

Onboarding in the Manufacturing Sector: A Theory-based Program Evaluation

by

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Abstract

For this Capstone, we conducted a theory-based formative process evaluation of the onboarding program at MANA Nutritive Aid Products Incorporated. With its headquarters in Matthews, NC, and its manufacturing facility in Fitzgerald, GA, MANA is a nonprofit firm that supplies ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF) to global food aid organizations. The problem of practice for our Capstone was that there had not been a formal evaluation of MANA's onboarding program, and the leadership team did not think that their onboarding program was effective due to the high turnover of new hires in less than 90 days. We built a theoretical framework from the extant literature to conduct the evaluation, including eight onboarding content areas and three timing stages. The content areas consisted of rules and policies, politics, performance proficiency, language, organizational goals and values, people, history, and future prospects. The timing stages included the anticipatory stage (pre-entry), the encounter stage (the first 90 days on the job), and the transformation stage (months four through 12). The questions that guided this project included the following:

Q1. To what extent does MANA's current onboarding program reflect the eight onboarding content areas that the extant research literature indicates make up an effective approach?

Q2. To what extent does MANA's current onboarding program reflect the structural and timing elements associated with an effective program in the extant literature?

We conducted document reviews and semi-structured interviews to investigate these questions. Our analysis led us to conclude that MANA has partially implemented an onboarding program for its hourly paid manufacturing personnel that reflects the eight content areas and timing elements the extant literature indicates make up an effective approach. Drawing on the findings and the extant literature, we recommended that MANA take the following actions:

- Create an onboarding buddy program;
- Build realistic job previews;

- Construct a structured supervisor meeting framework over the first year of employment;
and
- “Sweat the small stuff” by taking eight actions that, while seemingly basic, emerged from the literature as elements to assist in the identity construction of newcomers at little cost to the firm.

Keywords: onboarding, organizational socialization, theory-based formative process program evaluation, new hires, hourly paid manufacturing employees

Executive Summary

Our project focused on the onboarding program at MANA Nutritive Aid Products Incorporated, a manufacturer in the global food aid ecosystem. MANA's mission is to prevent child deaths and other health ramifications caused by severe acute malnutrition by producing ready-to-use therapeutic food. The firm's headquarters is in Matthews, NC, and its manufacturing facility resides in Fitzgerald, GA.

Problem of Practice

MANA has experienced rapid growth in demand for its products, leading to the need to expand its hourly paid manufacturing workforce. The organization wants an onboarding program that attracts and retains employees who desire to work for the company and believe in its mission. As such, our problem of practice focused on the fact that MANA had never formally evaluated its onboarding program, and its leadership team did not think that it was effective due to the turnover of newcomers in less than 90 days.

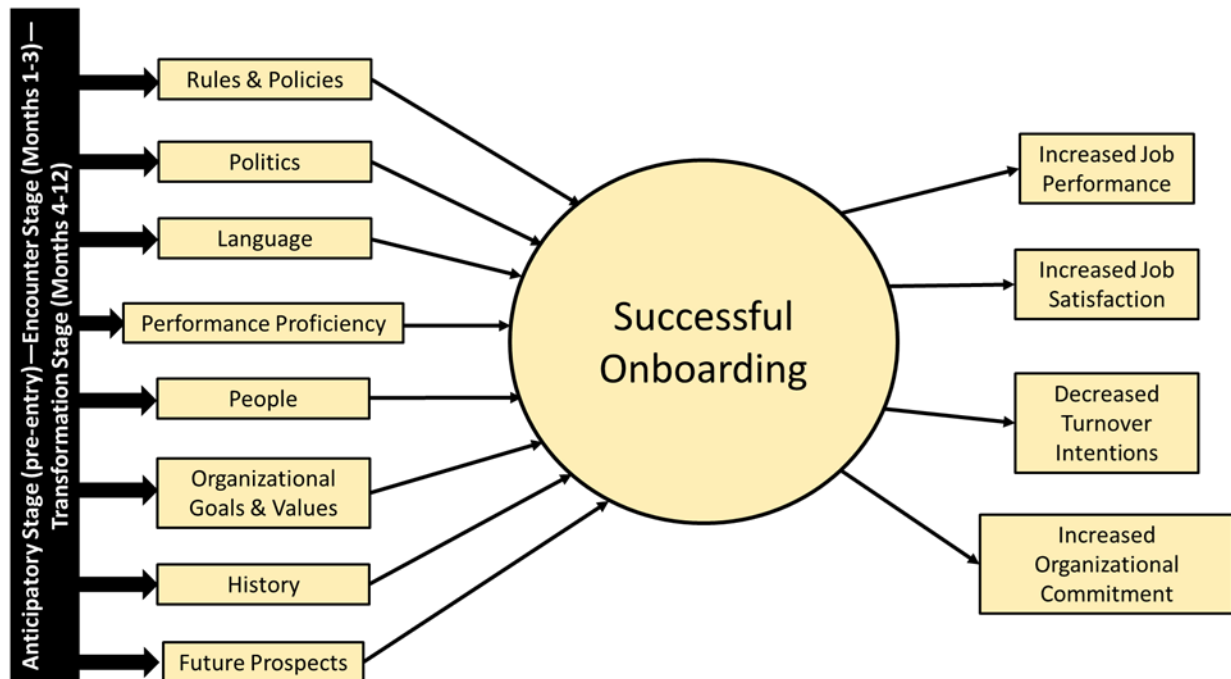
Framework

To perform this evaluation, we chose to conduct a theory-based formative process evaluation. Factors influencing this decision included the firm's focus on longer-term, less measurable outcomes (Fitz-Gibbon & Morris, 1996), our focus on evaluating an established program for process improvement (Davidson, 2005; Rossi et al., 2019), and our examination of the current program content against a desired standard (Davidson, 2005).

We built a theoretical framework from the extant literature that included eight onboarding content areas and three timing stages (see Figure 1). The content areas consisted of (a) rules and policies, (b) politics, (c) performance proficiency, (d) language, (e) organizational goals and values, (f) people, (g) history, and (h) future prospects. The timing stages included the anticipatory stage (pre-entry), the encounter stage (the first 90 days on the job), and the transformation stage (months four through 12).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for Successful Onboarding with Associated Outcomes



Note. This framework is one the authors designed based on the work of Chao et al. (1994), Taormina (2004), Bauer et al. (2007), Klein and Heuser (2008), Bauer and Erdogan (2011), Solinger et al. (2013), and Korte et al. (2015).

Project Questions

The questions that guided this project included the following:

Q1. To what extent does MANA's current onboarding program reflect the eight onboarding content areas that the extant research literature indicates make up an effective approach?

Q2. To what extent does MANA's current onboarding program reflect the structural and timing elements associated with an effective program in the extant literature?

Findings

Our analysis of question one found that the language content area was not implemented, and the other seven were partially implemented. As such, overall, we concluded that the onboarding

program at MANA represented a partially implemented program when we compared it to the content areas in our conceptual framework.

Analyzing the three timing stages in question two generated the following results. First, in the anticipatory stage, we found little evidence of the firm working to create that crucial positive first impression the literature described during this period (Reynolds, 2018). Moreover, we saw no actions contributing to constructing a sense of organizational membership or creating a realistic notion of what that membership entails for newcomers (Klein & Heuser, 2008; Korte et al., 2015; Solinger et al., 2013).

During the encounter stage, the firm's onboarding actions revolve around its one-day orientation program. An additional focus is a dependence on new hires reading the employee handbook. Both of these dependencies run afoul of warnings in the extant literature (Krasman, 2015; Maurer, 2015, 2018; Garcia, 2016).

Finally, during the transformation stage, we viewed the insufficient coverage of the content areas and the informality that characterized this stage as negatively impacting the newcomer's journey to becoming an organizational insider. Most learning likely emanates from random and variable daily interactions with co-workers, if it occurs at all.

Recommendations

After reviewing potential actions, we focused our recommendations on a small number of high-return-on-investment elements, not a total program overhaul. Our approach aligns with research findings that “a persistent set of small, orchestrated changes is the best approach to drive large and lasting change at an organization” (Kavanaugh & Tarafdar, 2021, para. 3).

Recommendation 1: Onboarding Buddy Program

We recommend that MANA build and execute an onboarding buddy program. Studies indicate that a well-run onboarding buddy program ranks second only to a high-quality on-the-job training program in helpfulness to the organizational socialization of new hires (Klein et al., 2015).

Recommendation 2: Realistic Job Previews

We believe the firm needs to generate and use realistic job previews (RJPs) for all hourly paid positions. RJPs bridge the perception versus reality gap that newcomers experience by providing insights into the positive and negative aspects of a role (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Bauer et al., 2014; Bilal & Bashir, 2016). Studies show that new hires who receive a significant quantity of accurate information before starting the job adjust to the new organization better (Bauer, 2010; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011).

Recommendation 3: Structured Supervisor Meetings

Our findings suggest that the firm would benefit from creating a plan for a series of programmed meetings between new hires and their supervisor over the first year of employment, using a standardized structure to aid consistency. These interactions would begin in the anticipatory stage, continue face-to-face during the first week on the job, and persist every 30 days across the encounter and transformation stages, providing opportunities to cover items housed in all eight content areas.

Recommendation 4: Sweat the Small Stuff

We recommend that MANA sweat the small stuff. By this statement, we mean that the firm should take eight actions that, while seemingly basic, emerged from the literature as elements to assist in the identity construction of the new hire at little cost to the firm. The first seven begin with hiring and progress to the first day on the job. They consist of a combination of mailings of letters and company information, telephone calls, company merchandise, delivering instructions, creating e-mail accounts, and providing a written onboarding plan. The eighth item concerns keeping the onboarding program effective over the long term via the use of phased surveys.

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Organization Context

In 2016, the United Nations (UN) launched its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, recognizing hunger as one of its chief issues to combat (United Nations, 2015). Almost 800 million people live in hunger (United Nations, 2022), with approximately 193 million experiencing acute hunger (Utkina et al., 2022). Acute hunger, also known as famine (Welt Hunger Hilfe, n.d.), is “when a person’s inability to consume adequate food puts their lives or livelihoods in immediate danger” (Utkina et al., 2022, para. 15). It often results from wars, internal conflicts, natural disasters, economic shocks, extreme poverty, or seasonal shortages (Vaitla et al., 2009; Palmer, 2017; Utkina et al., 2022). Additionally, poor nutrition is a direct cause of stunting, which the World Health Organization (WHO) defined as children whose “height-for-age is more than two standard deviations below the WHO Child Growth Standards median” (World Health Organization, 2015, para. 1). UN figures indicate that roughly 149 million children under age five are afflicted with stunting worldwide (United Nations, 2022), and this condition is largely irreversible (World Health Organization, 2015). Children afflicted with stunting experience worse educational, career, and health outcomes throughout their lifetime (Dekker et al., 2010). These deficits stem from the long-term effects on cognitive and physiological functioning that individuals afflicted with this condition experience even after receiving sufficient diets later (Berkman et al., 2002). These impacts persist even when accounting for mediating factors like socioeconomic status and schooling.

Built specifically to address the critical nutrition needs highlighted by the UN and WHO, MANA Nutritive Aid Products Incorporated (MANA) provides specialized food to the global food aid network (M. Moore, personal communication, 2022). It produces packets of a substance called RUTF (ready-to-use therapeutic food). MANA ships them around the world in response to orders from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the UN’s World Food Program (WFP). These packets are provided to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local governments to fight severe acute malnutrition (SAM). The products made by MANA are the front-

line defense against malnutrition in places such as Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Three RUTF packets a day are enough to save the life of a child under six suffering from SAM.

MANA's plant in Fitzgerald, Georgia, is a 50,000-square-foot facility initially constructed in 2010. Fitzgerald is in Ben Hill County, one of Georgia's poorest counties (#142 of 159; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The area's job growth, unemployment, and poverty rate numbers are among the worst in the state (Georgia Department of Labor, 2022), leading to intergenerational concerns from minoritized groups related to discrimination, poverty, and lack of access to resources. This context shapes the environment for the workers in the plant.

MANA's facility operates around the clock, with three shifts running five to seven days per week. The firm employs 96 people, of whom 75 are hourly paid manufacturing workers, producing between 450,000 and 500,000 packets for distribution daily (M. Moore, personal communication, 2023). This population's highest educational attainment typically consists of high school graduates or less, with an average age of 34 (H. Sanders, personal communication, 2022). The racial composition is approximately 65% African American, 5% Hispanic, and 30% Caucasian. Seventy percent are female, and 30% are male.

Area of Inquiry

According to its leadership team, in recent years, MANA has experienced an increase in worker attrition that seems excessive, considering the organization's critical mission, as well as its compensation package and working environment. According to its chief financial officer (CFO), the firm has endured a turnover rate of approximately 25% annually (C. Whitfield, personal communication, 2022). Moreover, early turnover represents a particular concern. Thirty-two individuals departed within the first 90 days of employment in 2021, and 45 similarly departed throughout 2022, with 82% of the latter representing voluntary turnover (H. Sanders, personal communication, 2022).

Turnover represents a crucial issue for MANA, as increased turnover rates might lead to higher product defect rates. One empirical study found that operator experience statistically significantly predicted manufacturing defect rates at MANA. Each additional year of operator experience decreased the error rate by over 13%, controlling for the day of the week, month of the year, work shift, sampling group, and machine tube (Smith et al., 2022). Most importantly for MANA, and its end-user-food-aid recipients, lower manufacturing defect rates equate to more lives saved. For reference, defect rates at the time of this project resulted in the loss of enough product to feed roughly 3,000 more individuals suffering from malnutrition for a year.

Since the firm viewed its salary and benefits package as competitive with or superior to most other labor options in its geographical area, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Mark Moore, suspected that the firm's onboarding program was not effectively integrating new team members into the organization, leading to disengagement and early departure. However, in its 13-year history, the onboarding program had never undergone a formal evaluation. Moreover, MANA's success in growing its output and maintaining strict nutritional standards in its products in recent years has led to dramatic growth in demand. As a result, during this project, MANA was constructing an addition to its current factory and purchasing a new warehouse which would triple its production capacity by the end of 2023. These actions would significantly increase its hiring and retention needs, making this evaluation of the onboarding program critical, as the firm already struggled to hire and retain enough people to keep pace with its growth. With these considerations in mind, our partner organization specifically requested that we evaluate its onboarding program, and the extant literature supported this exploration.

Firm Actions Prior to the Project

MANA's leadership team was acting to better understand its personnel attrition. Each month the accounting manager updated the active roster (location, department, and labor type), headcount by employee category, employee turnover for the month, turnover by type (voluntary, involuntary, and

unknown), and the identifying demographic data for all current and former employees. Turnover type, a variable used in MANA's tracking system, was further segmented by those with less than or greater than 90 days of employment at the time of departure. The accounting manager distributed this information in Excel format via email to the CEO, CFO, chief operating officer (COO), director of operations (DO), and plant manager. Historical data was available from 2018 to the present. At the time of our project, the MANA leadership team utilized this data for tracking and discussion purposes only.

Problem of Practice

The problem of practice was that there had not been a formal evaluation of the organization's onboarding program, and the leadership team at MANA was skeptical of its effectiveness due to the number of people leaving before the 90-day mark. It was an established, stable program, reaching back to the firm's origin in 2010.

For this evaluation, we used a theory-based approach. Theory-based evaluation is particularly suitable for exploring longer-term outcomes that are more intangible and less measurable in the short term (Fitz-Gibbon & Morris, 1996). In our discussions with MANA, they expressed long-term goals of increased organizational commitment, increased job satisfaction, embrasure of the firm's culture, and reduced turnover. Moreover, we chose to use a formative evaluation because we were evaluating a mature program for process improvement (Davidson, 2005; Rossi et al., 2019). Additionally, we adopted a process approach to this formative evaluation to facilitate exploring the onboarding program's content and how that content was implemented against a desired standard (Davidson, 2005).

Our theory-based, formative process evaluation aimed to identify where MANA's current onboarding program met or fell short in implementing a program based on a theoretical framework we constructed from the extant research literature, specifically looking at eight onboarding content areas that comprise an effective program. These include:

- rules and policies (Klein & Heuser, 2008)

- politics (Chao et al., 1994; Taormina, 2004)
- language (Chao et al., 1994)
- performance proficiency (Chao et al., 1994; Klein & Heuser, 2008)
- people (Chao et al., 1994; Klein & Weaver, 2000)
- organizational goals and values (Tuttle, 2002; Klein & Heuser, 2008; “Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process,” 2012)
- history (Haueter et al., 2003; Chao et al., 1994; Klein & Heuser, 2008)
- future prospects (Taormina, 2004)

The firm’s executive leadership team planned to use the evaluation findings to revise MANA’s onboarding program to improve job performance and address the previously identified long-term goals related to commitment, satisfaction, culture, and turnover.

Review of Literature

Onboarding, also known as organizational socialization (Bauer, 2010), is a “process through which new employees move from being organizational outsiders to becoming organizational insiders. Onboarding refers to the process that helps new employees learn the knowledge, skills, and behaviors they need to succeed in their new organizations” (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011, p. 51).

An effective approach turns organizational outsiders into insiders (Bauer et al., 2007), leading to improved job satisfaction, enhanced job performance, increased organizational commitment, reduced intention to quit, and decreased turnover (Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2002; Caldwell & Peters, 2018; Bauer, 2010; Taormina, 2004; Klein & Heuser, 2008; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Klein et al., 2015; Korte et al., 2015). In addition, authors have noted increased organizational profitability (Ellis et al., 2017; Strack et al., 2012), as well as greater levels of individual-level income and career advancement for those who experience high-quality onboarding experiences compared to those who have poor onboarding experiences (Chao et al., 1994; Ashforth et al., 1997).

In many ways, it is a process of uncertainty reduction (Solinger et al., 2013). New hires need to understand their role, how it fits into the bigger picture, and how to execute it (Maurer, 2015). At its core, onboarding is a learning process that moves people toward becoming proficient organizational members (Klein & Heuser, 2008). Onboarding resembles how individuals mature and learn new roles in society over time (Taormina, 2004; Taormina, 2009). Similarly, onboarding is a long-term journey of becoming an organizational citizen, teaching new hires how to function in their jobs. It should also convey the needed social knowledge surrounding company values, norms, and culture. Furthermore, onboarding is a comprehensive process that can last up to the first full year a new person is with the firm (“Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process,” 2012; Maurer, 2015; Sibisi & Kappers, 2022). At that point, the individual shifts into a continuous career development phase (“The 3 best ways to retain job hoppers,” 2015).

Utilizing university libraries, Google, and Google Scholar, we explored the extant research and practitioner literature about onboarding, exploring word combinations associated with the terms onboarding and organizational socialization. We focused on uncovering the elements that make up an effective onboarding approach and what outcomes the literature associated with efficacious programs. After the initial search, we focused on 63 sources, 26 from research literature and 37 from practitioner literature.

