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### Welcome to Our Company Getting New Employees Off to a Good Start

We all know the Chinese proverb, “A journey of a 1,000 miles begins with the first step.” While this is true, it is also important that the person making the journey takes that first step in the right direction if they are to reach their destination. Last month’s Link & Learn discussed hiring great new employees for your organization, this month we will look at helping them start off their new career on the right foot.

Many companies, particularly smaller ones, do not have a structured plan to bring new people up to speed and help them to quickly become productive members of the team. When someone joins the organization, they are given some rudimentary training and then left to their own devices. Research has shown that this approach leads to high employee turnover and a great deal of lost revenue. Selling advertising is a challenging occupation requiring a wide range of skills. In addition to learning their products and the company’s policies and procedures, new advertising sales people must learn the market and build relationships with their customers. My former publisher and mentor believed that it took a “year and a day” for a new rep to become fully productive. Employees are far more likely to resign in their first six months than at any other time in their career, long before they become productive and before their employers can recoup their recruiting costs. While some of these people leave to pursue other opportunities, surveys of recently separated employees found that frustration with their new position was the primary reason for them to resign. The reasons people offer for leaving a job early in their career include, “lack of clear guidelines regarding job responsibilities,” “lack of effective training,” “lack of recognition for their efforts,” and “lack of input and feedback from their manager.” While it is easy to dismiss these comments as “whining” or “sour grapes,” there is a great deal of evidence that a structured “onboarding” program can eliminate them and greatly reduce employee turnover. A study conducted by the Wynhurst Group found that new hires are more likely to remain three years or more with a company that has a structured onboarding plan in place than with companies which do not. Putting all of your efforts into recruiting top quality people and then failing to take the steps to integrate them into your organization is like buying an expensive high performance sports car and failing to put oil in the crankcase. Investing your time in developing an onboarding program for your company will pay major dividends in reduced turnover and increased productivity.

#### **Developing your onboarding plan**

HR professionals define “Onboarding” as giving new employees “the necessary knowledge, skills and behaviors to become effective organizational members and insiders.” This goes far beyond traditional new hire “training.” “Training” is an event, teaching a person what they need to know about your products, procedures and policies. Onboarding is a process that not only gives a new employee the basic

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skills they will need, but also introduces them to your company's culture and makes them feel welcome. Onboarding considers the emotional needs of a new employee. In order to realize their full potential all human beings need to feel that they are a productive part of a group that supports and appreciates them. The goal of onboarding is to create an environment where the new employee feels emotionally safe so that they can realize their full potential.

The onboarding process begins the moment that a person accepts a position with your company. Changing jobs is an emotionally challenging and inherently stressful step in anyone's life. Second thoughts and doubts can eat at a person's psyche during the transition period between jobs as they ponder whether they made the right decision or not. Communication is the key to reassuring your new team member that they made the right career decision. A personal letter from upper management welcoming them to the company will help them feel more confident. As a sales manager, I would send a "Congratulations on your new job" greeting card signed by all the members of my team the week before they were scheduled to start with us.

You want to have everything in place for your new employee before they arrive for their first day of work. I maintained a checklist detailing what I needed to address when bringing on a new employee. I had to contact HR to set up the required paperwork, IT to request a computer and the necessary passwords and I would have the new person's desk cleaned out and stocked with the supplies they would need. I would also meet with my team to tell them that we would have a new person joining us. I remind them how stressful starting a new job can be and ask for their help in making the new person feel like part of the team. Nothing can be more discouraging for a new employee than joining a company and having people scurrying around trying to find a place for them to sit and looking for the "paperwork." When I made a new hire, they arrived at the office to find a sign welcoming them in the lobby, the receptionist expecting them, a clean fully stocked and equipped desk and an agenda listing their first day's activities waiting for them. This not only made their first day much less stressful but sent them a clear signal about our company. They get an impression that our company "had our act together" and that we expect excellence in whatever we do.

