

# Onboarding in the Age of COVID-19

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# **ONBOARDING IN THE AGE OF COVID-19**

*By Christina Hynes Mesco*

COVID-19 has complicated how companies manage their internal relationships. Businesses that have not fallen prey to the financial devastation wrought by coronavirus have often struggled to continue services in the face of disruptive closures and stay-at-home orders. Some companies benefitted from governmental aid and are only now starting to spring back. Still, others were fortunate to be tech-ready before the outbreak and agile enough to pivot on a dime. Businesses with a variety of backgrounds are beginning to attain some level of organizational health and stability, leading some to return to hiring decisions they had put on hold.

However, just as it appeared that the US might see the end of COVID-19 on the horizon, coronavirus cases are again surging at explosive rates: new shutdowns and phase rollbacks are looming. Many businesses able to seamlessly conduct work from home have delayed mandatory in-office work to protect workers and their vulnerable family members (even in areas where the virus is more controlled). Remote work seems like it will be the rule rather than the exception for at least some U.S. businesses for the near term.

So, what is a business to do in this digitally close but socially distanced age when it needs to onboard a new employee remotely? Placing aside the (momentous) task of completing all

of the new hire documentation and ensuring the proper devices and supplies are provided, how does a business integrate a new employee into a team and, most importantly, its culture, virtually?

Given the significant time, effort, and expenditure associated with making new hires (one Society for Human Resources Management study places the cost at 6–9 months of the employee's salary), retaining new talent is key. Onboarding is an integral part of employee retention: the need to quickly forge a bond with and engage the new employee can help ensure that your new hire isn't one of the estimated 50% of employees who leave during the first 18 months of employment. Onboarding in the age of remote work necessitates a different approach than onboarding in person. That means ensuring the employment relationship is successful requires even more forethought and intentionality than before.

As with any employee, be certain that you have very clearly and intentionally articulated expectations to the new employee, not only what duties they'll perform and the resources available to them, but also a clear sense of the company's values and mission. Below are some tips that are working for our clients and colleagues in several different industries.

### **1. Plan an Initial In-Person Meet-and-Greet**

Gone are the days of the customary welcome lunch, happy hour, or dinner out for new employees—at least for now. Nonetheless, video conferencing cannot compete with meeting your new employee in person, even if masked and distanced.

So long as HR permits it and relevant health guidelines are followed, put an in-person meeting with your new employee on the schedule. Be flexible as to meeting location, and opt for a meeting outdoors if possible, to be mindful of health-related concerns during this pandemic. You might consider, however, that meeting at your company's office would afford the new employee an introduction to the workspace and help communicate your business' culture and operations in a way no words can. The feasibility of an in-office meeting will depend on the particular circumstances of your business' location and whether a meeting can be conducted safely.

Encourage other team members to (safely) join the meeting or to schedule their own meetings with the new employee, whether it is in person or virtual. Those meetings can serve as a friendly introduction and can even be used to achieve a specific business purpose, such as training. Consider distributing new employee training and orientation tasks to more than one (trusted) team member so that the new employee can interact with others on the team. Whether this is done in person or remotely will again depend on the circumstances of your business and local public health guidelines. Regardless of where or how it happens, make a meaningful effort to ensure that the new employee feels welcomed.

## **2. Assign a Peer Mentor and Hire in Groups**

One company we know has adopted a policy of assigning each new employee a peer mentor. The mentor is a high-performing

employee exemplifying the culture of the organization. A mentor serves as the first-line resource for any questions a new employee may have. Those questions might be immediately work-related, or they might be more general questions that would otherwise remain unasked because your new hire has no established relationships within the organization and little opportunity for interactions with the rest of the team. The mentor relationship can help integrate the new employee into the social order of the team in a more structured fashion and more quickly than if the employee were left alone. If your organization is large enough, also consider hiring employees in groups, which defrays training time and instantly creates a sense of community within the group of new hires. The goal is to create as many meaningful connections as possible between your new employee and the rest of your team to foster trust and ownership within the organization.

### **3. Check-in Regularly via Video**

In this age, the casual cubical drop-in has been substituted with impersonal instant messages and emails. That means it's crucial that you be intentional with the frequency and quality of your communications with your new employee. Remember that your new employee does not know you and has little context for interpreting your written communications. That G-chat joke may fall flat (or worse). The friendly suggestions you've offered via email may be received as stinging criticism. The antidote can be regular video conference check-ins. Especially during the onboarding phase, the non-verbal cues (tone, eye contact, body

language, etc.) that accompany your interactions with the new employee are critical for ensuring that the message you've tried to convey is what is actually received.

Additionally, be cognizant of the fact that there is little space for unstructured social interactions that would otherwise happen daily in a non-pandemic office setting. Create space for more engagement, not only in a one-to-one manager-employee setting, but also with all or some of the other team members. You might organize a remote happy hour from time to time, or an online company trivia competition. Ask your employees about the sort of remote team-building activities they would like to be part of and listen to what feels most aligned with your culture.

These efforts can help ensure your new employee feels a sense of belonging in your organization. That means the employee will easily weather this period of remote work, and that post-pandemic (which is hopefully very soon), she'll feel right at home in the office.



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