4 Secret Thoughts
of New Hires

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What they won't tell you about their onboarding experience.
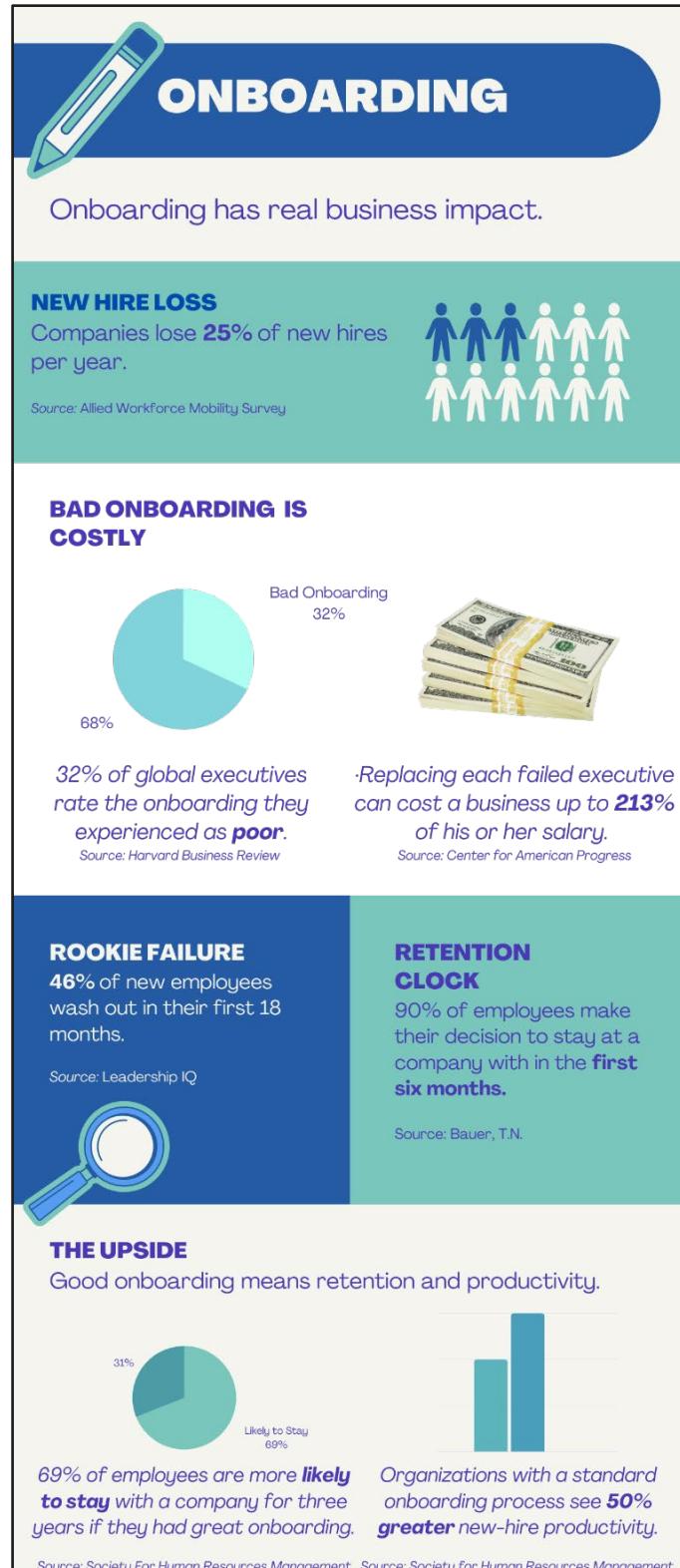
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Every organization struggles to survive and thrive. In the grand scheme of things, onboarding might seem like a small learning and administrative program— a list of boxes to check. But onboarding has real and tangible consequences for a business.

Clearly, it's worth investing in great onboarding. But what is great onboarding? It's onboarding that addresses what new hires are thinking and feeling.

How can you make your program a stellar experience? There are two keys: get inside their brains, and use the principles of change management.

Let's look at what your new hires might be thinking during onboarding, and what to do about it.

ONBOARDING

Onboarding has real business impact.

