The Challenges and Opportunities of Onboarding in Remote and Hybrid Work
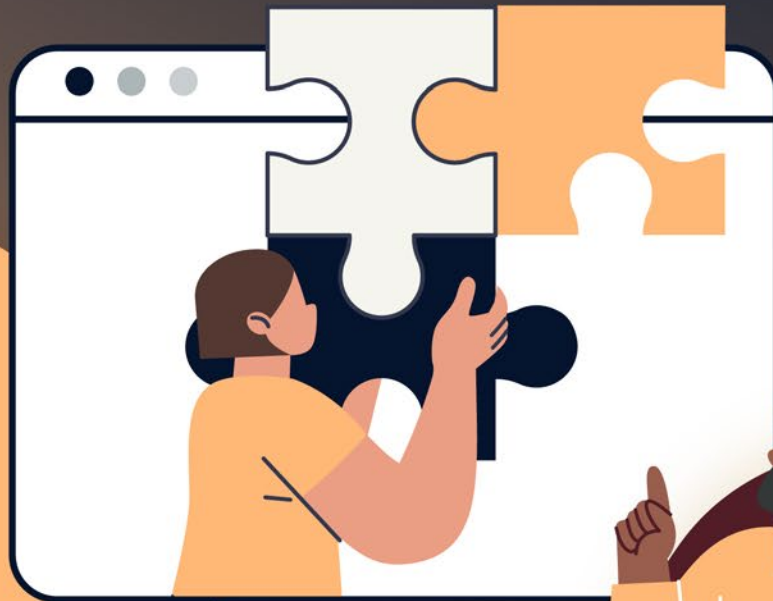
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Executive Summary

There may now be more employees onboarded remotely, but that does not change the core importance of onboarding practices. Employees want to collaborate and be part of a mutually beneficial team, which matches the needs of employers that seek cross-functional groups to meet the demands of a changed workplace. The struggle is for organizations to quickly achieve readiness for newly hired individuals and teams, then prepare them to meet their personal and organizational goals in an aligned manner.

More than eight in 10 organizations

plan to work in a hybrid model.
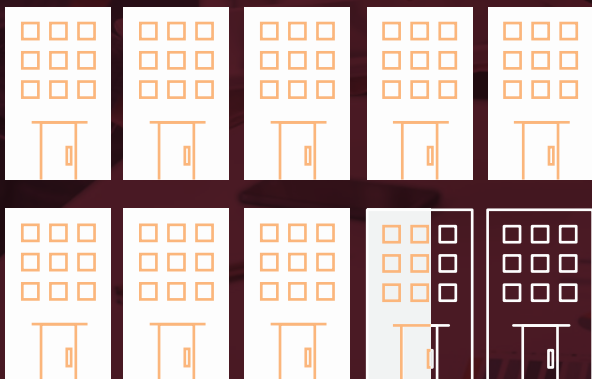
Almost two-thirds say at least 60%

of the workforce supports hybrid work going forward. Despite the widespread support for hybrid work, employee turnover is expected to increase in 69% of organizations over the next year.

Regardless of where onboarding takes place, the importance of engagement does not change. Assessments are one of the best ways to drive engagement. This is not just skills assessments but assessments of how employees are feeling, if they have the tools they need and if they can meet their peers and receive the training needed to succeed.

In all aspects of onboarding, organizations must think strategy over tactics — let technology handle the mundane, repetitive tasks and focus on the humanizing aspects of the onboarding process. Using an onboarding process that is adaptable, personalized at scale and able to create connections for an increasingly isolated workforce is not just a best practice for onboarding, it is the only way to ensure a successful experience for employee and employer.

Achieving Onboarding Alignment Begins With Assessments

Although the *who, what* and especially *where* of onboarding changed in the past two years, the why of onboarding has not. Brandon Hall Group research shows that a higher onboarding maturity level (use of technology, effective practices, linked to learning, etc.) positively impacts new-hire talent metrics.

For instance, those organizations with Level 3 and 4 maturity (the highest levels) are 80% more likely to see improvement in new-hire engagement than those at Levels 1 and 2 (lowest levels) (54% vs. 30%).

