ONBOARDING FOR BUSINESS SUCCESS

WHY AND WHAT OF ONBOARDING ............................................. 1
ONBOARDING AS AN OPPORTUNITY ........................................ 2
THE ONBOARDING TEAM .......................................................... 4
MORE THAN ACCOMMODATION .............................................. 6
A STEP-BY-STEP ONBOARDING PROCESS .............................. 7
CONCLUSION ............................................................................ 12

REFERENCES & RESOURCES ..................................................... 13

JOB AIDS
Simple Onboarding Plan .......................................................... 14
Simple Recruiting Brief ........................................................... 15
Employee Acquisition Plan ...................................................... 16
Personal Onboarding Plan ........................................................ 17

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Ajay Banga was beginning a leadership position at MasterCard. Banga had a three-step transition: getting announced as the new CEO in June 2009, joining in August 2009 as president and chief operating officer, and then—as previously announced—assuming the CEO role in July 2010. With this, MasterCard set Banga up for two fuzzy front ends—first with the initial announcement, then in assuming the role of president and COO.

In product innovation, the fuzzy front end is the starting point where opportunities are identified and concepts are developed prior to entering the formal product development process. In onboarding, the fuzzy front end is when opportunities are identified and relationships started before day one on the job. It is a period when future team members and other stakeholders are open-minded about a new hire and anxious to help them start strong.

Banga used his fuzzy front ends to do a listening tour—literally going around the world, stopping by people’s offices, flopping down in chairs, and saying, “I’m Ajay. Tell me about yourself.”

Rather than enabling a new team member to start strong and easing other stakeholders into accepting and understanding the role of a new employee, organizations too often adopt a sink-or-swim approach to onboarding. But sink or swim is way too expensive an approach, especially when it comes to executives.

In this issue of TD at Work, we’ll give you a better approach to onboarding new employees based on our experience onboarding senior leaders. We’ll explain:

• what onboarding is and why it fails so often
• talent development’s role in helping managers, other stakeholders, and the new employee
• a step-by-step process for getting every new team member off to a strong start.

Much of the information in this issue of TD at Work comes from our book, Onboarding, updated to reflect new learning.

WHY AND WHAT OF ONBOARDING

Onboarding is a process that helps get people into their new role as employee quickly and efficiently. Despite the methodology that should allow for success in this area, it seems that nearly everyone has a story about onboarding gone wrong:

• people showing up to interview candidates without a clear picture of what role they’re looking to fill, let alone what strengths they’re looking for
• high-pressure interviews that turn off exactly the sort of people the organization wants to recruit
• recruiting a candidate who turns out to be wrong for the organizational culture
• new employees showing up for the first day with no one to greet them, no place to sit, no tools to do the work, and no manager to point them in the right direction
• new employees getting off on the wrong foot with exactly the people they need to collaborate with most closely.

With deliberate practice, you can accumulate onboarding expertise. Onboarding done right drives new employee productivity, accelerates results, and significantly improves talent retention.

Few organizations use a strategic, integrated, and consistent approach to onboarding. As Mark Byford and his co-authors point out in their Harvard Business Review article, “Onboarding Isn’t Enough,” too many organizations think onboarding is all about accommodating new employees so they can do their work. That’s, at best, a missed opportunity and, at worst, a recipe for disaster.

The beginning of a new job or role is a powerful, vulnerable time in an employee’s life. This period includes the most important teachable moments your organization will ever have. If you use onboarding to put each new employee and the organization in full alignment, you will make a material difference in your business results.
The benefits you see will include:
• compressed recruiting, hiring, and assimilation time
• greater awareness of job requirements and fewer hiring mistakes.

ONBOARDING AS AN OPPORTUNITY

New beginnings always offer opportunities, and onboarding can be an opportunity for significant organizational progress. The trick is to take full advantage of the honeymoon before it passes. Effective onboarding of new team members is one of the most important opportunities talent development professionals have to contribute to the long-term success of their team or organization.

