Employee Onboarding: Best Practices

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> Leadership can be defined as the ability to influence, empower, and inspire others so that they in turn maximize their efforts. The process of onboarding employees, from their recruitment and orientation through to their achieving peak performance is ultimately the result of leadership. Are you that leader?

Employee onboarding is the process of acclimating new hires to company culture, job functions and standards so they can be productive and begin to contribute successfully to your organization's goals. Your firm wants to quickly and smoothly integrate new employees into your organization so they can make successful contributions to its mission and goals.

Onboarding Impact

In the typical organization, new employees get 90 days to prove their worth. This form of "sink or swim" onboarding, a common practice, forces employees to fend for themselves, promotes a very competitive work environment, and fails to immerse the employee in the company culture. Typically, companies that neglect onboarding practices face severe consequences such as:

- Higher turnover rates
- Slower rate for employees to become productive
- Failing to team-build between new employees and their co-workers
- Promoting a competitive environment that negatively impacts collaboration
- Possible bad publicity on social media sites, like GlassDoor.com

To avoid the pitfalls of an ineffective onboarding strategy, companies are developing comprehensive strategies that help new hires transition into the workplace. By setting the tone of the employee's time at the company, companies are benefiting from employee engagement, collaboration, increased productivity, and more.

Recruitment

Onboarding should start during the recruitment process, well before an employee's first day. Job advertisements and descriptions should align with the actual position so that new hires are not met with unanticipated responsibilities or expectations. Expectations should be clear, not vague or ambiguous. You want employees to feel confident in their jobs, and you want to feel secure in the employee you hire for the job.

Without someone fluent in small business HR, creating accurate job descriptions, screening candidates, conducting interviews, and selecting, onboarding and training new hires is a daunting task. Often, this leads to hasty hiring which makes employers vulnerable to error. It's understandable as hiring takes a tremendous amount of time and effort.

Hiring a new employee requires a critical examination of how and why you hire. Take time to audit your hiring methods, and look for and eliminate any discriminatory practices. Ensure open job positions are easily accessible to all potential candidates. Clearly and firmly explain employee expectations in the hiring process so there is no confusion in the future. Making a mistake could lead to a costly discrimination lawsuit down the road which is why it needs to be done right every time.

Best Practice Tips: Be very clear on objectives, roles, and responsibilities. Make sure the position is described accurately and consistently throughout the hiring process.

Company Culture

A company's culture encompasses the values, beliefs, and personality of a company. When an employee fits the company culture they tend to work better and stay longer, as their values align with the firm's mission and approach.

If a new hire fits into the company culture, or even the team's culture, they're going to be more productive while bringing their own unique skills. If they share the same business goals as the team or firm, they will aspire to be a part of the mission. Conversely, if they do not fit into the culture, a new employee may not complete work appropriately, possibly leading to termination.

A good culture fit is important for both the employer and the candidate. When potential hires are made aware of a company's culture, they can make a more informed decision of whether it's a place they would want to work. And when their values align with the firm's, they may become more passionate and hard-working.

Best Practice Tips: Figuring out if an applicant is a culture fit for the company can be completed in a variety of ways:
- Ask questions to spark descriptive answers about the culture at their previous company.
- Alert applicants what characteristics the company looks for in an employee, in addition to the skills needed for the job so they can be sure the company is a fit for them as well.
- When contacting their references, see what their thoughts are on the cultural fit at places they currently or used to work at, as well as what the culture is like there.
- When interviewing a candidate, expose them to the culture and let them experience first-hand what it might be like to work there and if it is somewhere they would want to be. This can be some exposure to co-works at the office, a shadow experience, or even a trial hire period.
- Determining a culture fit doesn't fall solely on the shoulders of the hiring manager. The applicant's potential manager and work team need to meet the candidate and consider whether or not s/he fits with co-workers and the environment and would work well with them.

Onboarding Technology

Onboarding technology and software can automate processes such as benefits enrollment and assist with new hire documentation. This ensures forms are completed, compliance requirements are met, and quality onboarding systems can electronically store required documents. This relieves employees and managers of the pressure to complete all forms on the first day, and the headache of manually inputting the information into a database.

Best Practice Tips: New hires retain limited information on the first day; don't overwhelm them with long lectures or lots of paperwork. Information overload can lead to confusion and disengagement. Direct new employees towards technology that eases first day paperwork that also provides employees with a positive introduction to the company.

Employee Retention

Employers have a short window to sell new employees on their company. In fact, as many as one in three employees voluntarily, or involuntarily, leave before their one-year anniversary. To avoid high turnover and benefit from the productivity of a tenured employee, companies are starting to have longer term onboarding policies.

With a formal onboarding strategy, employers can begin to track their employee retention rates and can evaluate the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of their strategy. Measuring retention can set employers on the path towards higher retention rates, lower turnover costs, and increased employee performance and engagement.

Best Practice Tips: Provide useful feedback to facilitate employee's progress at hiring and at the three-month, six month and one year marks. Get feedback from current employees to discover weaknesses, assess challenges and build on strengths of the onboarding process. Don't treat onboarding with a one-size-fits-all approach. Employees should be onboarded/trained according to their position, department, and/or skill set.

Creating an Onboarding Plan

Creating a personal onboarding plan with your new employee is an important step to begin a beneficial working relationship together. Work with the new employee to discuss the job and its requirements, various stakeholders, immediate and long-term needs and scope out what the employee will be doing. Develop a 100-day action plan that spells out who will do what by when so that both you and the employee are clear. Developing the plan together enables both of you to raise questions and discuss matters that might otherwise not be appropriately addressed.

Some sample benchmarks for such a plan might include:	
First 10 Days	An orientation process to meet team members and other stakeholders, in both formal and informal environments.
By Day 30	Identify priorities and what needs to be accomplished by when.
By Day 45	Review what's being accomplished, by when and by whom, answer questions and determine any course changes.
By Day 60	Identify specific accomplishments and acknowledge them and identify longer term goals to be delivered by month six.
By Day 75	Assess whether there is appropriate staffing and support & any needed changes.
By Day 100	Assess progress, reevaluate goals & resources, establish new benchmarks.
Ongoing	Ensure ongoing communications with employee and staff team.

Firms without – or with limited – HR staff may find managing the hiring process burdensome. A Professional Employer Organization (PEO) is a company that manages the many responsibilities associated with employee management including staffing, recruiting, and hiring management. Sometimes known as HR-outsourcing, a PEO shares responsibility and liability for the firm's employees with the architecture firm, called co-employment or employee leasing.

The PEO arrangement may be customized to take on other various firm responsibilities, such as: payroll, benefits administration, human resources, workers' compensation, regulatory compliance, and 401k administration. Find out more about how PEOs might be helpful to your firm and locate those in your geographic area by reading this AIA Trust newsletter article, Could Your Firm Use a PEO?