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Welcome to the jungle? How good is your firm's on-boarding process?

It's challenging enough finding the perfect candidate and securing their job acceptance. But firms need to do more if they want to prevent their new employees seeking an early exit.

Induction/on-boarding processes at law firms are highly variable, with many firms failing to make a good impression on their new employees despite the benefits it could bring to loyalty, engagement and retention rates. Some firms are so bad, in fact, that new joiners seem to receive very little information at all, let alone proper introductions to colleagues or relevant training.

This is according to a survey Totum recently conducted on law firm induction/on-boarding processes. The research was conducted in May 2016 via an online survey and conversations with a variety of employees across all sizes of UK law firm.

Of those responding to the survey, the majority (55%) considered their firm's induction processes to be 'satisfactory', 30% rated them as 'good', and 5% considered their induction to be 'excellent'. On the other hand, 10% described them as non-existent.

Given some of the feedback received, however, you'd be forgiven for thinking the bar must be set quite low. A number of respondents, for example, described experiences in which they received no introductions at all, had to organise their own induction meetings, got no training and weren't given even the most basic information on the firm and/or its team structure.

On a positive note, it was really noticeable where firms stood out. One firm (described as the 'smallest' of several law firms the candidate had worked at) was described as not being able to do enough 'buddies, diary planned with meetings before I joined, HR walking by asking if all was well, full IT kit available from day one, tour of the building, etc.'. The respondent went on to suggest other firms could do so much better without too much additional cost 'it just takes people who care'.

So, what are the specifics of the induction process that some firms are doing better than others?

Communication from the get-go

At first glance, it looks like firms are doing quite well in terms of keeping in touch with new employees between offering them the job and their first day. No fewer than 90% of firms sent some form of communication before the employee joined. However, on closer analysis, the vast majority (94%) were merely requests from HR for personal details.

After that, reports were less impressive '56% received information about joining the firm and what to expect, and 44% were invited to meet the team and/or attend a social event. Some (albeit a minority) got

nothing at all ? they described having to send their own emails to ask queries and set up their own meetings. Several specifically cited communication before starting as an area that they would like to see firms improve.

Settling-in

Thankfully, firms seem to make more of an effort once the employee starts. Most respondents (80%) received an induction pack, attended a team lunch or other get-to-know event (70%) and/or got a tour of the firm (60%). Nearly half (45%) also received invitations to meet senior management.

What is concerning, however, is that only 30% seemed to have received any one-to-one training and just a quarter of respondents enjoyed a hand-over period with a previous employee in the role. Some (10%) received none of the above ? not even an induction pack! When asked to name one thing they would improve about their firm?s induction process, one respondent said, ?Just one thing? Needs a total overhaul??. Another suggested an improvement would be to ?explain company structure and different teams and meet various people?; a further one asked for ?brief introductory training?.

Surely telling employees about the firm they?re working for, and offering just a bit of training, are the bare minimum firms should be offering by way of helping employees settle in?

A better way

If there was one thing that many respondents suggested as a possible improvement to induction processes, it was a ?buddy system?. They were included in descriptions of the best processes, and cited frequently in the suggestions for improvement. ?Assign a buddy rather than let new employees figure everything out by themselves,? said one respondent.

There?s clearly a real need to make induction processes more personal ? if not a buddy, respondents asked for more tailored and interactive training that properly reflects what the person will be doing. Some clearly felt unsupported, having to find out critical information for themselves, make their own introductions and pick up how to use bespoke systems on the job.

Firms will be pleased to hear that half of respondents claimed to have settled into their roles within six months. An additional and impressive 40% said they felt settled in their new firm within a month. But 10% are still waiting after six months. That?s 10% of your new workforce that is unlikely to feel engaged and may well already be looking to move on.

Interestingly, three-quarters of respondents were never given any opportunity to share feedback with their firm on their induction experience. What?s the bet that?s because it?s feedback firms would rather not hear?

Sadly, a disinterest in knowing what employees think also suggests this is an area that firms are not prioritising for improvement. The fact is, though, that firms could do more in this area without considerable cost.

Our tips for on-boarding success

- Recruitment processes may be getting more automated ? but that doesn?t mean you can discard the personal touch. A note to say that you?re delighted a candidate has accepted your offer costs nothing

and we've seen first-hand what a difference it can make.

- Good candidates often have three month notice periods ? that's a long time for them to change their mind. A team lunch or other get-together with new colleagues in this period will help keep them hooked. If you can't do that, at least keep in touch by email.
- Well done, your chosen candidate has turned up for their first day! Your job still isn't finished. With a shortage of candidates, we know that people can move on fast if they don't like what they see. At the very least, make sure somebody is ready and waiting to welcome them to the firm on their arrival, and to show them around (obvious, but we know some firms that don't even do this).
- Be prepared to deliver at least some form of introductory training or hand-over for the role you've employed them to do. Yes, your candidate may already be hugely experienced and/or senior but your firm will still have some unique requirements to share that will help him or her hit the ground running.
- Consider assigning a team member as a 'buddy' for a day or two. It's a great way of showing that you care, which will help build engagement. But not just that, it may well help your new employee perform better more quickly.
- In our experience, it's the smaller firms ? without the systems and the bureaucracy ? that are often better at this. Ensure you know who is responsible for ensuring new employees feel welcome ? don't just let it slip through the net or into the system.
- And don't just assume it's a job for HR. We know of a managing partner who has built a reputation for his personal touch in welcoming new employees ? and we have seen how he is a draw for great candidates.

Our experience and this survey suggest all these steps make a real difference ? because first impressions count. Looking like you care will shape your employee's long term views of what it's like to work for you.

Firms invest huge amounts into recruitment, and then risk it all with a poor welcome package. If your firm really cares about holding on to great talent, then it's time to give more focus to helping new employees feel at home.

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