

Onboarding

How Much Should New Hires Focus on Building Peer Relationships?

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Summary. From formal mentorship and training to networking events and social activities, there are many approaches to onboarding new employees. But how much of a role should relationship building among a cohort of new hires play in this critical process? In their... [more](#)

Starting a new job can be exciting — but it's not without its challenges. From navigating new workplace norms to figuring out how to use new tools and processes, there's a lot to learn in the

first few days, weeks, and months. What's the best way to help a new employee get up to speed?



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While some organizations focus on formalized training or mentorship programs, others prioritize relationship building between new hires in the same cohort. The latter approach can help new hires feel accepted and integrated into the existing group of employees, lighten the load on senior employees, and help new employees build social capital that can benefit their careers in the long run. But our recent research suggests that in some cases, it can also seriously backfire.

Specifically, we found that while focusing on helping new hires build connections with each other can help them adjust to their new workplace faster, contribute work sooner, and stay at the company longer, when taken too far, it can also impede their ability to grow and advance. We gathered detailed survey and performance data from more than 180 employees over three years to explore the impact of building early connections with peers on various longer-term outcomes, and we found that new hires with a moderate number of strong relationships within their cohort reported greater job satisfaction four months after joining the company, received higher annual performance ratings from their direct supervisors, and were less likely to leave the company in their first three years. However, our analysis also identified a Goldilocks effect: Rookie employees with too many connections with their fellow new hires actually struggled to ramp up as quickly as those with fewer cohort relationships.

There are a few reasons that cohort-focused onboarding can exhibit these sorts of diminishing returns. First, while many employees are advised to network as broadly as possible, connections with new hires outside your core group may not add much value when it comes to ramping up in your specific role in the first few months on the job, and they can distract from more valuable activities. In addition, even new hires with similar roles may not be as helpful as seasoned employees who already understand the ins and outs of the role and who are more able to interpret seemingly contradictory information from various groups within the organization that may have different priorities and serve different functions. Newcomers by definition know less about the organization and coworkers' roles than experienced employees do, so in many cases, they will be less able to provide necessary guidance. Furthermore, excessive networking by new hires can become a distraction from actually learning to do their jobs, especially if it isn't supplemented by other forms of support.

On the other hand, there are also distinct advantages to building relationships with fellow rookies. It's common for new hires to feel anxious about bothering their direct supervisors or other busy coworkers about something that might seem obvious, potentially causing many important questions to go unanswered. Employees who share "new hire" status may feel more comfortable asking one another for help, especially when it comes to interpreting the sometimes-unclear signals that their new coworkers are sending, and they may even have greater visibility into issues to which their more-experienced colleagues have become accustomed. For example, if a plan for a new project is announced in an all-hands meeting and a new hire isn't exactly sure what the announcement means for their role, they may feel less nervous asking a peer about the project's implications for them than someone more senior — and their peer is also more likely to notice that the announcement left out some key planning details, whereas a seasoned employee might not even realize there was anything that needed explaining.

Given these nuanced considerations, what can organizations do to ensure their newest members get enough (but not too much) cohort-focused onboarding? We've identified several research-backed strategies to help HR leaders find the right balance and design onboarding programs that will benefit both organizations and employees:

1. Facilitate meaningful connections between new hires.

Traditional approaches to onboarding such as formal training sessions and support from direct managers and mentors are certainly valuable — but our research highlights the importance of finding ways to foster meaningful connections between new hires as well. For example, some companies encourage new employees to create internal profiles so that they can learn about each other's interests and expertise before they even arrive on their first day. HR teams can also create digital channels and other forums for new hires to check in, share their experiences, and continue learning from each other on a regular basis.

2. Encourage newcomers to balance networking and learning about work tasks.

Of course, too much networking can be counterproductive. Studies have shown that especially when it feels transactional, excessive networking can become overwhelming and distracting from actual work tasks, ultimately harming both performance and wellbeing. To address this, organizations should empower new hires to balance the sometimes-conflicting demands of building relationships and learning to get tactical work done. This means both helping employees connect more effectively and efficiently, for example through systems that provide information about other new hires and facilitate meetups, and explicitly encouraging them both to pursue relationship-building and to learn to fulfill their job responsibilities. HR leaders can also provide supervisors with resources such as sample onboarding activity plans and discussion guides to ensure both goals are getting their fair share of new employees' time and energy.

3. Define and track onboarding metrics.

In many organizations, new employees go through a standardized onboarding process with little to no follow up until their 90-day or even annual review. How can you hope to improve your approach if you don't know how well it's working? Creating an effective, balanced onboarding program hinges on well-defined success metrics — and on a team that's committed to tracking those metrics on an ongoing basis. After all, many employees will go through a honeymoon period followed by a sharp decline in job satisfaction and performance, so it's critical to continue gathering feedback even after the initial onboarding is completed.

To do this, managers should conduct regular pulse checks to determine new hires' progress on building relationships and acquiring key work-related skills, and then identify opportunities for support and adjustment accordingly. In particular, when it comes to networking, organizations can leverage digital tools to help both new and veteran employees track their workplace interactions. For instance, managers can provide employees with apps that offer weekly summaries of time spent with different colleagues in different channels, such as hours spent in project meetings, at social events, on different Slack channels, etc. Access to this sort of data can help employees and their managers reflect on how they're using their time, who they're connecting with, and where there may be room for improvement.

Ultimately, there's no shortcut to finding happiness and success at work. But with the right mix of tactical support and relationship building, new hires can get up to speed quickly, boosting long-term wellbeing, performance, and retention.

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