

The art of onboarding - Recommendations and best practices

Young Academy Leiden (YAL) - *Position Paper*

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Summary

Onboarding is the process of incorporating a new employee into a company and familiarizing them with the company culture and policies, so they can become an effective and contributing member of the team and organization. While Leiden University has various policies in place to facilitate adequate onboarding, there is room for improvement, especially for onboarding processes at the team and departmental level.

In this position paper, we identify a number of concerns regarding onboarding from the point of view of early career researchers (ECRs), based on experiences collected from ECR participants at the Young Interfaculty Lunch on onboarding organized by YAL on September 25th, 2023, as well as a survey through e-mail. Based on these experiences and concerns, we put forward recommendations and best practices for the months before a new employee starts a new job, their first day, and their first months.

Our recommendations include:

- Managers/HR should have an onboarding guide/checklist that lists all the steps that need to be taken in the process of onboarding (including assignment of tasks to specific roles)
- The essential role of direct supervisors in streamlining the onboarding process
- The importance of the first day for a positive onboarding experience
- All paperwork should be arranged and new employees should have an office and computer on the first day
- New employees should be included in essential mailing lists and regular meetings etcetera from the start
- International hires should be provided with more insight during the hiring process into housing market, CAO, etc.
- It is helpful to create a 'buddy system' so that new hires have a direct point of contact for questions and concerns
- Best practices should be spotlighted and rewarded by supervisors and departments, and shared among different teams, departments and faculties.

Background

Onboarding is "the process of incorporating a new employee into a company and familiarizing them with the company culture and policies, so they can become an effective and contributing member of the team and organization" [1]. Leiden's Human Resources Management (HRM) department underlines that onboarding is essential for new employees to feel at home in the university context, get acquainted with the vision, mission and culture of the university, and familiarize themselves with their role and responsibilities [2]. Moreover, adequate onboarding can align expectations of new employees with the expectations and culture of the organization, and can contribute to a sense of belonging. Last but not least, onboarding can help to get employees up and running, enable them to work more productively and quicker, and contribute to their engagement with and loyalty to an organization.

Maslow's famous 'hierarchy of needs' demonstrates that various levels that need to be invested in to achieve adequate onboarding (ref 2). In the basis, their physiological needs should be met, as can be done by supplying new employees with the practical, technical, and physical means to be able to perform in their role. To ensure safety and security, employees must feel 'at ease' in their new environment. Building on that, onboarding can facilitate a sense of belonging. To achieve self-esteem, it is important to acknowledge the contributions of new employees and to pay attention to their socialization. Finally, it is important to foster self-actualization; giving a new employee the freedom and confidence to take initiative and be creative in their new role.



Current policies for onboarding at Leiden University and/or particular faculties include e-learnings as well as introductory meetings aimed at either all employees or specific groups such as PhD candidates (ref 2). Beyond that, essential parts of the onboarding process take place at the level of the department and the new employee's team. Generally, the way in which this is executed depends a lot on the new employee's specific department and team.

Points of concern

Various points of concern regarding onboarding were identified. In the months leading up to the start of a new position, prospective employees sometimes experienced significant delays with getting their contract, which in some cases even resulted in the employee starting their position without a contract. This negatively affected their sense of safety, security, and belonging. In some cases, the problem with getting a contract in time seems to be at the level of the direct manager, who does not start up the HR process quickly enough. In other cases, it seems that HR is overburdened and is not able to arrange the contract in time. Prospective employees moreover had varying experiences with the availability of their future manager in the months leading up to the start of their new job. In cases where the manager did not provide proactive or responsive input regarding the expectations and requirements for the start of a new job, this negatively impacted employees' technical and practical needs, and sense of safety, security, and belonging.

A special point of concern in the 'pre-first day phase' relates to the challenges that international hires face when moving to the Netherlands and into Dutch academia. Particular challenges included arranging a Dutch bank account, navigating the housing market before arriving in Leiden, not being informed that living in Leiden is not a necessity (and also not always a possibility), and gaining insight into the CAO and pay policies. While not all of the underlying issues can be solved by Leiden University employees, we found that more detailed information about the broader context of moving to the Netherlands would be greatly appreciated by prospective international employees. In some cases, international employees failed to find adequate information in English.

