



WEEKEND WORKOUT » NEW HIRES

Kira Vermont dissects the latest workplace and career trends

globeexec@globeandmail.com

Rolling out the welcome mat

It's been two days since starting your new job and you already know you've made a big mistake.

Colleagues treat you like you're invisible and HR just stuck you in a room with a 100-page employee manual with one command: "Read it."

While some companies still adhere to the old, here's-your-desk-here's-your-phone-and-good-luck mentality, other organizations are developing innovative ways to look at employee orientation to make transitions more comfortable and productive.

It makes sense. According to The Human Capital Institute, 90 per cent of newly hired employees decide whether they'll remain with the company during the first six months. Jennifer Cayer, partner with HR consulting firm PeopleSavvy in Marina del Rey, Calif., believes the time to impress is even shorter.

"You only have one chance to make a first impression. The first 30 days on the job will convince a person whether this is a long-term commitment or if it's just going to be a job," she says.

THE DEAD ZONE

Bayer Inc. in Toronto recently launched a new employee orientation program - some people call it onboarding - called Hello Bayer that lets new hires familiarize themselves with the company's culture and facilities before they even show up for work.

Employees enter an extranet website and peruse a virtual tour of the facility - great for locating their cubicle's nearest washroom - or read up on workplace minutiae like parking spaces, security passes, and even company acronyms.

Philip Blake, president and chief executive officer of the company, says Bayer wants to better tap into that dead-zone time between employment acceptance and the first day on the job so employees can hit the ground running.

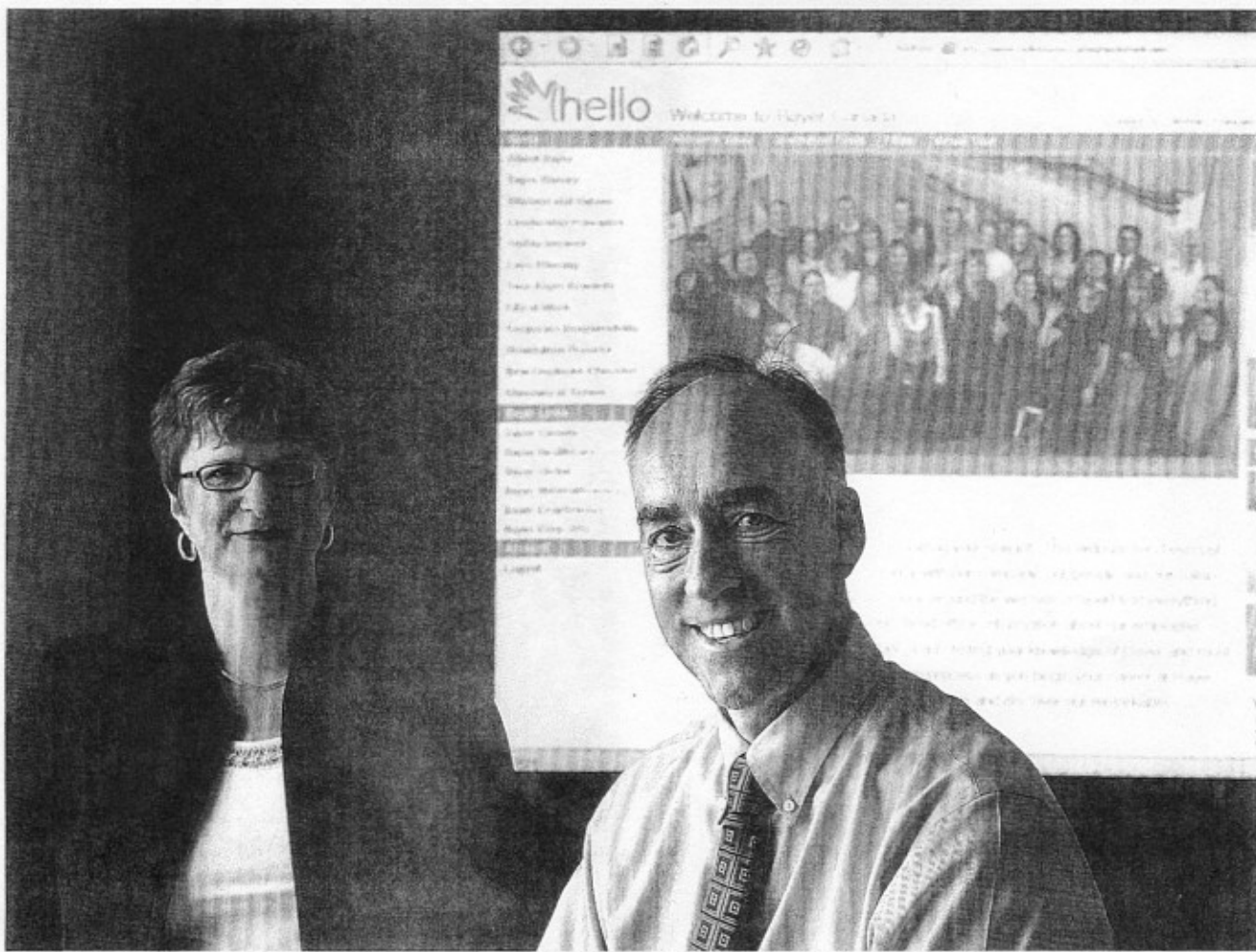
"It's all about feeling comfortable, fitting in and feeling wanted and welcome," he says. "This onboarding gives people the opportunity to see everything that they're coming to."

