Onboarding new telework jobs in the time of corona
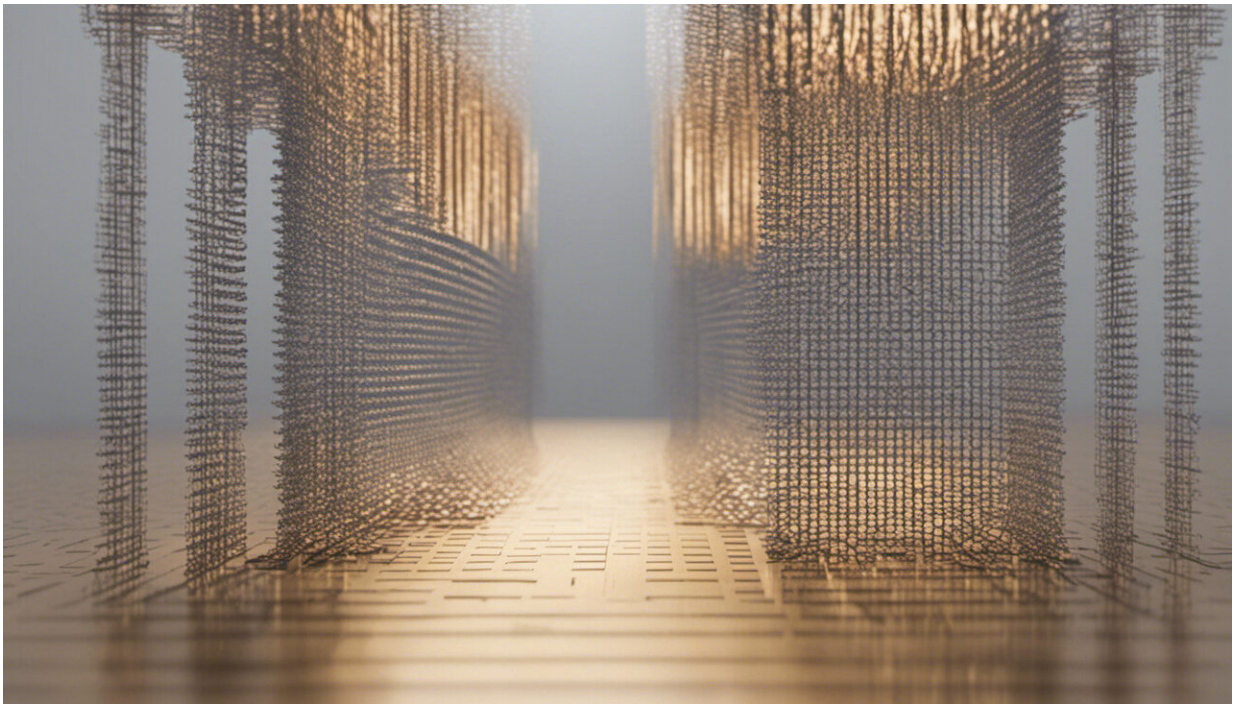
April 2 2020, by Christina Benjaminsen

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Now that "everybody" is working from home, it can be challenging for companies to recruit and onboard new employees. How can the new hires be productive and feel that they belong in the workplace when they are working from home? According to scientists, there are good guidelines for dealing with this and therefore no reason to delay action.

Onboarding, or organizational socialization, is a process that helps newcomers become integrated members of their new organization. This could be new employees entering a business, a person switching jobs internally in an organization, or a consultant who is entering a new project on a client's premises. All of them will be integrated into a new department or new area of expertise.

The coronavirus outbreak and subsequent infection control measures have resulted in employees working remotely, which has created a challenging situation for the traditional onboarding of new employees. However, onboarding—receiving new employees—in a virtual team environment is nothing new.

"Many companies have extensive experience in doing this, for example in IT projects that exist virtually and across global networks, where everyone is working from different locations. Research-based guidelines on the topic have also been developed. However, onboarding to virtual teams often requires a more structured approach than what is usually the case for co-localized teams," says Nils Brede Moe at SINTEF.

And so this applies to people who are new to an organization or someone who is about to take part in a new project or a new part of a business. Through the onboarding process, new members will learn the skills, knowledge and behavior required to succeed and be productive in their work.

The faster you manage to onboard a new [employee](), the faster the person is able to contribute productively to the new organization or role. The new employee will also experience a sense of mastery faster, which in turn increases their motivation and job satisfaction.

Time is money—delays can be costly

Moe has done considerable research into how we work together in [technology companies](#) using autonomous teams, and not least how we work with projects that do not require for us to be sitting in close physical proximity to each other.

