PERFORMANCE AND RETENTION STRATEGIES THAT WORK

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After effective recruitment and selection, one of the most important ways that veterinary practices can improve staff retention is through the strategic use of onboarding. Onboarding is the process of helping new hires adjust to social and performance aspects of their new jobs quickly and smoothly. This should always be a priority because in the United States, more than 25 percent of the working population experiences career transitions each year and half of all hourly workers leave new jobs within the first 120 days!

A Range of Approaches

Research and conventional wisdom both suggest that employees get about 90 days to prove themselves in a new job. Every organization has its own version of the complex process through which new hires learn attitudes, knowledge, skills and behaviors required to function effectively. The bottom line is that the faster new hires feel welcome and prepared for their jobs, the faster they will be able to successfully contribute to your hospital's mission.

The formality and comprehensiveness of onboarding programs varies widely across businesses, and those considered "best in class" for onboarding have more formal onboarding programs. For example, starting with a first-day welcome, global beauty company L'Oreal says, "Our aim is to develop successful, committed and mutually beneficial relationships with each of our employees." The company supports onboarding with a two-year, six-part integration program called "L'Oreal Fit." The program includes:
- Training and roundtable discussions.
- Meetings with key insiders.
- On-the-job learning supported by line management.
- Individual mentoring and HR support.

Approaches to onboarding range from quite structured and systematic—as in the case of L'Oreal—to the "sink or swim" strategy we often see in veterinary medicine, in which new employees often struggle to figure out precisely what is expected and to understand the norms of their new workplace. One of the first things practice leaders should consider is whether their practice is served best by *informal* or *formal* onboarding.
- *Informal onboarding* refers to the process by which an employee learns about his or her new job without an explicit organizational plan.
- *Formal onboarding* refers to 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.

Research shows that organizations that engage in formal onboarding by implementing step-by-step programs for new employees to teach them what their roles are, what the norms of the company are and how they are to behave are more effective than those that

do not. Again, as in the case of L'Oreal, formal onboarding provides a fixed sequence of activities for new employees, a sequence that is timed carefully and includes help from role models within the organization.

The Four C's

Onboarding has four distinct levels, the Four C's:
- *Compliance* is the lowest level and includes teaching employees basic legal and policy-related rules and regulations.
- *Clarification* refers to ensuring that employees understand their new jobs and all related expectations.
- *Culture* is a broad category that includes providing employees with a sense of organizational norms— both formal and informal.
- *Connection* refers to the vital interpersonal relationships and information networks that new employees must establish. The building blocks of successful onboarding are often called the Four C's. The degree to which each organization leverages these four building blocks determines its overall onboarding strategy, with most businesses falling into one of three levels.

Level 1: Passive Onboarding

Almost all veterinary practices cover compliance as part of their onboarding. For businesses that engage in Passive Onboarding, or Level 1, some role clarification may be given, but neither Culture nor Connection is addressed. Some informal ways of guiding new employees in terms of Culture and Connection may have developed over time, but no one is coordinating the task to maximize onboarding success. If your practice is engaged in Passive Onboarding, you are likely to view onboarding as a checklist of unrelated tasks to be completed. Nationwide, research shows that approximately 30 percent of all businesses work at this level. Passive Onboarding can be functional, but it is certainly unsystematic and certainly does little to differentiate your practice from the practice down the road.

Level 2: High Potential Onboarding

When compliance and clarification are well covered by a business's formal onboarding practices and some culture and connection mechanisms are in place, Level 2—High Potential Onboarding has been reached. In these organizations (about 50 percent of all businesses) the complete process has not yet been established in a systematic way across the organization.

Level 3: Proactive Onboarding

All four building blocks are formally addressed in Level 3, Proactive Onboarding. If your practice is systematically organizing onboarding with a strategic approach, you are at Level 3. Only about 20 percent of organizations achieve this level.

