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Early careers onboarding

Setting your candidates up for success

Contents

Introduction

An evolving early careers landscape

Despite economic stagnation, and the looming threat of a recession to come, the recruitment of all types of student hires increased by 16% in 2022/2023*. This increase is expected to continue, with an anticipated 9% increase for 2023/2024. Which means more and more early careers new starters who need to be set up for success in 2024 and beyond. And these aren't the only changes. 45% of respondents to the Institute of Student Employers 2023 Recruitment Survey expected that most of their recruitment will be conducted fully online and with increasing automation in the next five years. So how do employers ensure they don't lose the sense of human connection that is so important for engagement and inclusion amongst early careers new starters?

There are increasing efforts, too, being made to recruit more diverse cohorts across a range of areas from gender, socio-economic group and ethnicity. What do these changes mean for the way we onboard?

At the same time, 54% of employers expect to move to a recruitment approach that focuses on evaluating candidates based on their skills, rather than on their education or past work experience, and more than a quarter (29%) are expected to rebalance their entry-level recruitment away from graduates and towards school and college leavers. Both moves have implications for onboarding, potentially requiring more support, and more training and preparation for early careers starters at this stage.

Meanwhile, the economic situation, cost of living crisis, and after-effects of the pandemic are all taking their toll on the early career cohort, meaning additional emphasis on wellbeing and mental health support are important, too.

So – how can you evolve your onboarding strategy to meet these challenges and changes?

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*All statistics on this page are from the Institute of Student Employers - Student Recruitment Survey 2023.

Experience-led onboarding: why is it so important in early careers?

In today's environment, a purely compliance-based approach to onboarding is no longer enough. Consider the following statistics:

- **Average early careers cost per hire is £4,500***

- **Average number of graduate jobs applied for is 40**

- **Renege rate for graduates is 5%**

- **Renege rate for school and college leavers is 7%**

After a rigorous recruitment process which has taken a huge amount of time and energy to get right, losing high-quality early careers candidates between acceptance of an offer and the start date is very frustrating and costly. The renege rate average masks bigger problems within specific sectors, with drop out figures at 14% for charities and public sector, 10% for finance and professional services and 8% for digital and IT.

When you also consider that 54% of employers reported they found it difficult to recruit at least one of their graduate roles this year, drop outs become even more significant. Moreover, the brain drain doesn't stop with reneges. High attrition rates in the first 90 days, and the subsequent first year of employment are even more expensive and damaging to your organisation.

Connecting your new starters to the people in, and the purpose of, your organisation is a vital way to stop this haemorrhaging of talent. Building human connections between your early career cohort and people throughout your business is key to building loyalty. As is bringing the role they'll be working in, and the organisation they'll be working for, to life in a way that's personalised to them. It's all about building an experience that helps support, engage, reassure, train and prepare each unique individual for a successful career within your organisation.

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Experience-led onboarding is vital because:

- Your audience expects it - and will be receiving this experience from key competitors.

- Early careers audiences have some of the longest offer to start times - often as much as 9 months. So it's vital to keep them engaged and onboard throughout the process.

- Students have to make a difficult transition from study to work and your support can be the difference between success (an engaged employee who hits the ground running, going on to build a long term career with you), and failure (early drop out).

- Building a sense of connection & community is the most powerful way to build loyalty and resilience.

- Reneges on early careers offers, and drop out from early careers programmes cost money and are disruptive to your organisation.

During a recent webinar, we asked our panel:

Why do you think experience-led onboarding is so important?

"For us, at Police Now, our graduates aren't really going to understand what it's like to be a Police Officer or a Detective until they're actually here, doing it. So in the onboarding process, it's vital to create an immersive experience, that starts explaining the realities of what they can expect through information that's tailored specifically to them. We're taking them on an onward journey from attraction – to getting them prepped and ready. Obviously, there's lots of compliance needed, pre-employment, to become an officer. But that needs to be coupled with the experience they have along the way, to remind them continuously of why they applied in the first place."

