. As we've seen, the technology and tools are there for us to harness.

Do try to use the techniques above to reach alignment across all key stages of your induction process to help yield significant cost savings, more robust employee engagement and productivity. This will in turn lead to reduced levels of attrition.

Put simply, employees are more confident and competent in their chosen role and are appropriately motivated to perform in line with the corporate brand and mission if they experience a good on-boarding process. Going forward, this can only be achieved by putting communication and technology at the heart of your on-boarding strategy. ■

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