During our review of this literature, three dominant themes emerged that we discuss in the following sections:

1. There are common mistakes made in onboarding.
2. There are three onboarding stages, and the timing of these stages impacts effective onboarding.
3. Certain practices (specifically, eight content areas) are associated with positive onboarding outcomes for new hires.

Common Onboarding Mistakes

Despite its critical role in organizational health, onboarding is often a misunderstood and undervalued part of the employee lifecycle. For example, 25% to 35% of American firms do not allocate resources for onboarding (Kirchner & Stull, 2022). Poor onboarding undermines the effort put into recruiting talented personnel (Caldwell & Peters, 2018), negatively impacts referrals (Marks, 2010), and bears the responsibility for a significant amount of the turnover that firms experience (Orgera, 2017).

Ineffective approaches typically include similar elements. Effective onboarding does not equal one-day orientation briefings or simply filling out paperwork (Maurer, 2015; Maurer, 2018). It is also not just a facility tour and a discussion of the employee handbook (Krasman, 2015) or the typical mandatory initial training sessions (Garcia, 2016). Additionally, notions that onboarding does not start until a new hire's first day and that it is just for inexperienced hires are erroneous. Moreover, the common in-processing checklist of items does not represent effective onboarding (Karambelkar & Bhattacharya, 2017). Finally, it is not simply giving someone workspace and resources (Byford et al., 2017), giving them a welcome packet (Donoghue, 2018), or assigning them a mentor (Graybill et al., 2013). This discussion is not to indicate that these items are not valuable. Each represents a needed element, but, in and of themselves, they provide an incomplete and ineffective approach.

Moreover, while onboarding in manufacturing environments is an under-researched area, with few peer-reviewed studies over the last decade (examples include: Korte & Lin, 2013; Kirchner & Stull, 2022; Singh et al., 2022; "Increasing satisfaction in the workplace," 2022; Krugielka et al., 2023), one study focused on small to medium-sized firms like MANA, found that the emphasis in manufacturing firms concentrated primarily on simply getting new hires working as fast as possible (Kirchner & Stull, 2022). Most often, this approach resulted in poor initial training with no orientation toward the cultural elements in the firms, leading to high levels of uncertainty, low levels of job satisfaction, and negative retention outcomes.

Onboarding Stages and Their Importance

Onboarding is not a single event in a new hire's lifecycle. It is a learning process that begins during recruiting and continues up to the first year of employment ("Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process," 2012; Klein et al., 2015; Korte et al., 2015). Existing research defines three key onboarding stages: (a) anticipatory, (b) encounter, and (c) transformation (Solinger et al., 2013; Korte et al., 2015).

First, anticipatory socialization concerns an employee's pre-entry period (Tuttle, 2002; Solinger et al., 2013). It begins with recruitment (Klein & Heuser, 2008), accelerates once a job offer is accepted (Reynolds, 2018), and concludes before the first day on the job ("Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process," 2012). The goal of the organization during this stage is to create a positive first impression (Reynolds, 2018). Once a position is accepted, the individual begins to imagine themselves in the new role, and the information that the firm provides, or does not provide, shapes the newcomer's perceptions of the organization and receptivity to the socialization process (Solinger et al., 2013). During this stage, significant tasks for the firm are to begin building a sense of membership for the new hire (Klein & Heuser, 2008) and to create a realistic notion of what organizational membership will look like (Solinger et al., 2013; Korte et al., 2015). Although often neglected, the pre-entry period exerts significant influence on later levels of organizational commitment (Caldwell et al., 1990).

Next, the encounter stage begins with an employee's first day on the job and extends through roughly the first 90 days (Klein & Heuser, 2008; Bauer, 2010; Solinger et al., 2013; Korte et al., 2015). This period is when the new hire's expectations encounter reality, and this reality is often not what they imagined (Korte et al., 2015). The newcomer interacts with coworkers and supervisors and begins the process of identity construction and role negotiation (Cable et al., 2013). Given all these developments, uncertainty reduction for the newcomer is a significant need as future organizational actions and information are evaluated via the lens of opinions formed at this point in their tenure (Cooper-Thomas

& Anderson, 2002). This timeframe is crucial, with most socialization occurring during the onboarding process believed to take place during this early period. For example, one empirical study supported the significance of this stage, highlighting that the initial onboarding experiences of new hires strongly impacted socialization outcomes for turnover intentions, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (Major et al., 1995).

Finally, the transformation stage, also known as the adjustment (Solinger et al., 2013), metamorphosis (Tuttle, 2002), or integration stage (Korte et al., 2015), covers months four through 12 of a new hire's tenure ("Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process," 2012; Korte et al., 2015; Maurer, 2015; "The 3 best ways to retain job hoppers," 2015; Carucci, 2018; Sibisi & Kappers, 2022). During this stage, the newcomer pursues the identity of an organizational insider (Korte et al., 2015). Onboarding activities at this point seek to enable the new hire to "acquire a set of desired behaviors, attitudes, and values expected of him or her in the new organization or subunit" (Solinger et al., 2013, p. 1643). The intent is for the individual to take on the socialized identity intended by the firm, absorbing notions related to goals, rules, routines, and culture while achieving consensual group membership (Solinger et al., 2013; Korte et al., 2015). During this stage, the onboarding experience needs to be tailored based on roles (Hollister & Watkins, 2019).

Content Areas for a Successful Onboarding Program

Through our literature review, we identified eight primary onboarding content areas for effective onboarding programs. These included: (a) rules and policies, (b) politics, (c) language, (d) performance proficiency, (e) people, (f) organizational goals and values, (g) history, and (h) future prospects. Onboarding programs including these content areas lead to improved job satisfaction and performance, increased organizational commitment, increased organizational profitability (Strack et al., 2012; Ellis et al., 2017; Sibisi & Kappers, 2022), higher individual-level income and career success (Chao et al., 1994; Ashforth et al., 1997), and reduced intention to quit/turnover (Cooper-Thomas & Anderson,

2002; Taormina, 2004; Klein & Heuser, 2008; Bauer, 2010; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Klein et al., 2015; Korte et al., 2015; Caldwell & Peters, 2018). For example, Sibisi and Kappers (2022) claimed the potential for a 50% increase in retention and a 62% productivity boost among new hires with a formal, structured program. In the following sections, we more fully describe each of the eight content areas.

Rules and Policies

The rules and policies content area reflects “the extent to which the individual has learned the formal workplace rules, policies, and procedures” (Klein & Heuser, 2008, p. 307). Rules and policies are vital to the daily life of an organization. They specify both acceptable and prohibited employee behaviors. The company’s benefits and reward system (Klein & Heuser, 2008), terms of employment (Ibrahim et al., 2022), legal requirements (Chan et al., 2021), and ethical codes of conduct (Cesario & Chambel, 2019) also fall within this category. All new hires require this knowledge to acclimate to a new environment, whether the content is originated by the firm or an outside entity via laws and regulations (Klein & Heuser, 2008). Building mechanisms for new employees to gain this information is crucial to both the functioning of the organization and the socialization of each new hire.

Politics

Politics concerns the “network of power and interpersonal relationships in an organization” (Klein & Heuser, 2008, p. 305). Organizations contain both formal and informal relationships related to power and influence (Chao et al., 1994). Learning how to navigate the power structure these embody is crucial (Taormina, 2004). Watkins (2019) called this “political learning” and discussed how it pertains to discovering the nature of the decision-making process, who key influencers are, and how power works in the firm. While the importance of understanding the formal system is obvious, given its visibility in the organizational chart and the decision-making processes that it contains, comprehending the informal system is as, or more, essential for new employees to understand (Klein & Weaver, 2000). Understanding this content area makes it easier for new hires to predict their environment, reducing

uncertainty (Klein & Heuser, 2008). Uncertainty reduction is significant since it helps new hires understand how their job fits into the larger organization and how to execute it within the formal and informal power network (Maurer, 2015).

Language

The language content area involves understanding the terminology employed in a particular profession, including the jargon and acronyms utilized within their specific organization (Chao et al., 1994). To successfully communicate in the workplace, a person must understand the language (Klein & Heuser, 2008). Decoding the terminology can be a frustrating aspect of a new job, and organizations need to smooth this process (Carucci, 2018). Besides work competency, understanding the language helps demonstrate to coworkers that the person has become an organizational insider. This concept also extends to grasping the modes and methods of communicating and interaction (Graybill et al., 2013).

Performance Proficiency

Performance proficiency, defined as the tasks necessary to perform a job, is one of the items most typically associated with orienting a new employee (Chao et al., 1994; Klein & Heuser, 2008). The knowledge, skills, and behaviors to perform in-role tasks are fundamental to job success (Chao et al., 1994). Technical skills, job descriptions, available resources, and boundaries to authority all play roles in this area (Carucci, 2018), as do understanding products, customers, systems, and supervisor expectations (Watkins, 2019). Whatever avenues are required to achieve task proficiency should be directly incorporated into the onboarding process (Chao et al., 1994). Performance proficiency is foundational to completing in-role tasks and affects organizational commitment (Ahmad et al., 2010) and turnover intentions (Zimmerman & Darnold, 2009).

People

As the name implies, the people category concerns developing productive relationships with individuals in the workplace (Klein & Weaver, 2000). Building relationships with individuals who can

provide insight to a newcomer about the firm, their role, and their coworkers provides needed information to successfully function in an organization (Chao et al., 1994). Researchers divide this category into two pieces: (a) working relationships and (b) social relationships (Klein & Heuser, 2008). Both are important for organizational socialization. Whereas the politics content area concerns understanding what the formal and informal networks in an organization are, the people content area concerns creating and maintaining relationships within the associated workplace networks. Working relationships, or informational ties, are those that provide the information required to execute in-role tasks and expectations, as well as to comprehend overarching organizational issues. Social relationships, or friendship ties, develop from shared personal interests. Taken together, these facilitate cooperation, support, feedback, network access, and a sense of belonging in the workplace.

Organizational Goals and Values

To effectively further an organization's goals and values, a new hire must possess an in-depth understanding of what they are ("Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process," 2012). Since organizations tend to have both explicit goals and values, as well as implicit (noncodified but no less real) ones, a new hire needs to learn both (Tuttle, 2002). This content area concerns two subdivisions: (a) goals and strategy and (b) culture and values (Klein & Heuser, 2008). Goals are what the organization wants to achieve, while strategy represents the path to accomplishing the goals. Both move the organization and the individual toward achieving the stated mission by efficiently focusing resources. At the individual level, the new hire needs to understand how in-role tasks contribute to accomplishing firm objectives and how success is defined.

Onboarding is also a method of teaching the firm's culture (Klein & Heuser, 2008). Teaching newcomers the norms, values, rituals, beliefs, myths, and customs of the organization moves them toward becoming citizens and imparts the knowledge to avoid perceived violations. Thus, allowing employees to react automatically to routine situations with conforming behavior while also providing

them guidance on appropriate actions in situations requiring judgment. Essentially, to feel like they fit in and belong, newcomers must understand the culture (Taormina, 2009), as well as accept the firm's values, not just be aware of them (Taormina, 2004).

History

We define history as “the extent to which the individual has learned the [organization's] history, traditions, origins, and changes” (Klein & Heuser, 2008, p. 301). There is value for new hires at all levels in knowing when a company was founded and by whom, the evolution of the product line, and how the firm survived difficult periods (Haueter et al., 2003). Employees need to learn company rituals, myths, customs, traditions, and the personal backgrounds of influential people (Chao et al., 1994).

Understanding beloved stories serves as a method for discovering valued company principles. This knowledge “often explains why [an organization] operates as it does, and how it reacts to various situations” (Klein & Heuser, 2008, p. 302). Consequently, this provides a guide to the newcomer about how people may react or what behavior is acceptable or unacceptable.

Future Prospects

The future prospects content area focuses on an “employee's long-term view with the organization, such as his or her anticipation of continued employment in and the rewards offered by the organization” (Taormina, 2004, p. 78). It centers on how the new hire views their future career prospects, something highlighted as a strong predictor of organizational commitment and turnover intentions. This area revolves around items like promotion opportunities, the availability of higher pay, and bonuses. Also referred to as inducements, it is influential in forming early psychological contracts with new hires (Klein & Heuser, 2008). Newcomers quickly formulate opinions about needs-supplies fit perceptions. Needs-supplies fit describes “whether the resources provided by the organization can meet the needs of employees. When the resources provided by the organization are the same as the resources employees expect from the organization, needs and supplies match up with each other”

(Wang & Wang, 2018, p. 3). Given how rapidly these positive or negative opinions form, career development forms an integral part of the onboarding process (Hirsch, 2017; Donoghue, 2018).

Summary

As we demonstrated in this literature review, onboarding constitutes an important but often undervalued and overlooked part of a firm's activities. Effectual approaches to onboarding integrate all eight content areas (rules and policies, politics, language, performance proficiency, people, organizational goals and values, history, and future prospects). Moreover, competent execution recognizes that onboarding is not a single event in a new hire's lifecycle. It is a learning process (Korte et al., 2015) that begins during recruiting and continues during the first year of employment ("Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process," 2012; Klein et al., 2015).

Effective onboarding leads to improved job satisfaction, enhanced job performance, increased organizational commitment, reduced intention to quit, and decreased turnover (Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2002; Caldwell & Peters, 2018; Bauer, 2010; Taormina, 2004; Klein & Heuser, 2008; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Klein et al., 2015; Korte et al., 2015). Firms implementing a formal, structured program see significant increases in retention rates and improved productivity among new hires (Sibisi & Kappers, 2022). Given MANA's previously identified goals, our decision to apply this literature to the creation of our conceptual framework for this evaluation represents a valid approach.

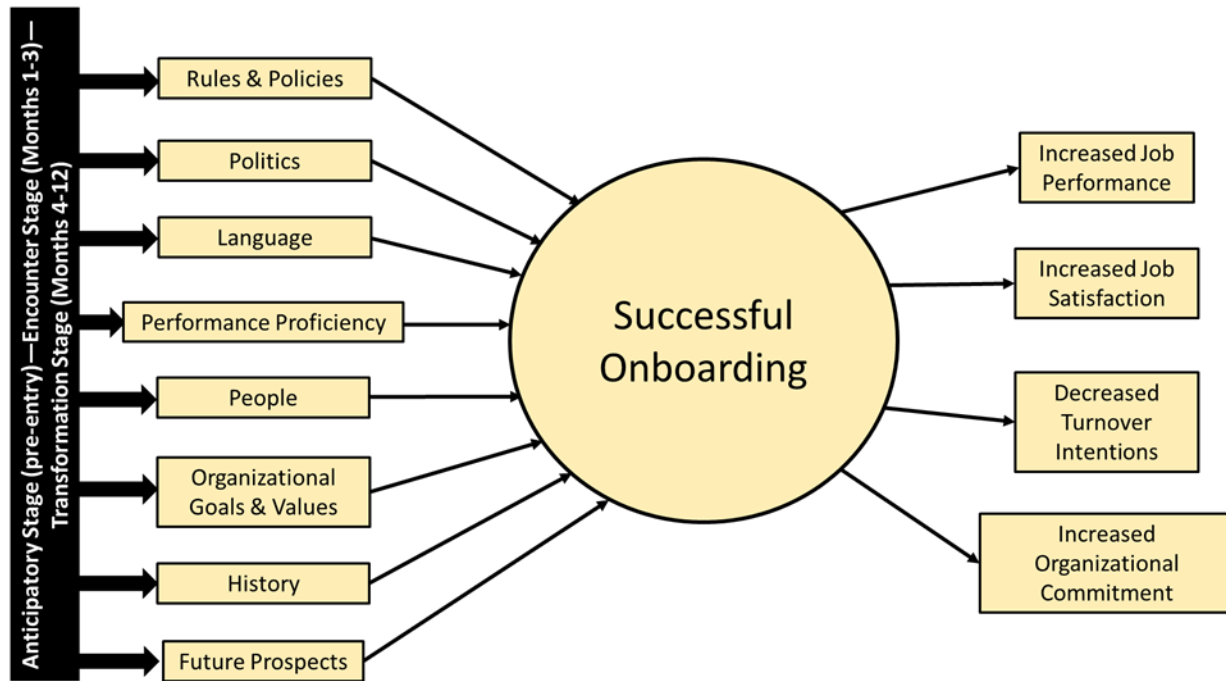
Conceptual Framing and Project Questions

We generated a conceptual framework (see Figure 1) informed by the extant onboarding research that illustrates how the eight onboarding content practices we identified holistically contribute to a successful onboarding approach. Each of these has been identified as an element of an effective onboarding program, leading to positive outcomes related to job performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intention to quit/turnover (Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2002;

Caldwell & Peters, 2018; Bauer, 2010; Bauer et al., 2007; Taormina, 2004; Klein & Heuser, 2008; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Klein et al., 2015; Korte et al., 2015; Bauer et al., 2007).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for Successful Onboarding with Associated Outcomes



Note. This framework is one the authors designed based on the work of Chao et al. (1994), Taormina (2004), Bauer et al. (2007), Klein and Heuser (2008), Bauer and Erdogan (2011), Solinger et al. (2013), and Korte et al. (2015).

Moreover, timing is a significant factor, and it is illustrated by the vertical banner along the left side of the graphic. Onboarding is not a single event in a new hire's lifecycle. It is a learning process (Korte et al., 2015) that begins during recruiting and continues during the first year of employment ("Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process," 2012; Klein et al., 2015). As such, firms should construct onboarding as a series of stages (Korte et al., 2015). In this vein, researchers identify three stages: (a) anticipatory, (b) encounter, and (c) transformation (Solinger et al., 2013). Anticipatory socialization concerns the pre-entry period (Tuttle, 2002; Solinger et al., 2013), starting with recruitment

(Klein & Heuser, 2008) and concluding before the first day on the job (“Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process,” 2012). The encounter stage begins with the first day on the job and extends through the first three months (Solinger et al., 2013; Korte et al., 2015; Klein & Heuser, 2008; Bauer, 2010). Finally, the transformation stage covers months four through 12 of a new hire’s tenure (Solinger et al., 2013; Korte et al., 2015; Tuttle, 2002).

All eight content areas are relevant across the three time periods indicated in our conceptual framework (Klein & Heuser, 2008). That said, employees’ receptivity to content is related to what they perceive to be relevant at the time (McGhee & Thayer, 1961; Klinger, 1975). Therefore, certain content areas grow in importance over time. New hires appear to be particularly receptive to future prospects, goals and values, and rules and policies during pre-entry (Klein & Heuser, 2008). Starting on day one, language, performance proficiency, and politics rapidly grow in significance. By month four, the newcomers’ receptivity maximizes in all eight content areas. Of note, the learning and reinforcement of knowledge in each content area grows in importance, starting with recruiting, over the first 12 months of employment. Effective programs address each content area during each stage. By the end of the first year, the depth of exposure for each new employee should progressively increase, and organizations need to provide new hires with opportunities to develop an in-depth understanding of each one.

