



Inclusive Onboarding for Newcomer Employees

A RESOURCE FOR EMPLOYERS

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About HIO

Hire Immigrants Ottawa (HIO) is an initiative that brings together employers, immigrant agencies and stakeholders to enhance employers' ability to access the talents of skilled immigrants in the Ottawa area. The initiative was launched in 2006 as a response to a growing need to identify and address barriers and challenges employers face in attracting, hiring and integrating skilled immigrants into the labour force.

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Introduction

Onboarding is the process of integrating and including new employees into an organization. Supporting individuals as they begin their employment cycle means providing them with the information, tools, and resources they need to fulfill their roles and become comfortable in the workplace. This can be a challenge in the best of times and can be doubly so for newcomer workers who may be adjusting to a new country. A positive onboarding experience is foundational to supporting the needs of the employee and of the organization. Research has shown that the successful retention of newcomers begins in this early phase of the employee life cycle, so investing time and resources is important for employees and for workplaces.

In addition to a rapidly changing labour force, over the last few years, organizations have faced many challenges in their talent management, including how to meaningfully onboard new employees with the rise of remote and hybrid work. While the workplace landscape continues to shift, employers are grappling with new ways to respond to some vital questions regarding welcoming their workforce, such as: how do we transmit aspects of our organizational culture in hybrid and remote settings? How can we foster a sense of community, inclusion, and feelings of belonging during the onboarding process? Some responses to these questions are included here.

The resource is organized into three sections: Onboarding strategies, a checklist and, resources and references. This structure allows for easy navigation and reference. Through out the document key take aways, tips and good practices are highlighted to provide actional insights.

This employer resource is the result of an insightful discussion with HIO's working group members who shared strategies on the topic of Onboarding for the Inclusive Workplace, with particular consideration given to hybrid work settings as well the challenges faced by newcomer talent entering Canadian workplaces. Additional research was conducted to nuance and substantiate the findings.

STRATEGIES

Pre-Onboarding Preparation

Onboarding begins from the moment a job offer is accepted. Initial interactions and preparations can support positive workplace experiences and healthy working relationships with new employees. Given more recent developments in remote and hybrid work arrangements, it's increasingly important to establish a clear onboarding process that considers both home office and workplace arrangements. Having and sharing an onboarding plan can be especially helpful for newcomers who may not know what to expect in a Canadian workplace.

Workplace Set-up

Ensure access to technology tools and other office equipment is ready to go on or before their start date. Consider both home office and workplace setups and consult with the new employee to learn about their specific needs.

Share a Plan

Prepare an onboarding plan with key dates and milestones and share it with the incoming employee. Include details of what to expect on the first day and first week. A new employee's first week should be carefully planned out orientation, including a mix of training, introductory meetings, and unstructured time. Inform them about the office and work hours, communication channels with supervisors and peers, coffee and/or lunch hours, and other informal activities. Encourage direct outreach to a point person for any questions, concerns, or other needs. Involve others in the process by informing staff members of a new employee's arrival and encouraging connections.

Good Practice

Initiate a pre-onboarding survey that new employees complete before their first day. Include a few 'get-to-know-you' questions such as "what is your favourite colour?" or "what is your favourite snack food?" so that you can personalize their welcome package and other onboarding activities. There are a variety of online tools available, such as [BambooHR](#), that can help with this type of survey and other HR processes.

Meet in Person

If feasible, extend an invitation to meet before their start date to establish a connection, obtain hardware and office materials, and respond to any questions they may have. An in-person tour can be especially helpful for providing newcomers with a sense of the physical workplace and for creating a bond with the organization. Be sure to indicate where common hangout spaces are and if there is a quiet area and/or prayer room.

Personalize it

Starting a new job is difficult for most people, and for newcomers, it can be even more stressful. Personalizing the experience for individuals can make it meaningful and even exciting! Initial interactions should be casual; make the first few exchanges fun and consider providing icebreaker activities such as 'fun facts about you' so that staff can learn about each other's backgrounds and interests. Prepare a welcome package and/or welcome message(s) with their name, a note, their favourite snacks, and other personalized goodies.

STRATEGIES

Pre-Onboarding Preparation



TIP

Put People First: Learn a new employee's name, pronunciation, and pronouns. If it's known they have recently arrived in the country, connecting newcomers and their families to settlement services, and providing helpful support and resources such as information about transit, grocery stores, or schools as part of the onboarding process can help them with the adjustment into a news community. These gestures can go a long way to lessen stress for newcomers who may be trying to learn multiple new things at once.

