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Good workplace integration isn't just about new duties and responsibilities; it's also about helping a new hire feel comfortable with the office culture. Assigning a fellow employee to act as an "office buddy" can help.

## **Tips for a new hire's first 90 days on the job**

**Shelley White**

The first 90 days are crucial when it comes to a new hire. If the fit is right, it can be the beginning of a successful long-term work relationship that benefits both employee and employer. If the fit is wrong, it can cost a company a great deal – both in time and money.

"Turnover is upwards of 30 per cent in the first three months," says Christian Codrington, senior manager of operations at the British Columbia Human Resources Management Association. He explains that the cost of replacing a new employee is one-and-one-half times the cost of any new hire, because "you have to recruit and hire a replacement while the work's not getting done."

For small businesses, these kinds of excess costs can be particularly damaging. But with some careful planning and attentive management during those first 90 days, companies can avoid the three-month turnover trap and help new employees integrate successfully into their new environment.

### **The orientation checklist: A must-have**

Well before their new hire's start date, employers should put together a detailed orientation checklist, according to Toronto-based human resources consultant Sari Friedman.

A comprehensive checklist will ensure that an employer won't miss important (but often overlooked) details, such as informing the rest of the office a new employee is starting, or making sure the new hire gets the proper payroll information.

On their first day, employers should refer to the checklist to make sure the employee gets all the essential facts.

"Make sure [new employees] have an understanding of the things that are close to people's hearts, like benefits and when they are going to be paid," says Ms. Friedman. "You need to take care of those basic things first."

Ms. Friedman recommends reviewing the new employee's job description in detail that first day. Explain what it is they will do, what the people around them do, and the overall scope of the

organization. “And walk them through it; don’t just plunk it down on the person’s desk,” she says.

### **A workable workstation**

Employers need to ensure that a new employee’s workstation is ready to go as soon as they walk through the door, says Mr. Codrington – not the next afternoon or a week later.

“I was a co-op student for a financial consulting firm years ago and for the first two weeks, I had a chair ... from the lunch room,” he recalls. “I sat in the hallway and my desk was a bunch of financial management books and a phone they had wired up ... people are kind of chuckling at you as they walk by.”

Even the smallest things matter, “like making sure someone’s desk and drawers are clean,” says Ms. Friedman.

### **Structure the first two weeks**

Mr. Codrington suggests giving new employees a schedule for their first two weeks, outlining who they should meet with and to whom they should talk. Meetings with key colleagues can be scheduled in advance, and managers should take the time in the first day or so to personally introduce the new employee around the office.

Just as critical are one-on-one sessions with the employee’s manager, scheduled frequently throughout those first two weeks.

“You can say, ‘Monday, Wednesday and Friday in the afternoon we’re going to spend some time decompressing from your day and just finding out how you’re doing,’” recommends Mr. Codrington.

Employees are most engaged when senior management shows care and interest in their situation, says HR consultant Janet Salopek, president of Calgary’s Salopek Consulting. In smaller organizations, it’s important for the company’s CEO or owner to schedule lunch meetings with a new employee, particularly if he or she is in a senior role.

“The owners can touch base with the new employee and give them some really good history of the organization and a feel for the culture, and we know that really excites people,” she says. “It’s a good thing [to do] that doesn’t take a lot of time.”

### **The buddy system**

Good workplace integration isn’t just about new duties and responsibilities, it’s also about helping a new hire feel comfortable with the office culture. Ms. Salopek says a good way to ensure this is to assign your new employee a “buddy,” a fellow employee who can fill them in on everything – from where the bathroom is and how to use the telephone to where the nearest gym and good local eating spots are.

“Particularly with the young people, [this] is critical. They need to know where people go to connect,” she says. “But you have to coach the buddy and let them know what their role is and what the expectations are, because it’s an important role.”

Ms. Friedman says employers should select their buddies thoughtfully. “Be really careful about who you select to orient the new employee so they don’t learn bad habits.”

### **Don’t lead with the negative**

Although you may want to involve your new employee in all the team meetings, Mr. Codrington says employers need to be mindful of what’s being said, particularly during the new hire’s early days. Meetings about money-saving measures, restructuring or belt-tightening might be confusing for someone new to the organization.

“What you shouldn’t do is overwhelm them with the negative,” he says. “Help people interpret the information they are getting. Make sure the manager follows up one-on-one to say, ‘You just were in this meeting where you heard some talk about restructuring, you must have some fears or concerns, can we talk about anything?’ Just don’t forget your new person.”

### **After the first two weeks**

Scheduled check-ins should continue throughout the first three months, says Ms. Salopek.

After the first month, she says both the buddy and the manager should check in with the new hire. During the second month, sit down with the new employee and set their goals. Finally, during the third month, review these objectives and look at further training and development.

Providing feedback is also critical, says Ms. Friedman. “Don’t wait. Part of orienting someone is giving them feedback, letting them know if they’re meeting expectations.”

Although the first month or so tends to get the most attention, Ms. Friedman says employers should be mindful of their employee’s all-important three-month mark.

“It is much easier and more cost-effective, if you need to sever the relationship, to do it in the first 90 days in terms of avoiding extra costs and extra legal liabilities,” she says.

“Every good manager should have the employee’s three-month date in their calendar.”

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