THE ART OF TRAVEL ONBOARDING:

Keys To Successfully Training New Employees in the New World of Work

In the aftermath of a hiring surge across multiple sectors and increases in business travel volume, travel managers are entering the new year with revised strategies and an increased understanding of the importance of onboarding employees to their travel programs.

The new world of work—often a mix of remote and in-office—combined with generational differences and varying levels of experience with business travel are adding to the complexity of designing and implementing formal onboarding processes for many companies. In this white paper, we review some of those challenges, along with key insights on effective tactics travel managers are employing to ensure employees are traveling well.

New hiring reached record levels in 2023. According to Indeed's 2024 U.S. Job Hiring Trends report, the U.S. labor force grew at a faster pace in the first 10 months of 2023 than it did in 2021 and in the three years prior to the pandemic.

"We have been on a huge hiring frenzy since last year, and we are on target to hire more than 1,000 people this year (2023)," said Karen Bond, travel and card manager with HNTB Corporation. Headcount rose from about 3,700 employees to more than 6,200, she said.

Many travel managers like Bond are grappling with onboarding new hires, as well as existing employees who joined their organizations when business travel was frozen or restricted.

"We have a very large population who joined the company over the last three years when we weren't traveling, so onboarding now is not just for folks who are just joining the company," said Kathy Burdge, Adobe senior manager of global travel.

COMMUNICATION IS CRITICAL

Beyond the volume of new hires, travel managers are often finding that new employees have varying levels of experience with business travel. "Finding the right way to reach them and communicate is a real challenge," Burdge said.

According to Sally Higgs, travel and events sustainability manager with Festive Road, travel managers can highlight how their organization's travel policy reflects corporate culture. Discussing topics such as sustainability during the travel onboarding process helps engage new hires, especially those from younger generations.

"When millennials, and Gen Z in particular, are starting with a new organization, they want to know that they're working for a company that cares about climate change and the environment," Higgs said. "The travel policy is a real opportunity to celebrate what the organization is doing with sustainability."

Hybrid and virtual workforces are limiting opportunities for in-person training. So, travel managers are shifting to virtual meeting formats, webinars or recorded videos.

"All the information you share during onboarding and in travel policies needs to be centralized and digitized so people can access it when they want to," Higgs said. "When you think about it, it's actually a lot easier for a travel manager that way, and it turns a challenge into an opportunity."

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IMPORTANCE OF ONBOARDING

Multiple studies have shown that onboarding has a significant impact on employee satisfaction, productivity and retention.

According to a report by the SHRM Foundation, the non-profit affiliate of the Society for Human Resource Management, "Onboarding helps new hires adjust to the social and performance aspects of their jobs so they can quickly become productive, contributing members of the organization."

The upside of effective onboarding includes many long-term outcomes that affect a firm's bottom line, including holding on to employees longer. More than half of organizations (52%) surveyed for the SHRM Foundation report found that effective onboarding improved retention rates.

Noted Burdge, "I think we play a key part in ensuring that we get our folks off to a good start, so they have a great experience, and ultimately, that's a retention tool."

➡ ADOBE'S MULTI-CHANNEL APPROACH STARTS WITH AWARENESS

At Adobe, "The priority is around awareness, at least initially," Burdge said. "Any employee who's onboarding is overwhelmed with information their first few weeks, so the most important thing that we can do in the travel program is make them aware of what their resources are....We focus on showing the value of our program and helping to set them up for success."

Burdge's team takes a multi-channel approach to onboarding new hires. All information on Adobe's travel program is available as static content on intranet pages, a knowledge hub support center featuring how-to articles, and bi-monthly online Travel Talk sessions, where Burdge and the TMC partner share program enhancements and field questions. Adobe also provides a support channel for addressing specific questions.

The team is currently working to revise its T&E e-learning module and make it more fun with interactive video content plus a short quiz. All new hires must complete the module, and existing employees must re-take it annually.

➡ HNTB HOLDS WEEKLY TRAINING, FOCUSES ON 'WHY'

At HNTB, the focus for onboarding is to explain the reasons behind the travel policy. "People want to know why something is important, 'what's in it for me,' and what resources are available," Bond said.

"We don't like the word mandate," she added. "We like the word 'expect.' Compliance is what drives our savings, duty of care and traveler accountability, so for them to understand the 'why' is important. Once they understand the 'why,' they're more likely to follow the policy, which then brings my compliance numbers up automatically."

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The travel team hosts a one-hour travel onboarding course every week. The intent is to provide new employees with an overall picture, starting with "how to book travel, and a live demo of our online booking tool. At the same time, we hit on our partners so we're threading in our policy as we're talking through the booking process." The course also covers corporate card uses and how to handle receipts and expense reporting.

The travel team encourages new hires to sign up for loyalty programs of preferred travel suppliers and provides links to "make it as easy as possible." As HNTB is an employee-owned company, Bond added, "When they're traveling for business, we want them to be rewarded. That also drives compliance."

What to Include in Travel Onboarding

Content varies based on a number of factors, including the size of the organization and the scope and complexity of the travel program.

Basics generally include:

✔ Why to travel and how to secure pre-trip approval, if necessary
✔ How to pay for travel expenses or secure a corporate card
✔ Expenses the company will and won't reimburse
✔ How to create a profile, including a mobile phone number
✔ How the company provides duty of care to those who book through preferred channels
✔ How to book travel using the preferred online booking tool
✔ Preferred suppliers and company approach to loyalty programs
✔ Expense reporting procedure and receipts required

The HNTB travel team also sets up "lunch and learn" sessions with administrators and travelers, and in 2024, Bond's goal is to launch online travel fairs, initially focusing on HNTB's biggest departure cities. Airline partners will participate, and the fairs will include fun giveaways.

WHEN ONBOARDING FAILS

On the flip side, ineffective onboarding has a number of significant downsides. "When onboarding fails to meet the expectations of a new hire, the next step for many employees is to leave," according to a research report from Paychex.

"Onboarding is the gateway into the company, and if the experience is bad, the company is going to have to work extra hard to build back out of that," said Teri

Miller, EVP of the global client team with BCD Travel. "Talent acquisition and talent management are the buzzwords of today, but the fact is you have to make that first experience something that makes them want to be a part of your organization."

START STRONG, AND KEEP IT SIMPLE

While organizations have different strategic approaches to onboarding travelers, Miller has two guiding principles to help new hires understand an organization's travel policy and program: start strong, and keep it simple.

"You get one shot, and you get it in the very beginning during that onboarding process," Miller said. "That's the one chance you get to tell them what the policies are, how those policies affect them, and why you need them to be part of the overall travel program. At that point they're excited about joining the company, so you have their undivided attention."

"People want to be good corporate citizens," Miller said. But travel managers must make the process— from booking through expense reporting— "as easy as possible."

CONCLUSION

As business travel volume is expected to continue growing in 2024, travel managers at companies large and small can support both travel program compliance and the stable growth of their organizations by reviewing, and potentially upgrading, their onboarding processes. Noted Burdge, "We're all in a situation where we're reorienting and reinventing things to some degree."

The new reality of remote workplaces, combined with changing views of the business travel experience, are forcing many travel managers to explore new ways to communicate with and train travelers.

Getting help from preferred travel suppliers, partners and technology providers can give travel managers the extra support they need to respond to the evolving new normal of business travel in 2024. "Success is going to be a collaborative effort, with all parties working together," Miller noted. ●

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