

'Onboarding' improves morale

ORIENTATION: A friendly welcome is key to employee retention

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After searching out the best candidates and enticing them to accept a job offer, companies may welcome their new employees with little more than a handshake and vague directions to the appropriate cubicle.

The offhand approach to orientation might work when jobs are scarce. But with employers struggling to recruit staff — and keep them from looking at other offers — organizations are reconsidering the way they introduce people to their new workplace.

New employees need to know how to use the phone system and where to get help when the computer crashes. But more importantly, they need to understand the organization's culture — and the faster the better, says Neil Crawford, leader of Hewitt Associates' annual Best Employers in Canada study and an associate in the human-resources firm's Vancouver office.

"People need to know what it's really like to work in the organization, and if they don't fit, you want them to figure it out as quickly as possible," Crawford said.

"There is a huge cost to having employees who are not engaged, in productivity and attitude."

Good orientation — recently renamed "onboarding" — improves employee engagement, increases retention and helps new staff become productive more quickly, he said.

Simple, inexpensive practices, such as initiating a buddy system with established staff and taking new employees out for lunch, can teach people more about the workplace's culture than six months on the job, he said.

"It takes individuals a long time to get the culture of an organiza-



Christian Codrington, a senior human-resources manager at Best Buy, credits onboarding practices with improving the company's rate of employee retention. JASON PAYNE — THE PROVINCE

tion, but it's better for business if they get it faster."

Progressive Canadian companies are paying more attention to how they integrate new employees, said Eileen Stewart, head of the human-resources program at the B.C. Institute of Technology.

"Organizations have always had some kind of orientation, but they're now recognizing that it's a process, not a program," Stewart said. "And it's more than just fill-

ing in benefits forms."

When new executives join Best Buy Canada Ltd., they get a desk at head office, but they also spend some time in the company's retail stores to get a hands-on feel for the operation.

The onboarding practice was launched earlier this year at the Burnaby head office and has already improved the retention rate, said Christian Codrington, senior human-resources manag-

er at the home-electronics firm.

"We wanted to help people immerse into the culture of the organization," he said. "We're making a concerted effort to ensure new head-office employees work in the store within the first 30 days, and within the first three months of implementing the new process, our turnover went down — it was so simple."

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