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A RENEWED MANDATE: EMPLOYEE ONBOARDING

HOW TO USE
THIS GUIDE

Organizations of all sizes benefit when leaders understand the increased employer value that a superior onboarding experience sets in motion, from competitive advantage to longer-term success for employees. To unlock that value, employers must take a second look at onboarding, adding the lens of today's hybrid work environment, in which some employees are on premises while many are not.

This guide offers five core elements for an onboarding strategy that can serve as a framework to help leaders think critically about their practices and identify areas they can improve. It also provides a way to start, step-by-step, to improve this often overlooked and undervalued part of the employee experience.

WELCOME ABOARD!
... NOW WHAT?

Employees, like customers, progress along a journey during their tenure with a company. Millions of hours are spent every year to find and hire ideal candidates: dedicated, high-value employees that will be with a company for years to come. But not nearly as much time is invested in onboarding employees after they walk in the door.

The onboarding experience is so much more than orientation, signing paperwork, and showing employees where they sit. It's also more than training. It's how people are introduced to your culture, how they first observe your mission and vision in action, and what opportunities they've been given to build bonds with their teams and their manager. Onboarding isn't a day, or even a week—many experts believe that the process could and should take up to a year.[1] But as we enter a new era where some employees work remotely while others are in the office, the need to be thoughtful about onboarding is higher than ever.

ONLY

29

percent

of new hires feel fully prepared and supported to excel in their new role after onboarding.[2]

THE NEW IMPERATIVES OF HYBRID WORK:

After massive upheavals and disruptions caused by COVID-19, companies and individuals alike had to quickly reorient how they did their jobs, maintained team relationships, and stayed engaged and on task. Although many workers have returned or will return to office settings, many employers have heard their workforces loud and clear: The ability to work remotely is preferred by many and critical to some. For example, Black knowledge workers report that a hybrid working arrangement has doubled their sense of belonging at work and has given them an astonishing 64percent boost in their ability to manage stress.[3]

The shift toward a consistently hybrid workforce of on-site and remote employees will require deep attention paid to the employee experience.

Making due in the emergency conditions of the pandemic was one thing. But operationalizing a hybrid scenario for the long term is quite another. In its *2021 Work Trend Index* summary, Microsoft reports, "We're on the brink of a disruption as great as last year's sudden shift to remote work"[4] when we think about hybrid work.

Designing an optimal onboarding experience for the hybrid work environment will be crucial. Mixed teams of remote and in-office employees will require companies to examine their approach to onboarding. They must ask, "How will we set up employees across the full spectrum of experiences for success here?" That means thinking through the enablement of those in office full time, those working from home with children, those with flexible work arrangements and new employees that may not even live in the same region as their team, among other scenarios. Executing this fairly and equitably should not be left to chance. It demands robust, universally accessible support.

Onboarding is just a single part of the employee experience, but it will be a clear indicator of your company's level of commitment to embracing the challenges and intricacies of hybrid work now and into the future. But what does it mean to be great?

"Especially without a physical office to help transmit values and vibe, companies need a digital experience that feels immersive and distinctive, from the way you organize a town hall for 100,000 workers to an online celebration for a single employee's anniversary. When employees log in for the first time or the 3,000th, they should feel like they belong." [5]

DELIVERING OPTIMAL ONBOARDING IN
HYBRID WORK ENVIRONMENTS:

Make no mistake, the key to thoughtful onboarding is not an off-the-shelf software platform. An exceptional onboarding experience needs to be a strategic, conscious decision made by your company and embraced as a core part of the employee experience. That it is digitally enabled merely reflects full consideration of who needs access to it. Onboarding as an employee experience is an opportunity to show that you are fully invested in your employees. It should bridge the promise of your recruiting outreach all the way through to tenured, happy employees doing work they are proud of and delivering business results.

