

EDITORIAL

Employee Onboarding: Best Practices, and Challenges

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Defining Onboarding

Onboarding is the bundle of deliberate, organisation-initiated practices that accelerate a newcomer's early adjustment and integration into a specific role, work unit, and organisational culture. It begins once an employment agreement is in place and ends when the newcomer reaches a level of expected independent performance (Klein, Polin, & Leigh Sutton, 2015). Unlike the lifelong, person-driven process of organisational socialisation, onboarding is a finite one, structured and explicitly initiated by the employer (Klein et al., 2015), with a three-fold purpose: to provide the knowledge and resources for task proficiency, embed the newcomer in organisational networks, and transmit organisational values so behaviour aligns quickly with organisational expectations. Several neighbouring constructs are distinguishable, however their boundaries are not always clear and they sometimes overlap heavily.

Briefly, *orientation* is a short, often one-day event that delivers rules, forms and compliance basics and it has a life span of days, not months (Wanous, 1993), *Einarbeitung* –a form of job training– concentrates on task skills and may last a few weeks; for example, a machinist learns safe equipment use under a trainer's eye. Other constructs include *mentoring* which pairs a new employee with an experienced colleague

for psycho-social support and career advice and lastly *organisational socialisation* that spans the entire career and includes changes such as a move to management or a return from leave (Moser, Soucek, Galais, & Roth, 2024). Thus, while all five constructs aim to ease adjustment, onboarding is the only one that deliberately integrates administrative, social and cultural elements into a time-bounded programme.

The topic has gained importance over time for at least three important reasons. First, remote and hybrid work remove the classic learning that once substituted for deliberate entry paths, forcing firms to design virtual equivalents. Second, demographic shifts and cross-border mobility induce a diverse spectrum of new employees who expect professional integration. Third, many employees now re-enter after prolonged leaves—parental, medical, or overseas assignments—and experience challenges comparable to brand-new entrants. The literature labels this the re-entry shock: initial euphoria at “being home” dissipates within six months, giving way to frustration and identity strain before genuine re-integration settles in (for a good example of re-integration process model see Hirsch, 2003). In short, onboarding is seen no longer as a “nice-to-have” tool but a system for accelerating contribution—not only for new employees, but also for colleagues arriving from long stays abroad who must re-learn the very organisation they once left.

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Pathways to organisational performance

Research identifies several ways in which well-designed onboarding promotes both individual well-being and organizational performance. For example, employees enjoy lower stress levels and display better coping mechanisms, as orientation augmented with trainings equip newcomers to handle demanding situations (Ślebarska, Soucek, & Moser, 2019). They also experience reduced expectation–reality gaps, with Realistic Job Previews and other pre-entry information lowering the risk of the so called *Praxischock* (i.e., disappointment with, or the bitter experience of, the substantial gap between the acquired theoretical knowledge and its actual applicability in professional practice) and early job dissatisfaction (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Wanous, 1992). Effective onboarding also sharpens role clarity, boosts confidence in job performance (Lapointe, Vandenberghe, & Boudrias, 2014), and accelerates the formation of social networks (Calero Valdez et al., 2016). From the organizational domain, benefits include better employee compliance and risk reduction (Stessl, 2012) and enhanced satisfaction and lower early turnover intentions (Saks, 1994). Yet if the advantages are so clear, why do many employers still struggle to implement such programs?

The gap in the implementation

Building on the evidence above, which favors clear returns on investments, one might expect onboarding to be a universal HR routine. In practice, however, many European organizations default to “laissez-faire onboarding,” wherein managers cite lack of time, HR delivers only paperwork, and cultural induction is omitted (Moser et al., 2024). On the Romanian side, quantitative data is scarce, however we do have a 2019 baseline survey of 170 HR professionals across various Romanian industries (My HR Lab, 2019). According to this data, about half of Romanian companies (50%) had a formal onboarding process in place, while an additional 44% said they were in the process of developing or improving one. This

indicates that by 2019, awareness of onboarding’s importance was high – indeed, over 90% of HR respondents believed onboarding has a major impact on attracting and retaining employees, but actual implementation is laggard, with many organizations still working to establish robust programs. In most Romanian companies, onboarding begins on the new employee’s first working day (39% of companies) or upon acceptance of the job offer (36%), whereas only a small minority (8%) start the process during the recruitment phase (e.g., providing integration resources before the employees’ start date). This suggests that pre-boarding – while recognized as useful – is not yet widespread except in a few locations. As for the duration of the onboarding process, it tends to be short: 44% of the respondents reported that the structured process lasts just 1–2 weeks, and only 8% extend their onboarding program to around six months –By comparison, best practice often advocates 3, 6, or even 12 months of phased onboarding activity (Moser et al., 2024). Perhaps closing this practical gap requires a simple, memorable framework that busy practitioners can apply and action upon without major investment. The Inform–Welcome–Guide (IWG) triad provides such a roadmap and outlined below.

