

Developing and Implementing an Onboarding Program for an Academic Library: Strategies and Methods

Lori Snyder

Erin Crane

Introduction

Rapid growth in enrollment and the planned opening of a new, free-standing library building resulted in a large influx of new employees at the Jerry Falwell Library in summer 2013. As a result, the library administration wished to implement an onboarding program to ease the transition for both existing employees, who would have a large group of people to get to know, and new employees, who would need to learn the organization and their duties quickly. With a three-person steering committee reporting directly to the dean of the library, the New Employee WIFI Connector Program was born. This article chronicles its development and implementation.

Relevant literature

The concepts and benefits of onboarding, organizational socialization, and acclimatization are well documented in the human resources literature. Tang defines organizational socialization as “the process by which newcomers acquire the attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge needed to make the transition from being outsiders to becoming effective members of an organization.”¹ Tang found in a retail setting that proactive socialization fosters in newcomers “a sense of role clarity and positive career attitudes, which further facilitate[s] commitment to the organization and reduce[s] employee turnover.”² The following authors also note that providing onboarding in the workplace is important as it contributes toward employee satisfaction which can then positively impact employee retention. Korte and Lin found that “newcomers who remained unsure of their position indicated higher levels of disappointment and anxiety because of feelings of isolation or neglect”³ and “that relationships have a huge influence on what they can do (performance) and how they feel (satisfaction) toward the organization.”⁴ Allen and Shanock discovered that socialization “tactics that provide more content and more social interaction are related to subsequent embeddedness [in the organization].”⁵

Within library science literature, onboarding is not well documented. While mentoring or orientation programs are often covered,⁶ an organizational socialization process is not. Some exceptions include a study documenting best practices for onboarding but the authors note that “the library literature has limited information regarding onboarding best practices.”⁷ The authors also state that “only one institution (6 percent) discusses either politics or language with new employees.”⁸ Another exception is Chapman who notes the importance of the socialization process in her review of the literature concerning onboarding. Chapman states that “it is the aspect of socialization that ensures that [the newcomers] will begin to feel part of the organization” and that “acceptance of the new employee from supervisors and co-workers . . . is crucial to whether or not that person will fit in and stay with the organization.”⁹ Other articles reiterate this need for socialization based on human resources literature,¹⁰ but there is no library

science literature concerning the implementation of such an onboarding program. The focus in library science literature is less on onboarding and more on acquiring necessary job skills or navigating the tenure process.

One close example that does exist in library science literature is from Ballard and Blessing at North Carolina State University Libraries. They describe an orientation program that was updated specifically in response to the socialization literature in human resources.¹¹ Their program includes orientation, checklists, and meetings with key co-workers.¹² The emphasis is on the core values and mission of the library in order to facilitate socialization rather than solely on day-to-day functions. They are also “developing a new program in which each new staff member will be paired with an ‘orientation partner’ outside his or her assigned department.”¹³ This partner will informally meet with the new employee to discuss any concerns in a more comfortable environment.¹⁴ However, no literature yet exists in which a library implements an onboarding program that includes familiarizing the new employee with the institutional politics, language, and unspoken rules.

Background

Founded in 1971, Liberty University is a fully-accredited non-profit liberal arts institution with 450 programs of study, offering degrees from the associate to doctorate level. The university remains grounded in its foundation as an evangelical Christian institution and has experienced rapid growth over the last decade. Enrollment at the university is approximately 100,000 students, the largest percentage of whom take classes online. Current residential enrollment is over 13,500 students and is expected to continue to grow. The Jerry Falwell Library plays a fundamental role in the academic, cultural, and social life of Liberty University. The library’s materials and services are available to all enrolled students as well as to faculty, staff, and the community.

Formation and implementation

In summer 2013, the Jerry Falwell Library was preparing to move to a new library three times larger than the previous facility. Subsequently, over twenty new positions were approved by the university to support new and expanded services. With the arrival of this large group of new employees, the dean formed a committee to develop an onboarding approach intended to help with acclimation to the library and university culture. A pilot for the New Employee WIFI Connector Program began in fall 2013. The pilot offered opportunities for learning best practices and the program continues today in a modified format.

Upon initial implementation of the New Employee WIFI Connector Program, the stated purpose was to help new employees more quickly acclimate to the library and Liberty University. This purpose was fulfilled by providing institutional history and cultural knowledge; lessening initial uncertainty with regard to policies, procedures, and expected activities; addressing basic questions about the library and/or the university; providing a connection outside of the new employee’s department; and making the workplace friendlier. New employees were matched with a veteran employee, called a connector, who was selected based on his or her experience and personality. The steering committee matched new employees with connectors from a different division of the library. These match criteria were based on the belief that it is beneficial for participants to see a different side of the organization and to get to know someone who is not connected to their normal workflows.