Short-Term Outcomes of Onboarding: New Employee Adjustment

Researchers have identified four major levers—related to both job roles and social environment that organizations can use to help new employees maximize their onboarding success. The first lever for successful onboarding is *self-efficacy*, or self-confidence, in job performance. To the degree that a new employee feels confident in doing the job well, he or she will be more motivated and eventually more successful than less confident counterparts. Practices should target specific onboarding programs to help boost employees' confidence as they navigate new organizational waters. Self-efficacy has been shown to have an impact on organizational commitment, satisfaction and retention.

A second task-related lever is *role clarity* - how well a new employee understands his or her role and expectations. Performance will suffer if expectations are ambiguous. Role clarity is a major driver in employee engagement. Therefore, role clarity (or its flipside, role ambiguity) is a good indication of how well-adjusted a new employee is, and measuring role clarity can help organizations stop potential performance problems before they get worse, leading to poor job attitudes. If new employees say they understand the roles they occupy, that obviously indicates higher role clarity. For example, a ward attendant needs to understand that making sure a patient is clean, brushed out and smells nice prior to discharge, has a major influence on client satisfaction and continued utilization of the practice down the road. Overall, measures of role clarity are among the most consistent predictors of job satisfaction and organizational commitment during the onboarding process.

Social integration is the third lever for successful onboarding. Meeting and starting to work with practice "insiders" is an important aspect of learning about any practice. In addition, new employees need to feel socially comfortable and accepted by their peers and superiors. Research has long found acceptance by peers to be an indicator of adjustment. According to one estimate, 60 percent of managers who fail to onboard successfully cite failure to establish effective working relationships as a primary reason. Integration into one's work group is positively related to commitment and retention. And high-quality relationships with leaders and other team members undoubtedly are related to favorable onboarding outcomes, including performance and job satisfaction. Tools such as orientation scavenger hunts can help facilitate making these connections. New employees should expect help from the practice leadership, but they also must *facilitate their own onboarding* by actively building strong relationships. Useful tactics include:
 • Making time to engage in small talk with coworkers.
 • Arranging informal social interactions, such as lunches or coffee breaks.
 • Participating in voluntary practice functions, such as an open house.
 • Trying to build a relationship with a supervisor by taking on new responsibilities

Knowledge of and fit within a practice culture is the fourth aspect of onboarding. Every hospital has a unique culture, so helping new hires navigate that culture (and their place within it) is essential. Understanding a hospital's politics, goals and core values, and

learning its unique language are all important indicators of employee adjustment and down the line are associated with commitment, satisfaction and retention.

Long-Term Outcomes of Onboarding: Attitudes and Behaviors

Beyond the short-term issues related to employees' initial adjustments, many long-term outcomes of onboarding affect a business's bottom line such as retention rates, time to productivity and overall client satisfaction. For employees, long-term outcomes of good onboarding include *job satisfaction* and o*rganizational commitment*. New hires should help a practice accomplish specific goals, and the degree to which they do this can be helped or hindered by onboarding. So *performance* is also an important long-term outcome of onboarding. A study of the onboarding process at Texas Instruments found that employees who went through an improved onboarding program were fully productive *two months* faster than employees in a traditional program. The ultimate failure of onboarding is the withdrawal of potentially good employees. Losing an employee who is a poor fit or not performing well may be a fine outcome, but losing employees because they are confused, feel alienated or lack confidence indicates inadequate onboarding. Simply put, good onboarding leads to good retention rates. At Corning Glass Works, new employees who attended a structured orientation program were 69 percent more likely to remain at the company up to three years. So a structured onboarding process really has a return on investment!

Recruiting

At first it might seem counterintuitive that the onboarding process could start before a new employee arrives, but the recruitment and selection process is actually the first step to effective onboarding. Clearly identifying valued behaviors and hiring candidates who demonstrate them will increase the likelihood of a smooth onboarding process.

