

Onboarding: Breaking in and settling in

“A good start is half way to success.”

—A Chinese Proverb

This is particularly true for those of you who have just joined a new company and wish to achieve long-term success and satisfaction in your career. This section discusses what you can do to make a good start.

What is onboarding?

Onboarding is a set of processes through which newcomers learn knowledge, information, skills, behaviours, organizational norms and values required to function effectively as a member of an organization. It is also used to describe the on-going process of orienting, socializing and engaging newcomers to ensure that they are able to make a positive start with the organization. Onboarding programmes may include a series of both formal and informal activities, aiming to speed up the process of adjustment and increase newcomers’ productivity.

Based on attempts of earlier socialization theorists, Feldman (1976) developed a model to demonstrate what newcomers are likely to experience after entering an organization (see Table 1).

Table 1 Feldman's stage model (1976)

Stage	Stage 1 Anticipatory socialization	Stage 2 Encounter	Stage 3 Change and acquisition
Characteristics	Setting job/career expectations which may be influenced by the amount of prior knowledge and social experience established before entering an organization	Breaking into the new workplace by participating in the organizational events, performing assigned tasks, and establishing networks	Defining and understanding the work role, mastering tasks, building relationships with other colleagues, and developing an attachment to work and the organization

Building on Feldman’s stage model, Louis (1980) suggested that newcomer adjustment was not only a process of ‘adding new roles to their portfolio of life roles’, but also involved a process of leaving a former role. Differing from Feldman’s overwhelming emphasis on activities newcomers may engage in after entering an organization, Louis focused on the newcomers’ experience in coping with surprises and making sense of the new settings. Specifically, Louis identified ‘change’, ‘contrast’ and

‘surprise’ as key features of the newcomers’ experience after organizational entry. He pointed out that individuals could not erase all the memories of former roles before settling into the new role. Therefore, newcomers were inclined to subconsciously undertake role change by interrelating with new settings and using previous experiences to manage surprise.

Feldman (1981) also suggested that role clarity, task mastery and social integration are three typical adjustment outcomes that reflect to what extent you are successfully settling in the new workplace.

Table 2 Adjustment outcomes

Adjustment Outcome	Meaning
Role clarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreeing implicitly or explicitly with the work group on what tasks to perform and on task priorities and time allocation • Coming to some mutually acceptable role decisions to deal with conflicts between personal/work life and to deal with intergroup role conflicts at work
Task mastery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning the tasks of the new job • Gaining self-confidence and attaining consistently positive performance levels
Social integration/group acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coming to feel liked and trusted by peers • Understanding the group's norms and values • Making a satisfactory adjustment to the group culture

Note: Adapted from Feldman (1981)

These three adjustment outcomes are often regarded as ‘proximal’ socialization outcomes in organizational socialization studies, proximal in the sense of occurring in the shorter term. Closely related to these are attitudinal variables (job satisfaction and organizational commitment) and behavioural variables (performance and turnover) as indicators of ‘distal’ adjustment outcomes, distal in the sense of occurring in the longer term (see Table 3).

Table 3 Successful vs. Unsuccessful adjustment

Successful adjustment	Unsuccessful adjustment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater knowledge about the organization and the team • Increased self-confidence • Increased productivity • Trusting work relationship • Accepted by the team members • Increased job satisfaction and commitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role ambiguity, unstable progress • Lack of confidence • Anxious and stressful • Lack of trust, unmet expectations • Feeling lonely and isolated • Unhappy, lack of commitment, and intent to leave the organization

Note: Adapted from Ashforth et al (2007)

What can organizations do to help you settle in?

While most newcomers experience some type of onboarding programmes, the formality, expectation and breadth of the programmes can vary considerably across occupations and industries. For example, doctors and nurses are usually required to attend long periods of formal onboarding programmes before they are allowed to work on their own due to the complexity involved in the work and the consequences of getting it wrong. Another example of the formal approach is when technical workers are required to attend formal training programmes to learn how to use specialised equipment before they are allowed to perform by their own. Those formal programmes are expected to ‘minimize risk by providing each new recruit with standard training that emphasizes the proper and accepted ways to accomplish things in the organization’ (Salisbury, 2006, p. 22). In contrast, some organizations prefer a less structured and less systematic method, where newcomers are left to the work team and learning usually takes place ‘on the job’. Under this approach, newcomers are provided with a greater control of their learning process. They learn the norms and principles usually from the interactions with other colleagues, and master the skills from assigned tasks.

