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How to onboard new staff virtually

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It's easy to organise for a courier to send your new recruit a welcome package, but how can you help them feel connected to your workplace when all staff are working remotely?

Katie is due to start a new job this Friday. It's a dream role of hers. So when she found out she'd be starting her new job from her living room, she was a little disappointed.

"In my previous job, I worked remotely at the start. So I don't feel nervous having my first day working from a different location, but I was excited at the prospect of going into a new workplace, mingling with the team and learning in-person. I even had my first day outfit planned!"

In between leaving her last job and starting her new one, Katie had planned to leave Sydney for a holiday back home with her parents in central western NSW. When she got there, COVID-19 cases spiked and Katie, who is immunocompromised, made the call it was safer to stay put.

"I contacted my new manager and asked about their working from home policy. I was met with a supporting and understanding email reassuring me that working from the bush is not an issue."

If anything, her experience has been remarkably well-handled. She received calls from the office manager, the head of HR and her direct manager. And she received an onboarding bundle a whole week before she's due to start.

"They've also sent me links to readings about their day-to-day processes to give me background on the organisation, so I don't feel green coming into the role.

"It is a very strange time. I'm lucky to work in communications - mostly everything can be done online. So I suppose it will be more of a case of physical distancing rather than social distancing."

Earlier this week *HRM* wrote about [virtual job interviews](#) in a time of COVID-19. This article is about the next stage of the employment journey: virtual onboarding. We spoke with two experts about how it's done.

The article is split into sections:

1. Before they start and early days
2. Onboarding principles and the first weeks
3. The personality challenge
4. Creating community
5. Onboarding risks

1. Before they start and early days

If you're making an investment in a new hire during these uncertain times, it's more important than ever that you get onboarding right. You want to counteract the negativity that's swirling around them as much as you can, and maximise the 'employee honeymoon' and minimise the 'hangover' (see *HRM's* [article](#) on interesting research on that topic).

First things first, you need to readjust your own expectations. It's going to take them longer to add value to your team as they're missing out on face-to-face, on-the-job learning and the social nuances of your workplace. But there's opportunity in this.

"The new starter can fully immerse themselves in learning and reading all the materials. They can *really* focus on the induction rather than having to also do the job [right away]," says Karen Gately, founder of HR consultancy firm Corporate Dojo.

"We need to be practical and sensible. As soon we start to pay someone, we need to be moving forward in extracting value, but let's just be real about what it's really going to take to get people there."

It's the give a little, get a little mentality. Allowing virtual staff more time to get up to speed upfront should make them a loyal and long-term employee down the line. Also, if they've had a good onboarding experience, they're more likely to work harder for you when times are tough.

"You need to have credits in the bank. People remember how you made them feel. If they feel welcomed and looked after in those first weeks, despite having very little contact, they'll remember that reasonableness. In contrast, if they feel disconnected or hard done by, they'll feel ripped off," says Gately.

Alex Hattingh, chief people officer at Employment Hero, says she'd double the time spent onboarding a staff member in person when doing it online.

"You're probably taking it from two weeks to a month," she says.

"Go overboard as opposed to underboard. Have them join extra team meetings and make sure managers alleviate any pressure they might normally put on someone new. "

Hattingh says it's also going to take HR leaders twice as long to put together an induction strategy when considering all the adjustments and tweaks that need to be made. So plan for that too.

2. Onboarding principles and the first weeks

It's simple advice, but Gately encourages people to think about the fundamentals of why we have onboarding processes in the first place. In her opinion, there are three main reasons:

1. To give them the information they need
2. To help them feel a sense of belonging
3. To help them build relationships with colleagues

"We just need to think about how to deliver some, if not all, of that experience through other means. For example, one-on-one or team meetings can continue by leveraging video conferencing platforms. And things like a buddy system can continue in the virtual world. Just encourage buddies to be both reactive and proactive with their communication.

"What matters most is that you continue to demonstrate your commitment to that person and express empathy for how disconnected they might be feeling."

