Helping with onboarding: Supporting a new employee

Have you ever been to a party in a country where you didn't speak the language? Everyone is talking and laughing, sharing stories and inside jokes, and if you just understood what they were saying, you could join in too. Instead you just stand there frozen, trying to blend in with a smile and a nod. This is very much what it can feel like to join a new workplace: frightening and isolating. Because indeed, a workplace is much like a country: with its own customs, cultural cues, and rhythms to get accustomed to. At least with our first day of school as children, there were many others in the same situation. When someone joins a new workplace, they often join it alone, making it that much more overwhelming.

Managers and employees alike have traditionally viewed onboarding – also known as orientation – as a largely administrative process of filling in paperwork, watching policy videos, and flipping through binders while wearing a nametag. Overall, it's a process that's commonly thought of as being tedious but necessary, and often treated as an afterthought. However, just like all first impressions, successful, engaged onboarding can positively impact employee satisfaction, performance, and retention.

The onboarding process is generally divided into two main areas: **professional** and **social**. Of course they overlap, and the places where they feel the most intertwined are usually the most overwhelming, as we may ask ourselves things like "if my new colleague isn't happy with my work, will I also risk losing their friendship?" This presents a great opportunity for strategic integration of these two spheres.

Here are some ways you can support your new hires or new coworkers during this delicate and stressful time, thus helping them feel comfortable and engaged in their new role and workplace.

Start before day one. Arriving for that first day at a new job is daunting, but by getting in touch with your new employee ahead of day one can help. Send the new hire a welcome package with information on their role, as well as a personal note. On the office end, let the new employee's future coworkers know they will be arriving so that they can say hello and make them feel welcome.

Implement a buddy system. Pair a new employee with someone who has been with the company longer. This person can serve as a go-to for questions about the position, the company, and can simply be a familiar face in an unfamiliar crowd.

Personalize it. The best onboarding programs aren't cookie-cutter systems that are implemented identically for all new hires. Each new employee comes with his or her own histories, expectations, and needs, so the way they're integrated into the company should incorporate that.

Make it fun. Bringing new hires into the fold doesn't need to look like dry presentations and longwinded briefs; all the information that's normally presented in these ways can be creatively retooled into energetic games – think game-show formats, charades, and even video games.

Extend it. Successful onboarding doesn't end after week one. Make the process ongoing, with check-ins and activities that decrease in frequency but continue throughout the first year of the employee's tenure.

Make onboarding important – not an afterthought. Thinking of it as a main event is the first step in making it interesting. Onboarding need not be a chore or a hurdle, it can actually be a celebration — add cake and music and applause – after all, new talent means new energy, and that is certainly something to celebrate.