There was a clear consensus that an employee's first day is essential for onboarding and the sense of belonging to an organization. Various respondents experienced a sense of feeling lost on the first day, due to the manager not being available for an introductory meeting and not knowing their expectations for the first day(s). If a manager and/or other team or department member welcomed

new employees, this positively contributed to their sense of belonging, as did small tokens of appreciation like receiving flowers on one's first day.

Regarding the initial period after employment, concerns frequently related to practical and technical needs, such as not having an office or computer in the first days, weeks or even months. If employees had to inquire and find out about relevant mailing lists, platforms, and meetings themselves rather than being invited proactively (or being included automatically), this negatively affected their sense of belonging, as did seemingly smaller things, like not being mentioned on the nameplate next to the door of one's office.

Other concerns that were shared by many concerned a perceived lack of clarity about expectations regarding teaching, research, and life at the department. Regarding teaching, employees frequently missed explanations about the courses they were expected to give, how these fit into the larger curriculum, and how they are generally set up (e.g. break in the middle, Leids Kwartier, etc.). This latter point was of particular concern to international employees, who were not familiar with the Dutch system of teaching and the expectations that students might have. In this sense, 'onboarding for teaching' seems to be an important point of improvement for international hires. In some departments, onboarding procedures focus specifically on certain groups of employees (e.g. PhD candidates, full professors) while (specific) onboarding programs targeted at other groups (e.g. support staff, post docs, assistant/associate professors) may be absent. Finally, in many faculties information is spread across many separate documents which moreover often use unexplained abbreviations, making it difficult to find and navigate the relevant information. In addition, these separate documents are hard to find as the Leiden University website is not easy to navigate.

Recommendations and sharing best practices

To address these concerns, we make the following recommendations for respectively the months before a new employee starts, their first day, and the first months of work, in addition to one general recommendation. It should be noted that this list of recommendations and best practices is non-exhaustive and pertains to what may be seen as 'low-hanging fruit' to further facilitate and improve onboarding at Leiden University. We would also like to highlight that best practices should be spotlighted and rewarded by supervisors and departments, and shared among different teams, departments and faculties as much as possible.

General recommendation:

- University/faculty/department/manager: Centralize information in one place and make sure respectively the manager and the new employee receive a link or copy.
 - HR: Make sure there is a quick guide to onboarding for managers/supervisors (see example document from Faculty of Archaeology in appendix) that outlines the steps that need to be taken and make sure that this document is easily available.
 - At a university/faculty/department level: make a summary document for new employees that contains links to the relevant manuals and guidelines and post it to the university website/department's intranet. Some departments already have an onboarding booklet with practical information (e.g. where to find the paper recycling bin, whom to contact about questions on particular topics, etc.).

- At a team level, this can be done by making a page with all relevant information/links on a platform like Microsoft Teams or [Confluence](#). It is also helpful to make a glossary of relevant terminology and abbreviations, and flowcharts of processes.

Recommendations for 'preboarding' - the months before a new employee starts

The process of incorporating a new employee into a company and familiarizing them with the company culture and policies already begins before the employee starts their job. This phase of onboarding - sometimes called 'preboarding' - effectively starts as soon as a new hire accepts a job.

We make the following recommendations for the preboarding phase:

- Managers/HR: provide a clear overview of the process from the moment that the employee accepts the job until they start. It is important to outline what the employee will be expected to do and arrange. Moreover, the manager should be responsive to any questions the prospective employee might have, or otherwise delegate this responsibility to the appropriate HR officer.
- Managers/HR: provide prospective employees with a contract within 4-6 weeks after the employee has accepted the position. This provides employees with security and safety regarding their position and clarity regarding the pay they can expect.
- HR: For international employees who are moving to the Netherlands from abroad, it is especially important to proactively discuss expectations and things that need to be arranged (e.g. a Dutch bank account, BSN number, housing). It is essential to provide any relevant information in English so all prospective employees can understand. It is important for the university to provide pointers regarding how to find housing, and most importantly to foster realistic expectations regarding how difficult it can be to find housing within Leiden. Moreover, it is relevant to include an explanation about the CAO, how this is different from a union, and information on how to join a union where relevant. It could for instance be helpful to create a standard information sheet or webpage that could be shared with all prospective hires.