Engaging with new hires, especially remote workers, is critical. A best practice for maintaining engagement with remote workers is assessments on a repeating cycle during the onboarding cycle, which

can improve retention, proficiency and cultural assimilation. Right now, a majority of organizations don't use assessments as part of their standard onboarding process.

The challenge many organizations face when attempting to implement a robust assessment system is the time-consuming nature of those assessments. The solution is to automate continuous onboarding with check-ins based on a variety of date milestones (30, 60, 90 days, etc.) or triggers based on where they are in the onboarding process, then delivering assessments to take the pulse of employee sentiment, gather employee referrals (a great thing to do in first three months), feedback on process improvements and/or periodic skills tests.

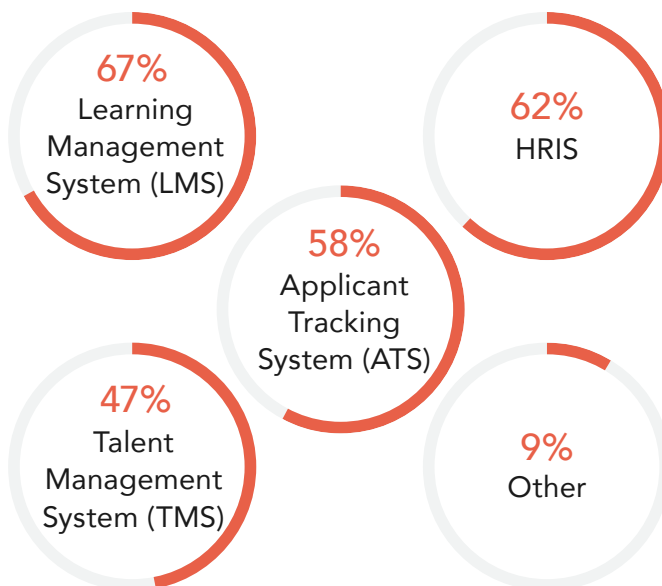# Onboarding Automation Leads to Onboarding Integration

Onboarding is one of the more challenging areas to automate because there are many other potential objectives, including document processing, assigning equipment, policy education, introductory career-pathing and more. A closer look at those objectives shows that some activities would benefit greatly from automation, however.

This means that a top-tier strategic onboarding plan requires planning, coordinating with multiple teams and systems, and the ability to report and fine-tune processes as needed.

The good news is that the most difficult part is setting up automated onboarding correctly. But once you do, it most likely won't require more than minor adjustments and can be easily adjusted for repeat and/or bulk task assignments.

Onboarding System Integration — Challenges in Data

What systems are integrated with your onboarding solution?

67%
Learning Management System (LMS)

62%
HRIS

58%
Applicant Tracking System (ATS)

47%
Talent Management System (TMS)

9%
Other

Source: The Impact of Strategic Onboarding Study
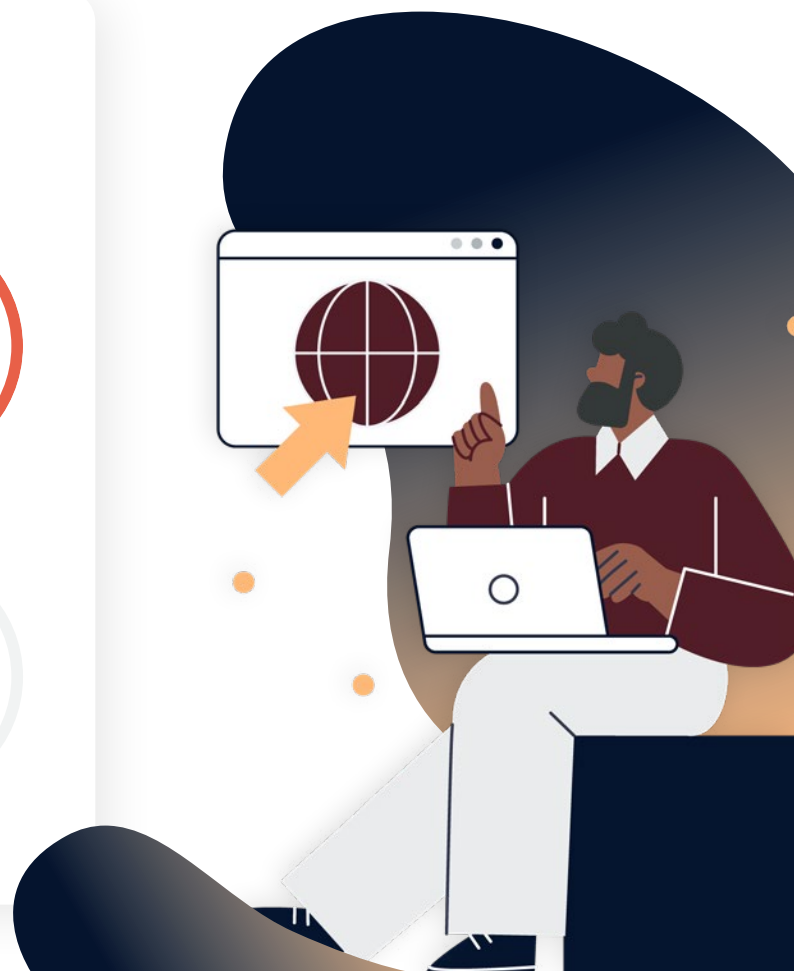
Integration with other systems goes beyond the administrative benefits of improved data collection, although that should not be discounted. In the eBook *Virtual Onboarding with a Human Touch — Creating Connection, Culture, and Community*, Nestle found that through integration and automation they were able to **"...reduce constantly recreating resources and programs, so by automating and streamlining the process they found they can start onboarding on day 1."**

