

Make
New Employee Orientation
A Success
By Jean Barbazette

New employee orientation is a planned welcome to the organization that usually is shared by the human resources (or training) department and the new employee's supervisor. There are twelve key factors that can contribute to the successful orientation of new employees.

The Training Clinic of Seal Beach, California, surveyed over 300 United States companies (in 1985, 1988 and 1990, 1993) who were conducting successful orientation programs. Here are the 12 factors.

1. All effective programs view orientation as an ongoing process, not just a one-day program. The process usually begins with the hiring decision and continues well into the first year of employment. New employee orientation (NEO) becomes the umbrella program for other programs that include performance reviews and training.
2. Because orientation is an ongoing process, information is given to the new employee closest to the time it is needed. For example, if the employee's health benefits vest 30 days from the start date, a benefits orientation is not needed during the first day or first week of employment. Many companies separated benefits from other orientation information. A separate meeting, if held in the evening, allows spouses to attend and participate in the selection of a specific health plan.
3. The benefits of orientation are clear and visible to both the new employee and the organization. The organization could identify such factors as reduced turnover or improved productivity as a few of the benefits of a systematic orientation. The employee felt valued and was able to "fit in" to the new job more easily and quickly. Fewer mistakes were made by the new employee who was more relaxed.
4. Successful orientation programs shared their "corporate culture" (philosophy, how to get along, how business is done, etc.). New employees need to be told the organization's norms, customs and traditions. If a new employee knows informality is expected, then having coffee at your desk or leaving work out on your desk overnight is

acceptable. However, if rules are strictly enforced, the new employee must know to follow the unwritten dress code and carefully adhere to accepted break and lunch times.

In some organizations all employees are addressed by their first names. In other organizations a strong sense of formality would demand using only surnames. Shared expectations and common definitions of "what's normal" can contribute greatly to the successful orientation process.

5. The employee's first day is truly welcoming and helps the employee feel useful and productive. This can be accomplished by being prepared for a new employee; desk, office, phone, and supplies are ready. How many times have new employees arrived at your organization and everyone is too busy to direct their activities or teach them the job? Several successful organizations set up a welcome, introductions and a tour that ends in the new employee's work area. The new employee is then paired with an experienced "buddy" to teach a specific task. This way a new employee can perform a simple task that contributes to the department's production on the first day of employment.

6. The supervisor's role in NEO is clear and well executed with human resources department's or function's assistance. Supervisors and the human resources department or function share responsibility for the successful orientation of the new employee. Supervisors need to identify what is best done by them and what information is more general and best given by the human resources department or function. The human resources department or function is usually best equipped to share organization policy, history and benefits. Supervisors usually prefer to explain safety rules, reporting requirements and job tasks. The division of tasks must be negotiated between supervisors and the human resources department or function if tasks are to be successfully shared.

7. Orientation objectives in successful organizations are measurable and focus on specific knowledge, skill acquisition and influencing attitudes. Too often poor orientation programs are an information overload - like drinking from a fire hydrant! Those programs that included some skills training (operating the telephone system or practice in using a fire extinguisher) found a balance of activity and pacing that made orientation interesting, not boring.

8. Adult learning concepts are known and used to guide orientation. If an organization wants its employees to use their initiative and exercise judgment, then a self-directed NEO is appropriate. Several successful NEO programs gave the new employee a list of tasks to accomplish, a deadline and the time and resources to complete the tasks. For example, a manufacturing organization gives the new hourly employee a checklist to be completed in 5 days. Items on the checklist include finding bulletin boards, safety and first aid supplies, and signing completed forms. Another organization gives its new middle managers and staff people a list of key co-workers to interview. A self-directed workbook suggests questions for the interviews. Sample questions are: 1) What do you expect from me when we work together? 2) What are your job and task goals and how do they affect me?

Many unsuccessful NEOs "spoon feed" all information to the new employee. This process often gives the impression to the employee that the organization will tell you everything you need to know . . . just wait for it to come to you. If you want new employees to work independently, at least part of their orientation should be his or her responsibility.

9. Many NEO programs use guest speakers (live or on videotape). Successful speakers are well prepared, present only essential information with specific objectives, and use good presentation techniques. The human resources department or function had frequently coached all speakers and even outlined or scripted their talks and provided professional looking visual aids. Guest speakers fail to meet their goals when they are ill prepared, ramble off their subject, or do not arrive on time (or not show up at all).

10. Audiovisual components of successful NEO programs provide emphasis to the program and provide a positive message. Frequently successful videos or slide tape presentations were used to describe the organization's culture, history and philosophy. Although the temptation is to put as much as you can on video, the content needs to be lasting. For example, benefits are best presented "live" if they are likely to change each year. The organization's history is not likely to change, but give the current executive group in written form on an organization chart. Guest speakers who deliver a consistent message and find attending every session of NEO are also good candidates for video.

11. The NEO process is evaluated by participants, supervisors and the human resources department or function from bottom-line results. Participants can give their reaction to NEO and offer suggestions to improve the process and validate the timing of content delivery. Supervisors can tell you if NEO information is used on the job and to what degree NEO needs revision. NEO should also be evaluated for results. A manufacturing organization was able to reduce turnover by 69% in the first three years by conducting a systematic NEO; a bank was able to reduce orientation and skills training of new tellers from six weeks to two weeks. Cost-benefit analysis is not easy to conduct, but worth doing to prove your results.

12. Successful NEO programs provide information to the employee's family. This included welcoming gestures and letters or organization newsletters to the family or a more inclusive program for spouses and families. Many companies welcomed families at work one day during the year. Others scheduled a benefits orientation during the evening. One unique approach involved a home visit by the corporate "welcome wagon."

These 12 elements suggest that NEO is a process that needs to be refined and customized for each organization. These 12 elements also need to be modified based on when orientation is first conducted and how many new employees are hired at one time.

Courtesy of Ideas and Training
www.ideasandtraining.com