Of note, our project was a formative process evaluation, not an outcome evaluation. As such, we evaluated the extent to which MANA’s onboarding program contained the eight onboarding content areas on the left-hand side of Figure 1, as well as the timing of those practices, not the four outcomes on the right-hand side. Once MANA implements our recommendations, an outcome evaluation should follow later (post-Capstone).

Given the nature of our evaluation, we generated the following project questions:

1. To what extent does MANA’s current onboarding program reflect the eight onboarding content areas (rules and policies, politics, language, performance proficiency, people, organizational

goals and values, history, and future prospects) that the extant research literature indicates make up an effective approach?

2. To what extent does MANA's current onboarding program reflect the structural and timing elements associated with an effective program in the extant literature?

Project Design

Data Collection

First, we examined organizational documents related to onboarding. MANA's human resources manager provided these documents via a shared Google Drive folder. The documents consisted of items related to job descriptions, new hire materials, organizational charts, and training matrices, as well as pay, benefits, and incentive programs. We moved these documents to a Box folder for security and processing purposes.

Reviewing the onboarding procedures and records offered opportunities to discover the indicators listed in our matrix. The benefits of interrogating the established procedures were straightforward, telling us what the firm thought it was doing. Examining onboarding-related records allowed us to crosscheck planned approaches with actual execution. It also provided the chance to explore the alignment of the program's design with what the literature-based model describes.

Next, as researchers have documented, interviews represent an appropriate method to supplement the probing of documentation and archival data when looking at adherence (James Bell Associates, 2009). As such, we interviewed a combination of three current members of MANA's leadership team and three hourly paid manufacturing employees. Our target for the hourly paid employees was those working for the organization between 12 and 24 months. This timeline was critical because our literature review revealed that onboarding should continue for approximately one year. Furthermore, we wanted to limit total organizational tenure to two years, believing that the longer the employee had been with the firm, the more likely they may be to forget specific details of their

onboarding experience. We also wanted to explore differences between leaders and line employees to evaluate the consistency of onboarding perception at each respective level. To facilitate this action, we chose to interview the hourly paid employees before conducting interviews with the members of the leadership team so that we could adapt the leadership team protocol to explore any items that emerged in the hourly paid employee interviews that differed from what the documentation indicated. We include details on recruitment in the recruitment and sampling strategy section.

Data and Subject Protection

Ensuring data security and participant safety was paramount to the credibility of our formative evaluation. We kept the information provided by interview participants confidential by not including the actual names of any individual in the report. Our categorical aggregation of interview-derived information for analysis after the completion of coding further protected identities. Moreover, we stored all data in a password-protected, cloud-based storage system.

Recruitment and Sampling Strategy

Given MANA's relatively small size (n=96) and the executive team's desire for as minimal disruption as possible, we interviewed three members of the leadership team with the most impact on the onboarding process (the plant manager, Georgia-based office manager, and the human resources manager) and three hourly paid manufacturing personnel hired within the last 12-24 months (n=22). We randomly chose the line employees, with names selected via a random number generator in Excel. MANA's human resources manager provided us with the information for participant selection. This individual also contacted people in the order the random number generator provided until three willing participants emerged. We worked with designated organizational members to coordinate data collection efforts to generate minimal disruption to daily activities. Each interview lasted less than one hour.

We reviewed the onboarding records before conducting the semi-structured interviews to support our question construction for the interview protocol. We believed that an iterative approach would allow us to probe questions that arose during the document review via the lived experiences of the interviewees. It also allowed us to cross-check the firm's written plan against the plan's real-world execution. In addition to questions related to the eight onboarding content areas and time factors, we explored whether the employee experience mirrored the intended experience of MANA's onboarding program. We believed that part of our data collection mission was to evaluate which elements of our conceptual framework were present in the existing onboarding program, but also if employees perceived these elements to be present as well. Another exploratory avenue concerned whether activities contributing to the onboarding experience were occurring but remained undocumented or unknown to the firm's leaders.

One week before each interview, we sent participants a recruitment letter via MANA's human resources manager that detailed who we were, our contact information, the purpose of the program evaluation, and the time commitment associated with participation (see Appendix E). Before starting each interview, we verbally reiterated these points as part of our interview protocol (see Appendices B and C). This document sought to provide reassurance of the positive intent to help the organization improve its onboarding efforts and how we would protect confidentiality. We recorded all interviews using Zoom since the interviews occurred remotely. We used a semi-structured format with established mandatory questions intended to lead to more in-depth discussions as warranted by the answers provided.

Although each interview was with a single employee, both Capstone team members participated, with one of us conducting the interview while the other took notes and observed. The note-taker also assisted with follow-up questions as the interview progressed.

Data Analysis Plan

Our first data analysis objective was to discover whether the eight key elements were currently present in MANA's existing onboarding program. Our second objective was to determine the structural and timing characteristics of MANA's current onboarding program relative to the evidence-based practices that formed the basis of our conceptual framework.

Our formative evaluation examined MANA's onboarding program to determine its adherence to a theory-based framework. Adherence is "the extent to which core components are delivered as prescribed by the model" (James Bell Associates, 2018, p. 23). In this evaluation, we made use of triangulation by using multiple data collection methods to enhance the validity of this project (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). We constructed standardized protocols based on the theoretical framework (see Appendices A and D) and used them to evaluate each core component.

Our project questions provided the basis for our analysis. We analyzed sub-questions (a through h) first, with question one (the overarching question for a through h) and question two examined last due to their program-level compilation focus. We measured MANA's implementation of each of the eight onboarding content areas using 40 indicators. We rated each indicator as present, superficially present, or not present. We defined superficially present as when an indicator was present, but we deemed its execution as shallow. We then used these indicator ratings to rate each content area as follows: (a) fully implemented if all indicators were present; (b) partially implemented if some but not all of the indicators were present or were superficially present; or (c) not implemented if none of the indicators were present. Moreover, each indicator also received a rating based on timing to facilitate answering question two.

Adding data from interviews to the document review data facilitated these actions. Overall, we viewed this as a strength of our approach. It allowed us to triangulate data from the different collection

methods against an established theory-based rubric derived from the content area-indicator pairing in

Figure 2.

Figure 2

Content Area-Indicator Pairing

Content Area	Indicators	Timing
Rules and Policies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reviewing rules and policies 2. Communicating benefits 3. Communicating organizational integrity principles 4. Completing employee paperwork 	Anticipatory Stage (pre-entry) Encounter Stage (Months 1-3) Transformation Stage (Months 4-12)
Politics	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explaining organizational information networks 2. Orientation program 3. Explaining responsibilities and authorities 4. Welcome coordinator or onboarding buddy 	
Language	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explaining technical language 2. Organizational glossary 3. Explaining communications modes 4. Teaching how groups interact 	
Performance Proficiency	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Job training 2. Communicating expectations 3. Providing necessary work tools 4. Providing performance feedback 5. Newcomer hotline 6. Distributed contact lists 7. Question and Answer sessions 8. Instruction on how to access needed resources 	
People	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Facilitating working relationships 2. Facilitating social relationships 3. Meet-and-greet opportunities 4. A buddy system 5. Frequent supervisor/leader check-ins 6. Welcome email communicated 	
Organizational Goals and Values	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reviewing formal goals, values, and norms 2. Reviewing informal goals, values, and norms 3. Communicating organizational priorities 4. New employee appreciation activities 5. Company website 6. Supporting new employee emotional needs 7. Explaining how the employee can contribute to organizational success 	
History	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discussing the firm's history, including its traditions, myths, rituals, stories, and key events 2. Discussing organizational roots and survival in tough times 	
Future Prospects	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Communicating future opportunities 2. Communicating cross-training, rotational assignments, and exposure opportunities 3. Explanations of inducements and benefits 4. Facilitating the transition to an organizational insider 5. Communicating customer satisfaction needs 	

For consistency, both team members individually coded all documents and interviews (see Appendices A: Interview Transcript Coding Protocol and D: Document Coding Protocol), looking for the presence of each content area and timing indicator, as described in the previous section. Following the independent analysis, both team members compared ratings to discover congruent and incongruent findings. We discussed all inconsistencies until we reached an agreement on the appropriate rating. We reconciled all codes, leaving no outstanding disagreements.

Our goal for this stage consisted of making a clear comparison between the practices in the current onboarding program and the recommended practices in the theoretical onboarding framework. By identifying areas where the current program does not adhere to the theoretical framework, we intended to provide recommendations to MANA. Conversely, we also sought to validate the current practices at the firm when those practices aligned with the theoretical framework.

Logic Model

Bickman (1987) defined program theory as “a plausible and sensible model of how a program is supposed to work” (p. 5). Douglas (personal communication, 2022) further delineated this concept as the small “t” theory and the big “T” theory. Small “t” theory concerns the design of the existing program, linking goals, activities, and outcomes. Big “T” theory connects to the extant body of research literature and what it indicates about the relationships displayed within the program’s small “t” theory. The logic model visually represents the theory that underpins a program (Center for Assessment and Research Studies, n.d.).

For MANA, no logic model existed for the organization’s onboarding program. An established, stable program existed; however, the leadership team was skeptical of its effectiveness. The company had short-, intermediate-, and long-term goals for the program that progressed from hiring qualified people and achieving high job performance to attaining high job satisfaction, high organizational commitment, and decreased turnover intentions, as well as seeing personnel embrace the

organization's culture. Even so, MANA's leadership team did not possess an understanding of how their current activities connected to those goals or if the activities facilitated the achievement of those goals.

As such, to facilitate our analysis of MANA's onboarding program, we found it useful to first describe the current program visually with a logic model. Figure 3 illustrates the onboarding program as it exists today. The model shows all the key inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes associated with the program; these aim to accomplish MANA's stated goals/outcomes. It also lists the contextual factors and assumptions specific to this program that had a bearing on the evaluation.

We tailored this onboarding program logic model based on our interactions with key stakeholders. Executive leaders and line managers provided much of the input. Differentiating colors and containers delineate the model's different elements to represent the current program's elements.

The outcomes represent the short-, intermediate-, and long-term objectives that stakeholders indicated were important in our interactions. Short-term outcomes focus on the ability to find, evaluate, hire, start, and retain qualified people. Intermediate-term outcomes center around creating an attractive culture for the workforce. Long-term outcomes relate to having an engaged and committed workforce that embraces the firm's culture and making MANA an employer of choice in its community.

Turning to the assumptions, we saw that many of these were related to MANA's local context and resources. One is that qualified personnel are present in sufficient numbers to meet hiring needs or that people will be willing to move to the local area to work for MANA. Another maintains that the pay and benefits package at MANA meets or exceeds other employers in the area, making the firm a more attractive option, especially when paired with its mission. There are also assumptions that new hires will view the work environment and culture as appealing, somewhere they can see themselves having a long-term career. Finally, and likely most telling for this evaluation, there is an assumption that the current onboarding activities will lead to the desired outcomes.

Figure 3

Logic Model

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Plant Manager 2. Human Relations Manager 3. Georgia-based Office Manager 4. Coworkers 5. Department managers 6. Information technology resources 7. Time 8. Money 9. Human resources processes 10. Shift managers 11. Team leaders 12. Background screening tools 13. Local partners: Fitzgerald Chamber of Commerce & Fitzgerald Economic Development Board 14. Job advertisements: internal & external—written, electronic, social media, billboard, & job fairs 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hiring program activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation to recruit • Advertising • Initial processing • Interviewing • Screening • Decision to hire 2. Notified of hiring 3. Start date established 4. An e-mail is sent to the managers about the orientation date 5. Plant access granted 6. Orientation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal paperwork for employment completed • Employee handbook discussed • Available plant leader visits the session to welcome new hires • Online training modules • Facility tour 7. Meet supervisor 8. On-the-job training 9. 90-day trial period 10. Weekly CEO e-mails 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Position advertisements 2. Applicants 3. Interviews 4. Background checks 5. List of non-hires that can be contacted for future openings 6. Relationships with local partners 7. Awareness of the firm's mission and its status as an employer 8. New hires added to the firm 9. Appointments for new hire starts 10. Notifications about new hires 11. Plant leaders and supervisors met 12. Company rules and policies conveyed 13. Completed employment paperwork and badging 14. Completed online safety and company familiarization training 15. Completed in-person in-role task training 16. Firm culture, values, and mission conveyed 17. Full employees at full pay <p>-----</p> <p>Situation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early turnover (within first 90 days) is a particular concern at the firm. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 32 in 2021 • 45 in 2022 <p>-----</p> <p>Context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MANA develops and delivers specialized food to the global food aid network. It produces ready-to-use therapeutic food at its plant in Fitzgerald, Georgia, a 50,000-square-foot facility (currently expanding). • The firm manufactures between 450,000-500,000 packets for distribution daily. The production operation employs 96 people, with 75 members of MANA's team being hourly-paid manufacturing workers. • MANA operates around the clock with three shifts 5-6 days a week, occasionally surging to seven-day-per-week operations. <p>-----</p> <p>Assumptions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interested and qualified personnel available in the local area or are willing to move to Fitzgerald, GA • Pay scale & benefits are attractive • Compelling mission attractive to employees • Employment competitors in Ben Hill county are not more attractive • Workplace environment is supportive, positive, & appealing • Current activities as executed satisfy new hire needs and desires • Current activities as executed will lead to the stated outputs/outcomes • New hires can see future opportunities within the firm <p>-----</p> <p>External Factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geopolitical environment • Economic cycles • Hiring environment <p>-----</p>	<p>Short-term:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Attract a pool of technically qualified talent for each opening 2. Applicants that can pass background checks 3. Hire qualified talent 4. Retain qualified talent 5. Retain technically qualified talent for each position 6. High applicant satisfaction with the process 7. Efficient & effective onboarding program 6. High job performance <p>Intermediate-term:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Improve equity, diversity, & inclusion in leadership roles 8. Create a strong MANA brand as an employer 9. Retain entry-level hires so that they become key contributors <p>Long-term:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. High job satisfaction 11. Retain personnel who embrace MANA's culture & mission 12. High organizational commitment 13. Decreased turnover intentions

The external environment helps drive the increased perceived need to improve MANA's onboarding program. The organization's plant expansion and growing list of orders necessitate increased capacity. Moreover, global food insecurity and poverty growing out of the conflicts in Ukraine, Ethiopia, and Syria, instability in numerous other countries, natural disasters, environmental disasters, and failed harvests have resulted in demand outpacing MANA's production capacity. Increased demand led to factory and warehouse expansion projects that will triple its output potential by 2023. The new

production goals will be at risk if the firm's onboarding program does not aid in improved employee retention. Economic cycles also impact MANA. For example, the effects of the "Great Resignation" may contribute to MANA's current issues, further complicating retaining qualified talent. Finally, an external challenge to achieving its goals rests in the location of MANA's facility in a rural community. Due to its location, there is a limited supply of potential employees with the transferable skills required for their factory setting, making an effective onboarding approach even more crucial.

This logic model represents the program as it exists today (Bickman, 1987; Rossi et al., 2019). Our evaluation investigated how the program approaches its objectives and compared those practices to what the theory-based model encapsulated by our conceptual framework (see Figure 1) suggested was the best way to approach the onboarding process. During the evaluation, we principally explored the activities section of this model. Even though we reference outcomes in the model, we performed a formative, process evaluation, not an outcome evaluation. The opportunity to explore that section of the model remains for a future effort.

Additionally, the logic model serves as the principal basis for our analysis of the big "T" program theory in the next section. We describe our findings about this program using our conceptual framework (see Figure 1) and the associated project questions.

Findings

This section describes the findings for our two principal evaluation questions grounded in our analysis of the data we collected via document reviews and interviews. Based on the design of this study, we detail the findings for each sub-area of the two questions before arriving at an overall summary finding for each principal question.

Question 1: To what extent does MANA's current onboarding program reflect the eight onboarding content areas that the extant literature indicates make up an effective approach?

1a. Rules and Policies

1a1. Reviewing Rules and Policies.

We found evidence of MANA describing rules and policies in its documents. The employee handbook discusses the drug and alcohol policy, weapons prohibitions, visitor rules, attendance/excused absence policies, appropriate conduct at work, outside employment guidance, personal protective equipment (PPE) usage, badging requirements, the usage of cell phones, the handling of workplace accidents, social media policies, media contacts, employee privacy, timekeeping, nepotism, employee benefits, marketing and communications, and how to raise concerns to organizational leaders. The firm also publishes guidance for its education assistance program. Furthermore, documentation elaborates on the employee incentive program, including what criteria result in an employee reward. The Good Manufacturing Processes—Employee Hygiene Guidance document covers healthy practices, in addition to requirements for clothing, hair, PPE, break room rules, and tobacco usage.

While the employee handbook is comprehensive and covers many rules and policies, we encountered evidence that it potentially does not pervade the workforce. For example, although one respondent indicated they gained most of their knowledge about rules and policies from the handbook, another stated, "That book is so thick, unless I guess you have a problem, you're not going to sit there and go through it and read it." This statement, echoed by other interviewees, highlights a potential overreliance on a single method, self-education via reading a manual here, of delivering information to new hires. Given this potential vulnerability, we deemed this indicator "superficially present" based on our data analysis protocols.

1a2. Communicating Benefits.

We discovered evidence that MANA communicates information concerning benefits during onboarding. The firm conveys this information in its employee handbook, the benefits plan summary, and the education assistance policy. New hires also receive verbal descriptions of these benefits during onboarding. However, some respondents indicated that benefits are only covered briefly during orientation. Comprehensive instruction appears to not occur until approximately 90 days into a new employee's tenure when the individual completes the trial period. One interviewee highlighted this approach as a shortfall in the current program, stating that enrollment nuances related to timing especially need to be covered better during orientation. Another example of a potential concern emerged from two respondents who indicated no memory of a benefits discussion during the initial orientation. Based on our document review and interview feedback, we rated this indicator as "superficially present."

1a3. Communicating Organizational Integrity Principles.

MANA describes organizational integrity principles as part of the onboarding process. The firm includes principles in select job descriptions and the employee handbook. Additionally, orientation videos in Alchemy, the company's online video training delivery platform, convey its principles to new hires through videos recorded by organizational leaders.

Moreover, the CEO also distributes regular emails discussing integrity principles and other firm-related topics. However, not all employees have access to company email, negating the possible effects this sort of communication could have. While office-based positions universally possess company-based email accounts, many hourly paid manufacturing employees apparently either do not have a company account or are unaware of its existence. Some also may not have personal email accounts. Likewise, the single-session nature of the orientation videos appeared to result in some respondents forgetting them

and, thus, losing contact with the messages conveyed. Given these potential shortcomings, we graded this indicator as "superficially present."

1a4. Completing Employment Paperwork.