The New Employee WIFI Connector Program was so named as a tie-in to the library’s customer service initiative: WIFI (Welcoming, Informative, Fast, Impressive). Because the connector program is considered to be a component of internal customer service, the steering

committee felt that the tie between the two would help connectors remember that they are performing internal customer service and facilitate new employees understanding of the library service model. In the pilot year of the program, connections were made for the entire academic year with the veteran employee and new employee meeting once a week for the first month and monthly thereafter. Surveys were conducted at the one-month and six-month points to evaluate the success of the program.

Successes and failures

Overall, the library administration deemed the program a success in terms of acclimating new employees to the library and university culture. Determining the success of the program regarding retention was more difficult. Retention figures from previous years were not readily accessible for comparison purposes. The steering committee decided to use the pilot program year as a benchmark for measuring future years. The overall retention rate for new hires was 88%. Further investigation showed that retention of benefitted new employees was 100%, but non-benefitted employees were retained at a rate of 81%. This difference offers an opportunity for more research to determine if the reason for the difference is benefit status.

Initial, one-month surveys were distributed to participants in October 2013 and had a return rate of 42% for new employees and 69% for connectors. These surveys were used to gather general perceptions from participants. Overall, the majority of respondents agreed that the program was working well; however, themes within the comments exposed areas for further exploration and improvement. These themes included the challenge of finding time to meet, the length of the program, requests for more assistance by the connectors in ways to relate to the new employees, requests for funds to support coffee or lunch meetings, and concerns about the matching criteria.

The next round of surveys was distributed in February 2014 and the questions focused on the themes that had emerged in the initial survey. Connectors had a higher return rate (57%) than new employees (24%).

Survey respondents overwhelmingly advocated for a shorter program. Fifty-six percent (56%) requested that the program be reduced to six months or less, with more individuals requesting the program duration be reduced to three months than six months. Because of these results, the steering committee reduced the duration of the program to three months.

Participants also expressed strong opinions regarding the number of times the connectors and new employees should meet each month of the program. Fifty percent (50%) were of the opinion that meetings should continue to occur once a week for the first month of the program and 69% indicated that meetings should continue to be once a month for every subsequent month of the program. These practices from the pilot program were retained as a result of the survey responses.

Survey results were mixed when rating the matching criteria. Respondents were asked to rank the following criteria from one to three, with one being most important: same age, same area of the library (public/technical), and same employment category (staff/faculty). The results differed slightly between the connectors and new employees. Connectors ranked the same area of service highest while new employees ranked the same category of employment the highest. In both cases, the same age was lowest in importance. Several new employees added comments to this section indicating that they provided the ranking as requested but did not see any of these as being particularly important to the success of their connector matches. One such participant said, "I actually think that it is good to have differences in each of these areas because it gives a broader perspective of the library." Taking all rankings and comments into consideration, the steering committee decided to not change matching criteria.

A few of the survey questions were unique to the connectors. These addressed the most important resource the steering committee could offer to connectors, the maximum number of new employee connections they could handle, and whether or not they would be willing to serve again. The steering committee was most interested in how it could better support the connectors. The results revealed that the most important resource was the provision of funds for taking the new employee to coffee or lunch while the second most important involved providing goal sheets or talking points for the meetings. As a result of these responses, the steering committee requested funding and created helpful talking point sheets for the connectors. In addition, the steering committee began to hold connector meetings to pass along helpful information and to provide an on-going means for gathering feedback.

After the conclusion of the pilot program, the organization and succession plan for the steering committee was altered. The initial committee had been established for the purpose of the pilot program and was intended to last for its duration. Once the program was deemed successful and planned for continuation, parameters had to be set for the steering committee. Committee members were asked to serve two-year terms except the member-selected committee chair, who serves an additional year.

Recommendations

The lessons learned through the Jerry Falwell Library WIFI New Employee Connector Program are transferrable to other institutions. Onboarding programs of three months or less with new employees matched to a same gender veteran employee in a different department would be possible at even the smallest libraries. In cases where the library is made up of one or two people, the connector could come from outside the library. Each library knows its culture and can create goals, objectives, and talking points that would assist the connector in starting conversations with new employees. With declining budgets in libraries, it may be impossible to offer funding for coffee or lunch, but these are not required components of the program. Meetings can occur at any other time during the workday without refreshments. The most important factor of the program is to create connections for new employees to the people of the library in order to foster commitment, acceptance, and growth.

Lori Snyder (lsnyder9@hmc.psu.edu) is Collection Management and Digital Resource Management Librarian at the George T. Harrell Health Sciences Library, Penn State College of Medicine.

Erin Crane (ecrane@germanna.edu) is E-Resources and Instruction Librarian at Germanna Community College.

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