



Onboarding not Working? Learn from your Offboarding Practices.

Lessons Learned from Exit Interviews can inform Onboarding Programs that Promote Employee Engagement, Retention and Productivity.

By Gayle Norton, talentRISE

First Impressions Matter

The expression, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression,” is one that a job seeker typically hears over and over again. But, the same mantra also holds true for employers wishing to attract the best possible talent. As the labor market heats up and the supply of qualified candidates for certain positions dwindles, an organization’s ability to make an excellent first impression on a candidate becomes ever more important.

There is also another very compelling reason to ensure that your organization makes an excellent first impression, even after an offer has been made and accepted; the productivity of the new hire, and by extension, your organization, depends on it. You can hire the best person for the job based on their qualifications, education, and career track record, but that is no guarantee that the individual will thrive in your environment. The adjustments can be huge – from needing to understand the corporate culture of the new environment to building relationships with new colleagues.

In fact, a study by Bersin by Deloitte on strategic onboarding found that it takes between 8 and 28 weeks for a typical new employee in a clerical role to reach full productivity; 11 to 18 weeks on average for professional staff to reach productivity, and an astounding 24 weeks, on average, for executives to become productive. (Strategic Onboarding, Bersin by Deloitte, 2008)

The Business Case for Onboarding

Given this, there is no doubt that onboarding is both a strategic business initiative and accelerator of company growth and performance. Ultimately, it is in the employer’s best interest to ensure that the new hire is successful. Allowing new hires to fend for themselves, while still a common practice, amounts to taking a huge risk that they will under-perform or even fail. On the other hand, well-intentioned organizations that offer short-term or ineffective onboarding strategies also fail to address key issues, such as productivity, engagement, and retention and, therefore, also tend to be ineffective.

Done right, onboarding is integrated within the hiring process and includes socialization, assimilation into company culture, and the use of technology to focus on both tactical (filling out required forms, tactical information-sharing), as well as strategic elements. Effective onboarding programs are consistent throughout the organization and incorporate a formal internal process to guide those who manage, as well as participate in the program. Key elements include consistent, standardized new hire messaging, manager and peer coach involvement, and a minimum 90-day onboarding experience roadmap for the new employee. These initiatives are invaluable, turning a new employee into a successful employee through team accountability, early rewards, and long-term career development. Best-in-class organizations begin onboarding upon acceptance of job offer and many forward-thinking organizations extend the programs as long as six months to one year.

Case Study

Our client was a large service provider, in growth mode, operating in a highly competitive marketplace. Two key initiatives of the organization were to focus on a high-quality candidate experience and improve time-to-productivity for new employees. A review of their onboarding practices showed they were:

- Utilizing manual processes that slowed candidate progress through the hiring cycle;
- Focused on basic orientation activities alone without incorporating socialization and engagement of new hires; and,
- Concentrating efforts on the tactical aspects only, neglecting the strategic aspects of onboarding that engages new hires and drives business outcomes.

As recruiting growth increased, our client realized that their current onboarding processes were not able to meet their needs. Their paper-based processes slowed turn-

around time and the lengthy manual processes were also negatively impacting the candidate experience. The talent acquisition team realized that they needed to implement a more streamlined and effective system if they hoped to achieve their goals of continued enhancement of the candidate experience and improved time to productivity.

The Approach

Following discussions to understand the client's business needs and challenges the following steps were taken:

- Implement an onboarding technology used in the recruiting process to automate and manage all hiring related paperwork and forms.
- Establish ownership of onboarding and extend to internal mobility.
- Revamp onboarding program to include automation of socialization components; improve candidate and new hire experience by engaging new hires in company culture.
- Develop 90-day roadmap for new hires, extend the onboarding initiatives to six months to one year.
- Integrate data from onboarding into new-hire development plans.

The Results

- Significant improvements were made in the candidate management process and integrated access to background check status.
- All onboarding paperwork was automated and included electronic signature, improving the hiring cycle turnaround time and saving the client substantial overnight mail fees.
- There was improved I-9 compliance.
- This significantly enhanced the candidate experience.
- An enhanced onboarding program improved new hire engagement and time-to-productivity.

Over the past few years, as the focus on socialization and cultural immersion have become top priorities for improving onboarding initiatives, many organizations have neglected the tactical side, forms and task management, of onboarding. However, for a new hire initiative to be successful, both areas are necessary. Automation of task management allows new hire forms to be completed in a timely manner, many prior to the first day, allowing the new hire to be able to contribute to the business more rapidly. The tactical components critical to improving time-to-productivity and organizational performance should be viewed in tandem with enhanced, but not replaced by engagement strategies.

