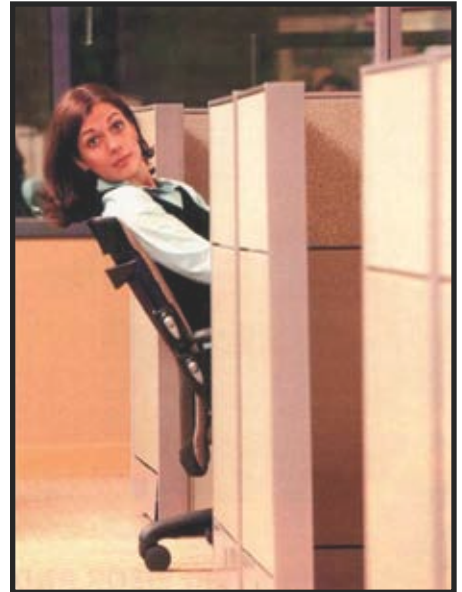


# Human Resource Executive

## Listening to the New Kids on the Block

Newly hired employees can be your  
best resource for improving the onboarding process.



BY LARRY STEVENS

**W**hen organizations want to evaluate their onboarding processes, most will turn to their highly experienced HR personnel. But a few are seeking to complement those professional assessments with information gleaned from far-less-senior sources: the new hires themselves.

"These are the people who most recently went through the process. They hold an important piece of the puzzle. They can be the best resource for us to find out how well

we're doing with new employees," says Carmen R. Schroeder, HR business partner at Noridian Administrative Services, a Fargo, N.D., firm that provides administrative services such as Medicare-claims processing and contact centers.

A few years ago, Noridian was experiencing some troubling inefficiencies when bringing in new employees. For example, some new hires had to wait days before their phones and computers were hooked up. In other cases, paperwork was submitted late or not at all, and obligatory background checks weren't performed on time.

It was difficult to pinpoint the problem areas because many different departments were responsible for the various steps in the process. So a companywide review of onboarding processes would have required wasteful meetings with multiple departments, many of which had only minor responsibilities for new employees and most of which were handling those duties perfectly.

So, figuring that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, the company decided to go directly to those most affected by the problem and survey new hires about 30 days after they start working.

Now, each new hire receives and takes a survey that uncovers, with specificity, areas that are working well and those that need improvement.

"By developing the right question sets, we were able to narrow down where problems were occurring and get them resolved quickly. It was also a good cross-check to see how the individual departments' procedures inter-related with each other," Schroeder says.

Jeff Hallam, a partner with Indianapolis-based human capital management consulting firm Exact Hire, says a small but growing number of companies are finding that surveying new hires provides them with data to pinpoint and eliminate problem areas, and improve efficiency. "It gives you some metrics and some definitive numbers on how your onboarding efforts are faring," he says.

Richard A. Sherwood, managing partner with Innovative HR Solutions, a Rancho Mirage, Calif., company that conducts employee surveys, points out that many companies already seek advice from employees, but they do so too late to make a significant difference.

"Most good companies," he says, "hold an exit interview to find out why an employee is leaving. They certainly help. But isn't it much better to get information early on, when you can make changes that improve retention much sooner?"

Onboarding surveys also detect soft issues, such as how welcome the new employee is made to feel—issues that would be difficult to gauge simply by studying the processes themselves. While the majority of new hires at Noridian did report feeling welcome once hired, a few gave low marks to how well their contact at the company maintained communications after the interviews and before being hired, leaving them to assume the company was not interested in them. In some other cases, managers didn't spend enough time getting to know the new employees and welcoming them to the company.

Zachary Misko, global director at Kelly Outsourcing and Consulting Group in Troy, Mich., believes such surveys not only measure the company's progress in making the candidate feel welcome, but also enhance it. For one thing, just the practice of



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# Onboarding

surveying new hires may help them feel they are respected and their feelings and ideas are important to the company.

In addition, by including a non-anonymous (usually optional) part of the survey, which asks about personal interests, managers can learn more about the new recruit.

"HR can learn about the candidates' experiences—both personal and professional—and use that as a way of getting to know them as individuals," Misko says. For example, his company asks about favorite movies, how many children new employees have, favorite hobbies and sports, and what motivates them. "These questions," he says, "help career managers know how they can properly reward an individual, among other advantages."

Hallam believes that, in general, the anonymity provided by most surveys ensures more honest responses. But other experts advise organizations to give employees the option of identifying themselves. Those who do so can be candidates for follow-up interviews and focus groups.

In general, new-hire surveys cover the period from the initial job interview to about 30 to 90 days after the employee is hired. While the specific questions vary by company, the surveys have two overall objectives. First, they provide a window into how well employees are reflecting corporate policy in their dealings with candidates and new hires. If the policy requires that an e-mail be sent to each candidate after each interview, it would be helpful to know how quickly that requirement is carried out. Second, the survey may indicate areas where corporate policy needs some tweaking. For example, if too many new recruits indicate difficulty making friends at their new positions, perhaps the company should consider throwing a pizza party for each employee at their 30-day mark. Or maybe assigning a mentor to each new hire will do the trick.