NEW HIRE LOSS
Companies lose **25%** of new hires per year.

Source: Allied Workforce Mobility Survey

BAD ONBOARDING IS COSTLY

Bad Onboarding 32%

68%

*32% of global executives rate the onboarding they experienced as **poor**.*
Source: Harvard Business Review

*·Replacing each failed executive can cost a business up to **213%** of his or her salary.*
Source: Center for American Progress

ROOKIE FAILURE
46% of new employees wash out in their first 18 months.

Source: Leadership IQ

RETENTION CLOCK
90% of employees make their decision to stay at a company with in the **first six months**.

Source: Bauer, T.N.

THE UPSIDE
Good onboarding means retention and productivity.

31%

Likely to Stay 69%

*69% of employees are more **likely to stay** with a company for three years if they had great onboarding.*

*Organizations with a standard onboarding process see **50% greater** new-hire productivity.*

Source: Society For Human Resources Management   Source: Society for Human Resources Management

"I am so stressed out. I feel like I am drinking from a fire hose."

Reduce fear.

Starting a new job is scary. The Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory measures life stress contributors to a health breakdown. It puts a career change as 18th on the list, just behind the death of a close friend. The brain perceives changing jobs as a threat to its survival.

Stress affects all systems of the body. Stress can limit the creation of short-term memories. This makes it more difficult to retain new information and keep it "close at hand," inhibiting our natural learning processes.

That's a problem. Onboarding is all about learning new information and applying it on the job as quickly as possible. What can we do about it? At Emerson Human Capital Consulting, we use neuroscience.

- Our brains see anything new as a **threat**. We feel fear, which inhibits learning.

- If starting a new job triggers the brain's threat responses, then onboarding program experiences should make new hires feel **safe**. If they feel safe, stress goes down and people can learn.

- The best way to make something feel safe is to make it feel **familiar**. Creating familiarity turns a new thing into an old thing, which feels safe and valuable.

- Create familiarity through **comparisons to past experiences**.

  - Generate conversation that will reveal how the new role is similar to something they like about their old job.

  - Compare new aspects of the company or the job to things they already know. For example, frame an onboarding group as the "class of 2022;" call the reading they need to do the "book club;" name their main conference room "home base."

  - Repeat what's important (and then repeat it again, *and again!*). The information is new, but through repetition, it becomes familiar.

"My old job was so much easier. Am I going to make it here?"

Engage and create momentum.

Onboarding is change. Science tells us that, with any change, people are likely to feel the pain of loss (of the old job) more acutely than the pleasure of gain (the new job). This innate response is designed for their own survival—to minimize threats and maintain a predictable, safe status quo. It's what makes any change hard. Faced with the pain of loss, people resist change.

To get new employees past that resistance, they need to feel what they're doing is **controlled** and **successful**.

- We don't like feeling vulnerable. Our brains crave certainty. Create feelings of **control** by offering predictability, structure, and choices.

  - Make it predictable, by showing them patterns. For example, give them a timeline that shows their onboarding milestones.

  - Create structure for your new hires by conveying rules, responsibilities, hierarchies, and plans. Knowing what to do and whom to work with will help them navigate the process.

  - Give new hires information and choices; let them make as many decisions as possible. For example, let them pick the sequence of certain activities, or the place they complete tasks.

- Brain research tells us exactly why winning feels good. And why winning together feels even better. To make the onboarding feel **successful**:

  - Break the new activities into small, simple tasks.

  - Make each stage of onboarding very doable.

  - Measure progress, so new hires can see how far they've come.

  - Celebrate small wins and the successful completion of onboarding.

"I am confident in my job skills, so why do I still feel like I don't know what's going on?"

Include them in the culture.

There's more to new-hire success than being able to perform the tasks of their jobs. **Role clarity, self-efficacy,** and **social acceptance** are three important indicators of new-hire adjustment.

Learning about culture, office politics, and knowledge of the "tribe" are key to social acceptance at a new job. So why is it that **just 29%** of HR executives indicate that they provide support for cultural familiarization in their onboarding programs? It's a big miss!

Prioritize people over process. Tribal knowledge, the understanding of "how we do things at this organization" is a critical outcome for effective onboarding experiences. An onboarding program should foster engagement and create a sense of belonging to the culture.