The first few weeks of a person's employment has a big impact on their career. A survey conducted by Bamboo-HR found that over 75% of employees formed their opinion of their employer during their first week on the job. The goal of a new hire's first day should be to make them feel welcome. I would usually start the day by introducing them to their co-workers. I would pick up some donuts and coffee and hold a meeting with the rest of the sales team where each person would introduce themselves and welcome their new co-worker. I would then walk the person around the office and introduce them to the support staff and other departments. We would complete the necessary government and HR paperwork. I always made sure that the person did not eat lunch alone, I would either take them out or have someone else do so.

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During the new person's first day I would sit down with them and go over their job description and expectations. I would also give them a list of what they should expect from me. In this document I would let the new employee know that I would give them the feedback they needed, that I would listen to them and would provide the training they needed. Clearly communicating your expectations and making a commitment to support an employee eliminates the major sources of frustration that lead to employee turnover.

Partnering the new hire with an experienced employee offers a number of benefits. A study conducted by Bamboo-HR found that high performing companies were two and half times more likely to have mentoring programs than the less successful firms in their industries. Assigning a mentor helps the new person bond with the group. This also fosters communication as they may feel more comfortable discussing their concerns with a peer rather than with their supervisor. This practice can free up some of the manager's time and has a beneficial effect on the senior employee. People see being a mentor as a distinct honor and often improve their behavior to provide a good example for the person they are helping.

Training is a key component of your onboarding program. New people need to be trained on your company's products, your procedures and your policies. Many companies "frontload" all of this training during the first few weeks of a person's employment. The problem with this approach is that the trainee may be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information they need to absorb. Rather than "data dumping" training on a new hire it is advisable to deliver training in small mentally digestible blocks. Shorter training sessions spread out over a longer period of time permit the new person to absorb the material. If you need to get the person into the field quickly, you can offer an overview of the material and then review their work with them using these discussions as training opportunities. Regular training sessions for new people should be scheduled on a regular basis throughout their first year of employment. The material covered should be determined by the manager's observations and by the employee's feedback concerning their training needs.

Building a productive team is analogous to raising a family, the youngest members require more time than their older "siblings." When a person first joins the team, the manager should touch base with them daily, ideally in a face-to-face meeting. The purpose of this meeting is to answer the new person's questions and address their concerns. These meetings allow the manager to direct the new person's activities and prevent them from developing bad habits. The manager should also use these sessions to encourage and motivate the new employee. As a manager I would "praise my people to success," by using the "three to one rule." I would offer three positive comments for every bit of negative feedback I had to give my reps. The manager should constantly solicit feedback from the employee concerning their challenges and feelings. The frequency of these meetings can decrease as the new hire begins to learn the job and demonstrates their capabilities.

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Formal meetings should be set up at regular intervals to review the new employee's progress. I liked to do this on a monthly basis for the first six months, then hold meetings on a quarterly basis thereafter. These meetings give the employee specific information on their progress and the areas where they need to improve. They also provide the manager with an opportunity to direct the career of their employee. Documenting these meetings provides the information the manager needs when making the decision to dismiss, retain or promote an employee.

### **Structure is critical to your success**

It is important to create a written onboarding plan for new employees. Your plan should include a checklist of everything you need to do to integrate a new hire into your organization. A checklist keeps the process on track and ensures that you do not miss a step. Given the pressures facing managers today, it is far too tempting to "cut corners," having a written program encourages a consistent and disciplined approach to onboarding.

### **The payoff**

Developing a structured onboarding plan requires an investment of time and careful thought. Implementing this program demands even more of a manager's time and energy. Companies that have adopted a structured onboarding plan for new employees have found that the benefits to the employee and the company far outweigh the time and efforts required to set one up. In addition to reduced employee turnover, these companies experienced increased job satisfaction, employee engagement, reduced stress levels and improved performance. In the long run, a well-planned onboarding program can actually save a manager a great deal of time. By getting employees off on the right foot, managers will find that they need to spend less time addressing performance issues and filling open positions. Our company's success is 100% dependent upon how well our employees perform. Setting up a structured onboarding program is the first step in making the journey toward the ultimate success of your team.

*This article was written by Jim Busch.*

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