An Opportunity for Conversations

Onboarding provides an opportunity for new employees to have structured conversations with stakeholders. Everything new employees do communicates. This includes whom they talk to, in what forum, and in what order.

For new leaders especially, people they talk to early will feel valued. Those scheduled late might feel slighted. You can make sure that your new employees (with the help of their manager, if appropriate) schedule discussions with their most important stakeholders as early as possible.

The objectives of early stakeholder discussions include:
• establishing a relationship with each stakeholder
• searching for different perspectives, not one truth
• learning about individual stakeholder expectations
• gathering knowledge about resources and “how things get done around here”
• learning how best to communicate with each stakeholder.

An Opportunity to Align Stakeholders

No one would bring in a new computer system without a plan to implement that system and train people on how to use it. It’s amazing how many organizations bring in new people without plans to integrate those people into the team and train others on how to work with them. This starts with onboarding plans and recruiting briefs. These two elements are important on their own—and even more important as tools for aligning stakeholders.

WHO NEEDS ONBOARDING?

Many organizations know that they need an onboarding program for new hires, but a robust onboarding program is about more than acclimating new employees to the company. It also involves helping veterans adjust to new roles.

Although the details of the process may vary, any of these events should trigger a full onboarding process:
• external hire
• internal promotion
• lateral assignment
• role change
• new project
• tuck-in acquisition.
Onboarding plans guide everyone’s onboarding efforts. They need to lay out critical activities; timing; and responsibilities for planning, recruiting, interviewing, selecting, offering, closing the sale, announcing, accommodating, assimilating, and accelerating new employees.

Recruiting briefs guide the individuals recruiting new employees. The format is less important than making sure key stakeholders are aligned on the positions’ mission and responsibilities (why these roles exist, the responsibilities of those who fill these roles, and interdependencies of this role—what other roles this employee interacts with, whom they report to, and so forth); pictures of success; and the strengths, motivation, and fit criteria you will use in evaluating candidates.

If key personnel are aligned around these two things, it will be easier for new employees to join up and become productive and for established employees to become more in sync and productive.

An Opportunity to Break Down Barriers

Imagine two crew members on a sinking ship, standing idly by as those on the other side of the boat desperately bail water from the boat. One says to the other, “Aren’t you glad the hole is not on our side of the boat?”

Of course, the people in your organization don’t take their silos to that extreme. They’re always willing to put aside differences in pursuit of the organization’s overall purpose, and there are no barriers of any kind between them. Right?

If there were barriers, the addition of a new employee would provide an opportunity to break them down. A new employee is a change—and a change in which most people will try to be on their best behavior to welcome the new employee. You can leverage that moment to bring people together across silos.

An Opportunity to Reinvent Teams

Charles Darwin has taught us that the species that survive are not the strongest or the most intelligent, but the ones best able to adapt and adjust to the changing environment. That’s one of the reasons that in today’s VUCA environment—volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous—we need a different type of leadership. Bill George writes in Forbes that to counteract these challenges, we can look toward VUCA 2.0 and leaders who have vision, understanding, courage, and adaptability. When it comes to onboarding, that last quality—adaptability—is crucial.

The addition of a new member to a team is an opportunity for the group to adjust and adapt to its changing environment. Teams that resist this opportunity by trying to get new team members to be just like previous team members are doomed.

The best teams use the addition of a new team member to adjust everything. This means changing what existing team members are doing, adjusting accountabilities, and rethinking communication and ways of working. Such adjustments are the difference between forcing new team members into existing ways of working and accepting that new team members are going...

ONBOARDING GONE WRONG

A talent development professional (who wishes to remain anonymous) shared with us this worst-case onboarding scenario:

I have witnessed a lack of collaboration, cooperation, and coordination between the recruiting lead, the human resource generalist, and the hiring manager that actually caused a new employee to show up for her first day on the job without anyone knowing it. I reported to the hiring manager and was asked to take care of “onboarding” this new employee. I was embarrassed for the company, myself, and her.