

Employee Orientation that Works

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The first six months of a new employee's tenure with your company can determine the quality of the employee's contribution to your company's success. By providing the employee an orientation to how your organization operates, you can have a strong, positive impact during this important period of time.

Organization entry

Orientation to a new job happens whether or not you have an official orientation program. It can be anything from "wash your coffee cup yourself" to an extended training and acclimation period that covers all aspects of employment, the company, and the job. Even if you only have hired one employee, it is important to cover this basic information to avoid potential misunderstandings in the future. When employment starts with clear expectations for both parties, the employee is more likely to feel the employer is fair and more likely to live up to these expectations. The orientation process lays the groundwork for ongoing communication and professionalism in the working relationship.

Creating a guide

If your company is too small for you to have yet tackled a formal orientation or employee handbook, consider the following list to develop a "bullet point" guide. Regardless of organizational size, it is important that information is communicated consistently to everyone.

- Basic employment requirements, including start time, attendance, breaks and procedures for scheduling vacations or calling off work.
- Harassment and drug-free workplace policies.
- Safety requirements and procedures.
- Benefits, such as health plans, profit sharing, retirement, and vacation. Don't forget that flextime, free parking, and/or cell phones should also be described.
- Company history, values, and mission. Employees can't share your pride if they don't understand the products, customers, and major work processes of the organization.
- Important business processes for quality control, continuous improvement, and administration that all employees should know.

- Key departments and people who can provide assistance, for example, if employees need help with a medical form or sending a fax.
- How performance will be evaluated. If you do not have a performance management system or appraisal forms, create a form with input from your current employees. The form will guide discussions about performance and ensure that bad news is never a surprise.

These pieces of information will help form the basic structure of an orientation process for your organization. Add to it any additional information you believe will help our new employees have a smooth transition into their new role in your company. Seek feedback from current employees about what would have helped them when they were new, and be sure to periodically review and update your orientation needs.

The first year

A new employee's first year is a critical time for fostering an employee-organization relationship that leads to loyalty and good morale. Ongoing aspects of employee orientation will help achieve this state. At organization entry the basic company information is conveyed, and the employee's questions and concerns are usually practical and immediate. Additional activities and opportunities to "check in" should be regularly spaced throughout the first year. Following are some suggested opportunities for ongoing orientation.

After an employee has had time to become familiar with his or her own work and responsibilities (a few weeks to a few months, depending on the position) is usually a good time to facilitate learning about different departments and functions of the organization. For example, have the employee "ride along" or spend time with people in other functional areas. Alternately, have the employee meet with managers of different departments to discuss how work interrelates to accomplish organization goals.

Some information presented at organization entry may be complex and take time to consider. After a few months, take time to re-open a discussion with the employee about such issues as health benefits, to make sure the choices that were made immediately post-hire are still meeting the employee's needs.

Finally, provide regular points of contact for the employee to give and receive feedback regarding work activities and performance. This will enable the employee to work together with people in the company to ensure that his or her work is on track. One means of accomplishing this is to arrange for a coach, mentor, or "buddy" to assist the employee during the first several months in adjusting to work life in your organization. Also, don't forget to seek feedback from the employee to ensure your organization is reasonably meeting the employee's needs and expectations.