

Getting up to speed - onboarding staff in the twenty-first century

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Integrating staff into the company culture and training them up for their new role is vital to ensuring employee engagement. Lars Hyland, Director of Learning Services at Brightwave, explains how the right training methods and tools can help bring staff on board.

How we work and who we work for is changing rapidly. In an internet-enabled, networked age where we can communicate with anyone, anywhere, in real time, the way in which we acquire knowledge and develop new skills is transforming.

To cope with the pace of economic and social change we must re-evaluate how we train and support our people. The onboarding experience is the crucial start to reaching a desired level of competence and confidence needed to deliver a valuable contribution.

However, this is often sadly neglected. New joiners arrive in their new workplace to discover they are expected to fend for themselves - their manager is too busy fire-fighting, work colleagues are stretched enough getting through the day, let alone having time to 'handhold' someone new.

The induction training is not scheduled for a few weeks, by which time its value is greatly diminished. Furthermore, what about the increasing number of staff working from home or on the move? How do they become integrated into the organisation's culture?

It is no great surprise then that many new joiners don't stay the course. It is 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 twelve months to reach the required levels of competence and confidence to deliver at expected performance levels.

As a result, staff attrition is extremely costly to an organisation. When a staff member leaves, all the investment made in that individual - from recruitment, selection and induction to salary - is lost before they can add any real value.

In areas where there are naturally high levels of staff turnover, such as contact centres and retail, this can amount to large sums of money spent on training and re-training without ever truly improving overall performance.



'...failure to retain employees is costing firms up to £1 billion per year.'

The Call Centre Association (CCA) claims a failure to retain employees is costing firms up to £1 billion per year and generating employee turnover rates up to 30 per cent. The current economic climate may have dampened these costs temporarily, but with increasing employee mobility, they will rise if not managed more effectively.

Employee engagement

A positive onboarding experience can seriously improve employee engagement. The government (see MacLeod Report commissioned by Lord Mandelson) has recognised the importance of improving employee engagement and its positive affect on productivity. Here's a definition of engagement taken from the report:

'Engagement is about creating opportunities for employees to connect with their colleagues, managers and wider organisation. It is also about creating an environment where employees are motivated to want to connect with their work and really care about doing a good job... It is a concept that places flexibility, change and continuous improvement at the heart of what it means to be an employee and an employer in a twenty-first century workplace.' (Professor Katie, CIPD, 2009)

The report also shows the difference employee engagement can make to the bottom line:

- Engaged employees in the UK take an average of 2.69 sick days per year; the disengaged take 6.19 days. The CBI reports sickness absence costs the UK economy £13.4bn a year.

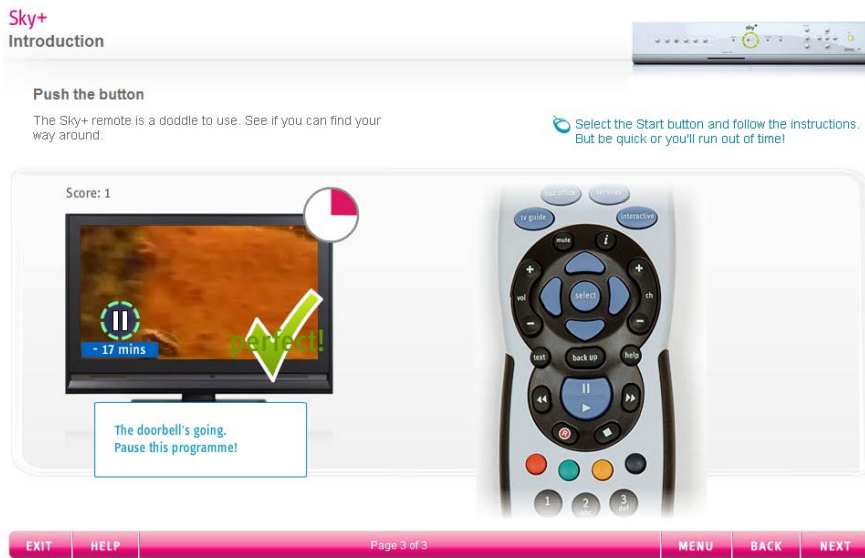
- 70 per cent of engaged employees indicate they have a good understanding of how to meet customer needs, only 17 per cent of non-engaged employees say the same.
- Engaged employees are 87 per cent less likely to leave the organisation than the disengaged. The cost of high turnover among disengaged employees is significant.

Ensuring that the early onboarding experience is a positive reinforcement of someone's decision to join will make a dramatic difference to these metrics.

Technology, more specifically e-learning, plays a central role in offering a more seamless, continuous support mechanism that simultaneously accelerates learning, releases managers from basic training obligations and significantly reduces time to full productivity.

Tips for successful onboarding: The pre-induction portal

The provision of online learning and assessment can be used at all stages of onboarding new employees, all managed through a single learning portal. This portal, alongside the corporate website, actively reinforces brand values and culture.



Here are examples of how e-learning can be used to improve efficiency and effectiveness for each stage of onboarding:

Recruitment - potential applicants complete short scenario-based assessments that provide more accurate impressions of the job role. The organisation benefits by encouraging those seemingly best suited to submit an application.

Selection - more rigorous assessment and psychometric testing can further filter applicants prior to, or as part of, the formal interview process. Tests can include realistic experiences that represent the job activities.

Pre-induction - successful applicants can receive additional learning opportunities that are completed in the run-up to their first day. With high levels of motivation and enthusiasm these individuals are in a perfect cognitive state to learn more about their new organisation. Learning modules may cover organisational structure, welcome videos, product knowledge, activity or system simulations (perhaps customer scenarios) and mandatory compliance (like health and safety). Such early learning means new employees arrive on their first day with a high level of confidence and active knowledge. This dramatically reduces time required for further induction training.

Induction period - continuing access to the learning portal carries new employees seamlessly through their first few days. Access to social networking tools accelerate contact with other employees, as well as access to additional learning modules on key systems and processes that were not available during pre-induction.

Ongoing development - these learning activities naturally integrate with existing HR systems to ensure a full record on which the individual can build further training and development as their career develops.

Tracking progress - tracking and reporting facilities allow the organisation to monitor new employees' engagement with learning opportunities. The portal can reward those who demonstrate exceptional levels of motivation and attainment, whilst nudging and supporting those who need encouragement. Equally, identifying early on those new employees who are uncertain of their decision or are likely to fail to integrate is valuable for both the individual and organisation.

Unbeatable business case

For those looking to reduce costs and improve employee productivity, overhauling the onboarding and induction experience is a strong candidate.

Sky, the satellite TV and broadband communications provider, has launched a pre-induction learning portal that has reduced induction time from four to three weeks with measurable improvements in sales and customer service targets. High levels of commitment and enthusiasm shown by individuals completing the pre-induction activities have also been sustained into the workplace.

While many organisations may not be experiencing growth or normal recruitment levels in the current climate, this is likely to change over the next twelve to eighteen months as the economy recovers.

Cost pressures, however, will not go away, so introducing a more cost effective onboarding model must be a priority in order to take full competitive advantage when the upturn arrives. When it does, employees will begin to further flex their new-found freedom and the battle for talent will intensify.

Call us on 01273 827676 or email us at enquiries@brightwave.co.uk to find out more about our corporate learning solutions and how we can help your business.