In Passive Onboarding, recruiting processes are unrelated to new employee onboarding plans. Rather than viewing recruitment as a time to begin the onboarding process, it is seen as a separate function. In fact, the entire goal of recruitment should be to get candidates to the next step (selection) and then to help them fit into the practice's environment and get to know hospital insiders and stakeholders. The recruitment process provides information, but it also helps new employees form realistic expectations. In this way, the quality of recruitment practices relates to higher organizational commitment.

Realistic Job Previews

Practices can provide candidates with realistic job previews (RJPs) regarding both the specific job to be done and the organizational culture. RJPs have advantages and disadvantages. In one experiment, one business randomly assigned prospective employees to either an RJP group or a non-RJP group. The RJP group had 50 percent less turnover than the non-RJP group. Realistic previews help to prevent new employees from suffering unmet expectations. Past research has found that new employees receiving large amounts of accurate information about a company and their new job tend

to adjust better than those who don't acquire this information. RJPs can be provided during recruitment and hiring in the form of a simple job shadow, or through more on-the-job experiences such as internships.

Orientations

Some 93 percent of businesses now use some type of new-employee orientation; either in person or online. Formal orientation programs help new employees understand many important aspects of their jobs and organizations, including the hospital's culture and values, its goals and history, and its power structure. Orientation programs also serve a social role, helping newcomers feel welcome by introducing them to their co-workers and other individuals within the organization.

Support Tools and Processes

Both during and after the orientation, readily available support tools, such as those discussed below, are invaluable for onboarding success.

A written onboarding plan is a formal document, or roadmap, that outlines the specific timeline, goals, responsibilities and support available to new hires will help them succeed because it spells out what they should do and what assistance they can expect. The most effective onboarding plans are usually written, communicated to all members of the company, consistently applied and tracked over time.

Stakeholder meetings. Proactive/Level 3 organizations often create check-in meetings at specific intervals to help new employees get the information they need in a timely manner. Many stakeholders should be involved in these onboarding meetings, and the schedule should identify who is involved at what point in time. With regular "touching base" meetings, potential problems can be solved before they expand into large problems. When you plan stakeholder meetings it is helpful to think outside the box. For example, your new technician may be scheduled to meet with your office manager. Such a meeting can go a long way to clarify policies, clarify roles and build bridges (or diffuse tension) between the front and the back of the hospital.

Coaching and Support

As mentioned above, stakeholder involvement is extremely valuable for successful new employee onboarding because stakeholders can help newcomers manage and meet expectations. Stakeholders include those involved in hiring, training, and normal coaching and support. They can influence new hires by not only sharing information but also serving as role models to be emulated. Mentors are a similar resource to help new employees learn the ropes. A mentor can teach new employees about the organization, offer advice, help with job instruction, and provide support in social and political terms. New employees may go to mentors with questions that they are hesitant to ask their managers for fear of seeming incompetent. One study found that new employees with mentors became more knowledgeable about their new organizations than new employees who did not have

mentors. Researchers have also found that new employees are more likely to have learned and internalized the key values of their organization's culture if they had spent time with a mentor. Mentoring programs, opportunities for informal interaction with colleagues and adequate information certainly will help the new employees adapt more easily to the new work environment.

Training

A new employee needs the confidence, clarity and skills to do the job he or she has been hired to do. Potential training for new employees includes *hard skills, soft skills* and *onboarding skills*, and each skill set is important. If a new employee has low levels of self-efficacy at the start, training is even more necessary to boost subsequent ability to cope and job performance. Training can show newcomers how to proactively help their own adjustment and therefore encourage successful onboarding.

