

THERE IS NO BEST ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL APPROACH TO SUCCESSFUL NEWCOMER ONBOARDING, SAYS DR ANDREA POLZER-DEBRUYNE.

She looks at the process from a neuro-psychological perspective and explains why it's important your new hire should feel safe.

Time to celebrate! You found the new employee who seems to be a great match with your organisation and the needs of the role. You have successfully waded through literally hundreds of applications to find the most promising team of graduates for your company. The expert you have been wooing for months has finally signed up with you. Contracts signed, pay system set up, employee handbook printed, tools and work space organised – the newcomers are set to come on board and hit the ground running. Or are they?



HIT THE GROUND RUNNING

EVERY TEAM, GROUP AND ORGANISATION HAS THEIR OWN CULTURE, THEIR OWN WAYS OF 'HOW THINGS ARE DONE AROUND HERE', THEIR SPECIFIC WAYS OF EXPRESSING VALUES THROUGH BEHAVIOURS, POLICIES AND PROCESSES.

Anyone entering such an environment for the first time, even if they are hired to change it, needs to become familiar with the visible and the invisible rules that govern the way people get on with each other and their work. That process of familiarisation is often known as 'organisational socialisation' or 'onboarding'.

Onboarding is a process through which new employees move from being organisational outsiders to becoming organisational insiders. Onboarding helps new employees learn the knowledge, skills, and behaviours they need to succeed in their new organisations. Research has repeatedly linked successful adjustment of newcomers to job satisfaction, employee engagement and commitment, as well as performance and turn-over.

Let's be clear: Onboarding is not a one-way process! It is influenced by the newcomer's characteristics and behaviours, as well as by organisational efforts - and its success depends on both. On the one hand, organisations (either passively or actively) create strong or weak situations under which newcomers are expected to adjust to their new environments.

At the same time, newcomers proactively seek information to help them adjust. Because there really is no 'silver-bullet' approach to successful onboarding, it does take time, thought, preparation and has direct as well as indirect costs attached to it.

Hence is not unusual for managers to ask why they should engage in 'costly' onboarding activities beyond the standard handing out of job descriptions, procedures, manuals, health & safety video links, and in addition to making the key team introductions.

After all, the newcomers are needed to do their job, preferably to hit the road running. In order to do all that, however, people need to reduce the impact uncertainty has on their ability to focus, to be present and to engage in executive thought.

Humans are wired to avoid threats and seek rewards. Changes (like those of getting a new job, joining an unfamiliar team, entering a new organisation) create uncertainty and trigger a threat response. As long as this perceived threat remains unsolved, the brain's survival reactions will reduce the activity in the pre-frontal cortex, limiting the capacity for concentration, focusing, analysing and decision making.

Thus for newcomers to your team, a large part of their mental and emotional processing capacity will be occupied with creating predictable environments that the survival system interprets as 'safe'. Until such a state is reached, until things make sense, until it is clear how they fit into their new surroundings, and how explicit and implicit messages are to be deciphered, newcomers will not be able to fully be 'on board'.

Knowing that newcomers' best intentions are restrained by their brains' capacity, can help in developing onboarding activities that reduce uncertainty and support desired outcomes.

Uncertainty is reduced through information provided via various communication channels, notably social interactions with superiors and peers.

At its core, information seeking focuses on three key aspects:

1. Referent information.

Providing the understanding of what is needed to function on the job (also known as 'role clarity')

2. Appraisal information.

Timely and frequent information on how well the newcomer is able to function in relation to role requirements (creating a realistic sense of self-efficacy); and