Erik Rivas
Head of Employer Brand & Recruitment Marketing, Police Now
(Police Now attract, recruit and retain outstanding graduates from diverse backgrounds to become Detectives or Police Officers on the frontline in England and Wales)

"For graduates and other early careers hires, this will be their very first insight into the world of work. They want to feel important – that all of their study has been for something, and that they're going to make an impact in their role. They've gone through a huge amount of due diligence in researching and applying, and you've spent a lot of money getting that offer right, so to just go – 'here's a standard pack, work your way through it', is not good enough.

You've got to respect that they've chosen you over countless other employers, and make sure you keep engaging them. For a lot of candidates this could be for 9 months or so. It's a long time, during which a peer at university will be saying 'Well I'm now talking to this other great employer'. Graduates will be easily swayed. I've been talking to some clients who have a 40% drop out rate. It's so important that your EVP is working all the way through the process – it's not just a marketing campaign."

Helen Sherwood
Early Careers Solutions Manager, Hays
(Helps clients look at every area of early careers, from school outreach to onboarding)

"Culture is key to retention. We're a car hire company – which might not be everyone's first choice in terms of sector. But we have incredible opportunities for people who start with us as graduates. We want them to understand that – and to go home after their first day and say to a parent or partner – day one was amazing. I've seen and felt the culture and it's great – I want to stay. We want to build excitement that helps keep them motivated even on any challenging days in the first few months."

Simon Crumbleholme
Group Talent Development Manager, Enterprise
(The global car hire company is a large graduate recruiter, taking on 3,000 new starters a year. They are passionate about the value of onboarding)

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Preboarding

Pre-boarding is often deprioritised, or overlooked altogether, yet building strong relationships between offer and start date is crucial. Candidates considering multiple offers, prolonged recruitment and preboarding times and potential mismatches in engagement methods can all cause unwanted drop outs. How do you engage with your early careers cohort over a period that can last anywhere from a week to 9 months, or even longer? And how do you build human connection in an increasingly automated world? (45% of employers say they expect their recruitment to be conducted fully online in the next 5 years.)

Preboarding should enable your early careers new starter to...

- Understand the specifics of how you, as an organisation, operate day-to-day

- Gain a greater understanding of the programme and what's expected of them

- Build a sense of community and connect with fellow grads

- Access L&D, training, knowledge & insight to improve early performance

- Have ongoing support at a critical life moment

- Get support to reduce anxiety, build confidence and champion wellbeing

- Access regular touchpoints and engagement to build connection with your organisation

- Be empowered & supported by technology that provides an experience tailored to their needs

Preboarding in action

Personalising the experience and building human connections

"At Police Now, we use the Eli platform for preboarding. It has allowed us to tailor information specifically based on each person's background and the route they've taken to join us. Different people coming into our programmes from a range of ethnic backgrounds have different relationships with policing, so we've created content that we're able to tailor to each of them. We've also looked at times and places where we do see high reneges, and figured out ways to build stronger human connections at those points, by doing things like socials, or in-person induction events, so grads can start networking and connecting with each other. Relocating is a big thing for us – where people are relocating to different areas to join different forces. For them to be able to meet each other and find people that they might house share with – all of this creates a sense of connection not only to Police Now and the force that they're joining, but to each other – which is going to be invaluable to them. The most subscribed preboarding webinar we have is our 'realities' piece. The amount of questions we get – even though every person has gone through the whole application process and seen all of our marketing communications – asking 'what's this going to be like?' No-one will truly know until they start and they're on the ground. But we have amazing connections to current police officers, and we constantly bring in people who are on our programmes, as well as programme alumni who are Sergeants or Inspectors, who can show our graduates the reality of development opportunities along the way."

