

## **Orientation: Taking it Online and the Trend to Blend**

By Roberta L. Westwood

Depending upon your personal experiences, the very mention of the word orientation may invoke either great memories of being warmly integrated into a team, or may bring unpleasant memories of confusion, boredom or outright horror.

While new employee orientation has the potential to be a powerful tool, its contribution to the organization is often overlooked beyond rote communication of policies and procedures. How can so many organizations get a good thing so wrong?

While many organizations continue to neglect orientation, and fail to see its value as a strategic tool, the tides are shifting. Organizations that put a focus on recruitment and retention are realizing that they can't possibly achieve their objectives without keeping orientation on their radar screens. In fact, ASTD reports that in 2002, best practice organizations are committing 3% - 8% of their overall training and development budgets to new employee orientation. [1]

There is little doubt that an effective new employee orientation can make a difference.

Two often-quoted studies prove the point. Research at Corning Glass Works revealed that that new employees that went through a structured orientation program were 69% more likely to be with the company after 3 years than those who did not. Another study at Texas Instruments found that employees who were carefully oriented to the organization and job reached full productivity two months sooner than those who weren't.

Beyond these important retention and productivity indicators, orientation can play a significant role in helping new employees understand the business, learn about vision and values and how they are applied every day, and immersing new employees in the culture. Today, more and more organizations are recognizing the difference that can be made by a well designed orientation program.

Reflecting this renewed interest in orientation, in recent years two key trends in new employee orientation have been emerging: the utilization of online tools in orientation, and leveraging orientation as a cultural tool. This first in a two-part series will look at the trend towards online orientation.

### **Taking Orientation Online**

One of the biggest challenges of traditional new employee orientation approaches is that, for many organizations, there is often a gap between when new employees start and when they attend a group orientation. In some organizations with smaller workplaces and infrequent hiring, sometimes as much as three months can go by.

By being available to new hires from the get go, online orientation is a wonderful tool available to today's organizations to ensure timely delivery of orientation information.

In a recent survey of North American Online Orientation Practices, conducted by Westwood Dynamics, 25 organizations that have implemented online orientation cited the following top four reasons why their organization decided to put orientation online: [2]

- Improved consistency of the orientation message (100%)
- Ability to provide orientation to all employees, regardless of start date (96%)
- Improved timeliness (96%)
- Ability to deliver to a geographically dispersed workforce (75%)

Additional benefits of online orientation include: better employee preparedness, improved connection to the organization, support for the organizational culture, flexibility and convenience, compressed delivery time, ability to test for understanding, reduced workload for trainers, ease of updating and positioning for rapid organizational growth.

## **The Trend to Blend**

While it is still early days for online orientation, one best practice is clearly emerging: a blended approach that combines online orientation with face-to-face elements. Used alone, online orientation runs the risk of lacking the interpersonal touch that is so important to welcoming a new hire onboard. But when online orientation and group orientation are used together in an overall blended strategy, the results can be impressive.

### **ORIENTATION BEST PRACTICES**

*Research has identified nine best practices for new employee orientation.*

#### **Make it part of the recruitment process.**

Ensure alignment with messages conveyed during the recruitment process and weave key messages throughout all orientation elements.

Reinforce messages from the recruitment process and validate the reasons the employee joined the organization.

#### **Link design to culture.**

Ensure your orientation reflects the unique culture of your organization. Weave messages on values both explicitly and implicitly into the material.

Develop interactive activities to help new employees learn about the organization's values and immerse them in the culture.

A mascot or online guide can help to communicate culture.

#### **Design a process, not an event.**

Use a modular approach with a variety of orientation activities that span several months.

If you plan on incorporating online orientation, consider how your site can support other orientation activities, such as making slides from group sessions available online.

#### **Make it timely.**

New employees need key information on day one. Don't leave them hanging.

If you plan group orientation, develop a strategy for providing key information to new hires that start between group orientation sessions.

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**Keep it fresh.**

Develop a strategy to keep your program up-to-date and revisit the overall design and messages on a semi-annual or annual basis.

Online orientation makes it easy to instantly update information.

**Design something memorable.**

Be creative in the design of your new employee orientation program to make it dynamic, unique, interesting and, above all, memorable.

Develop a theme and use it throughout your orientation.

**Create a good first impression.**

Chances are the organization made a good impression during the recruitment process. Now follow it through.

Use a professional design and carefully craft core messages to make a positive first impression with new hires.

**Get executives, HR personnel, and managers involved.**

When designing your orientation program, involve stakeholders in focus groups and on your design team. As you implement, ensure that every stakeholder understands their role.

Provide training to managers on their role in orientating their new employees, and how to get the most out of the corporate orientation.

Give the CEO and senior executives roles, even if they are virtual - such as video quotes or facilitating real-time web-conferencing sessions.

**Design to be inclusive.**

Every new hire in your organization needs orientation, regardless of their role and where they are located. Include both part-time and full-time employees in the program. Develop a strategy for contractors that end up becoming employees. Consider other uses such as re-orientation and return-to-work employees.

Organizations that have implemented online orientation report the ability to make orientation information available to all employees was the number one driver behind their decision to offer orientation online.

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Sources:

- [1] Rebecca Ganzel, "Putting Out the Welcome Mat," Training Magazine, March 1998 (citing research at Corning Glass Works [1981] and Texas Instruments [1981])
- [2] 2002 North American Online Orientation Practices Survey, Westwood Dynamics

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