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Onboarding: Improving Employer and Employee Relations

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Abstract

Onboarding is a process that is quite easy to institute, is used by local municipalities, and is vital for successful employee performance and retention. Municipalities that have an effective onboarding program are better able to prevent organizational failure and disappointment while improving employee performance, productivity, and engagement, and improving the retention of newly hired employees. Municipalities are challenged with competing to hire talented, knowledgeable, and skilled employees, but with a well-established and implemented onboarding process, municipalities can nurture and retain these new hires. This report breaks down four benefits of onboarding in municipalities: longer employee tenure, increased employee engagement and motivation, increased and quicker employee productivity, and better job attitudes and behaviors. These four benefits of onboarding play a vital role in the success of the municipality while ensuring that the new employees are engaged and connected with the organization and its success.

Introduction

Onboarding is a common term used by an organization's human resource professionals and members of its management team. According to the Society of Human Resource Management, "new employee onboarding is the process of integrating a new employee with a company and its culture, as well as getting a new hire the tools and information needed to become a productive member of the team."¹ Onboarding is not a new hire's introduction to the organization, nor is it a new hire's orientation, but is an organized process that extends well past the new hire's first few days or weeks of employment. The objective of the onboarding process is to develop a long-term relationship between the new hire and employer over the employee's duration of employment. An organization's goal is to get new hires equipped to perform their duties quickly and smoothly so that they can contribute to the success of the organization. Onboarding is the newest terminology for the more in-depth development of organizational socialization; according to Howard Klein and Beth Polin, "Socialization is a process that occurs within a person, whereas onboarding is the set of practices, policies, and procedures, formal or informal, put in place by managers and HR departments to help structure newcomers' early experience and thus facilitate the socialization of new employees."²

In a municipality, the onboarding process is not the sole responsibility of the human resources department, but involves every department manager, the city manager, and the mayor, as well. The dedicated investment in the success of the onboarding process by the municipality's leadership begins before new hires arrive for their first day of work and continues past their first day of employment. It is important for municipalities to recruit, hire, and maintain qualified and talented employees to work for their organization. The benefits of onboarding in municipalities are discussed in this article.

The History of Onboarding

The term onboarding originated in the 1990s, a time when the upper management and executives of an organization were provided a process to prepare them for their jobs while subordinates only received new hire orientation. The onboarding process has transformed since the 1990s and is now used to acclimate all employees. Prior to the 1990s, onboarding was referred to as organization socialization. The first organizational socialization theory was developed by Edgar Henry Schein in 1971, then further developed by Gerry Johnson and Schein in 1978, and then even further developed by John Eastin Van Maanen and Schein in 1979. Van Maanen and Schein's theory in 1979 identified six different tactical socialization dimensions: collective vs. individual, formal vs. informal, sequential vs. random steps, fixed vs. variable, serial vs. disjunctive, and investiture vs. divestiture. The six tactics, which exist on a bipolar continuum, are used by managers "when socializing new recruits into the organization or at various boundary passages."³ Following Van Maanen and Schein's pioneering theory, "the 1980s saw rich conceptual developing."⁴ The 1980s theories included those of Meryl Reis Louis in 1980, which described how new hires were surprisingly motivated to align their own behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions with their new employer's. There was also Nigel Nicholson's 1984 theory that theorized about how people transitioning learned and absorbed their new role requirements. G.R. Jones' model in 1986 proposed that Van Maanen and Schein's six dimensions could be reduced to two categories: "institutionalized and individualized socialization."⁵ Blake Ashforth and F. Mael in 1989 used the concept of social identity to describe how new hires developed an identity in the organization. The 1980s were the foundation for the significant advances and the newly transformed organizational socialization into onboarding in the 1990s. In 1994, Georgia T. Chao et al. discussed organizational socialization concerning the process of learning content and the process by which "one understands and adjusts to their new role in an organization."⁶ Since the 1990s, more than sixty-three onboarding studies and theories have been published. It was during the late 1990s that organizational socialization transformed into what is commonly known now as onboarding.

The Onboarding Program Process

An effective onboarding program is important in any organization, but even more important for municipalities. There are a range of approaches to creating an onboarding program, but no matter what an organization's specific program may consist of, its overall goal is to quickly make new hires feel welcomed and prepared for their jobs so that they will be able to successfully contribute to the organization's mission. During the onboarding process, new hires are introduced to their new positions, educated about the organization's goals, values, policies, procedures, and processes, and socialized into the culture of the organization.