Although the specific approach to take for onboarding varies for every company, there are **core elements** of the approach that you should build into your strategy:

1. **Empowering managers to make a difference**
2. **Delivering culture, vision and values**
3. **Establishing expectations of performance**
4. **Shaping the role of employees and their teams**
5. **Setting employees up for success**

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1.

Empowering managers to make a difference

The manager is the most critical piece of the onboarding puzzle. Gallup research shows that the effectiveness of an onboarding program is largely contingent on the manager's active involvement in the process.[2]

Companies must therefore set up managers for success as much as possible. Managers need permission and flexibility from their company to personalize the experience—setting up meet and greets, introducing new hires to their teams, and even giving new employees some autonomy to decide how and what they want to learn more about.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT IT IN A HYBRID WORK ENVIRONMENT

In a hybrid world, the correlation to employee expectation is equally as strong:

"85% of remote workers say that their managers are responsible for connecting workers to their company's culture, and 8 in 10 say senior leaders also have a responsibility."[6]

Most workers, managers included, had to handle the experience of working remote during the pandemic. For those companies hiring right now, what's needed is leading with empathy and adapting to each employee's—remote, in office, or hybrid—specific needs. That means acknowledging and respecting individual preferences and working them into the experience, and managers can help new hires feel accepted by actively working to eliminate unconscious bias.

"Be open about your own experience and encourage others to share their experience. ... Vulnerability tactically gives permission to others to share their experience."[7]

2.

Delivering culture, vision and values

The onboarding period is when a company makes good on their cultural values. New hires should see how your company conducts business, lives up to its values and treats its workers. This clear understanding helps employees begin to establish connectedness at work.

"38% [of workers] noted that more visibility into the work within the organization improved their sense of connection."[8]

Companies must instill a sense of purpose in the individual as a contributor and valued team member with the company's trust and support.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT IT IN A HYBRID WORK ENVIRONMENT

Remote employees and digital onboarding will struggle to replicate the energy and physical connection to a company. However, it's incumbent on companies to realize that it's more of the new normal than they account for:

"For so many people, the 'place' where work happens—today and here on out—is the internet. The digital experience of working for a company *is* the employee experience."[3]

Hybrid work will only exacerbate this trend. Companies must adopt processes, technologies and rituals that reinforce their culture and values through a digital lens and maintain the focus on vision and values that make them a great place to work.

3.

Establishing expectations of performance

As work intensifies, the onboarding period must outlast the new hire honeymoon. Managers must set clear expectations on par with the performance challenges of employees starting a new role and understand what motivates them as employees and inspires them to do great work.

One way is for managers to craft a 30-/60-/90-day plan with their employees that is personalized and provides clear direction—without expecting the employee to know everything from the first day.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT IT IN A HYBRID WORK ENVIRONMENT

In-person work settings are rife with impromptu stand-ups, whiteboarding sessions and face-to-face interactions that many employees crave. They are also where leadership can see employees hard at work and better understand the realities of workers' daily tasks.

Replicating this will be especially challenging for remote workers who won't be seen as easily as their in-office peers, but the effort of keeping remote employees engaged pays off. In fact, significant numbers of remote workers report increased productivity (42%), efficiency (38%) and even morale (31%).[8]

Avoiding "presenteeism" during onboarding, especially as a manager, will be difficult but critical. Supporting hybrid teams may also mean that companies need to involve in-office workers as part of the onboarding process. They will need to be coached on meeting etiquette, communications standards and more as they welcome new remote employees into their day-to-day experiences.
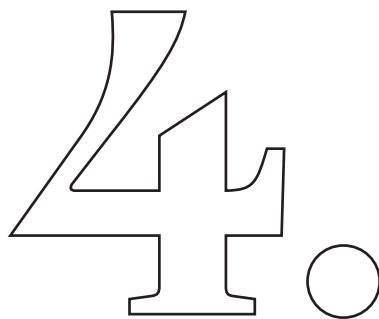
4.

