

ORIENTATION

Over the last two months, we went through the recruitment process, from preparations to implementation, and finally we chose somebody. Now we are looking at introducing somebody to the organisation.

Let's imagine we have hired our new gourmet ice cream sales manager, and it's his first day on the job. What happens next?

He should be put through an orientation programme.

The twin dilemma

There are two main components to orientation. Firstly, all employees need to know basic information about their new employer. The annual report is not enough, and neither is just chatting with colleagues. They need to understand company policies, rules, regulations, and benefits of employment. Many employers have an employee handbook. Newcomers also need to meet their fellow workers.

Secondly, orientation is the place where new employees can really get to know the corporate culture. It is the beginning of company socialisation. If they are going to be successful in this organisation, they need to know the attitudes, standards, values, and behaviours that are expected by the organisation.

Individual commitment to the organisation can be increased by a person's sense of inclusion: when people feel like an active, valuable part of something, they are more likely to stay and work harder.

Why is orientation important?

Many employers don't understand the importance of orientation, and as a result run it very badly, or even not at all, believing that people will pick up what they need to know "on the job".

A new employee doesn't know your business in any detail whatsoever. How could he or she? People work much more efficiently when they know what they have to do, to whom they have to report, how their own work fits in to the "big picture", what their responsibilities are in both work and general behaviour.

Suppose our new gourmet ice cream sales manager is a brilliant salesman and very quickly signs up a customer with a chain of restaurants across Europe for a very lucrative deal over ten years. However, he is only allowed to approve contracts for local delivery, because a pan-European contract would require long-distance logistics, and our company doesn't do that, due to prohibitive transportation costs.

The new manager has produced a very embarrassing and expensive mistake. We have lost reputation (which translates to future sales), because the sales manager looks irresponsible, as he didn't know his own company's business, and our company looks

incompetent, because we hired this bumbling moron. Do customers care if it's his first week or month on the job? No, they just want product to sell. In addition, because they didn't get it from us, we have lost a lot of money on a very good deal.

A proper understanding of company policy and procedures, including the limitations of authority (who can give permission to do what) would have prevented this costly error. It benefits both the company and the employee.

Stress reduction

Changes in life are stress-inducing. And change of employment is one of the biggest stresses in life, particularly if it also includes other major life changes, such as moving house or emigration. Across Europe, North America and the Asia-Pacific region, studies have revealed that stress is the number one reason why people leave their jobs.

If our gourmet ice cream sales manager came from abroad, in addition to doing his job, he has to get a new place to live, find new shops, schools if he has children, help his wife find new employment, transport all his possessions, and if he is in a very multicultural area, may even have to learn a new language. This all takes a lot of time and effort and adds a lot of stress to life. If he had an orientation programme which reduced stress on the job, at least that would be one less thing to worry about.

Experts agree that orientation is essential to minimise early turnover. It is very expensive to hire a new employee; every employer should do their best to make every new employee feel comfortable in their new job – and a quality induction programme will help a lot.

But do we have time?

Of course, some businesses might not run orientation, or simply pay it lip service, because they really do want the new employee to - literally - start working immediately. Any intelligent newcomer, including our new sales manager, can probably learn the essentials as they go, but that's the "hard way", and it takes a lot of time. Wouldn't it be better to have new employees become familiar with the organisation quickly so that they can start making money for the company as soon as possible?

Orientation should not take very long in a small company: organisational structure is small, there are very few people to get to know, the offices might take only a few minutes to tour, processes are few and easily learned.

In larger organisations, it can take a while, because there is a much larger structure to learn, there are more departments to understand, many more people to get to know, the offices may take hours to go around, and there are many company processes. But the time is nothing compared with how much will be saved when they start work, armed with the knowledge of their new surroundings.

When you visit a new city as a tourist, don't you find your way more quickly and easily with a map? If you lived in the city for months or years, you could get to know it well, even without ever seeing a map. But when touring, you want to be efficient quickly. And so it is with orientation: it's like a mental map, guiding the new employee quickly and easily.

Online or in person?

Many companies today put their company orientation programmes online. It makes sense to put operations manuals and paperwork on your company intranet. And it's more time-efficient: people can read the material online when they want, rather than when their trainers want.

However, studies show that most people do not bother with online training when they have a full work day. During breaks, they would rather do something else than continue to sit at their computer. And a full programme online is very impersonal. If you want to retain your employees, one of the best ways to do it is make them feel as if they are part of a team, and this is done most effectively in person.

Orientation should provide an opportunity for people to meet their colleagues and ask questions. A face-to-face training session is more personal, friendly, and gives a sense of belonging to a group that cannot come from a computer. You can provide follow-up material online: the details of things covered briefly in classroom training.

Conclusion

Yes, it takes some time at the start, but it is preferable to spend a little bit of time teaching the essentials to newcomers and have them work efficiently from the start, rather than have them spend a lot of time correcting their mistakes, misunderstanding the work of the company, or feeling unwelcome and unappreciated and leave, taking their expertise with them?

It is to the advantage of your organisation to run an efficient and effective orientation programme. Make your new hires feel valued, and they will repay you a thousandfold.

Some related links (copy-paste into your browser):

Getting the most out of orientation

http://www.humanlinks.com/manres/articles/employee_orientation.htm

Tips for better orientation

<http://humanresources.about.com/cs/orientation/qt/tipneonew.htm>

A sample orientation programme: Kansas State University

<http://www.k-state.edu/policies/ppm/4070.html>

Next month, we will be discussing the career development of your new employees.

References:

Bardi, J.A. (2003). *Hotel front office management*. Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons.

Dessler, G. (1991). *Personnel/Human resource management* (5th ed). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Greer, C.R. (2001). *Strategic human resource management*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Torrington, D., Hall, L., & Taylor, S. (2005). *Human resource management* (6th ed.). Harlow, Essex, U.K.: Prentice-Hall.

.