Procedures exist at MANA for new hires to complete employment paperwork during onboarding. In addition to the pre-employment application, our document review revealed a new hire packet containing employee data and HR forms, I-9 (employment eligibility confirmation), W-4 (federal employee withholding certificate), G-4 (Georgia employee withholding certificate), and direct deposit forms, all typical items associated with initial employment. Interviewees confirmed what we saw in the documentation. As such, we deemed this indicator as "present."

Rules and Policies Summary.

Our data analysis concluded that three indicators were superficially present, and one was present. Therefore, we assigned the rules and policies content area a grade of "partially implemented" (see Table 1).

Table 1

Rules and Policies Summary: Partially Implemented

Indicator	Present	Superficially Present	Not Present
Reviewing rules and policies		X	
Communicating benefits		X	
Communicating organizational integrity principles		X	
Completing employment paperwork	X		

1b. Politics

1b1. Explaining Organizational Information Networks.

We encountered no evidence that MANA explains organizational information networks to new hires in our document reviews or subsequent interviews. Furthermore, we discovered an absence of

information discussing informal leaders or decision-making processes in the firm. One item that emerged during our interviews concerned the variable delivery style for onboarding. Interviewees highlighted that the current approach is primarily informal, with most learning emerging from interactions with crew leaders once a person starts performing in-role tasks. While informal information gains are neither unexpected nor undesirable, informality at the program level is noteworthy. The published literature ties an increase in retention and productivity to a formal, structured program (Sibisi and Kappers, 2022). Additionally, our interviews indicated a universal dependence on employees getting information in daily pre-shift production meetings, adding to the variability of information delivery for this indicator. Given all these findings, we deemed this indicator “not present.”

1b2. Orientation Program.

There is unambiguous evidence of an orientation program at MANA. The one-day program is foundational to the firm's current onboarding approach. Their training matrix shows Orientation Alchemy, orientation-related videos all new hires watch. The employee handbook contains a description of orientation practices. In addition, during the interviews, several respondents referred to orientation, typically saying it lasted most or all of the first day of employment. The respondents described completing paperwork, watching Alchemy, going over highlights of key MANA documents such as the employee handbook, and discussing rules and policies, as well as general information. As such, we considered this indicator “present.”

1b3. Explaining Responsibilities and Authorities.

We found evidence that MANA explains responsibilities and authorities during onboarding. For example, job descriptions and the employee handbook both list them. The MANA organizational chart is another tool that conveys leadership authority. Orientation videos are delivered by MANA's leadership team, helping identify some of the key leaders within the organization. Leadership members informally visit with new hires during orientation to facilitate early exposure to decision-makers. One respondent

described these meetings as “throughout the day we’ll just informally pop in and say hello...It’s informal, but it’s also allowing them to meet the leadership team in person...that’s something that I think we do pretty well.” Of note, attendance by leaders is variable and based on individual initiative and availability, not part of a structured programmatic procedure. Several interviewees noted that they knew they could speak to supervisors or even MANA leadership when seeking a better understanding related to this indicator. Based on our findings, we deemed this indicator “present.”

1b4. Welcome Coordinator or Onboarding Buddy.

While neither document reviews nor interviews revealed an onboarding buddy assignment as part of the onboarding process, we saw clear evidence of a welcome coordinator. The Georgia-based office manager fulfills this role. The office manager interacts with new hires before their first day on the job, delivering information such as the start date. The individual also ensures the completion of new employee paperwork and manages the one-day orientation program. Based on our description of this indicator as a welcome coordinator or an onboarding buddy for the politics content area, we deemed this indicator “present.” We specifically discuss the onboarding buddy program later in the “people” content area.

Politics Summary.

Our data analysis concluded that three of four indicators were present. Therefore, we assigned the politics content area a grade of "partially implemented" (see Table 2).

Table 2

Politics Summary: Partially Implemented

Indicator	Present	Superficially Present	Not Present
Explaining organizational information networks			X
Orientation program	X		
Explaining responsibilities and authorities	X		
Welcome coordinator or onboarding buddy	X		

1c. Language

1c1. Explaining Technical Language.

Our analysis did not expose evidence of a structured approach for explaining technical language to new employees. We found limited definitions pertinent to the MANA workplace in the Good Manufacturing Processes-Employee Hygiene document and the employee handbook. The items covered focused on generic employment terms, not technical language specific to the firm's environment. Interviews further confirmed what we found in the documents. One respondent indicated, "That's something that we don't do very well...RUTF, you know we don't really tell our employees what that is. So, you know that is something we should explain to them." After being asked about the handbook definitions, this respondent said, "There's some definitions in our handbook, but I think that it doesn't really go over the items that you're discussing." Overall, our examination led us to assign this indicator a grade of "not present."

1c2. An Organizational Glossary.

We found no evidence that MANA publishes a glossary of technical terms. Several interviewees described this issue as a shortcoming to educating new hires when asked about the topic. As we mentioned earlier, definitions of general employment terms reside in the employee handbook. Even so, most interviewees did not remember the presence of any definitions in that document. Specifically looking at technical language, respondents described learning the meaning of terminology over time as a result of completing their in-role tasks. The expression they used to describe understanding firm-based jargon, acronyms, or slang was "it's learning on the fly." They also expressed significant gaps in understanding terms their co-workers used during plant-based conversations. Given all these items, we graded this indicator as "not present."

1c3. Explaining Communication Modes.

We found no evidence of discussions related to communication modes in our review of onboarding documents. In addition, a significant theme arose from several participants indicating communication was lacking within MANA. One stated,

“We discuss it as a leadership group. You know, what’s the best way to communicate with the teams? And do we need to change this method versus that method? But I don’t think there’s anything that’s discussed right now with the new hires.”

An apparent overdependence on company email without a strategy to effectively utilize it also appeared. While the leadership team relies on email as a communication venue, hourly paid employees either lack access or are unaware they have it. Additionally, many manufacturing personnel do not have a personal email account. This situation creates a communication vacuum since, for example, the CEO sends highly informative weekly email messages to the company about what is happening in the firm and with its products. However, the lack of access to company email accounts, as well as an absence of collecting personal email account information for the distribution list, limits the penetration of this information among hourly paid employees.

Overall, there does not appear to be a communication strategy within MANA, nor are there explanations of how communications occur to new hires. The use of message boards and pre-shift meetings leaves communication dependent on individual interest and initiative. Based on these findings, we deemed this indicator “not present.”

1c4. Teaching How Groups Interact.

We uncovered no evidence in the documentation or interviews concerning teaching how groups interact. Participants noted the lack of formal discussions about ways or processes for employees and teams to interact in the workplace, corroborating the lack of descriptions in the written documentation.

One individual expressed that this absence generated divisions between departments and a lack of message penetration across the organization. As such, we graded this indicator as "not present."

Language Summary.

Our data analysis concluded that zero indicators were present for this content area.

Consequently, we assigned the language content area a grade of "not implemented" (see Table 3).

Table 3

Language Summary: Not Implemented

Indicator	Present	Superficially Present	Not Present
Explaining technical language			X
An organizational glossary			X
Explaining communication modes			X
Teaching how groups interact			X

1d. Performance Proficiency

1d1. Job Training.

We found documented job training during onboarding. The orientation program videos cover training topics such as personal safety, emergencies, and food safety. The overall training matrix details dozens of training topics like personal safety, food safety, inspections, sampling, production tracking, meetings, checklists, hygiene, and conservation, among others.

Despite the presence of a program in the onboarding documents, our interviews revealed a belief that initial training practices need improvement. While the video portions of the training are heavily structured, a consensus among participants emerged that the on-the-job component was too informal and needed a more standardized, structured approach to train a new hire to complete in-role tasks effectively. Respondents also implicated the informality in shift-to-shift inconsistencies in task execution and production outcomes. Given these observations, we considered this indicator "superficially present."

1d2. Communicating Expectations.

Our document analysis indicated evidence of communicating expectations during onboarding. For instance, select job descriptions indicate employee expectations. The Villager Incentive Program addresses expectations regarding quality control. The employee handbook defines employee conduct expectations. That said, interview responses described this indicator differently. Several respondents described receiving after-the-fact performance evaluations from supervisors at designated intervals. In addition, the participants indicated that similar performance-focused conversations about expectations did not occur early in employment, revealing a potential shortfall in the organization's onboarding of new hires. Since our analysis led us to view an improvement in the firm's approach as warranted, we graded it as "superficially present."

1d3. Providing Necessary Work Tools.

Our interviews universally revealed that MANA provided all the necessary work tools for in-role tasks. While the level of need for equipment varied among participants, each indicated receiving all needed items in terms of PPE and station-related tools like scissors. As such, we viewed this indicator as "present."

1d4. Evidence of Providing Performance Feedback.

We saw evidence of MANA providing performance feedback. Although respondents gave different answers in terms of the intervals of employee performance evaluations, all agreed that performance evaluations take place. One respondent noted the existence of formal reviews at 90 days, six months, and after one year. Another participant believed performance reviews occurred after 30 and 60 days. Yet an additional interviewee thought performance reviews happened quarterly for the first year. Finally, a respondent thought they transpired every six months. This divergence in the views of when new hires receive feedback information creates concerns about the efficacy of the firm's current approach. The lack of any indication that feedback occurs early in a new hire's tenure heightens these

concerns, especially when considering this issue along with the early turnover that the company experiences. Based on our criteria for this indicator, we viewed it as "superficially present."

1d5. Newcomer Hotline.

We found no evidence of a newcomer hotline in the company's documentation, and all participants confirmed the absence of a hotline for new hires. Instead, there is heavy dependence on the Georgia-based office manager and individual supervisors. As such, we graded this indicator as "not present."

1d6. Distributed Contact Lists.

We encountered no evidence of distributed contact lists in our review of onboarding documents. Likewise, no participant noted the distribution of a contact list to new hires. The closest we came to the presence of this indicator was one respondent saying that individuals occasionally hand out their phone numbers to other employees, but not in a systematic, uniform way. Another respondent said there are a few phone numbers posted around the plant. Based on this information, we deemed this indicator "not present."

1d7. Question and Answer Sessions.

We found no evidence for new hire-focused question-and-answer sessions in our document review. Participants supported this conclusion during our interviews. The question-and-answer sessions that interviewees remembered occurred as a part of plant visits by senior leaders, not as a structured event for newcomers. Respondents recalled these sessions as occurring irregularly, with some believing they no longer transpired. Once again, respondents appeared to view the pre-shift production meetings as the principal venue for new hire questions. Our analysis led to a grade of "not present" for this indicator.

1d8. Communicating How to Access Needed Resources.

Some evidence emerged indicating that MANA communicates how to access needed resources to new hires. For example, the employee handbook encourages new hires to contact their supervisor, the human resources manager, or other senior leaders as needed. In addition, all participants communicated an immediate supervisor-focused approach to accessing resources at the firm. That said, the interviewees indicated that much of the learning about this indicator occurs informally over time, as new hires discover who performs the various tasks around the plant. Looking at this indicator holistically, we assigned a grade of "superficially present."

Performance Proficiency Summary.

Our data analysis concluded that one of the eight indicators was present for this content area, while four were superficially present and three were not present. Consequently, we assigned the performance proficiency content area a grade of "partially implemented" (see Table 4).

Table 4

Performance Proficiency Summary: Partially Implemented

Indicator	Present	Superficially Present	Not Present
Job training		X	
Communicating expectations		X	
Providing necessary work tools	X		
Providing performance feedback		X	
Newcomer hotline			X
Distributed contact lists			X
Question and answer sessions			X
Communicating how to access needed resources		X	

1e. People

1e1. Facilitating Working Relationships.

There was evidence of MANA facilitating working relationships, primarily focused on specific task-oriented work groups. During interviews, several participants reported working in relatively small

groups, which almost forced them to get to know their coworkers. Workplace colleagues helped one another accomplish objectives and, in the process, build working relationships. Supervisors facilitated this approach with pre-shift meetings. Although these meetings were mainly limited to production-oriented issues, convening them daily helped accelerate working relationships among these teams. One note of interest was that we did not uncover any episodes of MANA creating any small project or process improvement-type teams, which studies show increase team cohesiveness and improve team performance (Cohen & Ross, 1982; Franz et al., 2017). Overall, we graded this indicator as "superficially present."

1e2. Facilitating Social Relationships.

Our analysis yielded some evidence that MANA attempts to facilitate social relationships. One orientation video encourages new hires to stop by and meet one of the senior leaders. Another covers behavioral topics such as anger management, workplace conduct, harassment, and discrimination, all of which help develop or aid social relationships. In addition, several participants mentioned the Christmas party as an annual opportunity to develop social relationships. Others stated that further opportunities were "random...maybe a few times a year," describing occasional cookouts and "a few other minor events." We also saw no efforts to generate discretionary ties outside of work based on things like clubs, hobbies, or recreational activities that researchers highlight as effective in building social bonds (Klein & Heuser, 2008). When asked about building non-work bonds, participants struggled to provide any examples. Since we assessed this indicator as weak concerning new hire-specific efforts or events, overall, we graded it as "superficially present."

1e3. Meet-and-Greet Opportunities.

We did not discover examples of intentional meet-and-greet opportunities. Besides the company-wide events mentioned in the previous indicator, which were not built specifically for new hires, we saw no evidence of programmed, regular opportunities for employees to get to know one

another. Further, some personnel experience isolation due to food safety protocols in the plant, exacerbating this shortfall. Several participants mentioned that new hires experience only informal introductions to the team during pre-shift meetings. These meetings focus on immediate production and work-related items, not discovering mutually held personal interests that aid the construction of a sense of community outside of the plant environment. Based on this evidence, we graded this indicator as "not present."

1e4. Buddy System.

MANA does not employ an onboarding buddy system. This determination emerged from both the document reviews and the interviews. The only pairing respondents mentioned included one with a trainer when they first started; however, even the trainer varied day-to-day. When this concept arose during the interviews, participants commented about its positive potential value for the organization. Given its complete absence, we deemed this indicator "not present."

1e5. Frequent Supervisor/Leader Check-ins.

Although respondents possessed different perspectives on the specifics, the interviews revealed evidence that supervisors check in with their team members regularly. One respondent said supervisors check in daily with new hires, a task participants viewed as easy given the small crews involved. Another said, "There's nothing formalized in a policy...My expectation would be that they would be doing that, but I don't have any way to...verify that." One respondent described supervisor check-ins as informal, with another saying they would see their supervisor walking the floor a lot, but, as far as check-ins, "it wasn't too often." A final respondent said, "Sure, all of them do...once or twice a week." Of note, these check-ins are informal and unstructured, not necessarily consistent or repeatable across individuals and timelines. With the lack of formality, our discoveries during the interviews led us to grade this indicator as "superficially present."

1e6. Welcome Email Communicated.

MANA does not send out new hire introduction emails to everyone in the firm as part of its onboarding program. One respondent said, “You know that’s a good idea. We don’t identify the new hires in that email [to management]. We just say hey, we have new hires or new hire orientation. Come by to introduce yourself.” Moreover, as we previously discussed, even if an introductory email was sent, it would not currently be received by all employees. Based on the above description, we deemed this indicator as “not present.”

People Summary.

Our data analysis concluded that three of the six indicators were superficially present for this content area, while we labeled three as not present. Consequently, we assigned the people content area a grade of "partially implemented" (see Table 5).

Table 5

People Summary: Partially Implemented

Indicator	Present	Superficially Present	Not Present
Facilitating working relationships		X	
Facilitating social relationships		X	
Meet-and-greet opportunities			X
Buddy system			X
Frequent supervisor/leader check-ins		X	
Welcome email communicated			X

1f. Organizational Goals and Values

1f1. Reviewing MANA’s Formal Goals, Values, and Norms.

Our document review showed evidence of MANA reviewing formal goals, values, and norms. Some job descriptions emphasize organizational goals and values. Orientation videos discuss the firm's goals and values. The concepts conveyed include:

- building a family,

- not being jerks,
- being kind,
- not making excuses,
- fixing problems,
- creating a special organization,
- high quality,
- innovativeness,
- improvement,
- being engaged,
- being optimistic,
- being sustainable,
- high integrity,
- time matters most,
- and promote good health.

MANA's annual report discusses its mission of ending malnutrition, and the VIP incentive program details its goals and purpose. Also, the employee handbook discusses goals, organizational mission, the goal of community, commitment to equal opportunity and diversity, ADA commitment, protecting children, safety, and other core values in detail. The strategy deployment document covers 2022-focused initiatives for culture, quality, communicating MANA's history, adding resources, production improvements, employee satisfaction, safety, and communications.

All that said, the interviews yielded the impression that the onboarding program either did not cover this topic with new hires or covered it in a way that the material was not memorable. While the required orientation videos directly cover this content area, one participant stated that no one reviews goals with new hires, but "Mark [the CEO] sends out a weekly email. But not all of the employees have a

company email.” However, this respondent referenced the shirts that MANA previously distributed to employees with a message on them stating that "we're not jerks," expressing a desire to see other values conveyed similarly. Another respondent indicated that the only consistent method of sharing company goals occurred in the pre-shift production meetings, stating that there is no discussion on how the company will meet its goals, just day-to-day production discussions. Another respondent concurred, saying there are no planned or consistent discussions about goals or how to meet them. Other respondents mentioned hearing about goals from supervisors or leadership on rare occasions, such as the recent expansion groundbreaking ceremony. Given the noted disconnects, we graded this indicator as "superficially present." An execution issue appears to exist, not a lack of available content to convey.

1f2. Reviewing MANA’s Informal Goals, Values, and Norms.

We found no evidence that the onboarding program conveys informal goals, values, and norms. Multiple participants communicated that learning the informal rules of the company occurs on the plant floor while executing in-role tasks and talking with co-workers, describing it as a random exercise that depends on the interactions of the individual new hire. Given these observations, we rated this indicator as "not present."

1f3. Communicating Organizational Priorities.

We saw evidence that MANA's onboarding program communicates organizational priorities. Orientation videos listed priorities such as saving lives, feeding kids, building a community, and saving lives over profit. The annual report discussed how MANA’s priority of saving lives caused them to help other local organizations when peanut shortages emerged, rather than solely fulfilling its own pre-established goals. However, once again, a disconnect appears to exist between the firm's early tenure messaging and what interviewees recall occurring. The participants indicated that discussing organizational priorities with new hires did not appear to be a priority and represented an area for

improvement. With the stated disconnect, we graded this indicator as "superficially present" since the material was conspicuously present. The concern here appears to be one of execution over content.

1f4. New Employee Appreciation.

Our analysis yielded no evidence of new employee appreciation efforts in the onboarding program. We did find two examples of welcoming new employees to the firm. These instances occurred in an orientation video and the employee handbook. However, we noted no specific programmatic episodes demonstrating appreciation for the new hires. The interviews confirmed this conclusion, with all participants confirming the dearth of activity for this indicator. As such, we assessed this indicator as "not present."

1f5. Company Website.

