Turning a great hire into a great employee

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I'm not so sure when employee orientation became onboarding, but the concept is the new normal in many organizations, as labour shortages ramp up competition for attracting and retaining skilled workers in just about every industry sector.

Orientation and onboarding are not the same thing; in fact, using them interchangeably makes many HR specialists cringe. We're familiar with the idea of orientation, but even a modest amount of research about onboarding turns up a mind-boggling range of definitions, and no shortage of information and advice.

Orientation is the easier concept to get your head around; it's meant to share essential information new hires need to know, and usually includes a ton of paperwork. It outlines company policies and procedures and is generally not very interactive. Orientation is a one-time event, even if it lasts for two or three days.

Onboarding is much longer process. It could last weeks or months; some say the longer the better.

When I asked what a good onboarding process looks like, one of my HR guru friends told me that onboarding is meant to ingrain the company culture and way of working, and should reinforce everything the new hire was told during recruiting and orientation. "It should incentivize new hires to do their best work," she told me. "It should make them happy with their decision; it should develop, coach and mentor; it should turn a great hire into a great employee."

When I asked her how many trucking companies' hiring practices came to mind with that description of onboarding, her answer was: "Not enough…but many are starting to develop onboarding processes, whether they call it that or not." The bottom line, she tells me, is that onboarding encourages employee engagement, and engaged workers are happier, safer, and more productive than those who aren't; the ultimate payoff is increased loyalty and reduced turnover.

Last month I wrote about how through-the-roof turnover numbers never cease to amaze me whenever the ATA releases its quarterly turnover data.
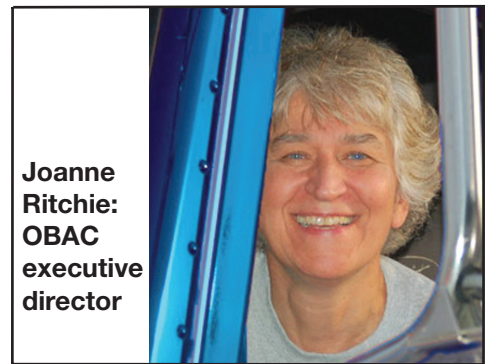
In defense of the CEOs who try to justify sky-rocketing numbers, I can accept the explanation that newly-licensed drivers skew the turnover numbers. Older drivers are leaving the industry faster than new drivers are coming in; with experienced drivers harder to come by, carriers are increasingly hiring drivers with little or no experience; larger fleets have more seats to fill, so they're more likely to be the ones hiring new drivers; it's those new drivers who are more likely to leave within the first 90 days of being hired, pushing up turnover numbers for large carriers.

This is why it's becoming increasingly clear that carriers need to develop finishing programs to integrate new drivers into the company, and be prepared for a lot of hand-holding and empathy as those drivers navigate their first miles and months on the road.

Trucking is by no means the only industry that struggles to keep new hires beyond the three-month hump; it's a challenge for employers in just about every field you can think of. As I mentioned last month, these early days are so important that big-name employers have transformed their approach to orientation and adopted bold new practices called "extreme onboarding."

Imagining how some of these practices would work in trucking can be hilarious. For example, one company has a month-long onboarding program, the first four days of which are characterized by games, skits, costumes, thumping music, and a limbo bar. Or how about the high-tech company that sends incoming employees on a week-long scavenger hunt designed to bring them up to speed on company culture and company jargon?

By capitalizing on the growing acceptance and popularity of everything online, many companies are leveraging cyberspace in their onboarding processes. One electronics company has developed an interactive onboarding computer game where new hires can select from game modules on industry basics, corporate history, and culture, then answer quiz-show type questions and get immediate feedback.

Technology allows companies to start the onboarding process even before the official first day.

A number of companies send new employees electronic welcome packets which include links to company videos, virtual tours of facilities, information on company history and core values, and access to websites where they can complete paperwork for benefits enrollment, taxes and direct deposit.

But ultimately, a carrier's onboarding process has to be its own, and it has to be designed so that new drivers are introduced into the real world and lifestyle of the company that's about to hand them over the keys. As my friend said, the onboarding process should reinforce everything the driver was told during the recruiting and orientation process. If it doesn't, don't expect that driver to make it past the 90-day mark.

Onboarding can be practical as well as glamorous; here are a handful of practices that could be included in any carrier's onboarding process: provide new employees with a list of Q&As covering areas of concern from previous new hires; provide a method that allows new hires to ask questions without being embarrassed; provide a glossary of acronyms, buzzwords and a who's who list of key people at the company; develop the capability to continue onboarding remotely using the Intranet, social media and teleconferencing. How simple is that?

Another nugget from my HR friend? The best onboarding programs start in the recruitment process. And that's another column for another day.