He says there is no reason to delay the onboarding process:

Many projects and companies drag their feet when it comes to onboarding new employees, which in turn means that key initiatives are delayed, that people are not brought up to speed so that they can start working sooner, or that companies fail to move resources to new key areas effectively. Instead of hiring, businesses are starting to downsize, and the total value creation is reduced.

"We now keep hearing about projects that are delayed or canceled, projects that could have a great social or business impact for the stakeholders we are working with," says Moe.

His advice to companies is that they need to 'just get down to it' and look for innovative ways to recruit new employees and get projects off the ground.

"The main question is how the companies can best onboard and socialize new employees into virtual teams that don't sit together physically," he says.

Making a new normal

A new team member must be familiarized with the team's daily routines and common practices. She must be shown where to find information, who she can ask to get that information, and what the best means would be for acquiring it. It is also important to get an introduction to the organizational culture and norms at the workplace: How she should work

and socially interact with the team, and how she can succeed in her role and grow within the organization.

"We have studied onboarding in virtual teams. Based on our findings, we can offer some suggestions as to how onboarding can be carried out under the present circumstances. We used a well-known model from Talya N. Bauer in our research," says Moe.

Here are six recommendations from the researchers to companies that are hiring new staff in the time of corona:

During recruitment

"Recruitment is more than a review of CVs and interviews to assess the candidate's competence and suitability. It is just as important to provide good information about the job at hand, as the goal is to establish proper expectations for the new employee—and meet them.

Tip: The team that will be taking on new members must actively take part in the onboarding processes—and that means being engaged in the recruitment as well. Team members that are engaged in recruitment have a much more positive attitude to the onboarding process. When a team can influence who is being hired, it will further strengthen the team's autonomy. The team manager, technical manager and product owner should be part of this process.

Create an introductory program that helps new employees understand the most critical aspects of their new job and the business. It should also touch upon the company culture and the company values. For example, the banking sector is a highly regulated industry, which makes it important to teach the employees about legal and regulatory requirements.

Tip: Provide a thorough introduction to what your business is doing and its technical solutions. Get started solving real tasks as soon as possible. The newcomer must not spend too much time on the school bench. This means that they should be solving work assignments together with others at an early stage.

Provide a thorough introduction to key personnel and where various resources can be found online.

Create a support tool

The support tool should consist of a written plan: A formal document with timelines, objectives, responsibilities and supporting resources for all new employees. This plan plays an important role in clarifying expectations and providing access to helpful resources, ideally with the aid of high-quality checklists.

Tip: Everyone in the virtual team and key staff members must be familiar with the plan. You should also provide an overview of practical issues such as access, security, non-disclosure and how to use various tools and equipment—and how equipment such as a computer and telephone should be provided to the employee in a virtual organization.

Talk to each other and provide feedback

New employees need continuous feedback and guidance to understand their role. During the actual onboarding, this is a mutual responsibility—the newcomer must actively seek feedback, and the manager must provide feedback regularly.

Tip: Arrange one-on-one video calls—with the mentor, team manager and ideally several other people from the team. The team should connect

with each other often, preferably on a daily basis, and reflect on the experiences gained during the early phase—with the goal of finding out what works and what doesn't, and to strengthen the team. When the new employee feels more confident, she will feel more comfortable asking questions that are important for quick clarifications. Keep in mind that being equipped with adequate tools for virtual meetings is essential.

It would also be wise to have a system that shows what everyone is working with at all times, why they are doing it, and when they have time to talk about it.

Practice together!

Set up training activities that involve professional work assignments and tasks linked to cooperation and communication, aligned with the employee's abilities and job requirements. Providing a dedicated virtual training portal or overview of useful tools would be a good idea.

Tip: Training activities should be carried out regularly. For the IT industry in particular, effective training methods that work on a remote basis should be used, such as pair programming, mob programming, Coding Dojo and Code review. After each training session you should evaluate which things did and didn't work.

Coaching and support are important

Having a good mentoring program seems to be one of the most important factors for virtual new hires. In a study where the researchers looked at the efficacy of having a mentor in virtual teams over a 12-week period, the mentor was found to have made a significant impact after 5 weeks. (Onboarding in Open Source Projects, 2014, Fagerholm, Guinea, Borenstein, Münch)

New employees with an appointed mentor were five times more active than those without a mentor. In order to benefit from the scheme, it should not be terminated prematurely. It also pays off financially: the researchers' findings suggest that a regular training curve for a new employee can take up to two years. Using a mentor can expedite the time it takes to become fully productive.

Another key finding is that new hires require frequent informal communication with the others in the project. It boosts confidence and makes it easier for new hires to reach out to senior team members directly.