There are two types of onboarding programs: informal and formal. Informal onboarding is the process by which new hires learn about their new jobs without a specific organizational plan. Formal onboarding is the process whereby new hires learn about their new jobs through "a written set of coordinated policies and procedures that assist an employee in adjusting to his or her new job in terms of both tasks and socialization."⁷ No matter the format of the onboarding program, it should consist of four components: compliance, clarification, culture, and connections.⁸

The compliance component covers education about the organization's policies, rules, and regulations. The clarification component clarifies the new hire's job and job-related expectations.

The culture component is the part of the process wherein the employee is provided formally and informally with a sense of the organization's norms and group behavior. The connection component is the new hire's responsibility. This is the component wherein they establish interpersonal relationships and information networks within the organization. Municipalities can adapt the four components of the onboarding process in ways that best serve them and their new hires, benefitting all those involved. Onboarding programs are designed and adapted to connect with an organization's new hires and begin before the new hire physically reports to their first day of work, extending over their first year of employment. In addition to being given tools and information during the instructional portion of the program, the employee is visited and checked on by management and supervisors at scheduled times throughout the onboarding process. During these scheduled meetings, managers and supervisors are able to identify areas where the employee may need clarification or support to allow them to be a successful member of the organization. Each person and process in the onboarding program contributes to the success of the newly hired employees and the overall operations of the organization.

Concerns

There are several concerns that can arise regarding employees working for a municipality. There is a need for engaged, long-tenured, productive, and professional employees in municipalities. An onboarding program and process can help improve employer-employee relationships. Due to many factors, however, municipalities can struggle to maintain a successful onboarding program for their employees. As Jonathon Wiersma writes, "Local governments, including their human resource departments, are often structured to operate with lean staffing models. One of the most common reasons that HR and department managers fail to properly onboard new employees is because of the perceived amount of time needed to do it properly."⁹ The lack of a well-designed onboarding program sets both newly hired employees and the organization up for failure. Some onboarding programs focus solely on the organization and fail to focus on the employees, which then creates obstacles for new hires finding their fit in the organization and its culture. If there is no emotional connection made with a new hire during the onboarding process, this will result in their inability to connect successfully with the organization. According to a poll released by Gallup in 2017, only "12% of U.S. employees strongly agree that their company has a good onboarding process."¹⁰

Factors That Impact Employer-Employee Relations

What are the benefits of onboarding in municipalities? There are several that municipalities should consider when implementing an effective onboarding program. Municipalities struggle to retain skilled and talented staff for a variety of reasons, but with an effective onboarding program, they can improve their employer-employee relations. Employees are not just automatically happy, engaged, and devoted to their organization as a new hire, but, through an efficient and effective onboarding program, the development of truly satisfied and engaged workers in the workforce begins. Onboarding affects employee retention, tenure, turnover, engagement, productivity, and job attitude.

Employee Retention, Tenure and Turnover

Employers often struggle to attract and retain skilled employees to fill their organization's available positions. Retaining skilled employees is important for municipalities, especially those in rural areas, due to the lack of trained and qualified individuals. Municipalities must also retain skillful staff to be successful and to provide consistent and acceptable services to their communities. In addition, retention of talented employees can help maximize productivity for the municipality. Productivity is doubly important given the minimum staffing municipalities are allocated. Municipalities are in the business of service: ninety percent of the work of a municipality requires human interaction. Employees are one of the most important assets of a municipality, and as written by Mark Stein and Lilith Christiansen, "In today's service-based and knowledge-based economy, new employee onboarding provides organizations with a critical means to retain the value and increase the productivity of one of their most important assets: human capital."¹¹ By utilizing onboarding processes, municipalities can provide the necessary information and tools to employees, and in return, the employees will feel better prepared for and less apprehensive about the challenges of their new jobs. As Michael Krasman states, "Instead of trying to save existing employees after they have made the decision to leave, a more effective way to reduce turnover is to consider how you can help your new and relocating employees overcome the initial challenges they will face when they join your workforce."¹²

