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Employee First Impressions: A "Mulligan," Please?

Companies can utilize next-generation HR technologies to positively influence a host of HR programs/activities—specifically, employee "preboarding."

by Cary Schuler, Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer, cfactor

I always love self-righteously claiming my right of a "Mulligan" as it's often referred to in golf. You didn't like that drive? No worries, just tee up another ball and try again…

Unfortunately, Mulligans don't work so well in our professional lives.

Case in point: making a positive first impression with your new employee. When you look at the large body of research available on the topic of first impressions, a consistent conclusion emerges: It takes very little time to form opinions about people and organizations. It is also clear that first impressions are remarkably persistent. Once attitudes are set, it becomes difficult to change them.

Likely we can all remember a time when we were in the new hire's shoes—simultaneously feeling nervous and excited. Wondering if you made the right choice. First impressions of an organization and its people matter. Good first impressions build trust and confidence. They are the precursor to positive new hire experiences.

Crafting Positive First Impressions
Underlying the challenges many organizations face is past practice—because traditionally, orientation methods have been mere administrative events. They typically include binders of information and mountains of forms to fill out. Hardly inspiring. What is truly important for your new employee is helping him or her "fit in"—feel welcomed, reduce anxiety, and start making personal connections. These are all vitally important factors in crafting positive first impressions that ultimately influence the employee's decision to stay with your firm.

How do you change the status quo? How do you start employees off on the right foot by delivering personalized, memorable experiences? How do you craft an effective program that:
- Creates the desired "first impression"
- Eases the employee's socialization into your organization
- Accelerates their time-to-productivity

…starting from the moment they sign on the dotted line?

A Role for Social-Infused HR Technology
We all know the importance of "real-life" experiences. Technology will never replace those. However, the latest social technologies are connecting people in ways never before possible. I often hear people comment on how many great relationships started exclusively online only to connect with the person face-to-face at some point in the future.

Next-generation HR technologies are evolving from mainly "back-office" systems to socially infused applications that recognize the value of the employee experience. This provides a great opportunity for organizations to leverage these next-generation systems to positively influence a host of HR programs/activities—case in point, employee "preboarding."

Preboarding
A new onboarding concept called preboarding refers to that span of time between a candidate accepting your job offer and his or her first day. Preboarding is designed to help with this critical phase in a new hire's acclimatization to your workforce—when an employee's first impressions are being cemented. Organizations rarely take advantage of this "honeymoon" period. The employee is excited and eager to make his or her mark.

All too often what happens is, well, nothing. Your new employee doesn't hear from the organization until he or she shows up on the first day.

This can change—right now. By utilizing HR technology, infused with rich media and social technologies, before new employees begin their first day, they can have an online personalized experience with the company. These experiences can be tailored to specifically reflect your unique culture, values, and way of doing things, while driving efficiency by ensuring your unique new hire processes (i.e., compliance and transactional) are kick-started as part of your preboarding program.

Things to Consider When Crafting a Preboarding Experience
Create the Desired First Impression. Use technology to get your story across:
- *Embrace:* Welcome e-mails; notifications; and an online, personalized preboarding hub.
- *Inspire:* Transform flat, boring Websites into interactive experiences by having your CEO/senior leaders walk out onto the screen to virtually welcome new employees to the company.
- *Humanize:*Pictures of colleagues, personalized messages, videos, and links to employee profiles.

Introduce the Company Through its People. Craft engaging and consistent experiences:
- *Explore:*Dynamic organizational charts with links to personal profiles, locate a colleague/expert that shares similar interests.
- *Contribute:*New hire communities, employee social networks, discussion forums, mentors, and real-time consultation tools (i.e., Instant Message).
- *Engage:*Interactive learning experiences driven through:
  1. Personalized information—learn about your organization, branch, leaders, and location based on specific job/position.
  2. Interactive topics (i.e., history, values, culture, products) introduced and explained by people using videos, conversation, real-time chat.
  3. Compelling content (i.e. ,multimedia product videos, wikis explaining company lingo, FAQs).

Accelerate Time to Productivity. Impact this key metric even before the employee's first day:
- *Guide:*Provide a list of suggested activities before an employee's first day (i.e., complete his or her personal profile, browse work communities, review benefits information), tell him or her what to expect during the first week and first year.
- *Automate:*Deliver linkages to the ATS, payroll, benefits, IT, and related systems.
- *Self-Serve:*Leverage a new hire survey enabling the employee to submit required information via integrated self-service processes.

Can It Work?
Even when voluntary, new employees are highly motivated to participate in an effective preboarding experience.

For example, DeVry Inc. uses a sophisticated online preboarding solution to support its goal of being an employer of choice in the educational services industry. As a result:
- Some 74 percent of its eligible employees voluntarily access the preboarding solution.
- 71 minutes is the average amount of time employees spend on the preboarding site.

As with all aspects of employee management, HR technology choices and preboarding/onboarding initiatives need to be considered as components that align to larger corporate goals.

So, now I ask you this: Did I make a positive first impression? Did these perspectives give you a fresh, practical approach to leveraging technology to develop a compelling new hire experience?
I hope I did as I'm pretty sure I don't get a Mulligan!

Cary Schuler is a co-founder and the chief executive officer of cfactor. Since its founding in 1999, Saskatchewan, Canada-based cfactor has rapidly expanded its operations currently servicing clients across North America. Prior to serving as cfactor's CEO, Schuler held progressively senior roles in health-care management, culminating with his appointment to the role of CEO of an 11-facility health region. Schuler possesses a Master's of Business Administration (University of British Columbia/Rotterdam School of Management) and Bachelor of Commerce Degree (University of Saskatchewan).For more information, visit www.cfactorworks.com.