Erik Rivas
Head of Employer Brand & Recruitment Marketing, Police Now

Preboarding in action

Personalising the experience and building human connections

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"During summer – just in my region – we induct 30 to 40 graduates every month. During preboarding we make sure they all get phone calls from people – not just from HR, but from the branches they are going to work in, from their manager and their manager's manager. We also have socials before they begin – to Pizza Hut, or to go bowling. Our culture is mainly at branch level, so meeting colleagues and customers is key. Bringing them to Head Office to onboard isn't what we do – it's very informal, very network based. Let's meet the team you're going to work with tomorrow, not just Head Office managers that you won't see. We can't have the reneges, so we keep that face-to-face contact going and personal touches like seasonal cards."

Simon Crumbleholme
Group Talent Development Manager, Enterprise

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Preboarding in action

Personalising the experience and building human connections

"It's important to set up different communities and groups. You can set up regional groups. You can also look at core competencies and skills. If someone is being brought in with specific skills, and is going to be working in a specific sector, or part of the business, get that community to start setting up that network, and assign a buddy. You don't want new starters to just have visibility of HR, you also want them to have visibility of their peers and of people in their team. Set up socials — including if events are happening client side – and invite new starters along to say hello.

It's about reducing anxiety and helping people find common ground by having a chat together. It's also about trying to help minimise the cost of living crisis for new starters, so they can get together and discuss house sharing or car sharing opportunities.

Make it clear that it's not just a company you've joined – you're one of us now."

Helen Sherwood
Early Careers Solutions Manager, Hays

Preboarding in action

Personalising the experience and building human connections

"Our clients use our Eli Onboarding platform as the enabler to build human connections. They use Eli's social wall to create tailored groups that bring people together and allow them to interact and build relationships before they join. They might all live in the same country, or come from the same university, have similar interests or specialisms, or be working in the same team. Eli also has instant messaging, so people can message as a group – perfect for the WhatsApp generation.

The platform also gives people the chance to share personal information about themselves that can spark connections with others, as well as a contacts book where they can learn more about who they're going to be working with.

There's a timeline and checklist too, so new starters can find out what they're doing in their first week, who they'll be meeting for lunch on their first day, what events they'll be going to, and so on. Little things that can bring actual humans together are really important."

Sarah Wardle
Relationship Director, Eli Onboarding

Preboarding in action

Building connections with families

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"The majority of people who join us haven't been thinking long term about a career in policing. If they had they'd probably have applied straight to a Police Force. We make a difference by attracting people from different backgrounds and with different interests. It is a challenge – it's a journey we have to take them on.

One of my favourite pre boarding events at Police Now is a friends and families event – where you can bring along your loved ones. In policing, you're not just trying to earn the trust of the candidate – but also to support them in their discussions with their own families. Most won't have a line of police officers in their own family, so it's a really big jump for them.

That event introduces officers that are currently on the ground through our programme, to allow mothers, brothers, grandfathers and so on to ask their questions.

It's about bringing more people who are stakeholders into the conversation and helping candidates to sell and explain the career choice that they've made."

Erik Rivas
Head of Employer Brand & Recruitment Marketing, Police Now

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Preboarding in action

Building connections with families

"It's important to enable parents and establish support structures to bring people through into their first role. With apprentices, you need to establish contact really early – often during T levels. If someone is doing a T level – they may well be planning to do an apprenticeship. During recruitment and preboarding, they and their parents need that safe environment to feel that they can ask anything they want. Establish psychological safety and make it clear no question is a bad question."

Helen Sherwood
Early Careers Solutions Manager, Hays

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Preboarding in action

Creating a preboarding engagement plan

"The preboarding time scale can be between two weeks and a year – and sometimes even longer. An engagement plan helps to make sure you keep in touch with candidates whilst not overwhelming them. Create key touchpoints, varying the media you use and the types of communication you send – a video one time, an introduction to their buddy the next. Build up to a crescendo at the time your new starter joins. Create a real sense of excitement – after all they are at the beginning of their entire career.