Statistics show that successful onboarding programs increase employee retention. Employees who are connected to the municipality will be embedded in the organization and in their responsibilities. Onboarding makes employees aware of expectations and responsibilities, which reduces "new employee buyer's remorse . . . greatly improving retention."¹³ The lack of a strategic onboarding program contributes to the failure of employees in their positions, leading to their separation from the organization. As stated in the book *Personnel Management in Government: Politics and Process*, "between 2006 and 2011, 16% of federal senior executives failed to complete their one-year probationary period successfully. Reasons include the lack of a strategic process for assimilating them quickly and their lack of clarity about performance expectations."¹⁴ Organizations have noted that with effective onboarding they have seen retention rates improve fifty-two percent, and explain that, "for employees, long-term outcomes of good onboarding include job satisfaction and organizational commitment."¹⁵ According to Madeline Laurano, organizations considered in the top twenty percent in terms of onboarding had ninety-one percent first year retention, and sixty-two percent of new employees reached their first-year goals—these numbers can be compared to the bottom thirty percent of organizations in terms of onboarding, which reported only thirty percent retention and seventeen percent goal completion for the same time frame.¹⁶

The implementation of a successful onboarding program that spans an employee's first year with a municipality will allow management to focus on the employee's needs and expectations, maximizing the chances of retaining the employee as part of the organization.

Employee Engagement & Motivation

Employee engagement relates to the level of an employee's mental and emotional commitment and connection to their work and workplace. An organization's success relies on its employees' engagement and motivation to perform their duties. The first engageable opportunities present themselves during the onboarding process. Well designed, fun, and engaging onboarding

programs promote and encourage employee engagement. This type of onboarding will encourage new hires to carry their engagement beyond the onboarding program and into their position and their work as part of the team. As D. E. Lewis writes, “Onboarding programs are designed to help senior leaders rapidly acquire an understanding of the organization’s environment, socialize them into the organization’s culture and politics, help them forge a network of critical relationships, and familiarize them with the operating dynamics of their work groups.”¹⁷

Mentorship is an informal opportunity for employers to encourage new hires to be more engaged with the organization. Mentorship within the municipality demonstrates the support of the organization while new employees get acclimated to its socialization. When new employees have mentors, they become more knowledgeable about their position, the organization, and its culture. Mentors can make new employees feel more comfortable in their new environment and offer extra support during their transition. In addition to helping new hires become more knowledgeable about the organization, mentors help new hires establish relationships with others in the organization. Employees who feel more comfortable will be more engaged.

Effective onboarding programs lead to more confident and committed employees who become engaged and active members of the municipality. Employee engagement leads to commitment, which leads to accomplishment, resulting in success within the organization.

Employee Productivity

Employee productivity is the assessment of the efficiency and quantity of output of work produced by an employee. Employee time-to-productivity is the measurement of the time it takes for an employee to obtain the information, tools, and skills to perform their duties at a productive level. An onboarding program provides employees with a structured platform that allows the employees to obtain knowledge much more quickly. Through the implementation of an onboarding program, municipalities can improve the productivity of their employees, which in return contributes to the organization as a whole. Providing employees with needed information and tools during onboarding reduces the amount of guesswork for the new hires. This decreases the employees’ level of stress, which results in better productivity.

Employees who participate in an effective onboarding program are able to develop job knowledge regarding the organization’s culture and their responsibilities. They quickly learn what is expected of them, how to deliver, and how and when their performance will be evaluated, which results in them becoming more productive more rapidly. As Lewis references in his article “Executive Coaching Viewed as a Bargain,” “onboarding is a program designed to speed up the learning curve and reduce the amount of time it takes incoming senior leaders to acclimate and become fully productive members of their newly assigned organization.”¹⁸ The studies and surveys below reflect the success of employers who have implemented onboarding programs:

- The Aberdeen Group completed a survey of some of the world’s highest performing organizations that have implemented onboarding programs, and found that “62 percent report higher time-to-productivity ratios.”¹⁹
- Texas Instruments conducted a study that found “that employees who went through an improved onboarding program were fully productive two months faster than employees in a traditional program.”²⁰

The most successful organizations understand that they must choose to invest valuable time and money in programs such as onboarding to position their employees to succeed, rather than expending those same resources in lost productivity. As Stein and Christiansen put it, the choice to implement “robust onboarding programs helps companies do more with less—a key business imperative in our dynamic, hyper competitive 21st century economy.”²¹

Job Attitudes & Behaviors

Employees’ attitudes show their commitment to the organization. If an employee is committed, they will have a positive attitude toward the organization and about their position. They will seek additional resources that help them to perform better in their position and become an involved member of the organization. As Talya Bauer and Stephen Green write, “New employee attitudes and beliefs toward their organization are established early on and can persist through their tenure, emphasizing the importance of imparting positive experiences and attitudes during organizational entry.”²² Municipalities that have an onboarding program are able to address and influence new employees’ attitudes and behaviors from the beginning, allowing them to positively impact the long-lasting attitude and relationship.