The Inform–Welcome–Guide (IWG) triad

Based on a thorough literature review of onboarding practices across academic and practitioner sources, Klein and Heuser (2008) develop the IWG framework, which translates newcomer socialisation into three overlapping stages —Inform, Welcome, and Guide— allowing organisations to move from intentions to structured action and behavior. The framework is simple, yet provides enough structure to inform and categorise onboarding practices according to their main purpose:

Inform. Start sharing essentials even before the contract begins. Send a brief role preview, outline first-day logistics, and point candidates to a short FAQ site. In the first month, arrange one-to-one meetings with the supervisor and team colleagues, run a

structured induction workshop, and give access to job-specific learning modules. Make sure the workstation, laptop, and key documents are ready and waiting. For graduates or trainees, schedule regular “on-the-job” sessions so they can practice tasks in real time.

Welcome. On day one, introduce the new employee informally through the company channels. Add them to the team’s intranet channels (or dedicated Slack/Whatsapp rooms) and plan a casual coffee or lunch during the first week. Simple team-building exercises in presence or virtual, reinforce the idea that they are part of the group.

Guide. After the first week, pair the new employee with a “friend” at *peer level* and a mentor or coach for more detailed questions. Hold structured check-ins at 30, 60, and 90 days to review progress, solve problems, and set new goals. A quick checklist or interview guide would help managers track which support steps are complete and which still need attention.

An illustrative case: DATEV eG

DATEV is a German cooperative IT-services provider with more than 8,400 employees and a customer base of tax advisors and auditors. The Nuremberg based company ranks as one of the top European software vendors (IDC-Ranking, 2020) and handles approximately 14 million payslips each month. Since the Pandemic, the internal onboarding program has been thoroughly reworked as to cope with the large and dispersed (read *virtual*) workforce. The result, described by Moser et al. (2024), stretches over six months and covers all the above Inform–Welcome–Guide (IWG) layers.

The process begins ten days before the start date. Instead of sending a hefty orientation manual, DATEV releases a sequence of ten micro-e-mails, one per weekday. Each message asks the future employee to complete exactly one task—upload identity documents, collect a laptop, review the payroll calendar, skim a short FAQ. The drip feed prevents information overload while making steady progress visible.

On Day One, newcomers join a live MS Teams event opened by a board member and the works-council chair, then choose elective breakout sessions on culture, security, or product basics. Polls (based on Mentimeter - a spiced-up MS PowerPoint used to create presentations with real-time feedback) and chat prompts keep engagement high, while the presence of senior leaders signals the importance of the moment. For those who need an in-person handshake, DATEV offers now a two-hour “Welcome Coffee” at headquarters on Day Two. Participation is strictly optional; according to DATEV keeping the event hybrid respects colleagues who live too far away to justify travel.

From Week 1 through Week 7 the same cohort meets weekly in “Onboarding Circles”—peer groups of five to ten guided by a trained volunteer. Each circle sets a small project, such as building a mock payroll workflow that pulls data from several corporate modules. The exercise accelerates cross-functional networking and demonstrates DATEV’s preference for self-directed learning. Formal support continues through Month 6. Every new employee is paired with a unit mentor and invited to two structured feedback rounds that include the said mentor, line manager and the HR department. The conversation mainly centers on role clarity, well-being and any roadblocks encountered; lessons learned feed directly into incremental improvements to the programme and are used as a feedback for the company.

DATEV’s approach shows that a comprehensive, virtual-first onboarding can remain personal, scalable (important for large corporations) and also data-driven. Reading practitioners can make leadership visible on Day One, leverage peer networks and circles and maintain feedback loops without expensive technology or large training teams.

Take home message

As one can see, onboarding is more than a first-day handshake; it is a structured, time-limited system that blends timely information, social inclusion, and ongoing guidance so newcomers—whether fresh employees or

repatriated staff— reach full productivity faster. The Inform–Welcome–Guide model distills this into scalable actions any organisation can deploy, even in remote or hybrid teams. Finally, for practitioners, DATEV’s six-month, drip-fed, peer-circle programme is a good example of pairing visible leadership with simple tech and regular feedback that turns onboarding into a strategic tool for higher engagement, lower turnover, and higher performance.

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