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Virtual Onboarding with a Human Touch —

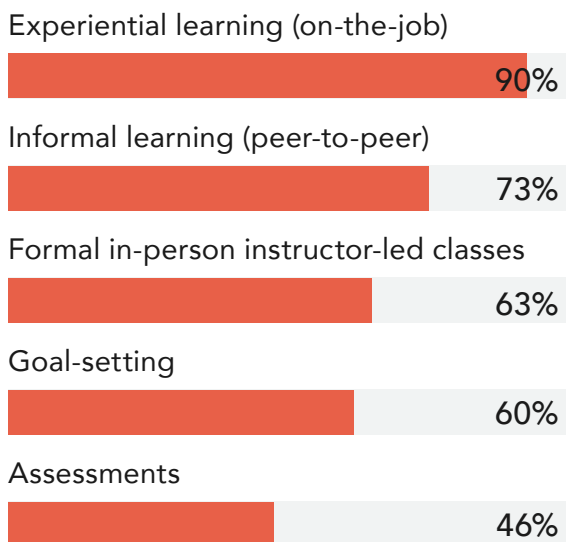Creating Connection, Culture and Community

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The employee experience is improved by systems integration during the onboarding phase. Think of it this way: If you just started at a company, you entered a lot of personal information. Every time you must repeat those entries, the more it feels like data entry and less like the new company is getting to know you. Ideally, the employee enters their information once and that data is used to personalize their experience, learning and onboarding journey, and makes them immediately feel like a contributing, valued member of the organization.

Connecting Onboarding to Learning and Development

Brandon Hall Group research has shown that while many organizations make use of some aspects of L&D, many others do not, and theres is a steep drop-off once the most common types of learning occur in the onboarding environment.

Top five learning and development approaches used during onboarding

Experiential learning (on-the-job)
90%

Informal learning (peer-to-peer)
73%

Formal in-person instructor-led classes
63%

Goal-setting
60%

Assessments
46%

Source: Brandon Hall Group

While nearly two-thirds of organizations are using some type of cohort learning during the onboarding phase, that still means about a third of organizations are not. Employees

must be able to make connections with other employees in remote/hybrid workplaces due to the sense of isolation that many feel in this situation.

Although this time in our work lives may be a period of stability — at least in comparison to the last few years — there is still an ongoing workplace change that organizations must adapt to — the increase in employee agency. This means organizations need the help of software and services designed and adapted for addressing The Great Resignation.

56%

My organization is committed to integrating onboarding practices to our broader HCM initiatives.

(agree or strongly agree)

Source: Brandon Hall Talent Acquisition Benchmarking Study

Connecting Onboarding to Company Culture

Indicate how important it is for your organization to onboard new hires (e.g., offer management, document, management, task management, etc.) through the following approaches?

