Virtual Onboarding of Remote Workers More Important Than Ever

The power of connection during this time cannot be overstated

By Roy Maurer

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Most organizations have transitioned to remote work in response to the coronavirus pandemic, making completely virtual onboarding of new hires a necessity. But providing a superb onboarding experience virtually can be a challenge for employers doing it for the first time.

"Hiring and onboarding new employees completely virtually is a new concept for most employers. A lot of companies are trying to figure it out," said Sally Stetson, co-founder and principal at Salveson Stetson Group, an executive search firm in the Philadelphia area.

Getting it right is more important than ever now, with workers starting new jobs from home against the backdrop of COVID-19 without having physically met anyone during the recruiting and hiring process, said Brent Pearson, the CEO and founder of Enboarder, an onboarding technology company based in Sydney, Australia. "Many managers wing the onboarding normally, doing it on the fly, but with everything being virtual, more structure is needed, meaning manager coaching is more important," he said.

Employers should strive to make virtual onboarding seamless, dynamic and informative, said Lianne Vineberg, the founder and director of talent and recruitment at Toronto-based Talent in the 6ix, an HR and recruitment consulting firm that specializes in helping startups.

"The No. 1 thing to remember is that you're building a foundation for the new hire to have new relationships in the workplace and helping them to have a voice, which is even more important when they are remote," she said.

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Cover All the Bases

Virtual onboarding should never be a "one-and-done" video session or phone call, Stetson said. "It needs to be conducted over multiple, interactive video sessions that provide an overview of the company and its products and services, and incorporates meetings with managers, team members and even business leaders like the CEO."

Not surprisingly, using video is critical to virtual onboarding, Pearson said. If your organization is new to remote onboarding, now is the time to create a series of short videos on induction topics, which can be sent to the new hire each day to complement virtual sessions.

Vineberg recommends scheduling full days of engagements so new hires don't feel neglected. "Create a structured calendar with separate links for each session," she said. "Stress punctuality to internal colleagues tapped for presentations. This is not a meeting you can show up 10 minutes late for or cancel and expect to leave a good impression with the new employee."

Global workforce management technology company ServiceNow already employed many remote workers before the pandemic and is accustomed to onboarding both in person and virtually. The company uses its own mobile onboarding app to help new employees complete required paperwork and make equipment requests.

"The one area where we had to slightly evolve was new-hire orientation," said Pat Wadors, chief talent officer and CHRO at ServiceNow. "We now have a completely digital orientation leveraging Zoom videoconferencing that includes lots of guest speakers to connect with all of our new hires."

ServiceNow's virtual onboarding starts with a six-hour session on Day 1 with built-in breaks and opportunities for connection, Wadors said. "We bring in partners from across the organization, including product, global talent, finance, IT [information technology] and sales, to name a few. We host another 90-minute session on Day 2, where employees can ask additional questions and hear from some other organizations within the company."

Onboarding can also include scheduled training sessions, one-on-one meetings with the new hire's manager and onboarding buddy, an all-team presentation, and a virtual happy hour with the team to get to know co-workers in a more casual setting.

At Enboarder, Pearson said, "some customers are having a quiz at the end of the week to see who knows the most about the new hire and offering gifts to the winners."

Kelly Chuck, a learning partner at LinkedIn who creates content for LinkedIn's onboarding program, expanded the company's one-day onboarding regimen into a weeklong virtual program when the company went remote in early March. "We didn't want to transition everything into a full day virtually because we weren't sure how new hires would respond after home life for so many people has changed so much," she said. "We felt we could best do that with shorter bursts spread over a week to allow flexibility with working from home, and then we could adapt as needed."

The five-day program includes regular check-ins and touch points to make sure new hires don't feel forgotten or overlooked. It begins with a one-hour live session on Day 1 that covers the company culture, values and products, and concludes on Day 5 with a question-and-answer session with a benefits expert, who helps new hires finish enrollment. Other activities during the week include a Day 2 introduction video from Chuck, an hourlong Day 3 session with a LinkedIn executive, and a Day 4 scavenger hunt within the company's online resources.

Set Up Technology

Feedback

Making sure new hires have the right technology is a true pinch point right now, Pearson said. "Shipping laptops to employees' homes is one thing, but the challenge is setting up the equipment and configuring it for the user, because IT is overwhelmed right now."

He added that companies can create a series of videos presenting step-by-step instructions for getting computers set up. "Automating a lot of the process will help some, but companies still need to offer personalized service if employees are having problems," Pearson said.

LinkedIn asked its IT team to enable company-specific software and programs to be loaded remotely. When remote workers open their laptops, they can download needed software and programs just by entering the right credentials. The process, which typically takes about one hour, happens as part of a one-on-one phone session provided for every new hire.

It's important to ask new hires what tools they need to be successful in their roles, Stetson said.

Build Engagement and Connections

Onboarding should be interactive to keep participants engaged and connected. "Do not ignore the social side of onboarding," Pearson said. "Coach managers to come up with creative ways to connect with the team."

Wadors advised building in multiple breaks to keep new hires engaged. "People can't retain information if they are sitting for too long. We fully utilize the functionality within Zoom, such as creating breakout sessions, polling employees on some of the sessions and engaging on chat. This is where we have seen the most engagement and where new hires are having fun and connecting."

LinkedIn also utilizes breakout groups. "Zoom allows you to have breakout groups of three or four, and this gives new hires a chance to meet each other," Chuck said. "We keep the breakout groups consistent throughout the sessions so that new hires can build relationships with people in their cohort."

Experts recommended scheduling virtual lunches and coffee breaks and covering the cost for the new employee.

"Those kinds of actions get shared on social [media] and build employer branding," Pearson said.

Stetson advised sending a welcome basket with branded gear to new workers' homes to make them feel like they are integrating into the company. Even before a new hire's first day, a manager should have reached out with a welcoming message and selected a team member to serve as an onboarding buddy to share advice and navigate the experience for the new hire.

Think Beyond a Week

Experts believe that the onboarding focus needs to last past an employee's first week on the job. "Companies have an opportunity to do more," Wadors said. "Last year, we conducted research and found that employee enthusiasm for work peaks at the start of a new job but wanes by 22 percent shortly thereafter. Companies need to think about how they are ensuring their employees feel like they are valued and heard. Are you providing them with enough resources? Are you helping to create micro-moments of belonging? Are you helping to create empowering environments that allow employees to stay connected and collaborate?"

Employee feedback is a gift to be cherished, Wadors said. New hires at ServiceNow are surveyed after one week about their overall onboarding and again at 45 days.

"We are in constant mode of reiterating and testing new ways of making the onboarding experience a fruitful one for our employees," she said.

Feedback

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