



Onboarding Program

Supervisor's Guide





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Introduction

This guide has been developed for supervisors to support an effective and successful onboarding process for new employees. As a supervisor, it is your privilege and responsibility to welcome your new employees to USDA and to introduce them to the culture and values of your area.

The orientation process begins with your first phone call to the new employee and follows with your meeting on their first day. But an employee's initial impression of their job extends far beyond that first contact. What transpires after the first day is referred to as the *onboarding experience*. The onboarding experience offers a better strategic approach for your new employee's success and provides them with a better sense of the Agency and its culture.

To assist you in understanding the importance and process of onboarding, USDA has created a Supervisor's Onboarding Training Program through AgLearn. This is a fun and practical program that will take less than 30 minutes to complete. It will provide an interactive way to learn everything you need to know about onboarding and how to develop and execute a successful program.

If you have any questions regarding new employee orientation and onboarding, please contact your Agency's Human Resources Office.

Role of Human Resources

Formal employee orientation and onboarding consists of a carefully planned welcome that is often conducted by your Agency's Human Resources Office. The Human Resources Office plays a vital role in building a strong foundation for new employees and presents a positive effect on their productivity, longevity, and morale. This includes ensuring a successful transition from the first day of employment through the employee's entire career with the Agency. The services of the Human Resources Office include:

- Contacting the Agency on the employee's first day.
- Communicating the importance of official and required documents, such as pay and benefits, wellness, rules, and policies, as well as completing paperwork.
- Partnering with the hiring manager to follow up and coordinate new employee activities.



Role of the Supervisor

Responsibility for new employee onboarding and orientation rests with the Human Resources Office, the supervisor and the new employee. The supervisor's role in getting the new employee off to a good start cannot be overemphasized, especially since the most important relationship within any organization is the one between the employee and their immediate supervisor. The relationship generally begins before orientation and is most important during the first few weeks and months of employment.

Some things to remember during orientation and onboarding:

- Work closely with Human Resources to ensure a new employee's smooth transition.
- Be enthusiastic and engage the new employee.
- Align the new employee's work with mission, vision, goals, and plans.
- Help the new employee assimilate as quickly as possible.
- Provide guidance to ensure proper training and development.

Please know that this is not about giving you something more to do. We know that, as USDA supervisors, you are already stretched thin and juggle many projects, responsibilities, and priorities. Rather, its purpose is to provide you with a process to create a more engaging and effective experience for both you and your new employee. This guide provides the tools and suggestions you need to accomplish a successful onboarding program. By attending to the items in this guide, you will create a stronger bond with your employee and ensure a shorter path to productivity for both of you.

Orientation vs. Onboarding

New employee orientation generally involves a first-day session or a first week of activities that familiarizes the employee with the Agency's structure, mission, and policies. It typically includes the review and completion of necessary payroll and benefits paperwork.

Onboarding is a much more comprehensive approach that starts before orientation and extends well beyond the first few days. In fact, the onboarding process will extend throughout the employee's first year of employment.



Onboarding is the process of integrating and acculturating new employees into the organization and providing them with the tools, resources, and knowledge to become successful and productive.

Why Onboarding

According to the Society for Human Resource Management, new employees decide within the first 30 days whether they feel welcome in their organization, and as many as 1 in 25 people leave their job just because of a poor or non-existent onboarding program, while 4 percent of new employees leave their new jobs after a disastrous first day.

Research published by the Gallup Organization, a global research-based consultancy, has shown that engaged employees are more productive employees. Gallup's findings suggest that engaged employees are more profitable, more customer-focused, safer, and more likely to withstand temptations to leave.

Employees arrive at their new jobs excited and engaged. Your job, as their supervisor, is to channel that energy toward success by helping them become embedded in the organization. Onboarding will help you do that.

Effective employee onboarding serves three interrelated purposes. First, it ensures that the employees feel welcome, comfortable, prepared, and supported. Second, these feelings increase the new employees' ability to make an impact and be productive within their role, both immediately and over time. Finally, this employee success leads to satisfaction and retention, which allows the USDA to continue to meet its mission.

While onboarding is a yearlong process, the first 90 days are critical. So, let's get started!