3. Relational information.

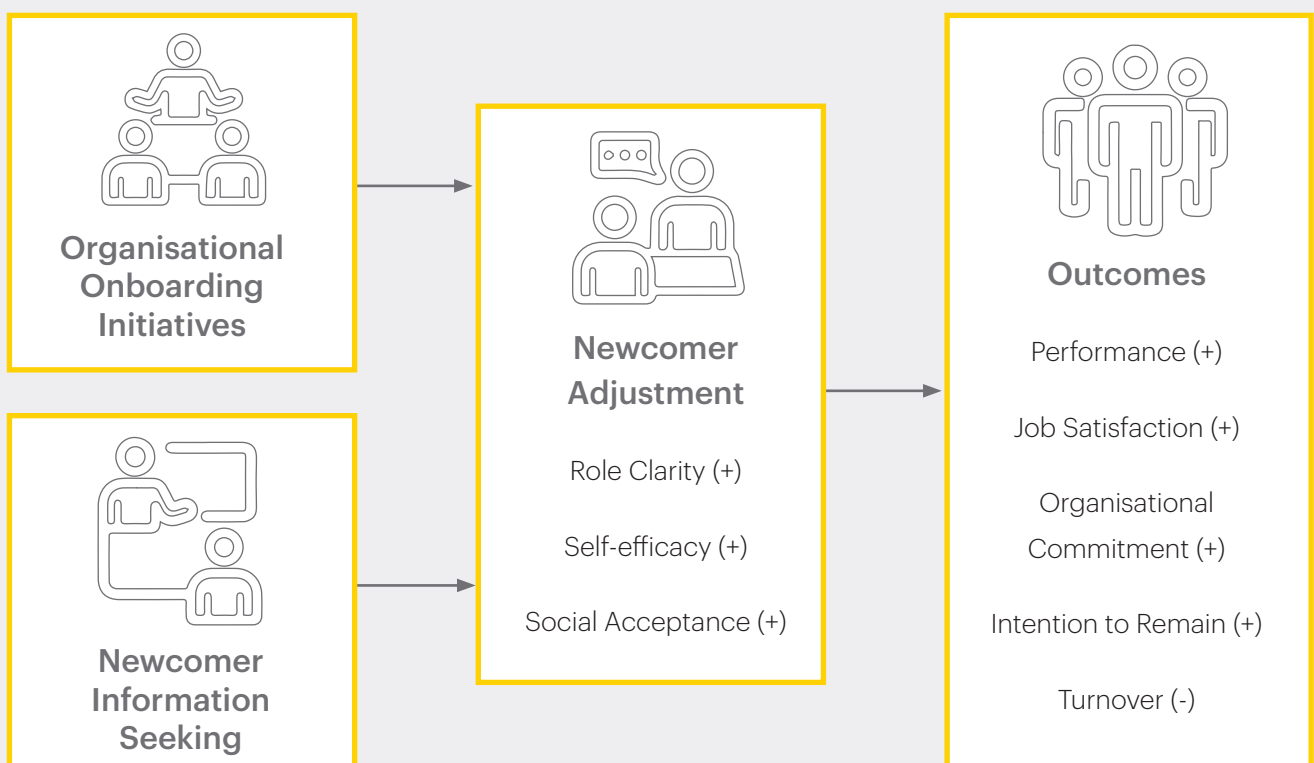
Enhancing the quality of relationships with organisational insiders (increasing the feeling of social acceptance).

Because reality testing is an important aspect of sense making, having insiders serve as 'sounding boards' and providing background information is critical for newcomers so they can correctly diagnose and interpret the many surprises they encounter.

Thus the importance of selecting and organising suitable buddies and internal mentors who pro-actively make themselves available to newcomers has long been recognised.

Over the past decades, numerous publications have explored the 'best ways' to induct a newcomer to an organisation and the team.

In research, role clarity, self-efficacy, and social acceptance repeatedly emerged as three important indicators of newcomer adjustment, which are closely linked to key, desired outcomes.



Recognising that there is no best one-size-fits-all approach, and that feelings of uncertainty limit individuals' capacity to 'get on board', successful organisations develop tailored onboarding solutions typically through strategies along five key decision points:

1. Collective or individual.

Under the collective approach, newcomers go through common experiences as part of a group, whereas under the individual approach, newcomers accumulate unique experiences separate from other newcomers.

2. Formal or informal.

Formal tactics involve newcomers who are segregated from others and trained off the job, whereas informal tactics involve little separation between newcomers and existing employees.

3. Sequential or random.

Under sequential, newcomers know what phases they need to go through, whereas under random, the progression is more ambiguous.

4. Fixed or variable.

The difference here is whether there is a set timetable of when the onboarding process is complete as opposed to having no specific timetable.

5. Serial or disjunctive.

Here the difference is whether the person is socialized with the help of insiders or without the help of a role model.

Whichever practice your organisation develops, one thing is clear: Printing employee handbooks, handing out links to safety briefing videos, glossy pamphlets with organisational values, and a hastily put-together 'welcome' morning tea do very little towards successful onboarding.

While steps in the right direction, they actually contribute relatively little towards the newcomers' ability to overcome the stressful feelings of uncertainty, or towards increasing their capacity of getting up to speed within their roles and their teams.

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