MANA maintains a company website (<https://www.mananutrition.org/>). The website contains information about the company, including its mission, products, leadership team, and financials. In addition, multiple participants noted the website during the interviews, and one mentioned using it for self-study about the organization. Given its presence, we evaluated this indicator as "present."

1f6. Supporting New Employee Emotional Needs.

We found evidence in our document review of MANA attempting to support the emotional needs of new hires. Orientation videos encourage building a family, being kind, being optimistic, and promoting good health. The annual report speaks of the importance of the MANA Village and the importance of caring for all employees. The educational assistance program encourages personal and professional growth. The employee handbook describes the significance of the MANA community and equal opportunity. Lastly, the strategy deployment guide emphasizes the importance of employee satisfaction and the MANA culture.

Although evidence for this indicator emerged during our document analysis, interviews painted a different picture. One participant indicated a belief that the messaging in this area was not reaching

the hourly paid manufacturing personnel. Others highlighted that while topics related to this indicator existed in the employee handbook and orientation videos, a dearth of active discussions with individuals existed.

Looking at this indicator holistically, we saw a disconnect between the different execution mediums, highlighting the potential need for a strategy based on a mixed mode of delivery. Noting the need for improvement, we assessed this indicator as “superficially present.”

1f7. Explaining How the Employee Can Contribute to Organizational Success.

We found no evidence of MANA explaining how individual employees can contribute to organizational success apart from generalizations about the values and culture the company attempts to achieve. We found interviews particularly revealing for this indicator. Participants called this area a weak link in the company, confirming they received no instruction on how their jobs contributed to organizational success. Given this information, we graded this indicator as "not present.”

Organizational Goals and Values Summary.

We found one indicator present, three superficially present, and three not present. Accordingly, we graded the organizational goals and values content area as "partially implemented" (see Table 6).

Table 6

Organizational Goals and Values Summary: Partially Implemented

Indicator	Present	Superficially Present	Not Present
Reviewing MANA’s formal goals, values, and norms		X	
Reviewing MANA’s informal goals, values, and norms			X
Communicating organizational priorities		X	
New employee appreciation			X
Company website	X		
Supporting new employee emotional needs		X	
Explaining how the employee can contribute to organizational success			X

1g. History

1g1. Evidence of Discussing the Firm's History, Including Its Traditions, Myths, Rituals, Stories, and Key Events.

Our document review revealed evidence describing MANA's history. Orientation videos discussed the CEO's background, how peanuts became part of the international food aid effort, and why MANA's manufacturing facility resides in Fitzgerald, GA. Another senior leader described his background, including where he lives and where he is from. The annual report covers historical topics, discussing its growth and milestones, as well as new contracts and partnerships. It also recounts how the firm became a recognized leader in RUTF production. Lastly, the employee handbook discusses MANA's progress over the previous decade.

On the other hand, interviews pointed to challenges in relaying historical content to the workforce. Participants highlighted the CEO's weekly email as a primary method of conveying history and traditions while recognizing the distribution limitations due to the lack of email penetration among hourly paid personnel. Interviewees also spotlighted management retreats as a method to discuss this topic but acknowledged that this venue does not reach the larger workforce. Others indicated no memory of hearing about the history of the company or leadership team.

Again, this scenario reveals a potential overreliance on information delivered to new hires on their first day of work and emails that do not reach the workforce. The material is apparent in the documents we examined. Given these conclusions, we graded this indicator as "superficially present."

1g2. Evidence of Discussing Organizational Roots and Survival in Tough Times.

We found no evidence of MANA telling stories about how it overcame hard times to its new hires. Neither document reviews nor interviews provided indications of activity related to this indicator. Given this conclusion, we deemed this indicator as "not present."

History Summary.

We found one of the two indicators superficially present for this content area. Accordingly, we graded the history content area as "partially implemented" (see Table 7).

Table 7

History Summary: Partially Implemented

Indicator	Present	Superficially Present	Not Present
Evidence of discussing the firm's history, including its traditions, myths, rituals, stories, and key events		X	
Evidence of discussing organizational roots and survival in tough times			X

1h. Future Prospects

1h1. Communicating Future Opportunities.

Our analysis of documents and interview transcripts yielded no evidence of material communicating future opportunities to new hires at a specific and individual level. While items like the annual report indicate increased employment opportunities due to the plant expansion, nothing communicates possible career paths as part of onboarding newcomers. Moreover, our interviews failed to provide evidence of this practice. Any conversations concerning future opportunities occurred as part of natural career progression once an individual showed promise, not an upfront discussion with new employees to apprise them of potential career paths with the firm. As such, we rated this indicator as "not present."

1h2. Communicating Cross-Training, Rotational Assignments, and Exposure Opportunities.

As with the future opportunities indicator, we found no evidence that MANA's onboarding program includes a component to communicate potential cross-training, rotational assignments, and exposure opportunities to new hires. The education assistance policy represented the closest item for this category, although it aligns nearest to the inducements indicator. Interviewees confirmed what we

uncovered in the document analysis, indicating that additional training emerged from individual performance over time rather than a repeatable, deliberate discussion as part of onboarding. Given these observations, we deemed this indicator as "not present."

1h3. Explanation of Inducements.

Our examination uncovered evidence of MANA explaining inducements to new hires. The annual report discussed employees visiting various African locations to see the effects of their work. Also, the villager incentive program describes incentives based on cost reduction and production increases. The benefits plan summary indicates the benefits new hires become eligible for after completing the 90-day trial period. Lastly, the employee handbook explains attendance bonuses, education assistance, and employee loan programs.

However, our interviews revealed a communication shortfall in this area. Some participants either did not experience or forgot discussions related to inducements, stating they gleaned the material about this indicator over time through conversations with co-workers. One interviewee believed that the material resided in the employee handbook but viewed actively searching that document for the information as an unlikely event for most people, stating that "they're not going to sit down and read the 50 pages." Others remembered initial inducement discussions only occurring after completing the 90-day trial period. Our analysis revealed a need for improved systematic messaging of inducements to new hires. Even though MANA makes the information available, we viewed the execution as lacking. As such, we rated this indicator as "superficially present."

1h4. Facilitating the Transition to an Organizational Insider.

This indicator is primarily associated with months four through 12 of employment (Korte et al., 2015; Maurer, 2015). Reviewing the documentation and interview transcripts, we uncovered no developmental mechanism during that period that aids a new hire in adopting the specific behaviors, attitudes, and values associated with membership in MANA's overall cultural community. We saw no

evidence of programmatic actions to create a socialized identity for the individual inside the firm's culture which would generate a personal identity actively associated with the mission of the company. There is evidence that much of the needed information exists to build upon. However, systematically conveying that information during the onboarding period without disrupting production is the challenge that requires addressing here. Based on our analysis, we viewed this indicator as “not present.”

1h5. Communicating Customer Satisfaction Needs.

Evidence exists that MANA attempts to communicate customer satisfaction needs to new hires. Documents regularly speak about malnourished children as MANA’s ultimate client and the need to maximize production so they can save as many lives as possible. Interview responses indicated a clear understanding of this foremost need. One potential negative here is related to the lack of discussion about the needs of the immediate customers, those who purchase MANA's products and deliver them to locations around the globe. Given the stringent production requirements that MANA operates under, messaging related to the needs of these immediate customers would enhance the understanding of the manufacturing workforce tangibly, equating immediate production quality needs with downstream users and offering the opportunity to improve comprehension of the demands placed on upstream suppliers. Given this analytical concern, we considered this indicator as “superficially present.”

Future Prospects Summary.

Table 8

Future Prospects Summary: Partially Implemented

Indicator	Present	Superficially Present	Not Present
Communicating future opportunities			X
Communicating cross-training, rotational assignments, and exposure opportunities			X
Explanations of inducements		X	
Facilitating the transition to organizational insider			X
Communicating customer satisfaction needs		X	

Our data analysis concluded that two of the five indicators were present for this content area. Consequently, we assigned the future prospects content area a grade of "superficially present" (see Table 8).

Question 1 Compilation

Bringing all the elements of question one together, as we show in Table 9, we found one content area not implemented (language) and the remaining seven partially implemented (rules and policies, politics, performance proficiency, people, organizational goals and values, history, and future prospects). Our analysis led us to conclude that MANA has partially implemented an onboarding program for its hourly paid manufacturing personnel that reflects the eight content areas the extant literature indicates make up an effective approach.

Table 9

Question 1 Summary: Partially Implemented

Content Area	Fully Implemented	Partially Implemented	Not Implemented
Rules and Policies		X	
Politics		X	
Language			X
Performance Proficiency		X	
People		X	
Organizational Goals and Values		X	
History		X	
Future Prospects		X	

The firm exhibited some strengths in the rules and policies area, with information about this topic readily available. However, we believe that a potential overreliance on the employee handbook and orientation videos watched on the first day of employment exists, undermining the effectiveness of the existing material. Conversely, the language content area emerged as the weakest area in the

company's current approach. Specific, repeatable, programmed methods to educate new hires about workplace terminology, communication modes, and group interaction methods are absent.

Looking at the politics arena, MANA heavily relies on its established orientation program and welcome coordinator (Georgia-based office manager) for the preponderance of its onboarding approach. That said, an apparent overreliance on pre-shift production meetings impairs educating new hires concerning organization-wide information networks, with informal learning dominating that item.

Findings related to performance proficiency yielded an understanding that, while job training clearly exists, it likely suffers from a lack of formality and repeatability, hampering the initial job performance of new hires. This observation also applies to the communication of expectations for new hire in-role tasks. No newcomer hotline, contact list, or question-and-answer sessions exists, leaving the ability of new hires to uncover answers to their questions dependent on the informal work networks they generate over time.

MANA's approach to the people content area largely centers on the pre-shift production meetings and the small-team nature of the work completed at the manufacturing facility. Its only approach to supporting social relationships consists of company-wide events like holiday parties. Additionally, while we noted that supervisors check in with new hires as they perform in-role tasks, we saw no evidence of a deliberate, scheduled, repeatable process for these interactions, leaving significant variability and informality in the program. Moreover, no buddy system, newcomer-focused meet-and-greet opportunities, or welcome communications currently exist.

Turning to organizational goals and values, we found content apparent for the formal aspects. However, interviews led us to conclude that a likely overreliance on the orientation videos and employee handbook also exists for this item. Furthermore, methods for relaying informal goals, values, and norms in the firm are absent. This area represents one where implementing a formal onboarding buddy system offers the potential for significant progress. In addition, an indicator that we found

particularly alarming concerned the lack of educating new hires on how their in-role tasks contribute to the firm's mission and overall success. Also, a dearth of methods for highlighting the contributions and successes of new hires, as well as appreciation for them, exists.

We found evidence of historical content in the documents we reviewed, orientation videos, and the company website. However, our analysis created an impression that the firm overly relies on one-time exposure via the orientation videos to deliver this information. We saw no repetitive, programmatic communication of historical content to reinforce the material. As such, our interviews led us to believe that the workforce forgets exposure to the information over time. Additionally, the lack of email penetration among employees—particularly hourly workers—hampers the effectiveness of the CEO's weekly communications.

While we graded the future prospects content area as partially implemented, we viewed it as a weak partial implementation. A systematic, repeatable method of educating new hires about future career paths with the firm and potential cross-training opportunities is absent. Currently, all conversations about these items occur over time as a part of natural progression in the firm as supervisors form opinions about individual performance, not as an upfront discussion with a newcomer to enlighten them about what a career at MANA can entail. In addition, the firm effectively communicates the importance of its ultimate customer, the children suffering from severe acute malnutrition; however, we did not find evidence of discussing the needs of the firm's immediate customers, the companies buying its product, with manufacturing employees. Not taking this step misses an opportunity to educate the workforce on why particular requirements exist. It also likely results in losing opportunities to enlist their individual creativity in meeting those requirements in ever-improving ways. Moreover, although information about inducements exists in documents, participants highlighted shortcomings in its delivery due to the timing of its presentation or the dependence on reading the employee handbook.

Question 2: To what extent does MANA's current onboarding program reflect the structural and timing elements associated with an effective program in the extant literature?

2a. Anticipatory Stage (pre-entry)

As we described in the literature review, the anticipatory stage starts during the recruitment period and concludes the day before starting the new position (Klein & Heuser, 2008; "Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process," 2012). Our document reviews, interviews, and discussions with MANA's leadership team revealed that few activities occur during this time frame.

Potential new hires complete the job application process and may see written job descriptions during this period. Additionally, some interview participants indicated that they visited the company's website before their first day on the job to gain insights about MANA. However, this action emerged from the initiative of individuals, not a firm-derived plan to immerse recruits in information about the company. Moreover, our interviews revealed that the history of the company and its life-saving mission form part of the sales pitch when recruiting for leadership positions, but not with hourly paid manufacturing personnel, the subject of our current project. On the other hand, some participants mentioned being contacted by the human resources department or the office manager before the employment start date to discuss logistical considerations and share limited information.

Given the observations above, our analysis yielded the following conclusions about the onboarding content areas in the anticipatory stage at MANA (see Table 10). We viewed the rules and policies content area as partially implemented. New hires complete some employment-related paperwork, and at least a rudimentary discussion of benefits occurs. We also graded politics as partially implemented with one of four indicators, a welcome coordinator, observed. Additionally, with one of the seven indicators present, we classified organizational goals and values as partially implemented. This outcome resulted from the existence of a company website even though no plan for its use existed. Language, performance proficiency, people, history, and future prospects all received categorizations of

not implemented due to the lack of the observed presence of any indicators for those content areas. We found no content area fully implemented during the anticipatory stage.

Table 10

Anticipatory Stage Summary

Content Area	Fully Implemented	Partially Implemented	Not Implemented
Rules and Policies		X	
Politics		X	
Language			X
Performance Proficiency			X
People			X
Organizational Goals and Values		X	
History			X
Future Prospects			X

2b. Encounter Stage (months 1-3)

The encounter stage begins with an employee's first day on the job and extends through the first 90 days (Klein & Heuser, 2008; Bauer, 2010; Solinger et al., 2013; Korte et al., 2015). This period is when the new hire's expectations meet the reality of the actual workplace (Korte et al., 2015). We found that most of MANA's onboarding activity occurs during this period, a not unexpected finding given indications in the extant literature that most organizational socialization occurs during this stage (Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2002).

The one-day orientation program, which typically occurs on the first day of employment, represents the foundational onboarding element at MANA. It contains the following components:

- initial employment paperwork,
- MANA's organizational chart,
- incentive program information,
- educational assistance program information,

- strategy deployment document,
- good manufacturing practices--employee hygiene document,
- orientation training videos,
- employee handbook,
- written job descriptions, and
- the new hire information packet.

Of note, the bulk of this information is presented on the first day, not repeated or spaced to promote learning as the existing literature highlights as best practices (Karpicke & Bauernschmidt, 2011; Carpenter et al., 2012; Soderstrom et al., 2016).

During the first week of employment, new hires receive a training plan from their supervisor or another co-worker as they start shadowing experienced employees. On-the-job training ensues at this point, with each newcomer completing a 90-day trial period before achieving the status of a permanent employee. Workplace-focused online continuation training also occurs monthly, supplementing topics the leadership team views as appropriate. Moreover, although these lack the formality that improves job performance outcomes (Sibisi & Kappers, 2022), we found evidence of some communication of expectations and performance feedback, as well as supervisor check-ins during this stage.

Looking at the interviews and document reviews, we arrived at the following assessment of the onboarding content areas in the encounter stage (see Table 11). We graded rules and policies as partially implemented, with all four indicators apparent in some form. Both the employee handbook and orientation program activities review rules and policies. While the documents and orientation materials we reviewed referred to this indicator, some disagreement over the depth of coverage emerged during the interviews. Videos recorded by the CEO communicate integrity principles. Finally, in most cases, completing new hire paperwork occurs on the first day of employment.

Table 11*Encounter Stage Summary*

Content Area	Fully Implemented	Partially Implemented	Not Implemented
Rules and Policies		X	
Politics		X	
Language			X
Performance Proficiency		X	
People		X	
Organizational Goals and Values		X	
History		X	
Future Prospects		X	

We also classified politics, performance proficiency, people, organizational goals and values, history, and future prospects as partially implemented. The firm provides an orientation program run by a welcome coordinator in the person of the office manager. New hires receive all required tools, and although less formal than is likely ideal, we saw evidence of providing job training and communicating expectations. The small team structure and the pre-shift production meetings facilitate work-focused relationships. Additionally, participants described informal supervisor check-ins during interviews. Performance feedback occurs at this point. However, it also appears informal until the transformation stage. Multiple participants highlighted the firm's reliance on immediate front-line supervisors as the source of needed resources, a message appearing to permeate the workforce. Moreover, the firm maintains a website with information relevant to this topic, while the CEO describes organizational priorities and the formal goals, values, and norms during initial video presentations. These presentations also present significant historical content about the firm's origins, as well as material about customer satisfaction needs, calling the ultimate customer the children suffering from SAM. Although interviews painted a mixed picture of this item, the firm attempts to address a new hire's emotional needs via video training and documents describing access to different programs. Finally, while it appears that

inducements receive more in-depth coverage after the 90-day trial period, we saw evidence of exposure to this topic, at least at a basic level at this stage.

We assessed the language content as not implemented. None of the four indicators emerged during our analysis.

2c. Transformation Stage (months 4-12)

The transformation stage encapsulates months four through 12 (“Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process,” 2012; Korte et al., 2015; Maurer, 2015; “The 3 best ways to retain job hoppers,” 2015; Carucci, 2018; Sibisi & Kappers, 2022). By the conclusion of this period, the goal of onboarding is to create the conditions for a newcomer to develop a socialized identity within the firm that embraces the behaviors, attitudes, goals, rules, and values associated with the company (Solinger et al., 2003; Korte et al., 2015). Our analysis revealed few activities associated with onboarding to support that outcome during the transformation stage.

Figure 4

The Boss



Note. (M. Moore, personal communication, 2023).

As we emphasized when discussing the encounter stage, most onboarding elements occur on the first day or during the first week of an employee's tenure. An exception to this is the required monthly online continuation training. When new hires reach the transformation stage, they typically experience an unstructured learning situation dependent on chance, self-study, word of mouth, and the co-workers in their immediate work team. For example, participants consistently indicated that training occurred early in their tenure, a situation changing rapidly into a scenario where future training opportunities depended on receiving a promotion or job change. Interviewees also spotlighted a dependence on self-study and learning from co-workers.

Conversely, we uncovered some actions attempting to reinforce values and behaviors, including providing team members with shirts portraying particular messages. These missives included items such as "don't be a jerk," a behavior-oriented message designed to reinforce information conveyed by the CEO during a day-one orientation video. However, it appears that the organization may not universally distribute these shirts to newcomers. Participants also stated that the firm provides the most in-depth communication about and access to benefits and inducements during this stage. Additionally, pictures around the workplace also support the focus on the ultimate purpose of the firm across this period. These pictures include one of a child that the CEO refers to as his boss (see Figure 4) at the entrance to the manufacturing facility, while another in the conference room called "Mr. Peanut Goes to War" highlights the battle against SAM (see Figure 5).