Most companies find the corporate intranet the easiest way to distribute the surveys, but a few still prefer paper. Regardless of its distribution process, however, the survey's effectiveness depends on its being anonymous. New hires, who don't yet know their way around the company, would be particularly careful not to say anything negative unless they can be assured no one would be able to tie the answer to them.

## Selecting the Questions

Each company's survey will be different. The Noridian survey includes questions about the hiring process to assess the applicant's interaction with the HR department. Questions in this section include the time it took for that process, whether the information the employee received was relevant to the position during his or her interview and whether HR was available to answer his or her questions.



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Secondly, the Noridian survey questions how quickly technology—such as computer, network connection and telephone—was made available (the goal is to be up and running the first day). The survey also asks about training. For example, was the new-employee orientation helpful and did it answer all of the new hire's questions?

And it queries about management/employee interaction during the first week of employment. For example, did their direct supervisor meet them for lunch the first day? Did they discuss the training plan for the employee? Did they discuss the expectations for the position? And did the executives responsible for that department introduce themselves to the new employee, either in person or via e-mail?

Beth N. Carvin, CEO and president of Nobscot Corp., a Kailua, Hawaii-based retention management and metrics firm that helped Schroeder create the survey questions at Noridian, says such polls should contain a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions. The former, which ask respondents to rate various aspects of the onboarding experience on a scale from 1 to 5, help organizations pinpoint the problem areas very quickly. The latter contain open-ended questions such as, "Describe your training experience."

"Once you've determined the problem areas using the quantitative data, you turn to the narrative responses to find out specifically what's going wrong," Carvin says.

Not only can the survey help the company improve the new hires' experiences, it can also make orientation more efficient by eliminating pieces that are redundant or unnecessary. For example, as a result of the survey at Noridian, new-employee orientation has gone from two days to one day. "From the point of view of executives looking to lower costs," says Schroeder, "this can be a big selling point of the survey."

Another change resulting from the survey at Noridian was the creation of an onboarding plan for team leaders and managers to use. "This really helps, especially in areas that don't do much hiring and so things get forgotten," Schroeder says.

## Boosting Retention

Wayne Vandewater, executive director of training at Applebee's Services Inc., the Lenexa, Kansas-based casual-dining chain, says surveys provide objective data that would be virtually impossible to get from informal interviews or casual observations.

"The only way to be sure about our hiring practices is to go to the source, survey new hires and evaluate the data," Vandewater says.

The primary purpose of the surveys at Applebee's is to improve retention, an important success factor as well as a troubling problem area in the restaurant industry, where retention averages about 50 percent. Applebee's first efforts on this front were to hone employee selection by implementing sophisticated screening assessments as part of the hiring process. Once the company was confident it was hiring the best people, it moved on to improving the chances that they will choose to remain.

Vandewater and others were aware that most employees go through a "morale curve": Morale is high after they're hired, rises during the first few weeks of employment and then drops off. It's at this drop-off point that people make the decision to stay or leave. Noting that some employees do this rethinking from the 30-to-60-day mark, that's when Vandewater decided to focus the survey. The goal, of course, was to improve the new employee's experience so that, at the critical juncture, more will opt to remain with the company.

To carry out the survey, Vandewater and an outside consultant correlated responses with the respondents' intent to stay. They found, for example, that people who

planned to remain with the company felt their training was sufficient to allow them to do their job well, that they were given enough practice time, that their manager's feedback was helpful and that at least one manager and one co-worker made an effort to make them feel welcome. Armed with this information, Applebee's began to increase training time and require supervisors to spend more one-on-one time with new employees.

The result is that Applebee's now enjoys much higher retention rates than most of its competition. In some periods, it reaches as high as 80 percent.

Despite its successes, Applebee's doesn't rest on its laurels. It continues to use the survey for new employees and is able to measure results, and identify problems, before they have a serious effect on retention.

An onboarding survey can also help HR become more nimble in improving processes, since the results of any new procedure can be assessed quickly. This is especially true for firms that are growing rapidly.

Take, for example, Oclaro. Headquartered in San Jose, Calif., the optical- and laser-components maker was created in 2009, already has 2,800 employees and is still expanding.

"Because we're growing so fast, we had a lot on our plate to be careful of. We wanted to be sure we didn't miss anything as far as our onboarding processes are concerned," says Agape Eleftheriadis, corporate HR manager.

Eleftheriadis says her company's survey, administered by Innovative HR Solutions at about the 90-day mark, offers transparency to a process that used to be rather opaque.

"Of course, we knew the steps we were going through in the onboarding process, but we didn't know how those steps looked through the lens of a new hire," Eleftheriadis says.

The data from the surveys not only provide Oclaro with information about what course corrections need to be made (and which processes are doing just fine), but it also measures the benefit of each course correction. For example, it discovered that a number of redundancies—for example, forms and interviews that covered the same material—had crept into its hiring process.

Previously, she says, "we wouldn't know if we successfully addressed the problem for months or even years. On the other hand, the survey provides us with immediate feedback."

Onboarding surveys are relatively inexpensive and require very few corporate resources. Yet, for companies that feel they may have a problem with new hires, they can shine a light on problems, point to ways to improve the processes and then measure the results.

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