Hattingh adds: "It's going to be confronting for the new starter when introducing them in your team meetings. So give them plenty of one-on-one time with the teams they're going to be working with. There's also value in having them join the virtual meetings of other teams, so they can get to know what everyone else does."

But you don't want to overdo it.

"People don't need a 'hook back in' every hour to make sure we're focussed. That's just counterproductive," says Gately.

Hattingh suggests scheduling downtime between each virtual meeting and encouraging the new starter to use this time to decompress and take notes, perhaps including any visual cues that will help them to become familiar with their colleagues' faces. This will make it easier for them to more quickly contribute to the frenetic pace of video meetings - where faces can flash on and off the screen in seconds - and it will also be beneficial when they finally do meet colleagues in person.

Gately suggests passing on all information to your new hire well before you actually schedule calls with them during the early days. That way the conversation can be more high-value, as it will be focussed on their questions.

"It's difficult getting information over the phone. If it's just something you have to learn and aren't excited about it, it can be very hard to connect with it and absorb. So when it comes to those educational aspects of onboarding, mix it up a little so the participant has to engage."

Hattingh seconds this and also says it's of utmost importance that people are provided with all the materials discussed during the meeting, so they can look back over a PowerPoint or document that was mentioned.

3. The personality challenge

When someone new joins your physical office, it becomes apparent pretty quickly what kind of person they are. You can more immediately detect what people are confident and shy about when you see them engage with the task in person. In the online world, it's much harder to get a read on people.

Gately suggests HR leaders spend more time upfront learning about the personality traits of your new hires, perhaps even in the recruitment stages.

"The more introverted people of the world are doing a happy dance right now. They might be thinking, 'Great, I can catch up, I can take a breath. I don't have as many distractions'. And there's real value in that for the business and individuals. But of course, more extroverted people might feel like they're in a mini-hell. As leaders, if we understand the people within our workforce we're able to be flexible and know what's required to support each of them."

Gately suggests HR put together a toolkit for their leadership teams which outlines the typical personality archetypes, and go beyond just listing people as introverts or extroverts. When you know more about the person, you can put together some personalised strategies to support them. There are plenty of different personality tests online which might be helpful.

4. Creating community

Hattingh says individual teams can quickly foster a sense of belonging with their new colleague as they're helping train them, working with them on similar projects and getting familiar through daily meetings. It's the sense of belonging with the wider workplace community that HR needs to facilitate.

In her workplace, they have three virtual social groups that are completely voluntary to join:

- A 10am morning coffee/tea catch-up
- A 12pm lunch catch up
- And a sundown chat at the end of the day

"Anyone in the company can dial in at any given time. This morning we had four people join our coffee catch up. Sometimes you'll get 20-30 people joining. People get more comfortable with these things as time goes on. So for us, it's really important that our new starters jump into those."

Like many other companies, Hattingh's workplace is also thinking about how to transfer the sense of office fun into the virtual office. She says some small things they're doing include online competitions and themed meetings.

“This Friday it’s ‘wear your favourite sports gear’ and our CEO will pick a winner.”

5. Onboarding risks

If the dramatic impacts of COVID-19 continue for months, getting that sense of connection between a new hire and the business wrong in the early days can be damaging when people return to the workplace, says Gately.

“You don’t want them to finally arrive back at your workplace and feel like they don’t really know who their colleagues are or that they only occasionally heard from HR. There’s so much potential lost there. And it can be damaging for the culture.”

But it’s also easy to get swept up in trying to make a new hire feel comfortable and part of the wider team and forget about adequate training.

“New starters won’t have that face-to-face ‘on the job’ training when working remotely. So you need to make sure people have the appropriate level of supervision if they’re taking on something complex,” says Gately.

Hattingh reiterates that onboarding is just going to take longer in today’s circumstances. And it’s crucial all stakeholders, including leadership and a new starter’s colleagues, know that.

“When we finally get back to normal, and unfortunately none of us know when that’s going to be, you want your new hire to feel as much part of the team as if they’d started in person.”