Moreover, company-wide events like cookouts and holiday parties promote working and social relationships; however, we discovered indications that these may have lapsed due to COVID-19 precautions. If so, that situation would leave an absence of social relationship-promoting activity and only the pre-shift production meetings as a tool to promote work relationships. Finally, interviewees provided evidence of feedback during the transformation stage, with indicated time frames including after the 90-day trial period, six months, and one year on the job.

Figure 5*Mr. Peanut Goes to War*

Note. (M. Moore, personal communication, 2023).

Returning to the onboarding content areas, our analysis found none fully implemented during this stage (see Table 12). We graded politics, language, and history as not implemented. We classified rules and policies, performance proficiency, people, organizational goals and values, and future prospects as partially implemented. This classification rested on the following indicator-focused evidence. MANA principally covers benefits and inducements during this stage. The firm continues to provide newcomers with the needed work tools and online continuation training, while the majority of communicating performance expectations occurs in the transformation stage. If company-wide events occur, both work and social relationships are supported. The pre-shift production meetings continue to promote work relationships. The firm's website remains present but requires self-study to derive any benefits from it. Formal goals, values, and norms receive reinforcement via elements like workplace

posters and shirts portraying messages. These items also communicate customer needs but, as we previously stated, also miss the immediate customers, the purchasers of MANA's products.

Table 12

Transformation Stage Summary

Content Area	Fully Implemented	Partially Implemented	Not Implemented
Rules and Policies		X	
Politics			X
Language			X
Performance Proficiency		X	
People		X	
Organizational Goals and Values		X	
History			X
Future Prospects		X	

Question 2 Compilation

Examining the three stages through the lens of our conceptual framework yielded the following insights. First, in the anticipatory stage, we found little evidence of the organization working to create that crucial positive first impression that research highlights as important during this period (Reynolds, 2018). Moreover, we saw no actions contributing to constructing a sense of organizational membership (Klein & Heuser, 2008) or creating a realistic notion of what that membership entails for newcomers (Solinger et al., 2013; Korte et al., 2015). This lack of early information exchange also potentially inhibits the progress of organizational socialization during the latter two stages (Solinger et al., 2013).

Next, it became apparent that MANA depends heavily on the new hire orientation program, an event occurring over one day in the encounter stage, a generally ineffective strategy (Maurer, 2015, 2018; Garcia, 2016). The current approach during the encounter stage also heavily relies upon reviewing the employee handbook, an approach also viewed as ineffective (Krasman, 2015). Moreover, we found

warnings in the literature against waiting until the new hire's first day to truly begin the onboarding process particularly pertinent here (Karambelkar & Bhattacharya, 2017).

Finally, the transformation stage focuses on aiding the new hire with completing the socialization journey and becoming an organizational insider (Tuttle, 2002; Solinger et al., 2013; Korte et al., 2015). We assess that the insufficient coverage of the content areas and the informality of MANA's approach during this stage negatively impact reaching that outcome. The absence of formality, and the lack of integrating the elements currently present into a structured plan, lead to a stage characterized by most learning emerging from day-to-day workplace interactions, if it occurs at all. While learning from one's community of co-workers represents a significant element in a new hire's socialization journey, when surrounded by an unstructured onboarding approach, it leaves the values and norms transmitted to individual happenstance, not necessarily what the firm is attempting to convey. New hires are particularly receptive to learning all eight content areas in our conceptual framework during the transformation stage (Klein & Heuser, 2008), magnifying the importance of reinforcing desired organizational messages in a structured fashion. We found the current approach at the firm during this stage almost solely focused on the new hire working on in-role tasks independently, with cultural elements neglected. This weakness is consistent with many other small to medium-sized companies like MANA (Kirchner & Stull, 2022).

Recommendations

Our findings revealed opportunities to improve MANA's current onboarding program across the eight content areas and the three defined time stages. After compiling a list of opportunities in each of those categories, rather than focusing on a total program overhaul, we concentrated our recommendations on a finite number of actionable high-return-on-investment items (see Table 13). We primarily targeted those activities that we believed touched numerous finding areas simultaneously. We also included some recommendations that, while seemingly basic or focused on a single area, emerged

in the literature as steps that significantly contribute to identity formation at little cost to the organization. We wrote recommendations using the following format:

1. What is the recommendation?
2. What are the benefits of the recommendation?
3. What are the implementation considerations?
4. What finding(s) does the recommendation address?

Table 13

Recommendations

1	Create an Onboarding Buddy Program
2	Build Realistic Job Previews (RJPs)
3	Construct a Structured Supervisor Meeting Framework
4	Sweat the Small Stuff

Recommendation 1: Create an Onboarding Buddy Program

First, we recommend that MANA create an onboarding buddy program. An onboarding buddy, also known as a peer mentor (Dee, 2015), an ambassador (Jusko, 2013), a sponsor (Lavigna, 2009), a local mentor (Korte et al., 2015), or an official friend (Graybill, 2013), provides many crucial benefits for a new hire. Studies indicate that a well-run onboarding buddy program ranks second only to a high-quality on-the-job training program in helpfulness to the organizational socialization of new hires (Klein et al., 2015). Some researchers denote that this effect likely emerges due to social tactics correlating strongly with workplace socialization outcomes (Bauer et al., 2007). Job shadowing programs and typical company mentoring programs do not replace an onboarding buddy (Korte et al., 2015).

An onboarding buddy aids a new hire in multiple ways. They help newcomers learn by serving as guides (Bauer et al., 2007; Dee, 2015; Klein et al., 2015). These individuals provide insights about the basics, like the locations of restrooms, cafeterias, or supplies, where to park or find copier machines,

and the details of refrigerator etiquette (“Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process,” 2012; Dee, 2015). Although mundane in nature, these issues create stress for a newcomer, and helping them both reduces stress and aids with the uncertainty reduction that Solinger et al. (2013) highlighted.

Next, at the concept’s most basic, an onboarding buddy furnishes answers to questions, many that new hires will avoid asking their assigned supervisor or manager out of fear (Lavigna, 2009; Bauer, 2010; Graybill et al., 2013). While providing insights into in-role specific tasks, onboarding buddies supply information about the job team where those tasks occur (Bauer, 2010; Jusko, 2013; Korte et al., 2015). The person also spotlights who the subject matter experts are for various topics around the worksite (Dee, 2015). Another aspect of learning for new hires concerns navigating the workplace (Lavigna, 2009). This navigation includes multiple components. Onboarding buddies identify the organizational stakeholders (Klinghoffer et al., 2019). They provide insight into the written and unwritten rules of the organization and how to navigate the firm when dealing with specific issues, as well as idiosyncrasies related to the social norms present (Lavigna, 2009; Korte et al., 2015; Klinghoffer et al., 2019). Buddies also aid in understanding “the ‘hot button’ issues for those in executive leadership” (“Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process,” 2012, para. 35) and in understanding the power dynamics and “sacred cows” (Graybill et al., 2013, p. 203). Essentially, buddies act as conduits to learning the firm’s culture (Graybill et al., 2013; Jusko, 2013; Dee, 2015).

Moreover, an onboarding buddy serves as a facilitator of group acceptance. Buddies provide introductions to co-workers and aid in getting the newcomer integrated into the workgroup, both sources of stress when individuals begin a new job (Lavigna, 2009; Korte et al., 2015).

Benefits of the Recommendation

Overall, providing an onboarding buddy delivers several benefits. Newcomers paired with buddies know more about their new place of employment and are more likely to internalize

organizational culture (Bauer, 2010). They also require less supervisory guidance (Korte et al., 2015) while receiving improved job support from their supervisor and workgroup (Klinghoffer et al., 2019). Likewise, researchers tie onboarding buddy programs to enhanced job performance (Chen, 2005), higher motivation, improved retention (“Creating a buddy system in the workplace,” 2023), increased productivity (Klinghoffer et al., 2019), and boosted new hire satisfaction with the onboarding program.

Implementation Considerations

Turning to appointing specific individuals to this role, the extant literature indicates the following ideas:

1. The organization needs to build a program and communicate the plan to all parties involved, including the new employees, with participant expectations spelled out (Klinghoffer et al., 2019; “Creating a buddy system in the workplace,” 2023).
2. Checklist-driven topic and task outlines represent a recognized method of promoting standardization (“Creating a buddy system in the workplace,” 2023).
3. Optimally, the firm assigns a single individual to a new hire, not a team, to facilitate the creation of professional and personal relationships (Klinghoffer et al., 2019).
4. The program is likely to be more effective in aiding the onboarding journey of a newcomer the earlier the firm initiates the relationship; preferably, the firm completes this task immediately after the employment offer is accepted (Lavigna, 2009).
5. Firms should not appoint a direct supervisor or someone serving in a named leadership function like the office manager or human resources manager to this role (“Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process,” 2012).
6. Furthermore, ideally, the buddy and the newcomer share the same supervisor since this increases the contextual value that the buddy provides (Klinghoffer et al., 2019).

The individuals chosen for this role are organizational advocates (Jusko, 2013). As such, selecting the pool of participants warrants care. The people chosen require outstanding records of job performance, knowledge of the new hire's in-role tasks, and time for the needed interactions (Klinghoffer et al., 2019). The last point requires reinforcement since this pairing persists across all three stages of the onboarding experience ("Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process," 2012). The buddy's workload must view this assignment as an in-role task and allocate time for it (Klinghoffer et al., 2019). Of note, no expectation exists that onboarding buddies be experts in everything; however, an appropriate expectation rests in the notion that these individuals know where to find the information needed as questions arise ("Creating a buddy system in the workplace," 2023).

People participating as onboarding buddies also benefit from involvement by developing and demonstrating leadership, supervisory, communication, and support skills (Klinghoffer et al., 2019). Moreover, organizations want to consider offering onboarding buddies incentives like a bonus, increased pay, or increased vacation days to promote participation and retention ("Creating a buddy system in the workplace," 2023).

Finding(s) the Recommendation Addresses

This recommendation explicitly links to several of our study's findings related to both the content areas and the time stages (see Table 14). First, and crucially in our view, an onboarding buddy program's effects stretch across all three onboarding time stages. Presently, minimal onboarding-related activity occurs during the anticipatory and transformation stages. Moreover, most of the onboarding activity in the encounter stage occurs during the first week. Instituting a buddy program directs attention to building a sense of organizational membership before the first day on the job while also addressing the dearth of a strategy to communicate company-desired values, norms, and behaviors during the transformation stage. Given our belief that an onboarding buddy program operates across all

content areas in all three stages, we focus the remainder of this section on describing how this recommendation addresses the eight content areas.

Table 14

Findings Addressed by an Onboarding Buddy Program

	Recommendation	Timing Stages	Content Areas
1	Create an Onboarding Buddy Program	All	All

Turning to the rules and policies content area, an onboarding buddy initiates the communication of organizational integrity principles, extending the reach of the single-session orientation videos. The program likewise supports elements related to rules, policies, and benefits that also reside in the employee handbook, which MANA heavily depends on. A buddy offers a conduit to the currently missing repetition in presenting those items.

As we moved to the politics content area, we saw that an onboarding buddy program provides a tool to address the currently missing explanations of organizational information networks and decision-making processes, relieving the pressure on the pre-shift production meetings and individual-level initiative to develop an understanding of these processes. This program would also eliminate the need for a welcome coordinator, a role currently managed by the Georgia-based office manager in addition to the rest of her job duties.

Additionally, as emerged in the concept's description, buddy programs are designed to explain communication modes and teach how groups interact in the workplace, both currently missing at MANA. Further, an onboarding buddy program may also help address the current absence of methods to convey technical language and jargon.

Examining performance proficiency, an assigned onboarding buddy aids in addressing the absence of a newcomer hotline, distributed contact lists, and question-and-answer sessions. The

program further benefits newcomers in understanding how to access needed resources while also assisting in communicating both stated and unstated expectations for in-role and non-role tasks at the firm.

By their nature, onboarding buddy programs touch many indicators related to the people content area. Besides directly addressing the buddy system indicator shortfall, they facilitate both working and social relationships while serving as a direct conduit for creating meet-and-greet opportunities.

The organizational goals and values content area is another zone of strength for onboarding buddy programs. While providing opportunities for the currently missing repetition of formal goals, values, and norms, a buddy program represents a significant path to relaying the informal goals, values, and norms of the firm. Individuals serving as buddies can also point newcomers to specific areas of the company website to reinforce messages while aiding unofficial new employee appreciation by providing positive feedback and encouragement. Furthermore, providing this program creates another venue to communicate organizational priorities and describe how the new hire's in-role tasks directly contribute to organizational success. Finally, while MANA's current approach to supporting the emotional needs of new employees rests in its video training, the onboarding buddy offers a flesh-and-blood proponent of this indicator since the concept of support is foundational to programs of this nature (Klinghoffer et al., 2019).

If correctly prepared and armed for the task, individuals working in this program can relay messages about the firm's history during their day-to-day interactions over time, closing the current gap in the repetition of these messages. Onboarding buddies also serve the role of storytellers, relaying the company's successes, growth, product line changes, and how the firm overcame obstacles.

Finally, looking at future prospects, onboarding buddies play a role in facilitating the transition of new employees from organizational outsiders to insiders by relaying the specific behaviors, attitudes,

and values associated with the firm's cultural community (Bauer, 2010). In addition, they supply a channel for repeating and providing insight into the inducements offered to employees by the firm. Lastly, an onboarding buddy can explain who the customers are and what those customers' needs are concerning the firm's products.

Recommendation 2: Build Realistic Job Previews (RJPs)

Next, we advise MANA to create and utilize realistic job previews (RJPs) for all hourly paid positions. RJPs relay information about a particular job starting at recruitment ("Realistic Job Previews," n.d.) and provide a method to help prevent the perception versus reality disconnect that new hires often experience (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Baur et al., 2014). Presenting accurate information about the firm and what the position truly entails facilitates this and makes RJPs effective (Bilal & Bashir, 2016). RJPs should include information about in-role tasks, expectations for in-role tasks, organizational culture, and the work environment ("Realistic job previews," n.d.; Bauer, 2010; Baur et al., 2014). Accuracy means discussing both the positive and potentially negative aspects of the position and the firm (Baur et al., 2014; Bilal & Bashir, 2016). Providing this information allows the recruit to assess whether the job is the right fit for them before the firm makes a significant investment in bringing the individual into the company ("The realistic job preview," 2020) while also facilitating the organizational socialization journey of new hires leading up to day one (Bauer, 2010; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). While most studies concentrate only on RJPs in the pre-hire period, Potocnik et al. (2021) highlighted the positive impact of RJPs during the post-hire period for reducing turnover. This notion speaks to creating an RJP approach that extends across the entirety of the anticipatory stage, not just during the recruiting period.

Benefits of the Recommendation

RJPs offer several benefits. Studies indicate that new hires who receive a significant quantity of accurate information before starting the job adjust to the new organization better than individuals not

receiving that information (Bauer, 2010; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). People receiving RJPs experience 50% less turnover than those employees not exposed to them (Bauer, 2010). RJPs can lower newcomer stress (Colarelli, 1984). Researchers also tie RJPs to higher job performance, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (Premack & Wanous, 1985; Phillips, 1998; Bilal & Bashir, 2016; van Vulpen, 2020), as well as increased role clarity (Graef, 2020). Moreover, providing RJPs enhances individual-level firm reputation (Bilal & Bashir, 2016). “Symbolically, the act of providing an RJP also signals something about unobservable organizational characteristics such as organizational honesty, organizational support, and care for employees” (Earnest et al., 2011, p. 888).

Implementation Considerations

When implementing RJPs, there are several considerations to keep in mind. First, tailor RJPs to the specific in-role position (Heaslip, 2022). Second, the accuracy of the information presented about the in-roles tasks and the firm is paramount (Breaugh & Billings, 1988; Baur et al., 2014; Bilal & Bashir, 2016). Next, ensure that the RJP reflects the position and the organization as they currently exist so that it is viewed as credible (Breaugh & Billings, 1998). Fourth, deliver the RJP in a way that people find engaging and informative (van Vulpen, 2020). Fifth, make sure to cover the organizational culture, vision, and mission, as well as rewards, benefits, training opportunities, development opportunities, and the promotion system, not just in-role tasks and responsibilities (“The realistic job preview,” 2020; van Vulpen, 2020; Heaslip, 2022). Also, organizations need to include front-line workers, supervisors, functional managers, and senior leaders in the creation of the RJPs (“Realistic job previews,” n.d.; O’Neill et al., 2001). Finally, deliver information at an appropriate time in the process, moving from general information to more specific information across the time horizon from recruitment to closer to day one on the job (Phillips, 1988).

Organizations implement RJPs in numerous ways. Examples in the literature include:

- written descriptions (“Realistic job previews,” n.d.; Breugh & Billings, 1988; Phillips, 1998; O’Neill et al., 2001; Baur et al., 2014),
- videos (“Realistic job previews,” n.d.; Colarelli, 1984; Breugh & Billings, 1988; Phillips, 1998; O’Neill et al., 2001; Tullar, 2011; Baur et al., 2014; Bilal & Bashir, 2016; van Vulpen, 2020; Heaslip, 2022),
- telephone calls (Colarelli, 1984; Baur et al., 2014),
- slide decks (Heaslip, 2022),
- brochures (“Realistic job previews,” n.d.; Colarelli, 1984; Phillips, 1998; Baur et al., 2014; Bilal & Bashir, 2016),
- physical walking job tours (Breugh & Billings, 1988; Tullar, 2011; Baur et al., 2014; Bilal & Bashir, 2016),
- online job and workplace tours (Banerjee & Gupta, 2019),
- meetings with in-role task incumbents (“Realistic job previews,” n.d.; Colarelli, 1984; Breugh & Billings, 1988; O’Neill et al., 2001; Baur et al., 2014; van Vulpen, 2020; Heaslip, 2022),
- group meetings (“Realistic job previews,” n.d.; O’Neill et al., 2001),
- web-based presentations (“Realistic job previews,” n.d.; O’Neill et al., 2001; Baur et al., 2014; Banerjee & Gupta, 2019; Heaslip, 2022),
- structured job observations (“Realistic job previews,” n.d.; O’Neill et al., 2001),
- a typical day in the job description (van Vulpen, 2020),
- interviews with current employees (Colarelli, 1984), and
- interviews with managers and senior leaders (Heaslip, 2022).

Researchers view using multiple modes of delivery for RJs (Breugh & Billings, 1988; van Vulpen, 2020) and repeating information (Garcia, 2016) across the anticipatory stage as best practices.

Findings the Recommendation Addresses

Relating to our findings, we made the following assessments. First, this recommendation directly addresses the current dearth of activity during the anticipatory stage, providing a platform for initiating the process of building a sense of organizational membership before day one on the job (see Table 15).