Shaping the role of employees and their teams

You had an opening and you hired somebody to fill it—does everybody know why? More important, does the new hire know? Onboarding is critical to establishing a role for employees as well as how they will fit in and contribute to larger team goals.

Socialization and the development of strong relationships can be a powerful determining factor in employees' decision to stay with a company, so the onboarding time period is crucial to establishing cohesion.

"No one should feel like they have to prove themselves to anyone else— ever. Your new hire was brought on board for a reason and they've already done the work to get there." [9]

HOW TO THINK ABOUT IT IN A HYBRID WORK ENVIRONMENT

Remote new hires or employees choosing to continue working remote deserve the same level of inclusion and respect as in-person team members. There are clear, logistical challenges to overcome—however, companies can take steps to ensure that their hybrid workforce is enabled:

- Introduce peer-to-peer buddy and mentor systems to encourage team building
- Have remote employees meet regularly with in-person employees in virtual visits
- Encourage new hire employee resource groups (ERGs) to break down siloes between mixed groups.
- Celebrate contributions equally and vocally

Building team unity is critical to retaining top talent, wherever they reside.

"73% of workers surveyed want flexible remote work options to continue while at the same time, 67% are craving more in-person time with their teams." [4]

5.

Setting employees up for success

Onboarding, even when it lasts well beyond orientation, is still an opportunity for your company to put its best foot forward on a few critical dimensions regarding the health and effectiveness of your new hires:

- **Physical**—The tools, workspace, technology and time that new hires need to become effective in their role

- **Mental**—Access to peers and leaders, introductions to clients and teams, and open door policies that encourage development

- **Well-being**—An understanding of the employee as a person—life challenges, desires and expectations for work

Organizations that plan for, execute and succeed on all three dimensions can thrive.

"Employees who strongly agree the onboarding process for their new job was exceptional are 2.8x as likely to feel fully prepared and supported to excel in their new role."[2]

HOW TO THINK ABOUT IT IN A HYBRID WORK ENVIRONMENT

All of the challenges of regular onboarding are multiplied for remote/hybrid employees. Many companies lack the infrastructure and processes to help remote workers with the necessary tools. And losing proximity and direct access to peers and leaders is a well-documented challenge.

Even more concerning, 42% of employees say they lack office essentials at home.[4] Digital new hires need the same access and tools, as well as safety and a feeling of being supported professionally and personally, to become their best selves at work. Well-being is becoming increasingly important, too.

"Only a third (31%) of CHROs say they're giving employees dedicated paid time off for community service and other activities they find meaningful."[10]

THE
OPPORTUNITY:

Hybrid work is a vast experiment that many companies will be undertaking with little experience and few examples to build from. And although onboarding is only one portion of the overall shift to hybrid work, its importance to the business—and even the bottom line—cannot be overstated. Even before the shift to this new model, the value of implementing an onboarding strategy that empowered employees had dramatic effects on employees.

Employees who strongly agree the onboarding process for their new job was exceptional are

2.6
TIMES

as likely to be extremely satisfied with their current organization as a place to work.[2]

"In sum, a culture of kindness, fun and cooperative collaboration is just as important to the bottom line as your daily to-do list."[11]

Employees who strongly agree they have a clear plan for their professional development are

3.5
TIMES

more likely to strongly agree that their onboarding process was exceptional.[2]

"The companies that create the greatest sense of belonging are the ones that people stay at for years."[12]

When companies invest in a spectacular onboarding experience, the results are clear. Not only does it drive satisfaction with the job, but it also helps deliver engaged, long-term employees that will be the foundation of your company for years to come. It also becomes a virtuous cycle as the onboarding culture takes root, helping reinforce the value of that experience to the next new hires.

WHERE TO START?

So what can a company do to improve this process? How do you get started evaluating your onboarding process to drive optimal results? As you look at your current process of onboarding employees for hybrid work, you should consider the following questions as a starting point to build your strategy.

"What do we do well now, and what can we do better?"