The Best Way to Proceed

In our view, one of the best ways to determine how to design a new onboarding program or improve an existing

onboarding program is to ask departing employees. Human Resources can learn a lot from the off-boarding process – or exit interviews – that ought to be conducted, particularly when well-regarded employees leave for greener pastures. Of course, there are multiple reasons to conduct exit interviews, ensuring that they:

- Provide an opportunity to potentially resolve differences with disgruntled employees;
- Prove to existing employees that the company offers a positive culture; and,
- Improve the performance of managers by uncovering ways in which their performance impacts employee retention.

But, most importantly, exit interviews provide valuable information on ways to improve recruitment, orientation, and onboarding of new employees. Assuming that the organization conducts interviews so that feedback is collected systemically, tracked in a useful way, and also shared internally, the organization can use the data to ensure that the onboarding programs:

- Are relevant, meaning that the information shared is timely and pertinent to the new hire's job and function;
- Address the most common obstacles new hires have in becoming acclimated;
- Position the company culture accurately and positively;
- Give the new hire access to people and information within the organization to help them become productive; and,
- Are structured in such a way that that the information is presented in manageable "chunks" and delivered in the most appropriate manner, whether through classroom learning, e-learning, or other vehicles.

So, what are best practices for collecting exit data that can help in establishing a great onboarding program? Here are the most critical ones:

1. The company should have a formal policy regarding exit interviewing and/or surveys.
2. Exit interviews should be reserved for voluntary separations, because issues raised by layoffs and "terminations for cause" require a special approach.
3. To encourage more employees to participate in an exit interview, employers should stress the confidentiality of the discussions or outsource the exit interview to an independent third party.
4. Utilize offboarding technology to provide a way to engage rehires, as well as ensure compliance.

What are the best practices for putting the exit interviews data to good use?

- Track it consistently – if you are using interviews, as opposed to surveys, have the interviewer fill in a form

where the answers can be quantified.

- Ask the right questions – particularly useful questions to ask in terms of improving onboarding are ones related to the employees first 100 days on the job. For instance:
 - Was the onboarding information you were provided with directly relevant to your job?
 - Was the information related to company processes and procedures clear and accurate?
 - What, if any, information provided to you in the onboarding process was misleading or incorrect?
 - If you had a chance to improve the onboarding process, what features would you change?
- Have the people responsible for onboarding involved in formulating the questions?
- Disseminate the results from the interviews frequently; in a large organization, where dozens of people may leave each month, prepare a monthly report.

The following excerpt from a 2013 study by Aberdeen (Aberdeen Analyst Insight – Offboarding: Leaving a Lasting Impression, May 2013) illustrates the effectiveness of an automated offboarding strategy.

Case-in-Point: EMC

Founded in 1979, EMC is a global leader in enabling business service providers to transform their operations and deliver information technology as a service. With over 53,000 employees located in 85 countries, EMC is committed to recruiting, developing, and retaining its global workforce. As a result of a new model that allowed EMC to focus on the tools, strategies, and capabilities that would make them more efficient and better able to drive a global workforce, offboarding (or “resignation management”) became a key business initiative.

Key Drivers

- *Compliance* – The most important driver was ensuring compliance when employees leave;
- *Relationship Building* – EMC’s corporate leadership strongly believed that any employee leaving the organization (both voluntary and involuntary) could help drive business or would be hired back in the future. Treating former employees well and engaging them when they leave became a top priority supported by senior executives;
- *Turnover* – EMC recognized that a formalized offboarding program could provide insight into turnover

and help to improve retention;

- *Consistency* – EMC had a consistent manual offboarding process in five countries. Through technology, they could create consistency throughout every region of the world; and,
- *Workflow* – Automating the process would improve back office operation excellence and efficiency and would increase exiting employee survey participation.

Lessons Learned

Investing in a more strategic approach to offboarding has enabled EMC to stay compliant, engage former employees, and create a consistent yet localized process across 85 countries. With the rollout of an enterprise-wide offboarding system, EMC shared several lessons learned including allowing additional time to question key stakeholders, empowering the solution design team with the knowledge they need, and accounting for cultural differences.

Summary

People who leave their organization may be brutally honest about their experiences without fear of immediate repercussions. In addition, it’s likely that they have recently been job hunting and interviewing and can offer some useful intelligence on how the company compares with other employers. Additionally, this feedback can also be utilized to effectively critique and improve the onboarding strategy. That is why the information gathered through exit interviews can be worth its weight in gold.

About the Author



Gayle Norton, principal at talentRISE, co-leads the firm’s talent acquisition consulting practice and focuses her efforts on helping companies conduct current-state recruitment optimization and talent risk organizational assessments to identify and address process, technology and strategy gaps. Previously serving as the co-chair of the HR Management Systems committee, she remains an active member of the Human Resources Management Association of Chicago (HRMAC) as well as the Society of Talent Acquisition & Recruitment (STAR) Chicago and American College of Healthcare Executives. She earned a B.S. in Health Arts from the University of St. Francis, Joliet, IL, and her Nursing diploma from the Evangelical School of Nursing in Oak Lawn, IL. She can be reached at gaylenorton@talentrise.com.