Table 15

Findings Addressed by Building Realistic Job Previews

	Recommendation	Timing Stages	Content Areas
2	Build Realistic Job Previews (RJPs)	Anticipatory	All

For the rules and policies content area, RJPs offer a tool for early reviews of rules, policies, benefits, and organizational integrity principles, which cover three of the four indicators for this area. Using RJPs to cover these items supports the orientation videos and the employee handbook while providing the needed repetition of these items that the program currently lacks.

In the politics area, RJPs represent a vehicle for transmitting the responsibilities and authorities inherent in a particular role, as well as being a venue to introduce the new hire to organizational information networks and decision-making processes, providing support to both the later pre-shift production meetings and reducing the dependence on actions stemming from individual-level initiative to gain insight into these items.

RJPs can also introduce firm- or task-specific terminology, technical language, and jargon, starting with high-use terms that the newcomer will likely encounter early in their tenure and expanding the list throughout the anticipatory stage. Given the opportunity to utilize a multi-pronged approach to delivering RJPs to new hires, this tool provides a chance to relay messages about how groups interact and what communication modes within the firm look like.

Turning to performance proficiency, a systematic RJP prepares a new hire for job training by providing insight into in-role tasks and the work environment. Moreover, if constructed appropriately, the RJP communicates expectations, provides knowledge about acceptable job performance, and provides opportunities for question-and-answer sessions via avenues like telephone conversations, plant tours, videos, or incumbent interviews. Incumbent interviews and in-person job tours present obvious chances to boost working relationships and provide early meet-and-greet opportunities in the people content area. However, if utilized, planners should not underestimate the effectiveness of videos or other web-based introductions to senior leaders, supervisors, and current hourly paid manufacturing employees. New hires will likely carry the familiarity gleaned there into the workplace, making them somewhat more comfortable when starting their new positions.

In our assessment, RJPs strengthen several organizational goals and values-related indicators. One method is writing a review of MANA's formal goals, values, and norms into various aspects of the RJP. The RJP can also point newcomers to distinct locations on the company's website, reinforcing the messages there. The demonstration of support inherent in the RJP enhances the firm's approach to supporting new hires' emotional needs while also providing settings for encouragement (Earnest et al., 2011). Finally, an RJP represents an excellent place to begin communicating how in-role tasks contribute to organizational success. All the indicators affected here contribute to message repetition, a missing item in MANA's current program.

Moreover, enacting RJPs provides an opportunity to address the history content area, supplying chances to build stories about the firm's traditions, key events, myths, roots, and challenges into the early tenure experiences of the new hire. Again, repetition emerges as one crucial side effect of creating RJPs and building this type of information into them, easing the current dependence on the orientation videos and weekly emails that only reach a limited audience.

Finally, as we previously highlighted when describing RJPs, they furnish a tool for aiding the transition from organizational outsider to insider by relaying the behaviors, attitudes, and values expected in MANA's culture. RJPs also provide venues to provide insight into and repeat content related to career paths with the firm, inducements available, potential training opportunities, and who the customers are, as well as some insight into their expectations and needs.

Recommendation 3: Structured Supervisor Meetings

Our third recommendation calls for MANA to create a plan for a series of specific, programmed, uninterrupted meetings between new hires and their immediate supervisor over the first year of employment. First, these meetings represent a meet-and-greet opportunity. Next, the sessions offer an opportunity to describe initial performance expectations. Third, these meetings represent chances for the new hire to receive regular performance feedback at programmed intervals. Finally, the appointments create a venue for discussing topics related to all eight content areas.

Benefits of the Recommendation

Onboarding is a team sport, and its effectiveness is dented if managers and supervisors are not actively involved (Lavigna, 2009; Jusko, 2013). For example, researchers highlight the criticality of new hires meeting with their supervisor during the first week of employment (Klinghoffer et al., 2018). From this one action alone, if done effectively, several outcomes ensue, including:

- personal network increases by 12%,
- personal network centrality doubles,¹
- intention to stay with the firm increases by 8%,

¹ Network centrality is defined as "measuring the degree to which a person or organization is central to a network" (Derr, 2021, para. 1). Ishakian et al. (2012), highlighted that "the centrality of a node in a social network often correlates with the influence of the node on the network" (p. 1).

- increased sense of personal belonging,
- collaborate with co-workers three times more than those not meeting with the supervisor.

Besides these outcomes, it is worth noting that new hires expect direct and meaningful guidance and interaction; not receiving it negatively impacts their perception of the organization (Korte et al., 2015).

Implementation Considerations

When implementing this recommendation, it is crucial to construct a standardized structure to maintain consistency across supervisors conducting the meetings, potentially using checklists and prebuilt background materials. Additionally, while these meetings continue across all three onboarding stages, given the current levels of voluntary turnover during the first 90 days of employment, we assessed that the firm needs to concentrate first on the encounter stage. As such, we suggest the following schedule. First, the immediate supervisor mails a letter to the new hire and conducts a telephone conversation with them during the anticipatory stage, welcoming them to MANA. Studies demonstrate that these welcoming activities contribute to organizational socialization by celebrating the new hire's addition to the firm and offering chances to interact directly and indirectly with someone from the firm (Klein & Heuser, 2008).

Next, we recommend that the supervisor deliver the initial performance expectations before beginning in-role tasks, following up with performance feedback sessions every 30 days for the first year of employment (Bauer, 2010), yielding three feedback-related meetings during the crucial job trial period, and 12 over the first year. This step aligns with the extant research that underscores that frequent feedback minimizes surprises for employees (Boice & Kleiner, 1997), improves the learning of complex motor skills (Wulf et al., 1998), improves in-role task skills (Pollock, 2018), eliminates the effects of selective memory on supervisor perceptions of performance improving its accuracy (Bigham, n.d.; Boice & Kleiner, 1997), provides earlier opportunities to improve performance (Boice & Kleiner,

1997), reduces employee stress (Bigham, n.d.; Pollock, 2018), and enhances the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee (Pollock, 2018).

Besides performance feedback and future expectations, conversations at all stages should incorporate discussions of topics related to mission, vision, and culture (Lavigna, 2009), as well as the indicators described in the future prospects content area. MANA should not underestimate this aspect. New hire perceptions about how organizations handle future prospects topics predict both organizational commitment and turnover intentions (Taormina, 2004).

Finding(s) the Recommendation Addresses

Turning to our findings, we believe that enacting this recommendation addresses the current dearth of activity during the anticipatory and transformation stages (see Table 16). It also enhances the activities currently provided in the encounter stage.

Table 16

Findings Addressed by Constructing a Supervisor Meeting Framework

	Recommendation	Timing Stages	Content Areas
3	Construct a Structured Supervisor Meeting Framework	All	All

We assess that performance proficiency is one of the three areas this recommendation strengthens the most. These private meetings with the supervisor contribute to job training by setting performance expectations early and by regularly providing meaningful feedback. Furthermore, new hires have direct access to a member of their leadership team who can aid them in securing needed tools and provide insight into accessing other needed resources. They also serve in the place of the currently absent question-and-answer sessions, contact lists, and newcomer hotline, providing direct access to a source of needed information.

This recommendation's second strength is that it addresses shortfalls in the future prospects content area. A core task of these meetings is to communicate potential future opportunities, enabling conversations about what a career at MANA might look like. Moreover, discussions of prospective training, rotational, or exposure opportunities form principal objectives in these sessions, as do descriptions of and repetition of available inducements. Customer-related topics should also be built into the structure of the interactions.

The organizational goals and values content area represents the third area we deemed to be particularly impacted, with six of the seven indicators directly involved. Supervisors should detail MANA's formal goals, values, and norms while also offering insight into the informal side of those. Furthermore, the meetings should be used to describe the firm's priorities and how the newcomer's in-role tasks contribute to achieving those priorities and other measures of organizational success. Next, as supervisors review performance, they can highlight successes to show appreciation for the new hire and provide encouragement. Finally, by showing support to new hires, conducting these regularly scheduled meetings buttresses new employees' emotional needs, if accomplished as intended and not turned into pro forma events.

Moving to the other content areas, this recommendation addresses three of the four indicators for the rules and policies content area by providing another venue for reinforcing rules, policies, and organizational integrity principles, as well as communicating information about benefits. It also covers two of the four indicators for politics, facilitating conversations about information networks and explanations of responsibilities and authorities. Looking at language, the regular sessions provide opportunities for the new hire to ask questions about terminology, communication modes, and group interaction techniques. In the people arena, the recommendation directly impacts the frequent supervisor check-in indicator. In addition, it affects the facilitation of working relationships by strengthening the supervisor/supervisee relationship and touches on the facilitation of social

relationships if the supervisor uses the information gleaned to make connections between co-workers who share common interests. Finally, these gatherings supply an excellent venue to describe the firm's history.

Recommendation 4: Sweat the Small Stuff

Fourth, we recommend that MANA "sweat the small stuff" by acting to remedy several seemingly small items that emerged as part of our findings. We viewed taking these actions as resonating with the research literature that described how "small changes...have a compounding effect that drives larger change and transformation" (Kavanaugh & Tarafdar, 2021, para. 3). Our list of recommended actions includes the following items:

1. Mail a package with company-branded merchandise to the home address immediately after agreeing to hire the person (Lavigna, 2009; "Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process," 2012; Robinson, 2018). Include a welcome letter from the CEO in this package (Lavigna, 2009; Marks, 2010; Graybill et al., 2013).
2. Mail a package two weeks before the first day on the job, including a welcome letter from the plant manager, a list of contact information for key functions, a glossary of terminology, a photo directory of the in-role task workgroup, and an organizational chart that includes photos of the senior leaders (Lavigna, 2009; Marks, 2010; "Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process," 2012; Graybill et al., 2013; Carter, 2015; Maurer, 2015; Hirsch, 2017; Orgera, 2017; Carucci, 2018).
3. Mail a package at least one week before the first day on the job, including the employee handbook, the day one schedule with instructions about where to park, what to wear, and who will meet them, and all employment forms with instructions to bring the forms with them on their first day at MANA (Lavigna, 2009; Marks, 2010; "Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process," 2012; Graybill et al., 2013; Hicks, 2013; Maurer, 2015; Hirsch, 2017;

Orgera, 2017; Carucci, 2018; Maurer, 2018; Robinson, 2018; “Employee retention starts with onboarding,” 2019).

4. Mail information from one to two weeks before the first day on the job, introducing the organizational history, culture, and mission (Lavigna, 2009; “Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process,” 2012; Graybill et al., 2013; Garcia, 2016; Orgera, 2017; Carucci, 2018; Robinson, 2018). As part of this material, provide pictures and numerical examples of the firm’s impact.
5. Set up email accounts for new hires before day one, either web-based company accounts or accounts on commercial sites like Gmail or Outlook to facilitate communication channels later (Lavigna, 2009; Marks, 2010; “Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process,” 2012; Krasman, 2015; Maurer, 2015; Orgera, 2017; Robinson, 2018).
6. Have the supervisor, onboarding buddy, or office manager call the new hire two days before the start date to ensure understanding of previous instructions and answer questions (Lavigna, 2009; Garcia, 2016).
7. On day one, greet the new hire at the door, provide them with a standardized written onboarding plan, and give them some organization-branded clothing (Lavigna, 2009; Bauer, 2010; Graybill et al., 2013; Carucci, 2018).
8. Develop and conduct a new hire survey at 60-, 180-, and 365-day intervals to measure job satisfaction, engagement, and perceptions of the onboarding program (Maurer, 2015; Hirsch, 2017; Robinson, 2018). Use the results to make changes over time.

Benefits of the Recommendation

Although some may view these items as potentially inconsequential, small things significantly affect newcomers’ perceptions of the organization (Klinghoffer et al., 2018). It is important to remember that most newcomers are not fully committed to the organization when they accept a new position

(Mauer, 2015). Taking these steps addresses several areas. They fill the quiet time between hiring and starting the new role, preventing early disengagement (Maurer, 2018). Shrinking the downtime also potentially lessens the number of ghosting episodes or no-shows (Robinson, 2018). Moreover, having these items in place supports the emotional and information requirements of newly hired individuals (Klein et al., 2015) and strengthens the firm’s brand as an employer (Maurer, 2018).

Finding(s) the Recommendation Addresses

Viewing these recommendations through the lens of our findings yielded the following conclusions (see Table 17). Significant activity attaches to the anticipatory stage, with fewer yet important actions added to the encounter and transformation stages.

Table 17

Findings Addressed by “Sweating the Small Stuff”

	Recommendation	Timing Stages	Content Areas
4	Sweat the Small Stuff	All (especially anticipatory)	7 of 8 (not performance proficiency)

The elements included here address all four indicators for the rules and policies content area by early completion of the required paperwork, elements explaining the organization’s integrity principles, and early dissemination of the employee handbook, which describes rules, policies, and benefits.

Distributing these earlier allows new hires to consume them at their own pace.

Under politics, new hires start the process of developing an understanding of the organization’s information networks while adding another layer to the explanation of responsibilities and authorities. These items directly combat the current dearth of language-related content due to the call to explain the firm’s technical language by creating a glossary of terminology.

Next, to facilitate the listed actions, the firm needs to create a contact list. Working relationships are enhanced through the distribution of photo directories, allowing newcomers to become familiar with their team members and senior leaders. Welcome letters also strengthen this area.

The early communication of formal goals, values, norms, priorities, and history occurs in the third recommended mailing to new hires. Moreover, as we previously highlighted, actions like these support new hires' emotional needs. Additionally, providing the mailings and company-related items shows appreciation that the newcomers are joining the firm.

While we assess the future prospects content area is significantly strengthened by other recommendations we made, that area was not our focus here. The exception rests in facilitating the transition from outsider to insider since these recommendations address concepts related to developing an identity associated with the mission of the company.

Conclusion

Our project focused on the onboarding program at MANA, a manufacturer in the global food aid ecosystem. MANA's mission is to prevent deaths and other severe health ramifications caused by severe acute malnutrition by producing RUTF. During our project, MANA was experiencing rapid growth in demand for its products, which required expanding its hourly paid manufacturing workforce. The organization wanted to ensure that it possessed an onboarding program that attracted and retained employees who desired to work for the company and believed in its mission.

Given this desire, our problem of practice focused on the fact that MANA had never formally evaluated its onboarding program, and its leadership team did not think that it was effective due to the turnover of newcomers in less than 90 days. To perform this evaluation, we chose to conduct a theory-based formative process evaluation. Factors influencing this decision included the firm's focus on longer-term, less measurable or tangible outcomes (Fitz-Gibbon & Morris, 1996), our focus on evaluating an

established program for process improvement (Davidson, 2005; Rossi et al., 2019), and our examination of the current program content against a desired standard (Davidson, 2005).

We built a conceptual framework from the existing literature that included the elements believed to contribute to an effective program. First, the onboarding content areas incorporated (a) rules and policies, (b) politics, (c) language, (d) performance proficiency, (e) people, (f) organizational goals and values, (g) history, and (h) future prospects (Chao et al., 1994; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Tuttle, 2002; Haeuter et al., 2003; Taormina, 2004; Klein & Heuser, 2008; “Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process,” 2012). Additionally, timing represented a crucial factor, with three stages of a new hire’s onboarding journey identified. First, the anticipatory stage deals with an employee’s pre-entry period, starting with recruitment and concluding before the first day on the job (Klein & Heuser, 2008; “Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process,” 2012). Second, the encounter stage starts with the first day on the job and concludes at the 90-day point (Klein & Heuser, 2008; Bauer, 2010; Solinger et al., 2013; Korte et al., 2015). Finally, the transformation stage covers the remainder of the first year of employment (“Managing the employee onboarding and assimilation process,” 2012; Solinger et al., 2013; Korte et al., 2015; Maurer, 2015; “The 3 best ways to retain job hoppers,” 2015; Carucci, 2018; Sibisi & Kappers, 2022).

Using this framework yielded the following findings. Our analysis found that the language content area was not implemented, and the other seven (rules and policies, politics, performance proficiency, people, organizational goals and values, history, and future prospects) were partially implemented. As such, overall, our investigation led us to conclude that the onboarding program at MANA represented a partially implemented program when we compared it to the content areas in our conceptual framework.

Analyzing the three timing stages generated the following results. We rated three content elements as partially implemented (rules and policies, politics, and organizational goals and values) and

five as not implemented (language, performance proficiency, people, history, and future prospects) in the anticipatory stage. Overall, we uncovered little proof that MANA works to create the positive first impression that the literature describes during this stage (Reynolds, 2018). Counter to what Klein and Heuser (2008), Solinger et al. (2013), and Korte et al. (2015) maintained was important, the firm's approach fails to take steps to generate a sense of citizenship in the firm or to create a realistic understanding of what that citizenship entails. The likelihood is that this lack of early socialization negatively affects new hire socialization during the two other stages (Solinger et al., 2013).

During the encounter stage, we assessed seven content areas as partially implemented (rules and policies, politics, performance proficiency, people, organizational goals and values, history, and future prospects) and one as not implemented (language). The firm's onboarding actions during the encounter stage at MANA revolve around its one-day orientation program. An additional focus is a dependence on new hires reading the employee handbook. Both of these dependencies run afoul of warnings in the extant literature (Krasman, 2015; Maurer, 2015; Maurer, 2018; Garcia, 2016).

Finally, during the transformation stage, we assessed five content areas as partially implemented (rules and policies, performance proficiency, people, organizational goals and values, and future prospects) and three as not implemented (politics, language, and history). We viewed the insufficient coverage of the content areas and the informality that characterized this stage as negatively impacting the newcomer's journey to becoming an organizational insider. Most learning likely emanates from daily interactions with co-workers, if at all. This is not uncommon for most small to medium-sized manufacturing organizations like MANA that tend to focus almost solely on getting new hires to perform in-role tasks independently, with cultural elements left out (Kirchner & Stull, 2022).

Our findings reveal opportunities to improve MANA's current onboarding approach in relation to all the content areas and timing stages. After reviewing potential actions, we focused our recommendations on a small number of high-return-on-investment elements, not a total program

overhaul. Our approach aligned with research findings that indicated “that a persistent set of small, orchestrated changes is the best approach to drive large and lasting change at an organization” (Kavanaugh & Tarafdar, 2021, para. 3).

First, we recommend that MANA build and execute an onboarding buddy program. Well-run onboarding buddy programs significantly contribute to the organizational socialization of new hires by answering questions and serving as guides that help a newcomer navigate the new environment successfully over the first year of employment (Klein et al., 2015).

Second, we believe the firm needs to generate and use realistic job previews (RJPs) for all hourly paid positions. RJPs bridge the perception versus reality gap that newcomers experience (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Bauer et al., 2014) by providing insights into the good and potentially not-so-good aspects of a role (Bauer et al., 2014; Bilal & Bashir, 2016). Using multiple modes of delivery and repeating information across the entire anticipatory stage helps facilitate a strong beginning to each new hire's organizational socialization journey (Breaugh & Billings, 1988; Bauer, 2010; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Garcia, 2016; van Vulpen, 2020).

