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ONBOARDING DURING A PANDEMIC: LOGISTICS AND SETTING UP FOR SUCCESS

Starting a new role can be nerve-wracking as new hires try to absorb information to do well in the role and build relationships with new team members. It can be even more intimidating to do this in a remote setting. Getting employees set up with tools and technology, on-the-job training, and making the new hire feel part of a team is all still possible if we adapt our onboarding process to a remote format.

Logistics

Preparing the technological logistics of remote onboarding is key to making sure that the new hire's first few days run smoothly. Work with IT on what hardware and software the employee will need, and coordinate a plan to get the employee set up with the technology for their first day. If possible, test the technology before the employee needs it, so that their first impression of their new job isn't overshadowed by technology issues.

Once technology is set up, evaluate the tools and information that the employee will need to access, and provide them the necessary information and log-ins. Make sure that the information that new hires need is available electronically, such as an employee handbook, org chart, extension list, and training documents and courses. It's also important that new hires know where to find this information, which can be included in an email on their first day.

As we onboard remotely, it's important that new hires can access the communication tools that they need, since communicating through technology is their only option. Make sure the employee is set up with the required log-in information for the communication tools your remote employees are using including phone, video, email, instant messaging, etc. If you do not have one already, consider using a screenshare tool that can help employees show the new hire how to do something on the computer. This allows new hires to "shadow" their team members like they would in-person.

Lastly, you may typically have new hires sign forms, such as the W-4 and I-9. Consider an electronic signature or onboarding system so that this can be done remotely. Be sure to follow any current COVID-19 guidance for completing I-9s. At the time of this writing, identification document inspection that usually must be done in person may be done virtually within the employee's first three days of employment. When in-person operations resume, you or an authorized representative must inspect the documents in person.

Set up for Success

The main goal of onboarding is that the new hire will learn their role and become engaged in the work. During onboarding, there's an important balance `between keeping the new hire informed and information overload. As you train them on their role, make sure that there is training documentation that they can refer to later if needed. Different people have different learning styles, so try to incorporate showing the new hire how to do something, letting them read and absorb training materials, and opportunities to practice aspects of the job and get feedback from a peer.

As you plan the new hire's first few weeks, it's important to create a training schedule so that the new hire can see what their days will look like, and won't have to worry about not knowing what to do with downtime. As they start to do some work independently, make sure they know where to go with questions, since they aren't able to walk around to find someone to help them. Also, take the time to give the employee feedback so that they know that they are doing a good job or how they can do something better. It may take more effort in a remote environment than a casual "good job" in the office, but receiving feedback is an important part of new hire engagement.

Social Onboarding

An important part of onboarding is that the new hire has opportunities to meet their coworkers, whether it's through formal introductions, casual conversations, or team building activities. Social onboarding is still important when employees are remote, but may require more planning and coordination as coworkers can no longer casually stop by and say hello to the new hire. Before the new team member starts, make sure to announce when they will be starting, and their work contact information so that people can reach out and introduce themselves. You can also coordinate meet-and-greets so that the new hire will become acquainted with their supervisor and people they will be working with regularly. You can also assign the new hire a peer mentor who is also working remotely, especially if the new hire is adjusting to remote work for the first time to help them address challenges.

After initial introductions and onboarding is complete, make sure to check in with the new hire on if they have questions and how they are feeling about the role. After a few weeks, you can also ask for feedback about how onboarding went, especially if remote onboarding is new to your organization. Talking with or surveying your new hires can lead to insightful feedback, but be sure to ask specific questions. Examples of questions to ask are, "What part of the onboarding process did you like the most?", "What additional information would have been helpful?", "Are there things you feel we should add to the onboarding process?", "What's one thing we can improve in the onboarding process?".

Two-way communication and showing empathy is important as we are all facing new challenges together, whether it's learning a new job remotely or onboarding someone remotely for the first time. As we navigate the increased need for remote work, employers can recognize opportunities to improve the remote onboarding process so that it can be just as successful as onboarding in-person.