



THE BEST [VIRTUAL] ONBOARDING OF MY CAREER

And how to afford your employees a world-class experience—regardless if they work remotely, hybrid, or on-site.

By Jonathan Ball

Once upon a time, in a past [career] life, I was recruited by a Fortune 100 company to serve as their creative director. Right off the bat, I must say how much I genuinely treasured my time with the firm. The projects I led were stimulating and the relationships I built with my colleagues—many of whom were the best in the business at their respective disciplines—endure to this day. That said, my onboarding was not what you might call “robust.”

Upon arriving on my first day, I obtained my employee ID badge before being whisked away to a small, windowless conference room alongside hordes of other greenhorns for new employee orientation.

Later that afternoon—after completing all the requisite benefits paperwork—I was handed a swag-bag filled with company-branded pens, notepads and a frisbee. Shortly thereafter, we were dismissed, never to convene again.

A few days later, I realized that my rapid-fire onboarding left me with zero context for the company’s unwritten rules—the social norms, mental models, and unconscious collections of vested interests, beliefs, and customs that truly define an organization.

Once again, I must reiterate that my overall experience there was exceedingly positive. But it’s not because I was prepared to hit the ground running—or because I understood how to relate to my peers and colleagues in a way that created strong relationships or facilitated an environment of collaboration and innovation. And, as it turns out, I wasn’t alone.

“During a time when companies are struggling to retain talent, creating a strong onboarding process for new hires is imperative.”

—Harvard Business Review



All Aboard

According to *Business News Daily*, “only 43% of employees report an onboarding experience that was more than a single day of orientation and basic benefits information,” and global recruiting firm Hays suggests that, “51% of employees say they’d go ‘above and beyond’ in their work if they had a good onboarding experience.” Perhaps most troubling, poor onboarding can result in an abrupt loss of talent.

“Numerous studies have shown that the risk of employee turnover is highest early on in an employee’s tenure and sometimes occurs within a person’s first 45 days on the job,” says *Business News Daily*. “Without the right information and tools to set them up for success, newer employees are quick to leave for other opportunities.”

At this point, I bet you’re thinking, “Hang on...didn’t this guy say he just had the best onboarding experience of his career?” I did. And it was here at Insigniam.

Now, before clutching your pearls and grabbing your pitchforks because I duped you into reading an advertorial about my company’s hiring practices, allow me to share a bit of context.



For many years, I worked alongside Insigniam as a vendor, even serving as an editor of *IQ* at various points in its publication history. Despite my close proximity to the company, I was never privy to the day-to-day goings-on of the firm behind closed doors. In order to amass this knowledge, I needed to be onboarded.

“Onboarding, also known as organizational socialization, refers to the mechanism through which new employees acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and behaviors to become effective organizational members and insiders,” says Marie-Caroline Chauvet, an Insigniam partner based in Paris who joined the firm in 2003 and oversees onboarding curriculum and delivery.

“Even organizations that are willing to invest the blood, sweat, and tears into designing effective onboarding programs can see their efforts fall short when key essentials are overlooked,” she says. “The goal for a successful onboarding experience is for a new colleague to feel at home and effective.”

Being ‘at home’ and ‘effective’ is foundational to any program because, early on, everyone must understand who does what, when, where, and why, says Ms. Chauvet.

“It’s about understanding and utilizing the tools and structures necessary to do your job.

“Onboarding, also known as organizational socialization, refers to the mechanism through which new employees acquire the knowledge, skills, and behaviors to become effective organizational members and insiders.”

—Marie-Caroline Chauvet
Insigniam Partner

When viewed through that lens, what belongs—and what doesn’t—in an effective onboarding curriculum begins to come into focus.”

On that note, let’s explore *what* worked, *why* it worked, and *how* to inject similar thinking into your own onboarding programs and practices—which are equally applicable for hybrid teams and on-site employees.

Context is Key

First and foremost, my exemplary onboarding experience lasted more than a day. In fact, it lasted two months.

During this time, my only “job” was to immerse myself in the nuances of the firm. Each week was broken out with a specific goal in mind, with several sub-milestones (80+ total) related to each stage. For example, my agenda looked like this:

- Week 1: I feel welcomed and familiar
- Week 2: I can navigate basic tools and practices
- Week 3: I understand what makes us distinct
- Week 4: I have a deeper grasp of the company
- Week 5: I am equipped for success
- Week 6: I feel at home and set-up
- Week 7: Onboarding is complete

The subtext behind each stage denotes how I was meant to feel at the end of each week. By the end of week one, I felt welcome. By week three, I had a deeper understanding of the company’s secret sauce, and by week six I felt at home and fully set-up.

“Early into someone’s onboarding journey, we do not consider them trained on *anything*—which is more a paradigm of training and development,” says Ms. Chauvet.

“Our philosophy for onboarding is that everything is contextual and applicable. It is not just about knowing *where* things are, but equally as important is the context of *why* we do what we do, *why* we use the tools that we use, and *why* relationships are the foundation for all accomplishments.”



The Buddy System

According to onboarding firm Click Boarding, “56% of new employees want a buddy or mentor” who is different from the person’s manager, so that the new employee feels comfortable asking any question, large or small.

As a linear-learner, I felt confident as I moved from week to week, amassing contextual knowledge about how to operate effectively within the organization.