Third, our findings suggest that the firm would benefit from creating a plan for a series of programmed meetings between all new hires and their supervisor over the first year of employment, using a standardized structure to aid consistency. These interactions would begin in the anticipatory stage, begin face-to-face during the first week on the job, and continue every 30 days across the encounter and transformation stages. These meetings serve as venues for relationship building, setting expectations, providing feedback, discussing the firm's mission, vision, and culture, and covering material related to the new hire's future prospects. In reality, if executed effectively, these sessions offer a designated venue to cover information from all eight content areas.

Fourth, we recommend that MANA sweat the small stuff. By this statement, we mean that the firm should take eight actions that we listed that, while seemingly basic, emerged from the literature as

elements to assist in the identity construction of the new hire at little cost to the firm. We believe that taking these primarily anticipatory stage-focused actions will aid in preventing early disengagement (Maurer, 2018), reduce potential ghosting episodes (Robinson, 2018), and support newcomer information and emotional needs (Klein et al., 2015) while also improving MANA's brand as an employer in the community (Maurer, 2018).

In conclusion, it is worth reinforcing here that we conducted a formative process evaluation, not an outcome evaluation. We evaluated to what extent MANA's current onboarding program reflected our content and timing elements, not the outcome elements represented in our conceptual framework (see Figure 1). We believe that, once our recommendations are in place for at least 12 months, MANA would benefit from an outcome-oriented evaluation. This timeframe emerges from the notion that onboarding should last for a year, giving time for new hires to experience the changes across that time horizon.

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Appendix A

Document Review Protocol

The following color-coded question-indicator list provides the legend for coding all MANA-related items during our documentation review. We will receive all documents in electronic format, facilitating the use of this color-coding scheme. Once an item receives a content area code, it will receive a second code based on when the activity occurs.

1.	To what extent does MANA's current onboarding program reflect the eight onboarding content areas that the extant research literature indicates make up an effective approach?
a.	The indicators for this overarching question are the results of the eight sub-questions. An analysis of those questions will yield the overall assessment here.
1a. Rules and Policies	
a.	Reviewing rules and policies
b.	Communicating benefits
c.	Communicating organizational integrity principles
d.	Completing employment paperwork
1b. Politics	
a.	Explaining organizational information networks
b.	Orientation program
c.	Explaining responsibilities and authorities
d.	Welcome coordinator or onboarding buddy
1c. Language	
a.	Explaining technical language
b.	An organizational glossary
c.	Explaining communications modes
d.	Teaching how groups interact
1d. Performance Proficiency	
a.	Job training
b.	Communicating expectations
c.	Providing necessary work tools
d.	Providing performance feedback
e.	Newcomer hotline
f.	Distributed contact lists
g.	Question and answer sessions
h.	Communicating how to access needed resources
1e. People	
a.	Facilitating working relationships
b.	Facilitating social relationships
c.	Meet-and-greet opportunities
d.	Buddy system
e.	Frequent supervisor/leader check-ins
f.	Welcome email communicated
1f. Organizational Goals and Values	
a.	Reviewing MANA's formal goals, values, and norms

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> b. Reviewing MANA's informal goals, values, and norms c. Communicating organizational priorities d. New employee appreciation e. Company website f. Supporting new employee emotional needs g. Explaining how the employee can contribute to organizational success
1g. History	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Evidence of discussing the firm's history, including its traditions, myths, rituals, stories, and key events b. Evidence of discussing organizational roots and survival in tough times
1h. Future Prospects	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Communicating future opportunities b. Communicating cross-training, rotational assignments, and exposure opportunities c. Explanations of inducements d. Facilitating the transition to an organizational insider e. Communicating customer satisfaction needs
2.	To what extent does MANA's current onboarding program reflect the structural and timing elements associated with an effective program in the extant literature?
a. Anticipatory stage (pre-entry)	
b. Encounter stage (months 1-3)	
c. Transformation stage (months 4-12)	

We intend to use the following coding scheme for activities that we are uncertain about. These codes are designed to ensure that further discussion occurs between the two evaluators before finalizing document coding.

- Content area questions
- Timing questions

Appendix B

Interview Protocol (Hourly Paid Employees)

***(Turn the recording device on and check it is working at this time)**

It is (date) and (time). This is (interviewer name) along with (capstone partner name), and we are interviewing (interviewee name) at MANA Nutritive Aid in Fitzgerald, Georgia.

What we intend to say to interviewees before we begin

Thanks again for participating and sharing your thoughts on MANA's onboarding program. This interview will last approximately one hour. We appreciate your time and want to once again say that our goal is to better understand what you have to share about MANA's onboarding activities. The definition of onboarding that we'll use during this meeting is:

Onboarding is the process through which new employees move from being outsiders to becoming a member of the company. Onboarding helps new employees learn the knowledge, skills, and behaviors they need to succeed in their new company.

We'll go through eight different topic areas. For each topic, we will first tell you about the general topic and then will list some examples of the types of experiences that would fit into the category to help remind you of some of the activities you may have experienced. If you remember some of the activities we mention, we'll then ask when you remember them occurring.

We really want to know how they helped or didn't help you start your employment with MANA. We realize everyone's experience is different, so we really want to know what it was like specifically for you. To do that, we'd like to ask you questions related to your personal experience at MANA. Please take your time to think about your answers and ask us any time you have questions about what we are asking.

We and MANA appreciate your honesty because the only way we can help improve MANA's onboarding program is to better understand your experience—the good, the bad, and the ugly. If you

have questions at any time, please let me know, and we can discuss whatever is on your mind. It's perfectly okay for you to tell us that MANA did not do the things we are asking about. Your company's leaders want to improve, and finding out what is missing is just as important as finding out what is occurring.

Before we start, remember that this interview is completely voluntary, and your answers are confidential. We won't tie your name to specific items. If you ever want me to stop recording just tell me and I will do it. Are there any questions or concerns before we get started?

(For each example the interviewee provides to the following prompts follow up with a question about when it occurred during their tenure.)

1. Rules and Policies:

- a. Did you fill out paperwork when MANA hired you? Before or after you started work?
- b. How did you learn about the rules, regulations, and policies at MANA?
 - i. Did you find that you weren't told about some that came up later?
- c. How did you learn about the benefits that the company offers?
 - i. Did you find that you weren't told about some that came up later?

2. Politics:

- a. Tell us about how you got information when you started working at MANA.
 - i. Was it from the company directly?
 - ii. Was it from coworkers?
- b. Was there an orientation program?
- c. Did someone explain who the leadership members were?
- d. Did someone tell you who the informal leaders in the plant were?
- e. Did someone tell you who the key people were to get things done?

- f. Did someone describe how decisions get made at MANA whether that was a supervisor, coworker, or anyone else?

3. Language:

- a. Tell us what you remember about discussing MANA's technical language about the job or company.
 - i. Was a glossary of MANA's terms available?
- b. How did you learn the acronyms, slang, and jargon used at MANA?
- c. Were there any discussions about methods that employees and teams use to communicate?

4. Performance Proficiency:

- a. Did you receive job training?
 - i. Was it in a classroom or on-the-job training?
 - ii. How effective do you think that your initial training was? Did it prepare you well or were there gaps that you had to pick up afterward?
- b. Did you receive any kind of work equipment? Did it meet your needs?
- c. Do you remember them setting performance expectations or giving you performance feedback?
- d. Were there any question-and-answer sessions held?
- e. Were you told who to ask questions if you had any?

5. People:

- a. Did anyone stay in touch with you after you were hired but before the first day on the job?
- b. Were you formally introduced to everyone on the team you work in?
- c. Were you assigned an onboarding buddy or a mentor?

- d. Did your supervisor check in with you every now and then to see how you were doing? If so, roughly how often?
- e. Did someone send out an email to everyone welcoming you to the team?
- f. Were there meetings where you could meet other employees?
- g. Were you invited to any outside-of-work activities?
- h. Did you make any friends that you hung out with outside of work?
 - i. If so, how did you meet them?
- i. How about a newcomer hotline or contact lists for employees?

6. Goals and Values:

- a. Did MANA send you any information about the company after you were hired but before your first day at work?
- b. Did someone review MANA's goals with you? By this, I mean what the company wants to achieve.
- c. If so, did anyone talk about how the company planned to accomplish those goals?
- d. Did anyone tell you about how your specific job would help MANA accomplish the goals?
- e. Did anyone discuss what MANA's culture meant?
 - i. What employee behaviors were valued?
 - ii. Did anyone discuss MANA's values as a company?
- f. Did anyone talk to you about the informal "rules of the road" here? Like how to act, what would get you into trouble, who to ask questions, who not to ask questions.
- g. Were you introduced as a new employee at any formal meeting?

7. History:

- a. Do you remember hearing about or discussing MANA's background? Things like when it was founded, by whom, and how the products have changed.
- b. Did anyone talk about how the company survived any challenges?
- c. Did anyone tell you stories about:
 - i. MANA's history?
 - ii. Traditions at the company?
- d. Did anyone talk about the backgrounds of MANA's leadership team?
- e. Did you learn about MANA's history in other ways?

8. Future Prospects:

- a. Do you remember discussing future opportunities to:
 - i. do other jobs?
 - ii. Get different sorts of training?
 - iii. The possibility of job promotions at MANA?
- b. Do you remember discussing the future perks and benefits of being an employee at MANA like college tuition assistance, higher pay, or bonuses?

That concludes our questions. Do you have anything that you'd like to add or bring up?

Thanks again for all your help with this. We plan to take the information that you and others are providing us and use it to help MANA improve the way the company helps new employees get started and become part of the team.

Appendix C

Interview Protocol (Leadership Team)

***(Turn the recording device on and check it is working at this time)**

It is (date) and (time). This is (interviewer name) along with (capstone partner name) and we are interviewing (interviewee name) at MANA Nutritive Aid in Fitzgerald, Georgia.

What we intend to say to interviewees before we begin

Thanks again for participating and sharing your thoughts on MANA's onboarding program. This interview will last approximately one hour. We appreciate your time and want to once again say that our goal is to better understand what you have to share about MANA's onboarding activities. The definition of onboarding that we'll use during this meeting is:

Onboarding is the process through which new employees move from being outsiders to becoming a member of the company. Onboarding helps new employees learn the knowledge, skills, and behaviors they need to succeed in their new company.

We'll go through eight different topic areas. For each topic, we will first tell you about the general topic and then list some examples of the types of experiences that would fit into the category to help remind you of some of the activities that are used during onboarding. If you remember some of the activities we mention, we'll then ask when you believe they occur within new employee hiring timelines.

We really want to know how you have experienced and perceived onboarding at MANA. We realize everyone's experience is different, so we really want to know your own observations. Please take your time to think about your answers and ask us any time you have questions about what we are asking.

We appreciate your honesty because the only way we can help improve MANA's onboarding program is to better understand how onboarding in the organization actually works—the good, the bad, and the ugly. If you have questions at any time, please let us know, and we can discuss whatever is on

your mind. It's perfectly okay for you to tell us that MANA does not do the things we are asking about. To help improve the onboarding program finding out what is missing is just as important as finding out what is occurring.

Before we start, remember that this interview is completely voluntary, and your answers are confidential. We won't tie your name to specific items. If you ever want me to stop recording just tell me and I will do it. Are there any questions or concerns before we get started?

(For each example the interviewee provides to the following prompts follow up with a question about when it occurred during their tenure.)

1. Rules and Policies:

- a. Do new employees fill out paperwork when MANA hires them? Before or after they start work?
- b. How do they learn about the rules, regulations, and policies at MANA?
 - i. Do you know of instances when they weren't told about some that came up later?
- c. How do they learn about benefits that the company offers?
 - i. Do you know of instances when they weren't told about some that came up later?

2. Politics:

- a. Tell us about how new employees get information when they start working at MANA.
 - i. Is it from the company directly?
 - ii. Is it from coworkers?
- b. Is there an orientation program?
- c. Does someone explain who the leadership members are?
- d. Does someone tell them who the informal leaders in the plant are?

- e. Does someone tell them who the key people are to get things done?
- f. Does someone describe how decisions get made at MANA whether that is a supervisor, coworker, or anyone else?

3. Language:

- a. Tell us what is discussed concerning MANA's technical language about the job or company.
 - i. Is a glossary of MANA's terms available?
- b. How do they learn the acronyms, slang, and jargon used at MANA?
- c. Are there any discussions about methods that employees and teams use to communicate?

4. Performance Proficiency:

- a. Do they receive job training?
 - i. Is it in a classroom or on-the-job training?
 - ii. How effective do you think that the initial training is? Does it prepare them well or are there gaps that they have to pick up afterward?
- b. Do they receive any kind of work equipment? Does it meet their needs?
- c. Do you set performance expectations or give them performance feedback?
- d. Are there any question-and-answer sessions held?
- e. Are they told who to ask questions if they have any?

5. People:

- a. Does anyone stay in touch with them after they are hired but before the first day on the job?
- b. Are they formally introduced to everyone on the team they work in?
- c. Are they assigned an onboarding buddy or a mentor?

- d. Does their supervisor check in with them every now and then to see how they are doing? If so, roughly how often?
- e. Does someone send out an email to everyone welcoming them to the team?
- f. Are there meetings where they can meet other employees?
- g. Are they invited to any outside-of-work activities?
- h. Do they make any friends that they hang out with outside of work?
 - i. If so, how do they meet them?
- i. How about a newcomer hotline or contact lists for employees?

6. Goals and Values:

- a. Does MANA send them any information about the company after they are hired but before their first day at work?
- b. Does someone review MANA's goals with them? By this, I mean what the company wants to achieve.
- c. If so, does anyone talk about how the company plans to accomplish those goals?
- d. Does anyone tell them about how their specific job would help MANA accomplish the goals?
- e. Does anyone discuss what MANA's culture means?
 - i. What employee behaviors are valued?
 - ii. Does anyone discuss MANA's values as a company?
- f. Does anyone talk to them about the informal "rules of the road" here? Like how to act, what would get them into trouble, who to ask questions, and who not to ask questions.
- g. Are they introduced as a new employee at any formal meeting?

7. History:

- a. Do you discuss MANA's background? Things like when it was founded, by whom, and how the products have changed.
- b. Does anyone talk about how the company survived any challenges?
- c. Does anyone tell them stories about:
 - i. MANA's history?
 - ii. Traditions at the company?
- d. Does anyone talk about the backgrounds of MANA's leadership team?
- e. Do they learn about MANA's history in other ways?

8. Future Prospects:

- a. Do you discuss future opportunities to:
 - i. do other jobs?
 - ii. Get different sorts of training?
 - iii. The possibility of job promotions at MANA?
- b. Do you discuss the future perks and benefits of being an employee at MANA like college tuition assistance, higher pay, or bonuses?

That concludes our questions. Do you have anything that you'd like to add or bring up?

Thanks again for all your help with this. We plan to take the information that you and others are providing us and use it to help MANA improve the way the company helps new employees get started and become part of the team.

Appendix D

Interview Transcript Coding Protocol

The following color-coded question-indicator list provides the legend for coding all interview transcripts. We will download all interviews from Otter.ai into Microsoft Word format, facilitating the use of this color-coding scheme. Once an item receives a content area code, it will receive a second code based on when the activity occurs.

1.	To what extent does MANA's current onboarding program reflect the eight onboarding content areas that the extant research literature indicates make up an effective approach?
a.	The indicators for this overarching question are the results of the eight sub-questions. An analysis of those questions will yield the overall assessment here.
1a.	Rules and Policies
a.	Reviewing rules and policies
b.	Communicating benefits
c.	Communicating organizational integrity principles
d.	Completing employment paperwork
1b.	Politics
a.	Explaining organizational information networks
b.	Orientation program
c.	Explaining responsibilities and authorities
d.	Welcome coordinator or onboarding buddy
1c.	Language
a.	Explaining technical language
b.	An organizational glossary
c.	Explaining communications modes
d.	Teaching how groups interact
1d.	Performance Proficiency
a.	Job training
b.	Communicating expectations
c.	Providing necessary work tools
d.	Providing performance feedback
e.	Newcomer hotline
f.	Distributed contact lists
g.	Question and answer sessions
h.	Evidence of communicating how to access needed resources
1e.	People
a.	Facilitating working relationships
b.	Facilitating social relationships
c.	Meet-and-greet opportunities
d.	Buddy system
e.	Frequent supervisor/leader check-ins
f.	Welcome email communicated
1f.	Organizational Goals and Values
a.	Reviewing MANA's formal goals, values, and norms

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> b. Reviewing MANA's informal goals, values, and norms c. Communicating organizational priorities d. New employee appreciation e. Company website f. Supporting new employee emotional needs g. Explaining how the employee can contribute to organizational success
1g. History
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Discussing the firm's history, including its traditions, myths, rituals, stories, and key events b. Discussing organizational roots and survival in tough times
1h. Future Prospects
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Communicating future opportunities b. Communicating cross-training, rotational assignments, and exposure opportunities c. Explanations of inducements d. Facilitating the transition to an organizational insider e. Communicating customer satisfaction needs
2. To what extent does MANA's current onboarding program reflect the structural and timing elements associated with an effective program in the extant literature?
a. Anticipatory stage (pre-entry)
b. Encounter stage (months 1-3)
c. Transformation stage (months 4-12)

We intend to use the following coding scheme for activities that we are uncertain about. These codes are designed to ensure that further discussion occurs between the two evaluators before finalizing interview coding.

- Content area questions

- Timing questions

Appendix E

Recruitment Letter

Dear [Name],

As doctoral students in the Leadership and Learning and Organizations program at Vanderbilt University, we are inviting you to participate in a capstone project about MANA's onboarding program for new employees. You have been identified as a potential interviewee for this study based on your position in the organization and/or how long you have worked at MANA.

Your participation in this study is extremely important to us and to MANA's CEO, Mark Moore, and will assist in improving the company's onboarding program. Should you agree to participate, we will contact you to set up a Zoom or face-to-face interview at a time of your convenience. The interview should take about 60 minutes. Participation is voluntary and your response will be kept confidential. You will have the option to not respond to any question that you choose. Participation or nonparticipation will not impact your relationship with MANA. Participating in the interview will be interpreted as your agreement to participate in this improvement project and that you are at least 18 years of age.

If you have any questions about the project, please contact the principal investigators, Shane Smith (shane.a.smith@vanderbilt.edu) and Michael Anderson (michael.s.anderson@vanderbilt.edu) or our faculty advisor, Dr. Lacey Hartigan at lacey.hartigan@vanderbilt.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant, contact the Vanderbilt Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (615) 322-2918.

Regards,

Shane A. Smith
Michael S. Anderson