Recommendations for the first day/week:

- Manager & HR: Schedule a meeting with the new employee and tell the new employee in advance when and where this meeting is and with whom. Use this meeting to (further) familiarize the employee with relevant procedures (e.g. how to arrange their e-mail account, how to print, what programs to install).
- Manager: Discuss mutual expectations between supervisor and employee in the first week. We found that some employees received information about what they were expected to do, yet many were not asked what they needed in order to be successful at these tasks. While we acknowledge that these conversations will differ between individuals, discussing 'what the university can do for the new hire' can greatly help feel new employees at home, seen and heard.
- Manager/Management Assistant (MA)/HR: If possible, provide the new employee with a token of welcome, such as some flowers. Small gestures can make a big difference for a new employee's sense of belonging.
- Manager/MA: Notify other colleagues that a new team/department member is starting so they can welcome them.

- Manager/MA.: Make sure the new employee is proactively informed about and invited for all relevant meetings, programs (e.g. Brightspace, Teams, Slack), and mailing lists within the first week.
- Manager/MA: Arrange an office, computer, and nameplate for the new employee. If this does not work out due to reasons that are beyond your influence, show that you care and communicate by when these issues will be resolved.
- To facilitate onboarding and provide a new employee with another point of contact to ask questions to, it can be helpful to work with a buddy system. A new employee can be assigned a buddy - a direct colleague who has worked at the department for a longer time. This buddy can also arrange a meeting with the new employee within the first week to provide any additional information and answer (e.g. practical) questions that a direct colleague might know more about than a manager. They are also available to answer questions that arise in the course of the new employee's first months.

Recommendations for onboarding during the first months of work

- Manager: Proactively schedule meetings between the new employee and their manager at a set frequency to discuss progress, expectations, and any questions the new employee may have.
- Manager/HR: Design onboarding procedures per employee group where relevant; it may for instance be relevant to design onboarding procedures specifically designed for international employees, employees who have a significant teaching load, and employees who have a supervisory role or responsibilities (see below).
- Manager/HR: Pay specific attention to the needs and questions that international employees who moved to the Netherlands may have. If international employees are expected to learn Dutch, provide them with the resources and time to do so during working hours.
- Manager/HR/IT support: For employees who (will) teach, provide them with an introduction regarding:
 - Programs used for teaching, evaluating, and submitting grades (e.g. Teams, Brightspace, etc).
 - The specific lectures/tutorials/courses they are expected to teach.
 - Information about the curricula of which these lectures/tutorials/courses are a part.
 - General knowledge regarding how lectures/tutorials are set up (e.g. break in the middle, Leids Kwartier, etc.).
 - Information about the ECTS system and how this translates into number of hours students should spend on specific tasks.
- Manager/HR: For employees who supervise other employees (e.g. PhD candidates), provide them with an introduction regarding:
 - Relevant programs and procedures to track progress and evaluate employee performance (e.g. Converis, when and how to evaluate employees, graduate school requirements).
 - The norms for supervision (e.g. frequency of meetings), co-authorships, etc.
- Manager/colleagues: Continue the buddy system mentioned in the previous section.
- Manager/HR: Make onboarding fun! See for instance this example from the Science Communication and Society department, where new employees receive the 'bingo card' pictured below. New employees can fill out this card as much as they can during the first

months of their employment, and when they hand it to their manager after a couple of months, they get a department water bottle.



Attended a Spotlight meeting	Spotted a misleading graph	Met one of our master students		Got the LU card printer to print
Kneeled down for a street weed		Emptied the dishwasher	Watered the plants	Joined a department meeting
Brought snacks to the office	Hosted a research meeting		Forgot LU card and got locked out	Got reimbursement through SAP
#Update Tuesday	Opened SAP Self Service	Talked to the Scientific Director	Talked to Hein	
	Met the institute manager	Was offered a nice snack from a colleague	Read SCS for Dummies	Heard an owl...

Welcome to Science Communication & Society!
 Try to fill your card in your first three months and hand it in to your supervisor to receive a nice gift.

Source: Science Communication and Society, Leiden University

References

- 1) <https://www.hibob.com/hr-glossary/onboarding/#:~:text=Onboarding%20is%20the%20process%20of,contributing%20member%20of%20the%20team.>
- 2) Presentation Esther van Opstal during Interfaculty Lunch (upon request)

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Onboarding document Archeology

<https://www.staff.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/archeologie/organisatie/board/beleidsstukken/onboarding-archaeology-en.pdf>