Additionally, within my first three-months, I completed several surveys and participated in one-on-one calls to provide real-time feedback on the onboarding program so that the firm could continually refine and evolve their onboarding prototype.

Getting Related

The highlight during my onboarding period entailed connecting with my new colleagues through a series of conversations designed to build relationships.

“A critical part of onboarding involves building relationships—and every relationship begins with a conversation,” says Ms. Chauvet. “In order to ‘get related’ to others, we must move beyond the transactional nature inherent to many professional conversations and into an informal environment to build trust and camaraderie.”

Case in point, every week my calendar was filled with Zoom invitations from colleagues around the world, all of whom were willing to take half-an-hour away from the pressing matters of the day simply to chat with me. Through these conversations, I learned which colleagues have pets, children,

grandchildren, and passions such as traveling and cooking. One colleague even knows Jon Bon Jovi personally (don’t ask who—I’ve been sworn to secrecy).

Speaking as a virtual employee who is 600 miles from the company’s closest physical office, these conversations were an essential first touch point to my colleagues, especially those outside my department. According to *Harvard Business Review*, there’s real value to these informal, one-on-one interactions.

“In a virtual setting, you can’t rely as much on the organic and spontaneous relationship-building that happens in hallways, over lunches, and at office events,” says James Citrin and Darleen DeRosa, co-authors of *Leading at a Distance: Practical Lessons for Virtual Success*, writing in the *Harvard Business Review*.

One risk of virtual work, say the authors, is the likelihood that individuals or leaders will operate in silos due to interfacing with the same small network of people on a regular basis.

“Creating both a strong core network and a broader network across the organization will allow executives to be more successful long-term,” say the authors. “To do this, create a blended series of informal and formal experiences that aim to create community and build in touchpoints.”

Buddies & Sponsors

Beyond the group dynamic, I was also fortunate to build a strong 1:1 relationship with my ‘buddy’—a designated colleague who made themselves available to triage any number of questions or curve balls that came my way. According to authors Citrin and DeRosa, this formula works in both traditional and virtual environments.

“Even in the office, it’s a good idea to have someone fill the role of informal mentor to support a new hire, but it’s even more critical remotely because the new leader won’t have colleagues around to spontaneously ask questions as they come up,” say the authors in *Harvard Business Review*. “It’s important that this informal mentor be a different person from the person’s manager, so that the new employee feels comfortable asking any question, large or small.”

Furthermore, buddies are in demand. According to onboarding company Click Boarding, “56% of new employees want a buddy or mentor.”

In addition to my buddy, I was also assigned a sponsor, who is someone responsible for expanding my capacity to make meaningful contributions to the firm. In a traditional setting, this would be a supervisor or manager, but the context for the relationship at Insigniam is unique.

“This structure is a response to an appreciation that one size does not fit all,” says Ms. Chauvet. “Some people need direct management to expand their capacity and some people need additional prowess.”

As a hallmark of the contributor-sponsor relationship, I was able to define my goals for the year—which were accepted and agreed upon by my sponsor—who will now work in tandem to ensure that I deliver on my promised outcomes.

Make it Yours

For enterprises open to enhancing their own programs, the *Harvard Business Review* recommends leveraging the power of coordinated action.

“Ensure this new platform integrates with your overall human resource management system,” says the *Review* in a piece entitled, *Onboarding Can Make or Break a New Hire’s Experience*. “That way, you can easily track the impact of your onboarding program on an actual new hire’s on-the-job performance and levels of new employee satisfaction.”

Lastly, if you’ve felt the pinch from the war for talent, now is the perfect time to enhance your approach, continues the *Review*.

“By implementing a strategic onboarding program, managers can build new hires’ confidence, increase engagement, and create an environment that retains talent for years to come.” **IQ**

“Creating both a strong core network and a broader network across the organization will allow executives to be more successful long-term.”

—James Citrin & Darleen DeRosa
Authors, *Leading at a Distance: Practical Lessons for Virtual Success*

Feedback Loop: Insigniam consultants reflect on their recent onboarding experiences.



Sarah Dancy Blackburn
ONBOARDING IN ONE WORD

“As someone who was working through the visa process at the time, I want to say ‘chaotic’, but it was truly ‘unbelievable’. Insigniam provided me with the resources and support that I needed as I moved to Paris, which happened to occur at the same time as onboarding.”



Cody Cerny
SETTING EXPECTATIONS

“Open communication throughout the onboarding process helped me codify my goals for the first 12 months, and I found the ability to self-manage with the support of a buddy both refreshing and empowering.”



Anna Islamova
CRITICAL CONTEXT

“The amount of context I was given for each milestone helped me connect the dots between small activities and major outcomes. Setting a broader context is in our company’s DNA, ensuring teams are aligned and engaged to deliver results with minimal supervision.”



Ryan Jones
RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

“The relationships I built during onboarding have been essential to my success at Insigniam—and I appreciate and recognize how each of my colleagues was committed to establishing a strong rapport with me.”



Kelly Robyn
SPONSOR RELATIONSHIP

“I was fortunate to be matched with a sponsor who is not only an extremely engaged leader and mentor, but is also one of the top performers in the firm. This relationship has been critical to my success at Insigniam.”