Tip: A mentor must be a central figure in the team and be very familiar with the technical aspects. Don't choose a mentor simply based on who has the most time to spare. However, the mentor must be able to commit to follow up closely with the employee through digital means, such as frequent one-on-one video meetings and messaging through Slack, Yammer or similar informal communication channels.

During virtual onboarding, the new employee should also have the opportunity to talk to others who are in the same situation. For example, if there are several new employees being recruited at the same time (either as new hires or through a consultancy), these should have a network of their own where they can discuss and share experiences.

Here's how Norwegian companies are preparing their onboarding processes right now:

The savings and insurance company Storebrand's recruitment processes have not been put on hold, even though working remotely has become the new norm.

"We are welcoming 15 new employees on 1 April. We will now have to

do that in a slightly different way than we are used to. On their first day, they will come in person to our Lysaker HQ to collect a computer and their access card. From there, they will be working virtually," says Live Leer, head of training and leadership at Storebrand.

She believes that virtual onboarding requires more structure now than what's usually the case.

"The key purpose of the onboarding process is to quickly make you feel a sense of ownership, pride and belonging. New employees should feel that they have made a good choice and that they are well looked after, even if we cannot currently meet up physically," she says.

Storebrand has solved this challenge by creating a digital program for the newcomers: Smart Start April 2020. It consists of three key points:

- Getting to know the company; its strategy, purpose and why we do what we do at Storebrand.
- Getting to know the systems so that they are able to work independently quickly. It is essential to become familiar with the systems that the others are working with as soon as possible.
- Getting started with learning and development. Get to know our learning philosophy: you should 'learn by doing' through the job you do.

"It is important that the people who are onboarded meet people from across the organization, not just their own team, but people from different areas. There should also be systems in place to allow the new employees to also form networks and share experiences," says Live Leer.

The company has already set up some mandatory courses available online, covering topics such as money laundering, anti-corruption work, and ethics.

"We don't really know how the process of taking in new people through a virtual environment is going to pan out yet, since this is a new experience for us. So we need to be humble about it, try it out, measure the results and learn from them in order to make any necessary adjustments. New employees must be followed up closely, and feedback is important," she says, and adds:

"The People Department (Group HR) and the individual employee's managers will be in close contact with them—digitally. Storebrand is also working with the managers to include them in the process and make sure that everyone is following up on our new hires and help them get up to speed as soon as possible," says Leer.

The company also keeps a finger on the pulse by frequently measuring employee engagement. Each employee receives a set of questions for them to score or comment on anonymously, which provides the managers with frequent feedback on how their teams are doing and the ability to quickly implement necessary changes to maintain high levels of engagement across the company's workforce.

Virtual coffee breaks and lunchtime quizzes

At the consulting firm Kantega, preparations are also well underway. They are keen on quickly getting their consultants up and running on their various assignments.

"This is important for the clients who have tasks that need to be resolved, and for the consultants who need to be engaged in meaningful assignments. We don't want them to be idle. We want our consultants to enjoy being at work and to be integrated into the new team quickly, to feel a sense of mastery and become productive as soon as possible. That's why we've created some guidelines based on research and our own experiences," says Siv Holen of Kantega.

"Our emphasis is on having a dialog with our clients about how the onboarding should be carried out. It's a process which now requires a more structured approach than before, not to mention how important it is to involve all parties.

"Therefore, it is important to agree on who does what, so that the consultant is taken on board and is able to quickly build networks at the client's site. People no longer chat around the coffee machine, and that has always been a great place to ask questions and catch up. There is a lot of silent knowledge in teams; tips and tricks of the trade that for the most part are undocumented," she says.

Holen believes that this might contribute to positive changes in the long term:

"What we're doing now is that we become better at having a good structure in place for the onboarding process, which we will bring with us after this is over," she says.

However, the circumstances around the coronavirus also present quite a few challenges, for example the fact that it has occasionally been difficult to obtain computers from clients, who require the consultant to work with the client's equipment. In many places you also need to be physically present at the workplace to connect to certain systems.

"In such cases, we need to collaborate and find good solutions that enable the consultant to get up and running quickly."

The consultancy business is working on establishing a mentoring scheme. The current emphasis is on creating useful and convenient spaces for networking and job training in the new virtual daily life. The consultants are accustomed to using pair programming as the best way to get into a new project and get to know the others in the team. This

especially holds true now that everyone is working from home. The social aspect of the workplace is also important and takes priority in normal everyday life, and that's still the case.

"My team has virtual coffee breaks every day at 10. This is an important space for the new people on the team. At lunch, we run video quizzes across the entire organization at Kantega. It's a fun project which might help alleviate some of the need for social contact we're all missing out on at the moment," says Siv Holen at Kantega.

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