Key Takeaways

- Creating and sharing an onboarding plan with new employees is a good practice and can be especially helpful for newcomer employees who may be unfamiliar with Canadian workplaces.
- Personalize the experience by creating a welcome package and some informal get-to-know-each-other opportunities.
- Meet in person early on and provide a tour of the physical workplace, highlighting both collaborative and personal workspaces as well as common areas.

STRATEGIES

The Role of Managers and Supervisors

Some onboarding processes are standardized across an organization, while others are not. For processes and learning activities that are not, managers and supervisors play a vital role in shaping a new employee's onboarding experience.

Oftentimes people managers are the first point of contact for new employees. For newcomer employees, they may also be their first professional encounter in Canada. They may be unfamiliar with Canadian workplace norms and require some additional guidance. There are several ways that managers can proactively initiate newcomer and immigrant employees into the workplace. Managers can proactively play a key role in guiding newcomer employees to understand the nuances of workplace culture.

Share a Checklist

Provide new employees with a checklist of time-bound onboarding activities so that the process is clear, and progress can be tracked and measured. Make sure they understand what tasks they are responsible for. Ask for their input and consider recommendations they may have to improve their onboarding experience and learning goals.

Set Clear Goals and Expectations

The main goal of onboarding is to setup new employees for success, by explaining the key requirements of their role and discussing performance expectations. Align performance goals to the requirements of the role and be specific about different aspects of their work, such as timelines for work completion. For example, if there are hard deadlines for some tasks, be precise about what that looks like.

Initiate 1:1 Check-ins

Meet with the new employees early and often (whether virtual and in-person settings) to monitor progress, field questions, and take stock of onboarding plans and goals. Use the opportunity to clarify goals and expectations for working together and any unwritten rules in the workplace. For example, if you have an "open-door" policy, be specific about what that means.

360 Feedback

Provide regular ongoing feedback to facilitate learning as well as normalize performance management discussions. Be sure to address both strengths and any observed areas for improvement. It is very important to consider feedback communication delivery styles (e.g. formal/informal, written/verbal) and check in with new hires to gauge their preferences around this. Some newcomer employees may benefit from very specific feedback with concrete examples of their performance. When sharing feedback, offer supports (e.g. coaching or other relevant workplace programs) and check in about the potential need for accommodations.

Team Building

Encourage each member of the team to send the newcomer a welcome note and make time to meet with new employees one on one, and include this in their onboarding plan. Arrange for a team get-together, for example, a meal or other informal activity during work hours, or a convenient time and place where everyone can participate.

Managers should remember that successful onboarding goes beyond the initial orientation process. It requires ongoing support and open communication and feedback.

STRATEGIES

The Role of Managers and Supervisors

Did You Know?

Cross-cultural communication: Newcomers bring a variety of skills, knowledge, and experiences that can enrich your team and organization. They may also bring different cultural norms and expectations which can impact communication and learning. Take the time to get to know new employees and try to understand their perceptions and approaches to the workplace. Equally important is to understand your own cultural views and assumptions and be prepared to communicate them with employees. Try to see situations from your own and your employee's cultural perspectives.

People managers and supervisors may benefit from training on cross-cultural awareness and best practices for working across differences. [Hire Immigrants Ottawa](#) offers a workshop series on cross-cultural competency for employers, people managers, human resources professionals and small business owners.

TIPS:

Encourage newcomer employees to ask questions but be aware this can be a challenge for some individuals who either may not be comfortable being proactive with their concerns or for whom workplace hierarchies are intimidating. Inform them of who else they can reach out to for clarification outside of those regular check-ins.

Reflect on your management approach and your communication style. Be prepared to share these with new employees so that they can understand expectations and behaviours. For example, if you enjoy casual conversations with your employees and don't expect to be addressed formally, let them know. For some newcomers, 'small talk' and informal exchanges with superiors may be an adjustment.

Key Takeaways

- People managers and supervisors play an important role in a new employee's onboarding experience. In fact, research has found that when managers are actively involved, new employees are more likely to report having a positive onboarding experience.
- Be mindful of cross-cultural communication and take into account the potential for different perceptions and interpretations of information and experiences in the workplace. Be clear about expectations and norms around time and punctuality, communication processes, and the function of hierarchies.
- Meeting one-to-one with new employees is a good practice to establish during onboarding to clarify expectations and build rapport.
- Throughout the onboarding process, encourage giving and receiving feedback, with concrete examples about skills and performance.