Getting Started

ONBOARDING CHECKLIST

During the first couple of weeks on the job, the goal is to ensure that the new employee understands the mission of the Agency, the responsibilities of their job and management's expectations. In addition, this time is used to assist the employee with integration into the Agency.



A checklist has been created to help you will all of the steps involved and the timelines associated with each. You can access [this checklist](#) or from the [Supervisor Tab](#) on the USDA Onboarding Portal. The checklist provides an overview of the areas that need to be covered during the first 90 days.

It is your responsibility to ensure that all of these items are covered with your new employee.

PRIOR TO NEW EMPLOYEE'S ARRIVAL

Send a welcome letter to your new employee. A [welcome letter template can be downloaded](#) for your convenience. Call your new employee a couple of days later and introduce yourself, welcoming them to your organization and arranging a time to meet.

BEFORE THE END OF THE FIRST 30 DAYS ON THE JOB

During the first 30 days, you want to meet with your new employee several times to review the expectations of the Agency, their expectations, to discuss progress and to continue efforts toward integration into the Agency.

During this time, supervisors should:

1. Discuss the employee's initial experience and how it is matching their expectations. Ask:
 - How is your job going?
 - Is it what you expected when you were hired?
 - Do you have all the work tools and resources you need?
2. Discuss any concerns or issues the employee has. Ask:
 - Is there anything you need that you don't have access to?
 - What obstacles, if any, are keeping you from being productive and successful?
3. Review progress toward initial goals.
4. Create a performance plan (this is an OPM requirement).
5. Identify any additional training needed.
6. Identify any upcoming opportunities to meet with key individuals.
7. Answer any questions.

During these meetings, you will want to solicit feedback from the employee. Once you have determined the training needed, be sure to schedule it or help the employee learn how to do so. Be sure to



provide tools and resources needed as well. You may want to enlist the assistance of the new employee's sponsor (see page 11 of this guide) to help with these things. Be aware of opportunities to integrate new hires into their work groups and into the Agency as a whole.

BEFORE THE END OF THE FIRST 90 DAYS ON THE JOB

The goal is to provide guidance and feedback to the new employee to ensure continued success and to make plans for their future with the Agency. During the first 90 days, you will want to meet with the employee several times to:

1. Discuss experiences and how they match the employee's expectations.
2. Review progress toward initial goals, and adjust if necessary.
3. Discuss any concerns or issues the employee may have.
4. Provide feedback on the employee's performance to date and solicit feedback from the employee.
5. Answer any questions.
6. Solicit feedback from the employee about the onboarding process and their suggested changes. (Provide this information to Human Resources.)
7. Discuss the career planning philosophy at the Agency and how it applies to the employee.
8. Complete an Individual Development Plan, or IDP (this is an OPM requirement).

SETTING EXPECTATIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Without a doubt, you, as the direct supervisor, are the most influential person in the onboarding process. You are key to the successful integration of your new employees into the organization.



It is your role to work side-by-side with your new employees until they learn the ropes and establish credibility within the organization. Help them thrive during the critical transition period and your efforts will pay off.



Following are seven ways you can help your new employee make a successful transition:

1. Clarify your expectations up front.

Even the most detailed job descriptions don't fully represent what the position entails, so be sure to share with new employees exactly what you expect of them.

- Review expectations point-by-point to ensure that each new employee understands them and is comfortable with them.
- Don't assume that new employees will know exactly what they have been hired to do. If they don't, they aren't likely to be comfortable asking.

2. Don't assume that qualifications equal immediate success.

Just because new employees are well qualified doesn't mean they will easily and quickly take to their new roles at USDA. Every new employee will have strengths as well as opportunities for improvement.

- Give positive feedback on strengths and pay attention to opportunities to coach through weaknesses. Remember that some responsibilities may be new to the employee. Be sure to show compassion when discussing these areas. It helps to recall what it was like when you were learning a new skill or behavior.
- Address a performance concern the *first time it shows up* as a learning opportunity. Again, do so as someone who is trying to help the employee be successful – not someone who is looking for mistakes.

3. Spell out important points about organizational and departmental goals, culture, and dynamics.

Be sure to cover “big picture” topics for USDA and your Agency--mission, overall strategy, strategic plans, and especially how your Agency supports the organization's mission. Also talk about the organizational and departmental culture. How do we all succeed? Be realistic when sharing this information, and make sure you are positive and supportive of the Department, your internal customers, and the organization.

