

## Profiting Through Employee Orientation

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I thought for years that candidate interviewing was the most flawed employee-related process in American business. Many companies just don't have a clue how to do an effective candidate interview. After looking at dozens of orientation programs, however, I now believe they are in more need of immediate attention by employers. Both small and large organizations are missing a great opportunity to increase productivity, quality and worker retention by failing to effectively welcome new employees.

Your employees are getting an orientation, whether you have a formal program or not. Unfortunately, it often isn't the one you want them to get. The words *bored*, *overwhelmed*, *confused*, *anxious*, *negatively spun* are most often used by new employees to describe the orientation they have just completed. I've watched, horrified, as new employees are treated much like cattle, herded in, sprayed with data (not information) and herded to their next destination.

Many managers seriously doubt the value of orientation programs in their organizations and are resentful of the time new employees spend in them. From what I've seen, they should be. There is little value in many orientations; managers are right to not support them. We should listen to their concerns and commit to improving orientation to the point that its impact is both large and measurable.

Good orientations can make a big difference in organizational results. Texas Instrument determined that employees who completed their orientation reached full productivity two months faster than those who did not do so. Corning Glass determined that 69 percent more employees remained with them after three years if they completed their orientation program. Many other studies demonstrate the value of a well constructed and presented orientation program. Common sense also confirms these findings. If employees are confused, overwhelmed and don't form positive social bonds (the negative ones form quickly in the absence of

positive ones), how can they possibly contribute to production, quality and customer service as effectively as we want?

In today's keenly competitive marketplace, the ability to bring employees to full productivity quickly and keep them long-term will be significant competitive advantage.

### **Making It Better - Determine The "Unmet" Need**

Start by evaluating how well your program is working today. Look specifically at productivity, quality, wastage, employee complaints and turnover attributable to employees who have been with you for less than six months. Interview, survey and do focus groups with those who have completed your orientation program, supervisors and managers to determine what is working well and what needs to be added to ensure that employees are getting what they need. Determine if new employees are quickly and positively developing social relationships in your organization.

Develop measures for each key area and record them as a benchmark for future comparisons. By doing so, you will have an objective measure of the value added by the improved orientation and a way to determine if you are making progress. Without concrete measures, activity is easily mistaken for impact.

### **Making It Better – Understand The Needs Of The Adult Learner**

Throwing a manual at a new employee, or just talking them through what they need to know once, is tantamount to teaching your child to drive a car by giving them a manual and letting them ride with you to the store one time. We know that young drivers need visual, auditory and hands-on practice to learn to be good drivers. We also know that repetition and testing are important to ensure a transfer of information has occurred. Your new employees need similar reinforcement and structure.

Orientations should include appropriate visual (manuals, overheads, notes, computer based information), auditory (lecture and an opportunity to interact with the orientation leader and other new employees) and practice (exercises, involvement in the program) components. These materials and experiences should be well designed and relevant to both the subject matter and the participants.

Repetition of important information is critical to memory retention. Timing and pacing of information presentation also have an impact on information transfer. Many employers attempt to sit people down and teach them everything they need to learn in one meeting. The human brain is much like a funnel. It can handle just so much at any given time – attempt to add more and the excess spills out. Give your employee the chance to process what you've presented by spreading the orientation over several days and by repeating key information.

Test for understanding. Don't let employees come to an orientation and leave only with a company pen. Make sure that they take something meaningful with them. Have them demonstrate their understanding. If you haven't successfully delivered the information you intended, you have an immediate opportunity to do so before the employee begins work and causes both your operation and themselves unnecessary hardship.

### **Making It Better – One Size Doesn't Fit All**

Each employee is unique. Each has a preferred learning style, needs and interests. Begin your orientation process by taking the time to find out what each new employee thinks may help him understand what he needs to know. Provide a list of key outcomes and materials and ask him to help you design his program. This process will rarely take over one hour (typically completed before the employee's first day). This will show that you care about his specific needs and the orientation process.

### **Making It Better – Use The Right Presenter**

One of the biggest mistakes made by companies is to use people in the orientation process who are not effective communicators. Someone with a less than enthusiastic presentation style, poor public speaking skills, and undeveloped listening skills will negatively impact both the perception of your organization and the transfer of knowledge process. Pick and train employees to do outstanding programs that are dynamic and interactive.

### **Making It Better – Teach Them How To Listen**

Don't mistake the ability to hear with listening. The two are very different. Most people lose 50 percent of what they hear within 90 seconds of hearing it. Longer-term losses are much more dramatic. Effective listeners retain more and retain it longer.

We teach people to read and to speak in public in school, but assume that they instinctively know how to listen effectively. As a result, most listeners aren't very good at it. Listening skills are easy to train and the opportunity to reinforce and use the skill happens continuously throughout the workday. If you want your orientations to really work, spend the time it takes to teach employees to listen.

### **Making It Better – Continuously Make It Better**

Don't stop working on your process. Continue to measure for results and make additional improvements. Even the best programs can benefit from ongoing employee input. One word of advice - don't use one of those monkey-in-a-plaid-suit-smile-surveys that deliver nothing but positives from people that have been with your organization only a brief time. These employees don't want to make waves and don't understand yet what they are missing. Use carefully constructed surveys and focus groups that are timed to ensure objectivity and which ensure participant confidentiality if you want the real scoop on where your program can be improved.

Good orientations earn you more money by allowing your employees to be more productive and more engaged in your enterprise more quickly. Welcome your employees better and you'll be welcoming more profits at the same time.

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