Roll Out the Welcome Wagon

Structuring New Employee Orientations

Cheryl Beeler

Starting a new job with a new employer is difficult not only for the new employee but also for the employing organization. This is true regardless of the new employee's position in the organization. Most public organizations, like private corporations, view their business as an investment that must be protected. New employees can be a potential threat to business; without proper orientation and training, they can interrupt day-to-day operations and impair the quantity and quality of services. Through no fault of their own, new employees also may damage the professional image of the organization.

Public organizations have an enormous responsibility for protecting their investments, including those in human resources. Designing and implementing an effective orientation program is a good business strategy that is as important to the long-term interests of the organization as it is to the employees. This article presents a strategy for structuring the kind of orientation programs that result from an understanding and appreciation of the issues and from the concerns of both the organizaton and the new employee. The information will be presented in two parts: understanding the major concerns of new employees and their employers, and structuring the orientation program for new employees.

Understanding the Concerns

Three major concerns that seem of equal importance are developing job-performance skills, gaining acceptance

from the boss and coworkers, and demonstrating commitment.

Job Performance. Public organizations want new employees to develop skills quickly to a level at which they can perform their work efficiently and effectively. At the same time, new employees have a strong need to show their potential and to demonstrate their skills and abilities. It is not uncommon, however, for organizations and their new employees to experience mutual frustration during the first few weeks of employment. New employees may feel overwhelmed with all the new information regarding the organization, their job duties and responsibilities, and the operational policies and procedures. Newcomers also may find themselves dependent on the assistance of others to perform the most elementary job tasks. For their part, organizations are frustrated by the seemingly inordinate amount of time required to supervise newcomers.

Gaining Acceptance from the Boss and from Coworkers. Another concern is that of "fitting in." Organizations want employees who are receptive to supervision and work well with others. Similarly, a new employee wants to gain the immediate favor of his or her boss and wants immediate acceptance by coworkers. Most new employees are preoccupied with such questions as "Do I like and trust my supervisor? My subordinates? My coworkers?" and "Do they like me?" The length of time needed to accept and become accepted typically is much longer than expected by both parties.

Demonstrating Commitment. In the early stages of employment, organizations and new employees want a demonstration of commitment. Organizations are looking for loyal employees who become emotionally tied to the mission of the business; they want indispensable partners who are capable of promoting a positive image through their attitude and behavior. At the same time, new employees are equally concerned about their future with the organization. They want to know whether they should treat their new jobs as temporary employment or as stepping stones to long-lasting careers.

To respond adequately to these concerns, organizations have a management responsibility to establish orientation programs for new employees. Effective orientation programs are designed to introduce new employees to their new job duties and responsibilities among the organization's staff members. Effective orientation programs are not designed for employees only; the benefits of orientation are just as important to the employing organization.

Most organizations claim to have an orientation program, but on closer inspection most of these programs do not address the issues and concerns of new employees or organizations, as stated above. In fact, many programs provided by public (and private) organizations actually contribute to the problems and frustrations of new employees. An effective strategy is to structure the orientation program.

Structuring an Orientation Program

One way to structure an orientation program is to establish predetermined objectives.

Orientation Objectives. Orientation objectives serve as the primary focuses for important information that should be communicated to new employees. The predetermined objectives may include: purpose, priorities, and structure of the organization; organizational culture and management expectations; location of physical facilities and areas; structure, functions, and services of a new employee's assigned division; job duties and responsibilities; key personnel in the organization and in the assigned division; key operational and personnel policies and procedures; compensation and benefits; and safety and accident prevention measures. Figure 1 gives examples of predetermined objectives and of selected topics that may be covered under each.

Organizations designing structured orientation programs adopt a time frame for accomplishing each objective, then distribute the written checklist of topics and time schedules to new employees in an orientation kit that contains written materials to be used throughout the orientation period.

It is unrealistic to assume that new employees are ready to receive and understand all the important information that needs to be conveyed to them during their first two days of employment. Structured orientation programs are designed to have a certain duration so that new employees can adjust gradually to their jobs and to the organization.

Length of Time for the Orientation Program. The length of time scheduled for orientation programs differs according to such factors as the predetermined objectives, the size of the organization, and the type of new employee (permanent versus seasonal, supervisory versus management, experienced versus inexperienced).

