

Hot new recruits feel abandoned

Many companies make a lot of effort to recruit the right executives but then demoralise them by doing nothing to help them fit into their new role

By Mary Braid



Chris Coe
Partner, CTPartners

The company made you feel so special at the interview and it couldn't wait for you to start. But when you turn up on the big day, all breathless, suited and shiny-shoed, nobody seems to be expecting you – or even know who you are.

The horror stories of new recruits were chronicled in a survey by a jobs website in which newly hired staff recalled demoralising inductions – such as

being left in a room for hours with a pile of videos, or being thrown the keys to an empty office with instructions to "get on with it".

The survey estimated that one in 25 workers walked out of a new job in a matter of days and other studies have reinforced the notion that many companies are very poor at induction and that much hard-fought-for talent seeps, almost immediately, out the front door.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's most recent recruitment-and-retention survey showed that 19% of leavers had less than six months' service. This is a huge waste in terms of recruitment investment and productivity.

"This is an area where many companies are least successful," said John Hindle, induction and onboarding manager at the HSBC banking group. "Lots of effort goes into identifying and wooing candidates and not much on helping them fit in. A lot of beautiful communication goes into recruiting the right person and then it's all lost.

"You have been made to feel special during the recruitment process – and then it's not unusual, for example, to hear nothing from a company until the day you start. There is also an implied promise in a job offer that the company is going to help you get up to speed, but often that promise isn't kept."

Induction failure isn't confined to low and middle-ranking jobs. Some surveys suggest it is common at senior levels, too.

A study by the global search consultants Korn/Ferry International, conducted in 80 countries, found that just three out of ten executives were positive about the way their company assimilated newly hired senior staff. Settling in took too long and many said it took three to five years to reach maximum productivity.

It seems bizarre that after going to all the time and expense of recruiting someone – and especially a senior person – that companies would miss the commonsense point that it is in their interest to get new staff settled and productive as quickly as possible.

Chris Coe, a partner with the global executive-search company CT Partners, said that, increasingly, a structured onboarding programme and a personal coach or mentor were part of the induction deal in the most senior hirings. It is recognition that senior executives need to hit the ground running. If they don't fit in quickly, it can cost a company dear.

Coe said a personal coach or mentor could be crucial. "Senior executives arrive all fired up and ready to go but what they need is someone to stop them going," he said. "The critical thing in the early days is to understand the new culture – to listen and to network. What you did in your previous company may not work here. An adviser can give an honest perspective on yourself as well as facilitating your introduction to a company."

Of course, further down the food chain, personal coaches and mentors are rare to nonexistent, but having someone to turn to in the early days in a new job is equally important – and companies that take induction seriously sometimes have a buddy scheme for new recruits.

The question remains, however. Why is induction still often neglected when it seems to promise high returns at low cost? Hindle thinks that some people mistakenly see it as a "soft and cuddly" process that doesn't affect a company's bottom line.

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"At HSBC, induction is the first chance for candidates to test the brand promise and our opportunity to build on the engagement created during the recruitment process."

Hindle also observed that he had never come across a situation in which a new recruit's induction was wilfully ignored.

"Often the problem is that there's confusion about whose job it is to do what for a new hiring," he said. "People are very busy. Everyone thinks that it's someone else's job. In many companies, onboarding and induction are no one's particular responsibility." Angela Barron, an adviser to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, agreed that while some companies were excellent at induction, many were not very good at all. She put much of the failure down to poorly trained line managers.

"Larger companies tend to have structured induction programmes but in many organisations it is left to the line manager," she said. "One of the reasons that induction is poor is that the general management and people skills of line managers are often poor. Since everything depends on the skills of the line manager, it's a bit hit and miss."

Barron said there was another factor in the high early-attrition rates after hiring – overselling during recruitment. Even the most skilled line manager will struggle to satisfy a new recruit who has been sold an entirely false bill of goods. In such circumstances, the "psychological contract" between a new employee and employer tends to break down very quickly.

"Recruitment is very competitive and there's definitely a problem with overselling jobs," she said. "When people get into a job, sometimes the reality doesn't match what was sold."

Again, that mismatch seems to be accepted as a fact of life by many people in business. A study a few years ago by the consultancy Chiumento found that two-thirds of HR professionals admitted that they were unable to deliver on promises made to new employees.

HSBC's Hindle believes that onboarding is getting more attention these days. But it seems there may still be a way to go in this area before many businesses achieve joined-up thinking.