Employees can exhibit several different job attitudes; through an effective onboarding program, municipalities are able to influence positive job attitudes among their new hires. An important attitude new hires develop as a result of participating in an onboarding program is organizational commitment, which is an attachment to the organization. Organizational commitment means that the employee shares the organization’s values, desires to remain part of the organization, and is willing to devote themselves on its behalf. Job satisfaction is another employee attitude that onboarding plays a key role in. Onboarding provides new hires with the necessary training and information to help them be successful in their position, which in return allows for a greater opportunity for the new hire to be satisfied with their job within the organization.

In addition to job attitudes, employees will exhibit job behaviors throughout their tenure with a municipality. These behaviors include information seeking behaviors, which phrase refers to when the employee will seek to identify information that may help them adjust to their new position within the organization. Information seeking aggressive behaviors may include the employee asking questions about their job and the municipalities’ procedures, and the employee otherwise taking an active role in understanding their environment. More passive forms of information seeking behaviors include reviewing the organization’s website and reviewing the employee personnel manual or other literature regarding the organization. Another beneficial behavior is feedback seeking, which refers to new hires requesting and receiving feedback from members of the organization both formally and informally. Another important behavior for a new hire to exhibit is relationship building, also referred to as networking. It is estimated that thirty-five percent of newly hired managers fail in their position within eighteen months. Of those managers that fail, sixty percent report that it is because of their “failure to build strong relationships and teamwork with peers and subordinates.”²³

Both job attitudes and behaviors are influenced by an organization and its culture, so to ensure that new hires are positively influenced, municipalities should ensure that during the onboarding process, they make the appropriate efforts.

Conclusion

As stated in the book *Engaging Government Employees*, there are two major reasons onboarding is critical in government: “hiring in government is slow and laborious,” and “it is unfailingly difficult to remove a poor performer in government.”²⁴ By starting the onboarding process at recruitment and continuing past the new hire’s first day, municipalities can ensure they recruit and employ the right people. Through the onboarding program, managers can identify inefficiencies and address them. If necessary, managers can sever the employment relationship due to identified inefficiencies before it becomes a difficult task. Municipalities can circumvent expensive costs due to turnover and employee issues if they implement a successful and efficient onboarding program. Krasman states it best: “Onboarding can reduce turnover, however, by setting the stage for a more satisfying work experience. For today’s organizations, a robust onboarding process isn’t just a good idea—it’s a fundamental requirement for business growth and sustainability.”²⁵ To ensure the success of the municipality and the quality of service it provides to its community, an onboarding program is necessary.

Notes

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² Howard K. Klein and Beth Polin, "Are Organizations On Board with Best Practices Onboarding?," in *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Socialization*, ed. Connie R. Wanberg (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2012), 268.

³ Alan M. Saks and Jamie A. Gruman, "Getting Newcomers on Board: A Review of Socialization Practice and Introduction to Socialization Resource Theory," in *The Oxford Handbook of Organization Socialization*, ed. Connie Wanberg (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2012), 35.

⁴ Seymour Adler and Lorraine Stomski, "Ropes to Skip and the Ropes to Know," in *Strategy-Driven Talent Management: A Leadership Imperative*, ed. Rob Silzer and Ben E. Dowell (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 165.

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⁷ Talya N. Bauer, *Onboarding New Employees: Maximizing Success*, *Society of Human Resource Management*, 2010, accessed 04 15, 2020, 2, <https://www.shrm.org/foundation/ourwork/initiatives/resources-from-past-initiatives/Documents/Onboarding%20New%20Employees.pdf>.

⁸ *Ibid*, 2.

⁹ Jonathan Wiersma, "Fostering Engagement with Effective Employee Onboarding," *CivicPlus*, accessed April 25, 2020, <https://www.civicplus.com/blog/hr/fostering-engagement-with-effective-employee-onboarding>.

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- ¹² Michael Krasman, "Three Must-Have Onboarding Elements for New and Relocated Employees,m" *Employment Relations Today*, 2015, 9, https://resources.urbanbound.com/hubfs/press/pr_feature_employmentrelationstodaykrasman_mb15.pdf.
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- ¹⁵ Talya N. Bauer, *Onboaring New Employees: Maximizing Sucess*, 6,
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- ²¹ Mark A. Stein and Lilith Christiansen, *Successful Onboarding*, 8.
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