Create a timeline for TA professionals, line managers and buddies, too. Every manager of a new starter should have the same training, and a checklist of things they absolutely need to do to make sure a graduate is set up for success. Tech can be useful here, with automated checklists that provide reminders and nudges. This reduces the workload of the TA team, whilst ensuring they can still track that pre and onboarding is going to plan. It helps busy managers with all the responsibilities of their own day job keep

on track, too. Each manager will still have their own style, but creating touchpoints means there will be a sense of consistency, and an even playing field, so no-one misses out on key learning points.

A lot of the early careers teams we work with are small. So don't feel like you have to do it all yourself. Get the wider team to help you – whether that's running a session on L&D or wellbeing – whatever their area of expertise."

Sarah Wardle
Relationship Director, Eli Onboarding

Preboarding in action

Creating a preboarding engagement plan

"How often should you contact your early careers new starters in the onboarding phase? Fortnightly is about right in the UK – but it depends on the age and the experience of the candidate. That's why using recruitment platforms can be really useful, because you can track what people are engaging with or not engaging with, and it helps you tell if you're striking the right note – and if you're using the right medium and communication techniques for different audiences. If you're sending someone an email and they're not opening it – is that because it's the wrong format – and the person doesn't 'do' email? Or maybe they have limited resources, and they might need to access online content on a university computer in a library perhaps."

Helen Sherwood
Early Careers Solutions Manager, Hays

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Inclusion, social mobility & onboarding

57% of students enrolled in HE are female and only 46% of graduate hires are female

A great deal of effort is made within the early careers space to recruit from a diverse range of candidates, with increasing success. The ISE report this year showed that 39% of the graduate intake were from ethnic minorities, and 34% from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, for example. (It also noted that less successfully, only 5% were neurodiverse). However – there's little point in taking in a diverse workforce if the pre and onboarding stages don't ensure they feel supported and welcomed.

Take time to put yourself in the shoes of different demographics – and think about how the onboarding process might look and feel through their eyes – understanding any anxieties or challenges they might have.

Your inclusion and social mobility strategy should include:

- Improving accessibility for all

- Offering more support to those who need it

- Ensuring everyone arrives with the same knowledge and experience, no matter what their background

- Eliminating practices, process or touchpoints that exclude certain groups

- Monitoring wellbeing and mental health

*All statistics on this page are from the Institute of Student Employers - Student Recruitment Survey 2023 unless otherwise stated.

Onboarding inclusion in action

Ensuring graduates from every background feel welcomed, supported and included

"Police Now was created to bring diversity in policing – so for us, supporting those coming from underrepresented backgrounds that aren't in the police currently is taken very seriously. It's about representation, role modelling, and providing additional resources around the realities of what they will experience in their role. We also have a Professional Development coach for everyone – to provide support in challenging moments. Some won't take it. Others will. But it's there, so when people do raise their hand, we're equipped as a team to support them as they want to be supported. Perhaps most important of all is helping fuel a sense in people from underrepresented communities that they are vital to bringing about the change we need to see in policing.

One example – from the time when the Baroness Casey report came out. The report showcased the internal workings of the Met, and reported on a range of challenges, especially around race and bullying. This could obviously be quite daunting for someone of black heritage coming into our programme at this time. I remember sitting in an onboarding session, and I was talking to a female black officer who had joined our programme. She said to me "I was thinking about reneging on the offer from Police Now when the report came out – but I thought – no, I'll go to the induction – but if they don't address that report – I'm out." But we did – we did address that report – and we were truly open and honest about how the new generation are the people who are going to make a change in the policing culture. That's the kind of moment that makes me so proud of our team – having those transparent conversations – because these are the things that make or break a new starter's experience with you. And these people – the ones who challenge – are the people you want on the programme – because they will go on to make a massive change in the force they join."

Erik Rivas
Head of Employer Brand & Recruitment Marketing, Police Now

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Onboarding inclusion in action

Ensuring graduates from every background feel welcomed, supported and included

"It's about setting everyone up for success. You need to have complete clarity in your core messages, and you need to deliver them in a range of different ways to make sure that everybody is seeing – and absorbing – the mandatory, vital information. Not everyone will use every type of content, but it ensures no-one slips through the net.

