



# Hughes-Consulting

## "News You Can Use"

July 2007

Partnering with You to Achieve Results



**Hughes-Consulting specializes in Human Resources and Organizational Effectiveness Consulting.**

### Contact Us:

To learn more contact  
**Hughes-Consulting** -  
e-mail:  
hughesconsulting@bellsouth.net  
or phone :  
985-893-2236

For past copies of "News You Can Use" please see our website  
[www.hughes-consulting.org](http://www.hughes-consulting.org)

## Making Employee Orientation Count

By Mark Vickers

Face it. First impressions last a long time, yet employee orientations can be pretty dull stuff. The goal is usually to get new hires up to speed on work rules and environment. Most companies try to do this as quickly as possible while trying not to bore, discourage or overwhelm newcomers. But some experts think the goal *should* be more ambitious because the orientation period gives employers a unique opportunity to impress and engage.

A new i4cp survey shows that most organizations try to move swiftly through the new employee orientation (NEO) process. Of 597 respondents, fully 86% say their organizations have such orientations company-wide. Nearly half of them (46%) say the process lasts a day or less, and another 26% say it lasts two to three days.

What do most organizations do during orientations? The top four activities, are telling new employees about benefits (86%), core values (83%), company history (82%) and mission/vision statements (78%). There's also the semi-obligatory tour of the facility (cited by 72%) and a host of other possibilities, from communicating policies and procedures to teaching about safety and compliance issues.

It's a basic tenet of group dynamics that newcomers need to learn about the group's values, history and vision in order to become functioning members. New employees deserve thorough explanations of important policies on issues such as ethics, harassment, confidentiality and other items that require their signatures. And, they need to know the details of their benefits packages, partially to give them an appreciation of the value of their new affiliation and partially because there are often important decisions that must be made about those packages.

But these basics can feel like a "to do" list for employers and like a torrent of hard-to-assimilate information for new workers. To truly engage people in the NEO process, some companies try to establish more personal or emotional connections. The i4cp survey specifically asked respondents about what kind of "wow" factors companies use in the orientation process. It found that the most commonly used "wow" factors include giving out company memorabilia such as pens, shirts and binders and getting senior staff involved with the orientation.

Judging from write-in survey responses, a lot of organizations also engage in the age-old tradition of breaking bread with new group members in order to make them feel welcome and to get to know them. There's often a breakfast, lunch or both, and sometimes this includes a meal with the CEO or other senior leader. Some organizations even go out of their way to provide new hires with favorite foods, gifts or other "pleasant surprises." One survey respondent wrote, for example, "we find out what some of their favorite things are and we try to find them and give them during orientation."

Other respondents seem more skeptical of special gifts or events. One wrote, "I think more important to folks is getting them the right info and getting them connected (literally and figuratively) so that they can be/feel productive." Indeed, feeling connected and developing relationships can be an important part of orientation programs. Various respondents pointed to establishing mentoring relationships as part of the NEO process, and one participant alluded to a "new employee networking program" and a "new employee mentor/buddy for [the] first six months." Through such relationship-building, new recruits can gain deeper insights into the unique qualities of their new employers.

Some companies take orientation to another level. In a recent *Harvard Business Review* article, Tamara J. Erickson, president of the Concours Institute, and Lynda Gratton, a professor of management practice at London Business School, suggest giving new hires a taste of the "signature experience" of their new organizations. "The experience," they wrote, "is created by a bundle of everyday routines, or signature processes, which are tricky for competitors to imitate precisely because they have evolved in-house and reflect the company's heritage and the leadership team's ethos." By involving new employees in this way, employers aren't just *telling* employees about the values and procedures of the organization, they're giving

employees a chance to *experience* them first hand.

Erickson and Gratton point to the example of Trilogy Software, which places new employees in what amounts to a three-month “extreme orientation period” during which they’re immersed in team-based innovation projects that focus on anything from developing new products to coming up with whole new business models. After new employees emerge from this trial by fire, the organization pores over their performance and provides exhaustive feedback to them.

This kind of intense orientation isn’t suitable for every company or every new recruit, but it gives new workers at Trilogy a good idea of what the organization does and the values it lives by. Assuming Trilogy has recruited the right kind of people, this sort of experience not only can energize and engage people but can give them the kind of knowledge and networks that make them much more productive over the long haul.

Such NEO programs blur the lines between orientation, onboarding, training and development. Maybe that’s where the most important “wow” factors emerge in some organizations. Getting a t-shirt with the company logo on it is great, but it’s no substitute for being truly excited by an organizational culture and a career that fit the new recruit to a T.