For example, a large organization with hundreds of employees may choose to break an orientation program into different phases. Phase I may be designed to acquaint the employee with the overall organization and impress upon him or her the image the organization wants to portray to the public. This phase may be scheduled for the entire first two days of the employee's employment and may include such topics as the organization's purpose, mission, phi-

Figure 1: Orientation Objectives and Topics

Objective:
New employees will become acquainted (in general) with the purpose, mission, and services of the organization.

Topics:
Purpose, philosophy, and history of the organization
Organizational structure and functions of various divisions
Programs, services, areas, and facilities provided
Geographical area and clients served
Growth pattern, goals, and priorities

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Objective:
New employees will become acquainted with the organizational culture and with management's expectations.

Topics:
Introduction to top administrator and key management employees
Expectations of management for employees
Traditions, success stories, standards, and norms

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Objective:
New employees will become acquainted with the location of physical facilities and areas.

Topics:
Location of administrative offices, key buildings, complexes, and areas
Parking
Worksite office and area
Designated areas for eating, drinking, and smoking
Water fountains
First aid and safety equipment (fire extinguishers, alarms, exits, etc.)

Restrooms
Supply and equipment rooms

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Objective:
New employees will become acquainted with the structure, functions, services, and practices of their assigned department or division.

Topics:
Organizational structure and functions of specific divisions
Specific programs, services, areas, and facilities provided
Clients served
Relationships among the functions of this division and with other divisions
Goals and priorities
Key policies and procedures
Regularly scheduled meetings and training (staff meetings; in-service)
Expected standards of conduct

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Objective:
Each new employee will become familiar with his or her work area and assignment, including specific job duties and responsibilities.

Topics:
Work area and assigned work space
Issuance of keys, uniform, equipment, and security codes
Dress code or uniform requirement
Work schedule, including daily work hours and times; shifts
Meal and break periods
Overtime work and compensation
Reporting of time worked (timesheets)
Detailed explanation of job based on current job description and expected results
Explanation of why job is important; how the job relates to others

in the department or division and to the organization
Explanation of practices and procedures to accomplish work tasks
Types of assistance available; when and how to ask for help
Discussion of common problems and how to avoid and overcome them
Required reports and records
Performance standards, basis of performance appraisal, and monitoring of performance
Requisitioning of equipment, office supplies, and materials
Telephone system and policies governing use
Operating procedures for computer software programs
Operating procedures for office equipment (copier, fax, pagers)
Reimbursement procedures for using personal vehicle for business use
Procedures for using company vehicles
Personal conduct and appearance
Cleanliness standards
Security, theft problems, and costs
Communications with the public and with the media

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Objective:
New employees will become acquainted with coworkers and with key supervisors and staff members within their division.

Topics:
Meeting with each key staff supervisor and staff member in division
Introduction to coworkers

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Objective:
New employees will become acquainted with personnel policies and procedures.

Topics:
Assignment, reassignment, transfer, and promotions
Resignation or termination of em- ·ployment
Collective bargaining agreement (if applicable)
Grievance procedures and appeals
Equal Employment Opportunity provisions
Probationary period
Reporting late to work
Reporting absences; annual leave requests
Performance appraisal system
Career development opportunities
Discipline
Content and examination of per- sonnnel record
Privacy Act
Upward and downward communi- cation
Standards of conduct
Code of ethics

Objective:
New employees will become ac- quainted with employee compensa- tion and benefit programs.

Topics:
Compensation
Pay rates and ranges
How pay is received
Deductions, both required and op- tional
Overtime pay and/or compen- satory time off
Discounts available
Advances on pay
Shift differential
Credit union services
Reimbursements for job expenses (i.e., mileage)
Benefits
Insurance: Medical, hospitalization, life, and disability
Worker's compensation
Paid leave: Illness, bereavement, holidays, vacations, family leave, military, jury duty, emergency, and extended absence

Tax shelter options (tax-deferred annuities)
Retirement plans and options
Job training and tuition reimburse- ment program
Employee assistance program
Medical examination
Employee privileges (use of facili- ties, services, and equipment)

Objective:
New employees will become ac- quainted with basic safety and acci- dent prevention measures.

Topics:
Health and first aid clinic
Use of alcohol and drugs on the job
Safety precautions
Fire prevention, control, and exits
OSHA requirements
Sanitation and cleanliness
Security and identification
Reporting hazards, emergencies, and accidents

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losophy, and historical background; products, programs, and services de- livered; long-term goals; and imme- diate priorities.

Phase II, familiarizing the em- ployee with the organization's prop- erty and physical facilities, may take place on the third day of work.