- Never assume a new employee knows the basics even if they are coming from another Agency within the organization. Remember that knowledge and culture differ from Agency to Agency, as well as from organization to organization.



4. Help new employees nurture their network.

Introduce new employees to their internal strategic partners. As part of the introduction, talk about client expectations. Success on the job hinges on the ability to form a strong network with coworkers and customers alike.

- Have a frank discussion about the individuals who will affect the new employee getting their job done. Emphasize relationships: direct reports, subordinates, major internal customers, organizational leadership, and others.
- Make key introductions.
- Invite the new employee to meetings and encourage participation.

5. Be honest about potential pitfalls and past mistakes.

We all need to learn from past mistakes. Inform new employees of these and make sure they don't make the same common past mistakes in your Department. Help them know what influences employee success in the Department. And talk with your new employee about possible obstacles to success (e.g., not meeting client needs) and the strategies to overcome them.

6. Hold regular discussions.

The "honeymoon period" can last anywhere from three months to a year, depending on the person. Hold regular meetings with each new employee in their first year. (See suggestions under "Before the End of the First 30 and 90 Days" sections on pages four and five.)

- Find out what is going well and what is difficult for them.
- Ask what you can do to help them.
- Provide feedback on how you think they are doing.

7. Make coaching and mentoring resources available *before* there is a crisis.

Don't wait until a new employee is in serious trouble before taking action. Address issues as they arise. Know the coaching, mentoring, and other resources within your Agency. Who makes a good coach, sponsor, preceptor or mentor? A good resource:

- Listens to what is being said.
- Helps the person understand why something didn't work as expected.
- Offers suggestions for improvement.



DEFINING THE CULTURE

In addition to feeling welcome and learning about the unit's vision, mission, and goals, the new employee needs to have some introduction to the culture of the organization and the Department.



Culture can be defined as the combined beliefs, values, ethics, procedures, and atmosphere of an organization. The culture of an organization is often expressed as "the way we do things around here" and consists of largely unspoken values, norms, and behaviors that become the natural way of doing things. An organization's culture may be more apparent to an external observer than an internal practitioner.

Your role as Supervisor, especially during the first year, is critical to retention and helping your new employee be successful through understanding the specific organizational and office culture within the Federal Government and your Agency. To prepare for a conversation about office culture, it might be helpful to ask yourself these questions:

- How would you describe the environment (e.g., is it fun, serious, data driven, complex, etc.)?
- What does this work unit value most? (For example: customer service, meeting deadlines, a collaborative process, observing the hierarchy, etc.)
- How are decisions made? Who is involved in the process?
- Who, outside the work unit, are important stakeholders in decision making?
- What do you need to be successful in the workgroup or team?
- What lessons have you learned that you wish to pass on to your new employee?
- What are the three most important things to know about the organization?



Answering these questions for yourself may help you to provide a snapshot of the organizational culture for new employees. Assigned sponsors can also help the new employee with understanding and working in the new environment. See page 11 for information on sponsors.

WELCOMING NEW EMPLOYEES TO THE GROUP

One of the best ways to help new employees get acclimated is to create a welcoming environment with their new team. Following are some ideas on how to do just that. These can be assigned to employees or be assigned as a team project facilitated by you or one of your team members over several sessions.



1. **Create a “Welcoming Book.”** Ask current employees to write about themselves in the book and include pictures.
2. **Create a “New Employee Discussion Group.”** Establish a schedule for all new employees to get together with a facilitator to discuss their experiences, identify successes, describe moments of pride, ask questions, etc.
3. **Plan a “Welcome Event.”** Put together a welcoming breakfast or lunch. Consider doing something at a staff meeting when employees regularly gather together. Make it fun.
4. **Create a “New Employee Get-to-Know-You Questionnaire.”** Ask new employees to profile themselves. Use some unintimidating questions such as:
 - What is your hidden talent?
 - Who is your most admired person and why?
 - What do you like to do in your spare time?
 - What’s one thing you would really like other people to know about you?
 - Create a “favorites list” and have all employees complete it. (Ask, what’s your favorite: snack, restaurant, hobby, actor, sport, store, music, color, dream job, dream vacation, etc.)