1 Not at all important   Critical to the business 5

Organizations choosing 4 or 5

Offer management, benefit enrollments
and document management
76%

New hire feedback
67%

Assimilating/socializing new hires into
culture/values/mission
75%

Collaboration with others (Learning and
Development, Talent Management,
Department Heads, Managers, etc.)
64%

Product/service/job training
74%

Preboarding new hires before first day of work
55%

Coaching and mentoring
74%

Social networking activities
38%
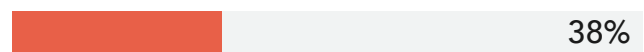
Source: Brandon Hall Talent Acquisition Benchmarking Study

The benefits of building processes that allow for social interactions — and having the technology that supports them — are immediately apparent when seeing that just over a third of organizations understand the importance of social networking activities when it comes to onboarding new hires. Imagine the sense of disconnection these new hires have if they work remotely and are unable to interact with their peers. In the other direction though, consider the case of Stanley Black and Decker, which saw immediate improvements in their onboarding process when they layered in social support systems with managers, mentors, coaches, people in the same function, and buddies all being part of the formalized socialization process during those critical first few weeks.

Indicate the level of importance and effectiveness in your organization for the following onboarding outcomes

	Critically importance (5 score)	Extremely effective (5 score)	
Increased new-hire retention rate	57%	23%	34%
Faster assimilation of new hires into organizational culture	44%	21%	23%
Ability to identify and begin development of high-potentials	43%	24%	19%
Shortened cycles for new hires' time to proficiency	39%	18%	21%
New-hire alignment with organizational goals and values	39%	27%	12%
Improved new-hire engagement	39%	18%	21%

More important than cultural issues or development is retaining the employees who just started. Surprisingly, this is also the onboarding outcome that has the biggest difference between effectiveness and importance. Clearly, organizations are having trouble getting people to feel good enough about their new organizations to just stick around through the new-hire period. This speaks to a fundamental problem with the onboarding experience, which will be helped by establishing a solid connection with an associate at work. Does your organization enable that?

Onboarding solution

*(includes onboarding/
pre-boarding portals, document/
task management, etc.)*

Not at all

Somewhat important

74%

Critical to the business

Source: Brandon Hall Talent
Acquisition Benchmarking Study

When examining the core objectives of onboarding, many organizations see it as a checklist of tasks that ends with the goal of 100% worker productivity. This is an ineffective mindset in the short term and can set a lasting negative impression on

newly hired employees in the long term. Ideally, onboarding should be a process that is personalized and directly job-related, providing a safe space to try out job skills. Organizations should aim for a standardized experience that leverages on-the-job experiences and cases, helping employees become comfortable before bringing on the human element of coaching and mentoring, then easing them into the workflow.

A challenge many global organizations face, especially if they are decentralized, is maintaining consistency in their onboarding process across different branches, subsidiaries and locations. One way to mitigate these obstacles is through cross-functional teams, either project-based teams or projects with social networking or ideation. This again shows a benefit of automation; the ability to preserve a consistent look and feel of the onboarding process without sacrificing any of the personalization that different locations might require.

Key Take-Aways and Best Practices

Finding the right mix of employee self-service and process standardization in the onboarding phase must be done on a company-by-company basis, but one consistent practice is that it should be a blend of approaches; a single one will not work. Other ways to achieve efficient, aligned onboarding for remote and hybrid workers are assessments in the post-hire phase, tools to support onboarding automation and data integration, and creating a peer learning system through informal or formal methods.

Whether your organization is purposeful about onboarding or not, the cultural impressions, connections (or lack thereof) and general feeling about the company are established in those first few weeks. This initial time at the organization is critical and has a noticeable impact on the new employee's expected tenure and productivity, sense of belonging and ability to collaborate.

Organizations must think long-term when it comes to onboarding tasks and find ways to automate the tactical requirements and humanize the more strategic needs of the new employee.

Find ways to identify and automate the mundane, machine-capable onboarding activities for a more personalized, humanistic onboarding experience and you'll ultimately have an effective process to onboard remote, hybrid and all other types of employees for a modern and sustainable workforce.

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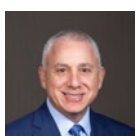
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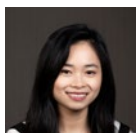
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