



AIA Best Practices: Successful employee onboarding

Contributed by Donald C. Simpson, AIA

Summary

Successful employee onboarding is the process of seamlessly integrating new employees into the firm culture and their role in a way that allows them to quickly become collaborative, contributing members. When done correctly, it produces measurable positive results for everyone involved.

Why is onboarding so important?

Optimal performance: Quicker social onboarding of employees into their new setting with their new teams allows them to arrive at their optimal performance quicker by removing some social barriers early.

Positive anchor: New employees feel welcome from the beginning, anchoring a positive psychological experience that can positively impact the organization's culture.

Collaboration: Much of our work is team-driven, and successful onboarding of newer employees promotes a shared understanding of the skills and strengths of both new and existing employees.

Limit missteps: Educating new employees about the organizational culture can limit missteps, resulting in a smoother acclimation, and potentially a longer lasting stay.

Better retention: Studies indicated that over 20% of new employees who received a poor onboarding experience leave within the first 12 months.

Great onboarding starts before day one on the job

The best onboarding starts during the interview process. Be clear about what is most important to the firm during the interview to allow both the firm and the candidate to discern if there is a good cultural fit. Ideally it is an open, two-way discovery process. You want to communicate, and demonstrate with your consistent behavior, the values and culture of the firm. If there is not alignment on these most foundational principles between the firm and the candidate, it is best to find out prior to making an offer of employment. Your communication style and offers of employment should be consistent with your values and tailored to the candidate.

Preparing for day one

Much of the magic behind great onboarding starts in the preparation for the new employee's first day. All new employees like to feel like they are welcome, expected, and prepared for and that their first day is the start of great new opportunities. Following are some best practices to help ensure that your new employees will feel that way on their first day with your firm.

Complete negotiations prior to arrival: Complete and document all negotiations with the new employee in writing prior to their start day.

Communication and rapport: Continue the consistent communication with the new employee and add new people, especially team leaders they are expected to work with, into the conversation as needed to prepare for their arrival. This will allow you to continue to build rapport with them and answer questions that may come up.

Day one agenda: Communicate with them again a few days ahead of day one to confirm the details of their arrival and a general agenda for the first day so they can start getting mentally prepared. Consider pushing back their start time from normal business open to give yourself some day-of preparation time.

Interview download: Communicate with your team about their arrival, some of what was discussed in the interviews, and your company's goals for the onboarding process. Highlight any unique skills or interesting histories.

Prepare the team: Plan with your managers what teams they will be joining and when, and make sure that the team is prepared to enfold them.

Complete paperwork in advance: Provide the option for new employees to complete the required paperwork before their start date so that their first day can be spent on more important things like getting to know your people and your culture.

Mission, vision, and values: Provide new employees with information on your mission, vision, and values.

Tell the firm: Communicate with the firm about their arrival and some information about the new employee that can serve as conversation starters during introductions on day one. This could be in the form of an email with the new employee's photo and a little blurb they could write about themselves.

Appoint a firm mentor/ambassador: Decide who will lead the day one effort to help with the transition to the office culture.

Housekeeping preparation: Prepare for the employee's IT needs, furniture, building access, parking, and other related items, which helps show that they were expected and prepared for. Use checklists to make sure that none of the needed items are missing.

Schedule an office leader meeting: Schedule time with your office leader on day one to welcome the new employee and start building a relationship.

Out-of-town guidance: If they are moving from out of town, ask somebody to provide some guidance about places and any other needs.

Day one

The new hire's first day with the company should feel like a continuation of the relationship and trust building that happened during the recruitment process. There should be consistency in the communication about the culture of the firm, which they will now be immersed in for the first time. Following are some best practices for day one, with a particular focus on helping the new employee understand and join the culture of the firm.

Recruitment to day one: Have the people who built the initial relationship with the new employee during the recruitment process present to welcome them to the office. Handing a new employee off to HR or others they have not met immediately upon arrival can break the consistency in the communication unnecessarily.

Firm ambassador: Consider appointing an ambassador. This is ideally the person who helps demonstrate the company culture and brand on the first day. This person can help find some fun amid the sometimes tedious aspects of onboarding. Optimally, this person is a peer of the new hire.

Office tour and introductions: Take the new employee on a tour of the office and introduce them to the different team members to them, focusing on the team the new employee will begin working with. In those introductions, highlight what each member generally does and what the new employee is capable of.

Leader introduction: Provide time on the first day for a leader to meet with the new employee and talk about the mission, values, and culture of the firm.

Cultural discussion: Provide time with someone during the day to talk about cultural issues with very practical stories as examples. Discussions could include:

- A brief history of the firm and some stories of successes and failures, and the lessons learned from each.
- The genesis of the firm's mission and vision.
- The firm's values with some stories of how those values are applied on a daily basis.
- Some processes related to their area of work. For example, if the new employee is an architectural designer, you could discuss the design process and show how some projects were developed, further developing firm knowledge and pride about the workplace.
- How to succeed at the firm, including the attitudes and behaviors that are encouraged and discouraged in your workplace.
- Asking the employee about their goals in their new role on both personal and professional levels and in terms of both contribution and learning. This could also be an opportunity to identify any training and development needs.

Hit the ground running: Have their team leadership prepared to read them into the first project assignments and set initial expectations.

Go for lunch: Plan for a group from the office or a team leader to take the new employee to lunch to help build relationships.

Network communication: If a blurb about the employee and a photo has already been prepared, consider sending it to the organization's email list as an introduction. This could also include the company website and social media.

End of the day: Have someone check in with them near the end of the first day to see how things went. Get their feedback on what went well, what concerns they have, and any questions that arose during the day.

Create an incentive to meet the new employee: In larger offices, cookies or snacks at the new employee's desk create a reason to stop by and say hello.

Ask for recommendations on improvements: If the new employee has a lot of prior experience, ask them to make recommendations when they notice things that could be done better or for which they know a best practice from a former employer. After about six months, new employees stop noticing those things, so it is good to get their input when their experience is fresh.

Over the first six months

Mentoring: Engage a mentor.

Coaching: Give consistent performance feedback, both good and bad. Make early course corrections in behavior, attitude, work quality, and work ethic. Make the transition to the company a career development process.

Relationships: Find out if the employee is developing good relationships with others at work.

Management: Get feedback from the employee and their manager about their working relationship. A poor working relationship with a direct manager is consistently the top reason people leave a firm.

Continuous improvement

Track that the goals set out for the onboarding process are being achieved over time. Following are a few ways to identify areas for improvement:

Quick check-ins: Check in with the employee regularly in the first few weeks of their arrival. This could be a quick chat at their desk.

Speak to their team leader: Have a quick check-in with their team leader to ask about the employee and any related feedback.

Longer chat and immersion: After a month or two, take the employee out to lunch for a longer discussion about their onboarding and immersion. This could also be a good opportunity to hear from someone with fresh eyes about ways to improve the firm. Sometimes we become too used to what we do that we are not able to take a step back and see how we could improve.

When applied consistently, these best practices for onboarding can increase employee engagement, productivity, and retention.

About the contributor

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