Thinking about the core elements for your onboarding strategy, where is your momentum and where are your gaps? For example, along the lines of setting the employee up for success, if your tech support is providing the tools and processes employees need to find success, mark that in the win column and move on to address the gaps in your experience. That said, even your highest rated experiences can usually be improved. The onboarding process is loaded with opportunities to solicit feedback from new team members, particularly for hybrid work environments, when many of the processes that we take for granted must be inspected with a new lens by all.

"No business has perfect processes in place, and there's always room to improve or grow as the world around us constantly evolves. Leaders and individual contributors alike should always voice what's not working, especially if your company is new to operating remotely.

Your new hires, having started in a completely remote environment, will have firsthand knowledge and ideas for improving the remote experience."[9]

"Are our managers enabled and capable of being our onboarding leaders?"

With so much of the onboarding experience driven by managers, it's unfair to expect exceptional delivery if managers haven't been enabled with best-in-class training, tools, processes and even the freedom to do what it takes to ensure that the experience is exceptional.

If your company doesn't help managers personalize the experience of onboarding for each employee, the experience will fall flat, setting a tone for how valued the new employee feels. In a hybrid work environment, managers must be capable of giving the same level of attention to remote team members as their in-person team. That requires a level of discipline and dedication that some managers may not be prepared for. Without the backing of leadership, processes and a support system meant to help managers ensure that the employees succeed, some managers may falter.

"HR leaders should rethink onboarding and double down on support for employees early in career to ensure their ideas are heard and that they can contribute fully. Managers have an amplified role in supporting new hires and helping them grow their networks. Cohort-based onboarding programs can also be redesigned, for instance, to ensure they foster connection and community in a hybrid work world."[4]

"How are we weaving in the spirit of onboarding throughout the entire employee journey?"

Onboarding is a time-limited experience. Although many experts believe that it can be a year before employees truly feel they understand their role and their onboarding can be considered complete, that is only with regard to new-employee onboarding. An employee's tenure is likely to include many new situations. What is the right way to support these transitions? What is it like for employees to change teams at your company or work on a new product? What about changing their role entirely? And perhaps most important, what about becoming a manager for the first time? These events don't call for onboarding, per se, but they present opportunities to revisit and strengthen core concepts from your process. The term "reboarding" has become popular for describing this way to set managers or teams up for success with a transition or new endeavor.

Another crucial moment to consider: when employees move in or out of remote work in your hybrid environment. Not only does the employee being affected need support, but the entire team may also need a refresh on the best ways to engage and ensure that every employee is being seen, and heard and is contributing to the company mission.

"Workplace cultures are consciously created through hard work and intention. A reboarding strategy keeps company culture front and center and provides managers with a road map for how to create a positive work environment in a hybrid working world. Reboarding should be more than a reminder of how things were done in the past—it needs to be intentional, strategic in nature and applicable to all employees, regardless of tenure or location."[13]

FINDING SUCCESS IN A HYBRID WORLD:

Finding success in the hybrid work environment requires intention, strong leadership, and a conscious investment from companies in their managers and employees. More than working across distributed teams separated by locations, time zones and functions, truly hybrid work represents a foundational shift in the way we think about employees' relationships to their team, their manager and their company.

The employee experience is paramount to success. For industry leaders, employees represent an essential driver of business outcomes. Helping people thrive from the moment of their first interactions with the company will separate successful institutions from laggards. For those who pay little attention, high turnover, poor employee satisfaction scores and costs to the bottom line will likely follow. A holistic systematic, yet individualized approach to the employee experience—with specific attention paid to onboarding and transitions—will pay dividends for companies looking to attract and retain top talent.

Looking to build and execute a world-class onboarding program?

Ogilvy Experience can craft and help execute a comprehensive program that draws on the latest in employee experience, experience design, technology, and communications. Contact us for help getting started.

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In his free time, Stephen pushes himself on his Peloton bike, writes and is slowly accruing fly fishing gear to take advantage of the beautiful Colorado landscape.

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