But how? The most successful onboarding programs include not only training and administrative support, but **ALL** of the following:

Onboarding Element	Best Practices
New hire programs foster **engagement** so that new hires:	• Feel welcome. • Are happy about their decision to join. • Feel connected. • Are inspired to speak positively about the company.
New hire programs provide robust **training** that is:	• Available on their first day. • Targeted at the company, department/ function, *and* job levels. • Blended, combining live events (in-person, virtual and digital), on-the-job learning, and performance support. • Tailored to different audiences. • Developed to include leadership presence.

Onboarding Element	Best Practices
New hire **processes** are:	• End-to-end, starting with recruitment and proceeding through an employee's first few months/year. • Not treated as a one-time event. • Clearly defined with a RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) chart or a similar roles and responsibilities tool. • Built with a single point of contact to oversee the entire onboarding program. • Designed to minimize the number of handoffs.
New hires are enabled with **technology**. On Day 1, they have:	• The configured equipment they need. • Systems, information, buildings, badges, etc. • Policies and training related to the technology (security awareness, login information).
New hire **communications** are:	• Aligned to relay consistent, accurate information. • Timed appropriately.
New hire programs include **socialization** support, such as:	• Tools that enable networking/connecting with others in the organization (e.g., chat tools, people profiles, etc.). • Specially planned events (welcome lunches, happy hours, team introductions). • Key contact lists (company, department, and team).
Coaching/mentoring programs include:	• New-hire buddies. • Career counselors/mentors. • On-the-job (OTJ) coaching—someone to help a new hire adjust quickly to a new project and provide performance feedback.
Program stakeholders consistently employ **evaluation** techniques, such as:	• Formal and informal feedback from the new hire throughout the process. • Performance feedback to the new hire during the first year. • Data-gathering on key metrics such as attrition/retention, time to proficiency, etc.

"My onboarding was so bad. Did I pick the right company?"

Engineer the context.

We all know that recruiting goes both ways—while a recruiter is interviewing the candidate, the candidate is assessing the company. That doesn't stop with a hiring decision. On Day 1, you are *still* selling the company to the new hire. Onboarding is your chance to make the right first impression.

How do you make new employees feel like they are in the right place? People have quick, subconscious reactions based on the data they process. You can build cues into your onboarding environment that make the new hire feel they are in a good place.

- **Fairness** – Focus on standard criteria or rules—an even playing field. For example, clearly describe how the path to job success is achievable for everyone.

- **Rewards** – Along the onboarding journey, use praise, feedback, peer recognition, and team recognition.

- **Loss** – Acknowledge the uncertainty and confusion of Day 1, and compare it to the future happiness of being a fully functional and integrated employee.

- **Altruism** – Talk about the mission of your organization and the employee's new team. Then invite new hires to share *their* higher purpose for joining your business. Help them see that those missions fit; they will help the team achieve something great.

- **Connection** – Introduce them to rituals of the team. Are there inside jokes that only your employees share? Let them in on it. Share stories about struggles and hopes for the future. Stories are powerful. Through "neural coupling," the stories we hear feel like our own experiences. The emotions in stories release dopamine, helping content stick with us. Plus, stories activate multiple areas of the brain, aiding retention.

- **Impact** – Celebrate small wins during onboarding. Show new hires how they are already contributing to the success of your business.

- **Delight** – Offer unexpected gifts and fun activities. There's no reason onboarding has to feel like work all the time. Play a little bit, too. Researchers find that playfulness and laughter help people bond, socially, and buffer them against stress. That's exactly what you want to make new employees feel—like they have found their new professional home.

And if you do all this well, there's a good chance your new hires will be thinking…

"That was a great experience and I'm excited to get started!"

Onboarding is learning, but learning is fundamentally a change process. View your onboarding program through the lens of human behavior change. Design your program to reduce the stress of your new hires. Incorporate the principles of *familiar*, *controlled*, and *successful* into the new hire's learning experience. Share your tribal knowledge to create a sense of belonging. Build cues into the program that make new hires feel at home, and display their best selves.

Imagine building onboarding *differently*. Your new hires, and your business, will thank you for it.

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