

EMPLOYEE ORIENTATION

A proper welcome

Any new CEO's first 100 days are critical, so companies provide an extensive support system to ensure success. But what about other employees? Increasingly, employers are recognizing that a new recruit's orientation experience directly contributes to that individual becoming a valuable and committed employee.

You've invested heavily in selecting a talented new employee—and a potential future leader. You no doubt screened intensively for culture fit. Now the challenge is creating a memorable first-day experience, and building on it to help recruits feel personally connected to your company's mission and culture.

The Great Place to Work Institute's consulting and research for its Best Workplaces lists, in 29 countries, has identified useful lessons about welcoming new employees. Simply put, people who are genuinely welcomed by their new employer feel respected, personally and professionally. The payoffs include trust in management, commitment to the organization and more inspired job performance.

Take Vancity, a credit union based in Vancouver, which is No. 1 on the 2006 Best Workplaces in Canada list, published by *Canadian Business*. Its existing employees are very proud of their organization and protective of its culture. Vancity gets a head start in orienting recruits because 60% of new hires arrive through referrals by current staff. So orientation begins well before the first day on the job.

At Genentech Inc., a leading global biotech in San Francisco and No. 1 on *Fortune* magazine's 2006 list of Best Companies to Work For, employment has grown at an average annual rate of 15%, since 2001, which makes welcoming and integrating new hires an ongoing challenge. One of the steps Genentech takes is to provide new hires an opportunity for informal question-and-answer meetings with executives. The integration process is carefully monitored. A survey at the six-month point gives feedback to supervisors, making them accountable for successful integration.

New recruits need to understand how their jobs contribute to bigger goals and tan-

gible outcomes. They also need a clear picture of what steps they can take to advance their careers and make even bigger contributions. S.C. Johnson & Son, a manufacturer of household products, publishes career guides that clearly describe the competencies, training and experiences that help people move from level to level in various departments. By removing the mystery surrounding the promotion process, the guides help employees become more proactive in planning their career development.

As a startup, Toronto-based IT firm Softchoice had new hires walk around the office on Fridays, introducing themselves as they served beer from a cart. No longer practical with hundreds of employees, the idea continues in the form of Friday gatherings (complete with refreshments and snacks) to unwind, meet new hires and share stories with people in other departments.

A proper employee welcome is much more than just being hospitable. And it pays off

At Qualcomm Inc., a high-tech firm based in San Diego, new employees learn about the organization's culture through a program called 52 Weeks. It provides one new story each week about the company, via e-mail. This storytelling service is an effective way to tell new people about what makes Qualcomm unique. Extensive communication, surveys and supervisor support are part of an integrated "on-boarding" process for new hires. Ultimately, managers are accountable for maintaining a work environment in which new arrivals—and all other employees—can thrive.

Cisco Systems, based in San Jose, Calif., works hard to smooth the transition for employees who join the company through mergers and acquisitions. All necessary office systems and equipment are up and running on the employee's first day. An orientation explains how to succeed in Cisco's culture and how to use its website for details about benefits and rules. Each employee is assigned a "sponsor" who acts as a mentor, not a boss.

These successful new-employee orien-

tation practices provide lessons for retaining and developing your future workforce. First, whether it is a new grad starting their first job, a summer student, a seasoned manager transitioning to a post-retirement position, or employees of an acquired firm, strive to make their first day memorable. This initial immersion into your culture will have lasting impressions, signalling the kind of relationship you and your firm want to create with that individual.

Second, make an employee's first day the launch of an orchestrated, ongoing process of supporting them to develop strong relationships, personally connect with the culture and fully understand how their job contributes to the mission. This is best accomplished through formal and informal practices, from clear learning and development plans to time for unscripted interactions with co-workers and managers.

Third, establish open communication channels with new recruits so that senior managers know how they are doing. Provide ample opportunity for them to ask questions and to have meaningful input. Within hours of arriving, new employees need to feel like a valued part of the team, even if their contributions may not be fully realized for a while.

Fourth, ensure that a new hire's manager has the soft skills and resources needed to support long-term success. Supervisors play a key role in employee development and retention, so they need to be held accountable. They should also be recognized for their positive contributions to nurturing new talent.

Rolling out the welcome mat for new employees goes beyond being hospitable. It is a sure way of tapping the full future potential that just walked through the door.

GRAHAM LOWE

Graham Lowe is a founding partner of Great Place to Work Institute Canada, an affiliate of a global workplace consulting firm. He can be reached at glowe@greatplacetowork.ca. Nominate your organization for the Best Workplaces in Canada at www.canadian.business.com/workplace.