Some organizations tend to accept newcomers as they are and newcomers are valued for what they bring to the organization, while others deny these personal attributes and ensure newcomers accept prescribed standards of membership. For example, in police onboarding training, new cadets are informed that they are no longer ordinary citizens and their behaviour needs to be strictly regulated. Table 4 highlights some of best organizational approaches used to help newcomers settle down.

Table 4 Best practices to help you settle in

Aims and objectives	Organizational approach
Reducing uncertainty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share realistic job previews • Provide a written, in-depth and up-to-date file/guideline on job responsibilities and duties • Set specific goals and clarify expectations • Connect orientation programmes to job roles
Increasing productivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide on-job training and/or work shadowing opportunities • Provide job-specific training • Give continuous and developmental feedback • Provide tools, facilities and resources
Building networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train line managers on how to support new employees • Assign mentors and/or buddies • Organize social events (e.g. welcome party, group lunch) to enable new employees to meet others • Help newcomers to nurture their networks and socialize with others • Implement formal orientation programmes

Note: Adapted from Bauer (2011)

What can you do to settle in successfully?

To reduce uncertainty and stress associated with onboarding process, you should learn about your organizations, job roles and social relations (see Table 5).

Table 5 Content of learning during onboarding

Learning areas	Examples on what to learn
Understanding of the company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational strategies, mission statement, values, culture, history, code of ethics, core business and services • Rules and policies: compensation and benefits packages (e.g. forms and procedures), health and safety guidelines • Housekeeping: eating facilities, equipment, parking guidelines • Communication information: key executives, key contact, reporting system, union representatives, help line
Knowledge of the job role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance review: when, how, when and by whom your performance will be evaluated • Work hours, job location, requirements, key tasks and duties, expectations, priorities, responsibilities and authorities • Promotion opportunities, career paths, professional training, role models, career sources and available support
Information within the team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both formal and informal power structure within the team • Unwritten rules of conduct and behaviours developed by the team members • People to contact for learning about job skills • Information on self-position and self-image

Note: Adapted from Jablin (2001) and Morrison (1993)

In addition to learning, research has found positive relationships between newcomers' information seeking behaviours and a number of socialization outcomes, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance, and negative relationships with work anxiety and intention to turnover (Chen, 2010; Bauer et al., 2007). The implication is that it is vitally important for you to engage in various proactive behaviours during and after the onboarding process. You should actively take part in those behaviours without asked.

More recently, Cooper-Thomas and Burke (2012) revealed a list of proactive behaviours that newcomers may take part in to make sense of the workplace and reduce the levels of uncertainty, which they classified into three categories, including mutual development (e.g. networking, boss relationship building), change self (e.g. performance feedback seeking, monitoring) and change role or environment (e.g. redefine job, change work procedures). Details are presented in Table 6.

Table 6 Your can-do list: Examples of proactive behaviour

Dimension	Examples of proactive behaviour
Mutual Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Developing work-place networks with your colleagues• Exchanging resources with your colleagues• Negotiating job duties and the methods of performing tasks• Building a good work relationship with your boss• Taking part in social activities organized by the group and the organization
Change Self	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Seeking performance-related information from your colleagues and supervisors• Trying to responding to situations in a positive way• Trying to emulate the ways your colleagues behave in order to achieve better outcomes
Change Role or environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Minimizing new role requirements to achieve a better fit to your current skills and abilities• Redefining the job duties and work methods• Testing limits by carrying out work in your preferred way and seeking if it works• Gaining credibility in order to have more influence• Delegate responsibilities

Note: Adapted from Cooper-Thomas and Burke (2012)

Concluding Remarks

Onboarding is a continuous process, and you are expected to become a functional organizational member by the end of it. Most organizations are able to provide various practices to help you to settle in, but you should also take the initiative to learn, and to integrate into the team and culture as quickly as you can with an eye to your own personal development.

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