From a neurodiversity outreach approach – set really clear expectations and set out a really clear agenda. Design clear steps all the way through with a 'you can't pass this point until' approach, to make sure that everybody has reached the same basic level of understanding by the time they come onboard. Also explaining what you need to do and why you need to do it all the way through is key.

When it comes to the social aspect you need to cater for everyone – extravert or introvert. Make sure everybody understands what's mandatory as part of the onboarding, and what's the additional interaction they can choose to be involved in, so you don't put people off.

Making sure all your material is accessible is important too. Take a look at the visual contrasts in your online web designs – will the tonal differences in the visuals be stark enough to allow screen readers to work? These are simple steps that you can do yourself – without the need for any whizzy technology. What does it look like if you turn your design into a black and white image? Making things simple, clear, straightforward and accessible is best practice for everyone – so you're benefiting everybody by taking these steps."

Helen Sherwood
Early Careers Solutions Manager, Hays

Social mobility in action

Driving graduate social mobility through onboarding

Cognizant is a multinational information technology services and consulting company. Their highly supportive application and assessment process delivered a cohort of graduates that the Bridge Group said was 'the most socio-economic diversity they'd seen across the percentiles of any graduate recruitment'. It was also representative in terms of ethnicity, too, and saw a steep rise in the number of successful female applicants.

But once you've attracted such a diverse cohort, how do you ensure that they feel supported and included, and can go on to successfully develop their career in your organisation?

At Eli Onboarding, we were called in to help with the preboarding stage, to help set this hugely diverse gradate cohort up for success. Driving social mobility is all about inclusion – an accumulation of experiences that makes you feel like you belong.

So we wanted to focus on three different areas to achieve that in our preboarding strategy.

1. Making sure graduates, apprentices and students understand how you do business

2. Social and cultural integration

3. Support – especially in terms of mental health and wellbeing

Step 1

Making sure new starters understand how you do business

Grads and apprentices need to **understand how you do business**. The how is critical. It's not about who you are or what your business does, but how people at your organisation do business day-to-day. If you think about people from certain socio-economic backgrounds, they might not have experience passed down from their parents about what it might be like to work in a technology department of a big organisation or an international bank. It's important to explain everything clearly – key systems you might use in the organisation, how your timesheets work, the dress code, how to book holiday, hybrid working. We need to help build the skills and knowledge that ensure no one feels left out or excluded on day one.

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Step 2

Social and cultural integration

Students need to **build social and cultural integration.** This includes building connections with other students who will be graduates with them, as well as people throughout the organisation who are going to support their career. At Cognizant, they connected graduates through an online portal with their Early Careers team, and their Development Manager who was present at their assessments. They were also connected to the mentors who had supported them through the assessment and they introduced them to technical mentors, too, who could help them build the tech skills that they might need in their roles. Then they had their line manager and their buddy – both of whom had training to make sure they knew how to support their new colleague. Development Managers were also mental health trained. All of this support team, and the students themselves, were kept on track and in touch through a portal with personalised timelines, diarised events and catch ups, interactive social walls for people to build connections, and instant messaging. This meant everyone knew what they had to do, and when, nothing was left to chance and no one fell through the cracks.

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Step 3

Mental health and wellbeing support

Support and wellbeing is key. Starting a new job can be a scary time – so imagine if you're the first person in your family to do this in a big corporate firm. The Cibyl Student Mental Health Study 2023 reported that 87% of students from low socio-economic backgrounds have experienced mental health issues. So Cognizant Development Managers were trained in mental health support. In addition, all the graduates were linked directly to the Cognizant wellbeing team. Which meant they had easy access to mental, physical and financial health sessions, guided meditation, yoga or flex and stretch at your desk.

