Evidence-based Onboarding Practices: Talking Shop with Don Kirkey
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The Issue: Half of all hourly workers leave their new jobs within four months. Half of all senior outside hires fail within 18 months.

The Impact: If organizations are systems, then onboarding may be one of the most influential process in the entire system—an inflection point. This first few days and weeks are critical. Initial attitudes and experiences influence subsequent attitudes and behavior for years.

“The most important day on the job for a new employee is the first day.” Talya Bauer, Onboarding New Employees (SHRM, 2011).

Onboarding: The process by which an individual learns, adapts to, and integrates into the role, work group, and culture (i.e., the values, norms, beliefs, shared meanings, and expected behaviors), of an organization.

In organizational psychology, this process is known as “organizational socialization.”

### Onboarding Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Organizational (Institutionalized)</th>
<th>Personal (Individualized)</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Collective</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Whether newcomers are onboarded in groups or individually.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Whether newcomers are segregated from or integrated with insiders during onboarding.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Sequential</td>
<td>Random</td>
<td>Whether newcomers are provided with a fixed order to onboarding events or left to their own devices.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fixed</td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>Whether there is an explicit, fixed timetable for completing the various onboarding stages or there are no deadlines.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Serial</td>
<td>Disjunctive</td>
<td>Whether or not previous / existing job incumbents are available as role models and support for newcomers.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Investiture</td>
<td>Divestiture</td>
<td>Whether or not newcomers receive positive social support from insiders.</td>
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In order of impact, the categories are: 1. Social; 2. Context; 3. Content. How people learn—and from whom—has a most substantial impact than what they learn.

Social onboarding practices have the strongest impact on performance and persistence. Direct supervisors and coworkers have a greater impact on the onboarding process than anything the organization can do.
Organizational Onboarding Practices
Generally, these practices are more labor- and resource-intensive
Target: Newer and less experienced new hires
Outcomes:
- Increase shared values
- Reduce uncertainty and anxiety
- More proactive behavior
- Increase job satisfaction
- Lower turnover
- Create greater conformity
- Tendency toward “not-invented-here” syndrome

Personal Onboarding Practices
Generally, these practices are less labor- and resource intensive
Target: Older and more experienced new hires
Outcomes:
- Increase innovation and creativity
- Encourage greater autonomy
- Lower organizational commitment
- Raise turnover

Onboarding content: What do new people need to learn?
- Required knowledge & skills
- Expectations regarding fulfillment of tasks & functions
- Available resources & their use
- Personalities, interests, attitudes, preferences, & behaviors of colleagues, superiors, & subordinates - & how to deal with them
- Expected attitudes & behaviors
- Evaluation standards & procedures
- Organization & work group structure, goals, history, market, procedures, products & services, competitive situation, & current performance
- Organization & work group culture: traditions, rituals, myths, taboos, & language
- Formal & informal power structures & politics

We often underestimate the amount that new employees need to learn, adapt to, and integrate.

Positive Psychology

Even small positive affirmations on the first day or two have a profound impact for years on performance and tenure.

Direct supervisors and coworkers have the biggest effect.

Instead of onboarding that is all about “how things are done around here,” what is expected of you, and why you should be proud of the company … Employees who are encouraged to recognize and leverage their unique strengths and bring their “authentic selves” to work are more engaged, more productive, more connected, and more likely to stay.

“They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.” Carl W. Buehner
Job Embeddedness

Definition: The construct or concept that there is a web of forces and factors connecting an individual to a job, an organization, and a community, — and the more and the stronger the connections there are, the more likely the employee is to stay and perform well.

Sacrifice: The more embedded an individual is, the greater the “psychological cost” of leaving.

2 Types of job embeddedness:
  o On-the-job embeddedness
    ▪ Social links: supervisor relationships; mentors; friends
    ▪ Financial links: salary; benefits; vesting; promotion potential
  o Off-the-job embeddedness
    ▪ Social links: local friends and family; professional, social, and religious associations; community involvement
    ▪ Financial links: home ownership; other financial enterprises; spouse’s employment

Some findings:
  o Embeddedness is stable, not dependent on transitory mood or attitude
  o On-the-job embeddedness predicts performance and persistence
  o Off-the-job embeddedness predicts persistence
  o Organizational onboarding practices can encourage embeddedness

Evaluation & Needs Assessment

Evaluating onboarding
- Every onboarding program has tradeoffs between efficiency and effectiveness — and efficiency usually wins
- Program evaluation — often against best practices since onboarding:
  - often evolves organically rather than as part of a comprehensive and thoughtful design
  - is often highly politicized within organizations

Needs Assessment
- Symptoms: Look for high early turnover or low early performance or engagement as symptoms of inadequate onboarding
  - However, there are a huge number of variables in the causes of these symptoms
- Need? Onboarding is more akin to a solution than a need
  - Think broadly about what people need (and when) to be successful in a role, a team, and an organization
  - And ask, how—and when—is that enabled?

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References for all of the concepts presented are available from the presenter. Further conversations or inquiries about the research and evidence-based practices of employee onboarding are always welcome.