REEL THEM IN

Ms. Cayer says there's another reason to connect with newly hired employees. A lot can happen during those two weeks between saying yes and showing up.

The current employer might just come up with a counter-offer, other offers could be coming in, too, or a nervous spouse could derail the process.

"You've got a two-week period there where you have to manage that buyer's remorse," she says.



Philip Blake, right, CEO of Bayer Inc., sits with HR manager Helen Sraka, in front of a screen showing the firm's website for new employees. FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Welcoming new employees

PAVE THE WAY

Fill the dead time. Don't wait until the employee's first day on the job to give her forms to fill. Send the benefits package before.

BE PREPARED

Have the office or cubicle cleaned out and ready for a new occupant. Ensure a computer and computer ID code is ready too.

HAVE A HEART-TO-HEART

Sit down with the new employee on Day One and explain why he was hired. It builds morale - and lets him know what's expected of him.

DRAFT A 3-DAY GAME PLAN

Give the worker some specific, achievable goals to work on right away.

ROLL OUT

THE WELCOME WAGON

Give new hires a basket of freebies, from pens to calculators to a BlackBerry, to make his job easier.

The trick is to make workers feel like they're already part of the company. Ask the hiring manager to make a welcome call by phone or send a letter signed by the whole team. Reaching out and making that connection works, says Ms. Cayer.

Once new employees arrive at Toronto-based company I Love Rewards Inc. the company cranks things up the first day on the job with its I Love Rewards University. Think five full days when new recruits sit in a room together and learn everything from dress code to how to make the organization's drink of choice, the RedPoint, (parts Sour Puss raspberry liqueur, Crown Royal and Red Bull - don't even ask for specific measures).

They also spend hours poring over corporate culture and vision statements and are tested on the material with a final exam. At the end of the week, everyone comes out for a graduation ceremony.

"Normally you're just given an employee manual and told, 'Read this.' So it was definitely an interesting way to spend my first week at

work," says Christina Weber, PR co-ordinator for the company.

"It assured me I'd made the right decision to be there."

DOWN AND DIRTY

Merge Gupta-Sunderji, a leadership consultant and president of mergespeaks Inc., in Calgary, agrees that quickly encouraging employee engagement is a good idea, but the process also needs to include hands-on learning to be useful.

That means don't stick employees in a room looking at policy manuals. Instead, get them out on the floor, let them listen in on calls - or even take them with you to visit clients on their very first day.

"I mean, wow. What a huge motivator to be introduced to the front line on Day One," she says.

THE QUIRK LIST

Anyone who has ever changed positions knows one of the biggest hurdles to getting up to speed fast is the supervisor. It just takes so much time and energy to understand, say, how she likes

the phone answered or the intricacies of his archaic filing system.

Years ago, Dion McInnis, associate vice-president for university advancement at the University of Houston-Clear Lake in Houston, decided to give his new employees a break. He created what he calls his quirk list, basically all the little things that drive him nuts.

"I've always felt that a lot of an employee's time is spent on getting to know who the boss is. What makes him tick - and what ticks him off," he says.

No. 1 on his list is bad spelling. No. 2, tardiness. No. 5 implores the new employee to check in and out boxes at the office regularly.

The list isn't always well received, he admits, but when his first employee was promoted to another position, Mr. McInnis gave an exit interview and asked her what was the best thing he'd ever done as a manager.

"She didn't even pause to exhale," he says now.

"She said, 'The quirk list. It cleared the table for us to get down to work!'"

THE UPSIDE

It's a week that helps you really get to know what's going on, but also it shows you what the workplace is going to be like.

Christina Weber, PR co-ordinator for I Love Rewards Inc. in Toronto

THE DOWNSIDE

I think the worst thing you can do is stick employees in a room for a week and make them learn everything. They do need to learn it, don't get me wrong, but you need to intersperse it with real stuff.

Merge Gupta-Sunderji, president of mergespeaks Inc. in Calgary