Finally, the onboarding portal that Eli developed for Cognizant to preboard the grads also tracked wellbeing. Every time the grads went on the site (an average of 80 times in the preboarding stage) they would rate their wellbeing, and if it fell low the system would automatically let their Development Manager know about it, so they could reach out.

The tech allows for real consistency of support. It also provides data and feedback at every stage from graduates and all of the people supporting them to help improve the process as each cohort comes in.

Measuring progress

What does success look like, how do you track it, and how can you use data to drive improvements?

When you get onboarding right the benefits for your early careers cohort and your organisation are huge.

Cognizant's key stats:

- 100% new hire engagement

- Reneges on offers 8% (12% below the industry benchmark)

- 0% of new hires reported feeling unhappy at any point during their onboarding. (Stats taken July 22 - Mar 23)

NatWest Group's key stats:

- In their first year with Eli, dropout reduced by 18%

- Conversions from interns (who stay on Eli when they return to university) to graduates consistently remains near 100% year on year

- Interns and grads visit Eli upwards of 100 times each during preboarding

- Grads and apprentices hit the ground running and excel in their role

- You develop a highly engaged cohort of advocates

- A strong sense of community is built

- Improved early performance

- Reneges and early attrition are reduced

- A strong pipeline of engaged early careers talent who will continue their career in your organisation
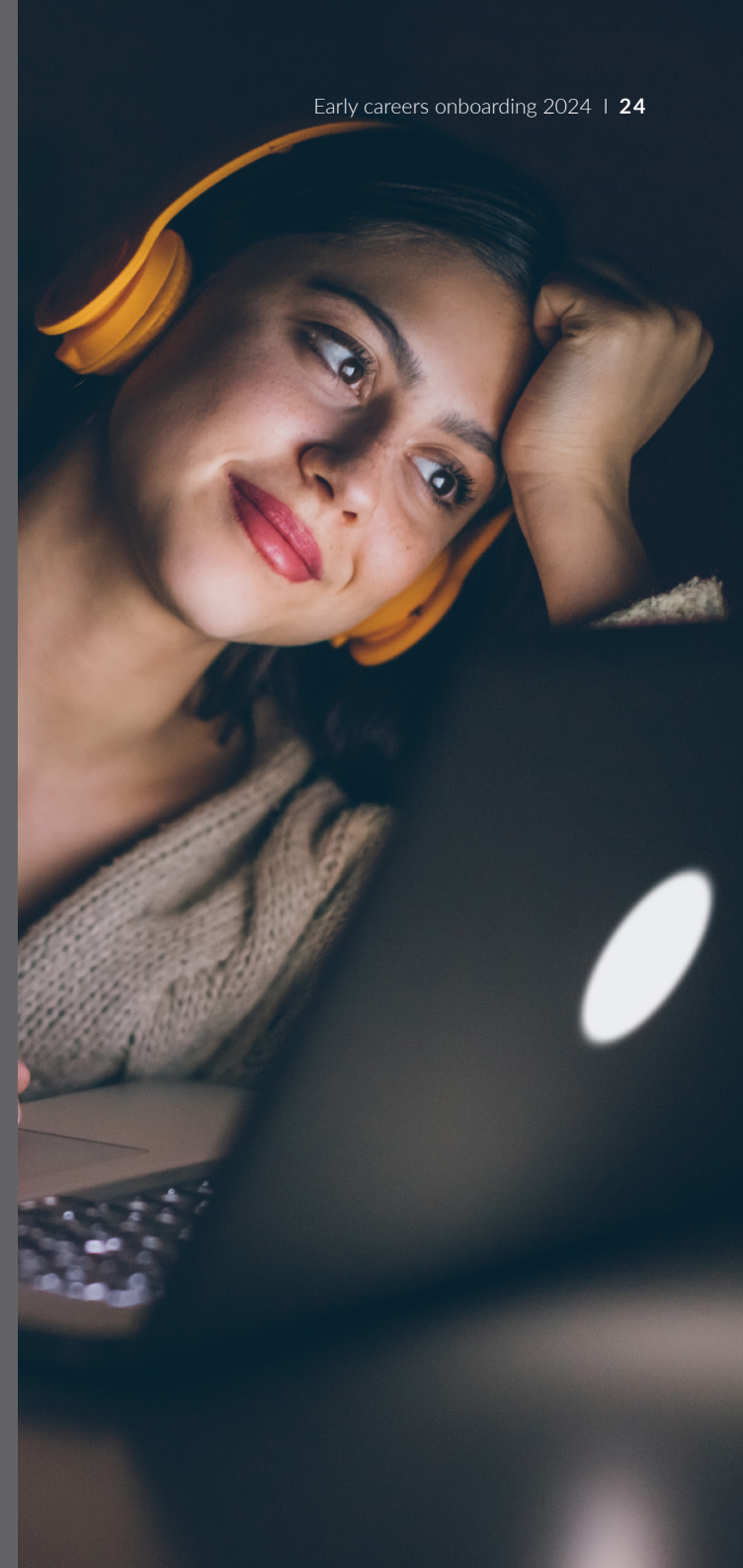
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*All statistics on this page were taken from July 22 - Mar 23