STRATEGIES

Facilitate Connections

Part of creating a welcoming and inclusive environment is fostering connections among colleagues. Some newcomers may experience loneliness than other employees due to a lack of established social or professional networks. It may also be part of their cultural norms to develop relationships with colleagues. Hybrid work settings require more intentionality in creating opportunities for employees to connect as they may not happen as organically as when fully in-person daily. HR departments, managers, and employee peer/resource groups can play a role in orchestrating the following suggestions:

Relationship Building

Everyone in the workplace has a role to play in building relationships within teams. Facilitate intentional introductions among colleagues to new employees, especially when in person. Even when colleagues have met virtually, an in-person introduction can help reinforce connections. Create opportunities for staff interactions beyond work-related matters.

For example, include icebreakers in your weekly team check-ins, plan outings, and open up some events to include partners and families.

Coffee Chats

Immediate team members of new employees should initiate informal invitations to meet with new employees for brief 1:1 chats. This time can be used to share information about their role in the organization and share any helpful information about collaborations, team dynamics, and opportunities for development. This is a good opportunity to help newcomers understand unwritten norms in the workplace.

TIP

Provide a list of acronyms used throughout the organization. Avoid using slang, jargon, and acronyms without explanations, or make assumptions that everyone is familiar with Canadian workplace customs and norms.

Celebrate Diversity and Cultural Events

Inform newcomer employees about different holidays that are observed and/or celebrated in the workplace. Don't assume that everyone is familiar with Canadian holidays.

Also note historical or cultural celebrations or tributes that take place throughout the year that are recognized in the workplace (for example, Black history month, National Indigenous History month, Pride month, etc). Use this as an opportunity to find out about what newcomer employees celebrate and add this to your events calendar. Highlight your organization's leave policy for cultural or religious observances and accommodation.

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)

Ensure new employees can easily learn about existing employee resource groups or other peer committees that may be of interest. For example, ethnocultural and/or LGBTQ2+ resource groups, as well as common interest groups, such as gaming or book clubs, or lunch hour meet-up groups. Also, let newcomers know where and when colleagues around the organization tend to hang out socially.

By adapting these suggestions, organizations can proactively create opportunities for their newcomer employees to build connections, feel included and a sense of belonging in the workplace.

STRATEGIES

Facilitate Connections



Good Practice

Some organizations have a peer onboarding committee comprised of newcomer and immigrant employees who are prepared to welcome newcomer new hires. This can be especially helpful for navigating common barriers unique to immigrant experiences and creating comfortable connections in the early days of employment.

Key Takeaways

- Hybrid work settings require intentional relationship-building efforts. Extending invitations to new employees for one-to-one chats during their first few weeks is an important initiation.
- Team building activities such as icebreakers in meetings, coffee chats, or other gatherings (virtual and/or in person) can help encourage connections and foster a sense of belonging for newcomer employees.
- Providing a variety of opportunities for involvement with peers in the organization, such as Employee Resource Groups, common interest groups, and other events, will help establish and build both personal and professional networks.

STRATEGIES

Provide Ongoing Support

Onboarding extends beyond the initial stages of employment and plays a crucial role in the first few months and beyond. Offering ongoing holistic support is essential for helping newcomer employees quickly adapt to their roles, enhance their comfort, and increase their engagement in the workplace. Implementing support programs can facilitate their adjustment process and provide assistance in understanding Canadian regulations and workplace systems. By providing continuous support, organizations can empower newcomer employees to thrive and contribute effectively to the team.

Buddy Programs

Pair up new hires with a peer (usually a more established colleague at a similar level) with whom they can meet informally to ask questions and learn about the more subtle or unspoken aspects of the workplace culture. Sometimes pairing a newcomer employee with a buddy of a similar ethnic or cultural background or who has also been a newcomer at some point can be helpful. Consider also rotating buddies to facilitate greater peer networking and relationship building. Buddies are great resources for transmitting day-to-day aspects of work and for responding to questions that may seem too insignificant to ask one's supervisor.