5. **Think of your own idea.** Poll your team and invite ideas about what would have made them feel more welcome. Then involve them in creating the experience for the new employees.
6. **Send an e-mail.** Prior to your new employee's arrival, it is best to send an e-mail to your team introducing them. A suggested format:

To: Team

Subject: Welcome NEW EMPLOYEE NAME

Dear Team:

Please welcome NAME, TITLE to our team. NAME's first project will be BRIEFLY EXPLAIN. (if you don't know this information, tell them what this person's role will be.)

NAME comes to us from PLACE, where s/he was TITLE / YEARS. Before that s/he worked as TITLE. NAME brings with her/her DESCRIBE experience, knowledge, certifications and the like. (If you have it, you can share some information about the new employee such as where they are originally from, information about their family, hobbies, etc.)

NAME's first day of work is DATE, and s/he will sit it LOCATION. Please stop by and introduce yourself.

Sincerely,

YOUR NAME

ONBOARDING WEB PORTAL

The [USDA Onboarding Web Portal](#) is a great resource for you and your new employee.

As you will see, the portal contains a wealth of information, including forms, due dates, Agency information and links, pay and benefits information, training, and what to expect during orientation.

New employees will be directed to this website prior to their arrival to complete pre-employment forms as well as any required training. In addition, this portal will serve as a great resource for you, the new employee and their sponsor during the first few months of employment.



The Role of the Sponsor

As we have discussed throughout this guide, transitioning into a new job can be stressful. Another way to smooth this transition is to assign a sponsor. A sponsor is someone who partners with a new employee during the first year of employment to offer advice and guidance in helping foster and promote the skill and professional development of a new employee.

A sponsor should be a superior performer with strong people skills. The sponsor knows the ropes and, more importantly, knows what actions to take to be successful in achieving our mission. The sponsor is a source of advice and encouragement who can succeed in steering new employees in the right direction, as well as help create and maintain a positive and productive culture of excellence.

The sponsor should be someone who the new employee can trust. Part of this role is to create a comfortable, more informal environment in which the employee can ask and receive information about the Department's culture and norms, including those everyday (mostly unwritten) procedures and policies that help to explain how things really work.

Finally, a major goal of the sponsor is to establish a sense of belonging for the new employee. With an effective sponsor, each new employee will quickly become a contributing member of his or her new Agency.

Please access the [Sponsor Guide](#), or use the link to the guide on the Supervisor Tab of the USDA Onboarding Portal. This guide will provide more information on the sponsor's responsibilities.

MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES

As the supervisor of the new employee, you have the most critical relationship. You may have heard the saying, "People don't leave organizations; they leave leaders." This guide has been created to help you successfully perform in the role of effective leader. Part of your responsibility will be to select a sponsor for the new employee. Some things to keep in mind as you do so:

1. Select a positive role model as a sponsor.
2. Ensure the sponsor has time to be accessible to the new employee.
3. Provide the sponsor with the tools and resources needed to be effective in their role.
 - Review the Sponsor Guide so that you are familiar with the sponsor's role and responsibilities.



- Respect the confidentiality agreement between the sponsor and the new employee.
- 4. Check in with the sponsor regularly to ensure they have what they need to be successful.
 - At the end of the program, ask for feedback on what went well and what might be needed to improve the program.

SPONSOR SELECTION CRITERIA

Selecting a sponsor is an important step in this process. There are a number of ways this can be accomplished: you can nominate someone, you can request nominations or you can request volunteers. Regardless of your method, please consider the following criteria in selecting a sponsor:

- Is a high performer in their current job.
- Is a positive role model.
- Understands the new employee's job.
- Understands the Agency's mission and culture.
- Has patience and good communication skills.
- Has strong interpersonal skills.
- Shows interest in taking on the responsibilities associated with the sponsor role.

Remember, the sponsor will be part of the new employee's life for a year or more, so it is important to choose this person with care. We strongly recommend that any sponsors you select take the Sponsor Training Program through AgLearn. Like the Supervisor Training, it is fun and interactive.

If you have any questions regarding this or any aspect of the onboarding process, please contact your Human Resources Specialist.