Feedback Tools

New employees often make missteps and may find it challenging to understand and interpret positive or negative reactions they receive from co-workers. This means they will often need feedback and guidance. During onboarding, feedback is a two-way process. New employees seek and receive information, and companies vary in how well they use feedback tools during the onboarding process. A couple of common approaches to employee feedback are:

Performance appraisals and 360-degree feedback. Performance appraisals can give new employees developmental feedback. Normally, however, practices conduct appraisals only once or twice a year. When integrating appraisals into the onboarding process, monthly, or quarterly meetings can be helpful. The benefit of 360-degree feedback is that it helps new employees understand how others view them. Feedback from all sides can help resolve any disagreements early on. This more frequent feedback is craved by Millennials and is very important in retaining those who now represent the largest component of our workforce.

Employee-initiated information and feedback seeking. Employees can help or hinder their own onboarding. Information-seeking and feedback are proactive new employee behaviors that may help them adjust as they ask questions about different aspects of their jobs, company procedures and priorities, all to make sense of the new workplace. As time passes, employees should start asking more questions of supervisors about expectations and evaluation, but they may be reluctant to do so if they believe such questioning will reveal their own weaknesses. Yet asking questions will often communicate to others that the new employee is interested in learning the norms and performing well. The need for new employees to ask the most basic questions is lessening as more organizations institute formal onboarding programs that include help desks, online information centers and regularly scheduled meetings with stakeholders.

Onboarded Hourly Workers

Almost all research studies to date have examined the onboarding of salaried workers rather than hourly workers. Recently, however, researchers have tried to get a better understanding of what onboarding looks like at the other end of the corporate ladder. What they found was a different picture. How do hourly workers differ?

Time. New hourly employees reported that they were fully on board after an average of three-and-a-half weeks, but supervisors reported that new hourly employees were not fully functional until three months after they were hired. Three months is more in line with past research and theories; less than one month is not. Beware of the new hire who is overconfident.

Stakeholders. For hourly employees, direct supervisors and co-workers were involved in onboarding with little contact from those higher up in the organization. Getting adequate time and attention from leaders was a common challenge for new hourly employees.

Content of onboarding. Most of the content of onboarding for new hourly employees was related to Level 1 - Passive Onboarding. Paperwork and rules were covered, but little else was systematically addressed. While limited, other onboarding practices included job shadowing, mentors and understanding who to go to for specific information. Based on these limited findings, it is clear that there is a potential to greatly enhance the onboarding of new staff which will result in higher performance, lower turnover and more positive work attitudes.

Onboarding Best Practices

Both the big things like using a formal orientation program and written plan and the little things like greeting a new employee warmly, taking her or him to lunch, and providing a functioning workstation on Day 1, matter in your onboarding program. The most important day on the job for a new employee is the first day. The value of the practice owner taking a newcomer to lunch on their first day should not be underestimated and this becomes part of the practice culture. A new hire's success is set as early as the first two weeks, it is important to make the first day a special one. Many new hires do not come back if the first day is disappointing. To get beyond the first day, review the list of best practices for onboarding below.

Best Practices for Onboarding

✓ Implement the basics prior to the first day on the job.
✓ Make the first day on the job special.
✓ Use formal orientation programs.
✓ Develop a written onboarding plan.
✓ Make onboarding participatory.
✓ Be sure your program is consistently implemented.

✓ Ensure that the program is monitored over time.
✓ Use technology to facilitate the process.
✓ Use milestones, such as 30, 60, 90 and 120 days on the job—and up to one year after joining your practice to check in on employee progress.
✓ Engage stakeholders in planning.
✓ Include key stakeholder meetings as part of the program.
✓ Be crystal clear with new employees in terms of:
  • Objectives
  • Timelines
  • Roles
  • Responsibilities

Conclusion

Successful onboarding is a key part of your practice's retention strategy. With the high cost of turnover, practice leaders must understand that effectively integrating new hires into the practice is an important step to ensure their success. Understanding who owns the onboarding process as a whole and who controls various steps in the process is vital to onboarding success and sustainability over time. Simply writing down a formal plan will not help new employees succeed. The key is to engage important stakeholders and new employees in interactions that help them understand one another and how they interact over time resulting in a more productive and engaged practice team.