Success in action

Defining success, tracking results, and using data to drive further improvements

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"What you measure and track depends on the individual objectives of your onboarding plan. Tracking not only provides proof to the wider business of the tangible benefits of your onboarding strategy (improved performance, reduced reneges and so on) but also allows you to pinpoint areas where you can drive further improvements.

For example, if this is applicable for your business, you could track the point at which your graduates become billable, in order to show that this can happen more quickly because of pre boarding and onboarding activity. Tracking external measures such as your employee NPS score – would graduates and other early career employees recommend you as a place to work to their friends – is also powerful as a proof point."

Sarah Wardle
Relationship Director, Eli Onboarding

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Success in action

Defining success, tracking results, and using data to drive further improvements

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"We track our graduates throughout preboarding – and then also collect data up to 120 days from start date. We try to measure everything – drop out rates, the exact point of drop out rates, whether each graduate got a phone call before they started from their manager, and levels of engagement at stages throughout the process including two weeks and 90 days after the start date. These regularly hit 90%.

Because of our geography, with rental units across the country, and the handover from TA to TD after graduates start, it's important that HR doesn't lose contact with graduates from day 1 onwards. Pulse surveys help us monitor what's happening and plan for the future. We ask questions like 'How prepared were you for your branch', 'Did you feel orientation prepared you for your branch', 'What do you feel you need to learn that you didn't that we can adapt for next time'? We have a lot of autonomy and flexibility in TA and TD so we can adapt and change things fast based on the results. We listen well – and act on consensus. We've made big changes from feedback where 3 or 4 people are making the same points. It's important to not only track engagement, but also to make sure there's real visibility around the results. We have strong stakeholder engagement from senior management, who'll help reinforce the importance of onboarding. So if we find a graduate didn't get a preboarding phone call, or missed out on any other stage, we follow up on that, ask why, and act swiftly to rectify any omissions. We're having great results with retention, engagement and ongoing business performance."

Simon Crumbleholme
Group Talent Development Manager, Enterprise

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Success in action

Defining success, tracking results, and using data to drive further improvements

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"Success is two-fold. For the candidate, success is a person feeling that they've made the right choice, and that all of that effort and work has paid off. For the business, success is a new starter who is right for them – and has been empowered to hit the ground running with the right onboarding tools and training. For HR, it's also about having the data – so that they can prove to the business that putting all of the pre and onboarding strategy in place in a potentially cash strapped environment – was worth that effort. It might have been a long hard slog to put all of these measures in place – but look at all that this person has achieved. Setting someone up for success pays such long-term dividends – from the stickiness that removes early reneges, to graduates who go on to be leaders of the future – because you hire early career candidates for potential."

Helen Sherwood
Early Careers Solutions Manager, Hays

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