Phase III may begin on day four and continue through the em- ployee's first three months of em- ployment. In this phase, a new em- ployee actually reports to a worksite within a specific department or divi- sion of the organization and meets his or her immediate supervisor. The employee may receive a checklist of information specifically related to the functions of the division, the em- ployee's job duties and responsibili- ties, and operational policies and procedures. To accomplish all of the objectives of Phase III, the supervisor

may schedule blocks of time each week during an individual's first 60 days of employment to ensure that each topic on the checklist is covered adequately.

Phase IV, an in-depth presentation of the organization's compensation and benefits program, may not be scheduled until the fourth month of employment.

Structured orientation programs designed by small organizations (fewer than 20 full-time employees) may require shorter time periods. This also may hold true for organiza- tions hiring employees with several years of experience in the field. For example, the same orientation objec- tives as stated above may be covered in a shorter time span if the organiza- tion is small and if a newly hired manager has five years of supervisory experience in a similar organization.

Selection of Orientation Methods.
The method selected for presenting the orientation topics should depend on what the organization wants new· employees to learn. Most individuals, including new employees, have a dif- ficult time retaining a large amount of new information presented in a straight lecture format or written in thickly bound policy and procedure manuals.

A more effective strategy for pre- senting information is to choose a method (or combination of meth- ods) after reviewing each predeter- mined objective and the topics that fall under it, and carefully consider- ing the type or types of new employ- ees to be oriented. For example, one of the orientation objectives may be to acquaint new employees with the organization's property and physical facilities.

Amelia Island Plantation, a resort in northeast Florida, uses a unique method of accomplishing this objective. It designs a team scavenger hunt for new employees. By this method, they learn the whereabouts of such physical facilities as the administrative office, recreation division offices, special event offices, conference center, health and fitness center, tennis and golf complex, beaches and swimming pools, restrooms, and all other amenities on the property. Besides achieving the objective of teaching the locations of buildings and facilities, this method also promotes two other important outcomes of orientation: socialization and teamwork.

A variety of presentation methods is available to organizations designing orientation programs. Here are examples that may be considered in designing a program to meet orientation objectives: videotapes, walking or van tours, slide projections, role play, workbooks, group exercises, on-the-job orientation techniques, reading lists and discussions, lectures, and storytelling.

There is no one best method of presenting the orientation objectives. Organizations should be creative in designing programs that provide a learning experience and at the same time accomplish the orientation objectives. Sometimes, out-of-the-ordinary methods are the most effective.

Leaders of the Orientation Program. Several staff members usually are involved in a structured orientation. Typically, they are chosen for their expertise in a particular area and for their ability to hold the attention of their audience. For example, the local government manager may be involved in the first day of orientation activities, perhaps delivering a motivating speech, welcoming the employees, and making them feel that they are important parts of the "family."

A staff member from the human resources department may be responsible for helping new employees understand the options available in the compensation and benefits program. Usually, the new employee's immediate supervisor and several key division staff members are involved in helping the employee understand his or her job duties and responsibilities and the everyday procedures for getting work done.

Evaluation of the Program. The quality of orientation programs typically improves when changes are made based on the findings of a formal evaluation procedure. Asking new employees to provide feedback on the orientation objectives, the presenters, and their method or methods of presentation is essential in determining the value or worth of the program. Feedback from supervisors and other staff members also is important in determining whether or not employees have learned and are able to apply the lessons learned.

Written questionnaires and scheduled interviews with supervisors, as well as with new employees who have completed the orientation program, may help to formalize the evaluation procedure. Based on all of these findings, the orientation program can be changed or modified to meet the predetermined objectives more effectively and efficiently.

A Sound Business Strategy

The greatest resource and largest investment for any organization, public or private, is its employees. New employees should be considered and treated as valuable parts of an organization's long-term investment strategy. A carefully designed orientation program provides a firm foundation on which new employees can continue to build on their full potential, become highly productive, and make a return on its investment to the organization. Structured orientation programs for new employees are a sound business strategy. **PM**

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Materials to Include in the New Employee Orientation Kit

- New employee orientation checklist
- Names, titles, office numbers, and telephone numbers of key personnel
- Map of the property and physical facilities
- Directory of sources of information
- Employee handbook, or copy of personnel policies and procedures
- Copy of dress code
- List and explanation of compensation and benefits
- Copies of performance evaluation forms, dates, and procedures
- List of on-the-job training opportunities
- Organizational chart
- Copy of job description, including duties and responsibilities
- Copy of operational policies and procedures manual
- Detailed outline of emergency and accident prevention and reporting procedures