Job Shadowing

When applicable, provide on-the-job training that has a new employee follow, observe, and work with a colleague in a similar or related role. This allows new employees to gain a better understanding of how their team and organization work together while learning specific tasks. Shadowing also creates another opportunity for new employees to develop a supportive collegial relationship in the workplace. E.g. Invite them to meetings where they can be introduced to stakeholders and enable them to build their networks.

Mentorship and Coaching Programs

Workplace mentorship and/or coaching programs are a great way to help newcomer employees grow personally and professionally. Pairing a newcomer employee with a mentor or coach (typically someone in a higher position in the organization) can increase learning and engagement. These programs can be especially helpful for newcomers to expand their networks and develop their careers. Mentors and coaches can also act as cultural informants to newcomers and assist them understand the nuances of corporate culture.

Provide Language Support

Some newcomer employees might benefit from language learning support. Discuss workplace language requirements with new employees who may need assistance and offer them opportunities to improve their skills. In most communities there are some government-sponsored programs designed to help newcomers assess and enhance their language proficiency. Employees in many workplaces use sector-specific terminology, jargon, slang and colloquial language. These can be difficult for newcomers and are usually learned over time and through experience. A buddy in the workplace can help them navigate these terms.

STRATEGIES

Provide Ongoing Support

Good Practice

As part of the orientation, discuss with newcomer hires why Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) is a priority for the organization. By emphasizing its significance, you can help them understand the value placed on fostering an inclusive and diverse workplace. Additionally, highlight the resources, training and support available to ensure employees have the knowledge and skills to actively contribute to the implementation of the EDI policy.

TIPS:

Some organizations have a world map on display in common areas with location pins or flags representing the origins of various employees. This is a fun interactive way to foster engagement and cross-cultural learning among colleagues.

Provide time and opportunities for employees to learn and practice language(s). Whether it's to attain full English language proficiency or to practice French or another language used in the workplace, hosting informal "Language Lunches" or conversation groups can help by providing regular practice and for learning the nuances of workplace 'lingo' in another language.



Key Takeaways

- Onboarding processes that include a variety of support programs benefit newcomer employees and tend to increase retention rates for all employees.
- While the duration of onboarding processes varies depending on the nature of the job, research has shown that it can take up to eight months for a new employee to reach full productivity. Support programs like buddies and mentorship can accelerate the learning and growth of new employees.
- Buddy systems and shadowing are good practices for creating informal and ongoing peer support systems, while mentorship and coaching can help with career progression and cross-cultural competence.

ONBOARDING CHECKLIST

Pre-Onboarding

Familiarize yourself with the new employee(s)

- Name: pronunciation and pronouns.
- Accessibility requirements or job aids.
- Onboarding process preferences.
- Language preferences (accommodate if and where possible).
- Extend a welcome message and an invitation to meet prior to starting date to address any questions and to provide a smooth setup for the first week.
- If you know they are new to the country, include settlement-related support as part of the welcome package.

Setting up

- Work hours and location(s), schedule, and start date.
- Prepare and send a Welcome package.
- Office equipment and technology tools set up for both home office and workplace settings.
- Arrange for a 'buddy' if implementing a buddy program.
- Arrange for a 'shadow' if implementing job shadowing.

Orientation

Introductions

- Together with the employee, prepare an introductory message about the new employee to staff, including some 'fun facts' or interests.
- Make introductions to immediate team members and facilitate 1:1 coffee chats.
- Introduce new employees at all staff meetings and via other communication channels used in the organization.

Tour of the physical workplace, including

- Emergency exits, entry codes, keys, etc
- Shared spaces and personal space(s)
- Washrooms (including all gender and accessible ones)
- Quiet room/prayer/meditation room

Tour of remote technology tools available, including

- Use of remote communication channels and their purpose
- Shared drives and folders
- IT contact person for troubleshooting

Organization functions

- Organization chart and communication hierarchy
- List of acronyms and their meaning used throughout the organization

ONBOARDING CHECKLIST

Organizational compliance, culture, and committees

Protocols and procedures, including:

- Health and safety.
- Hybrid work arrangements.
- People policies, for reference and reporting.

Introduce new employees to available supports and common interest groups available within the organization, including:

- Employee Resource Groups (ERGs).
- Staff committees or common interest groups.
- Events and/or celebrations (e.g. Lunar new year, Pride, Truth and Reconciliation, etc.).
- Mentorship and/or coaching programs.
- Professional development and learning opportunities.

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

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