

Designing New Employee Orientation Programs: An Empirical Study

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The present study is aimed at exploring the policies and practices relating to designing new employee orientation programs in corporate companies in India. Based on the information collected from 46 organizations, the study found that organizations define the role of orientation program, link it with their business strategy and company culture. They assess orientation needs and design the program considering their organizational values and culture. The program design features predominantly team-building activities and plant/workplace visits. It incorporates multiple methods of delivery such as group orientation, buddy program, one-to-one interaction and online modules.

Introduction

Creating an effective workforce is one of the major challenges of human resource management function. Recruiting, selecting, training, offering career development opportunities, paying market-driven compensation and benefits, and retention strategies get attention to address the challenge. An often-overlooked initiative that can add value and create effective workforce educated in the organizational goals is a new employee orientation program (Westwood & Johnson, 2008). Systematically and comprehensively planned new employee orientation can set the stage for positive, long-lasting relationships between the organization and the employees (Tauber, 1981). It is an effective tool for improving employee satisfaction and contributing to organizational goals (Kanouse & Warihay, 1980). The present study examines the processes involved in designing new employee orientation programs and the issues and concerns associated with this process.

Review of Literature

New employee orientation is traditionally called induction or organizational

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socialization. Now it is also called 'on boarding' (Dessler & Varkkey, 2013). Skeats (1991) defined staff induction as any arrangement made to familiarize the new employee with the organization, safety rules, general conditions of employment, and the work of the section or department in which they are employed. Induction is seen as the first opportunity for the organization to introduce the cultural norms, values, and work ethics of the organization to the new employee (Arachchige, 2014). As pointed out by Bailey (1993), it is the period during which the organization has a chance to clearly demonstrate its values and quality standards, including those that relate to staff issues. This period is largely responsible for shaping the potential of each individual as an employee. Good induction of new entrants is important to the smooth and efficient running of any organization. Induction program need to be designed to meet the needs both the new hires and the organization.

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Ardts, Jansen and Velde (2001) defined organizational socialization as the learning process by which new hires develop attitudes and behavior that are necessary to function as full-fledged members of the organization. According to Tuttle (2002) it includes the entire process of actions taken both by the organization and the newcomer to ensure ef-

fective adjustment. Similarly, Goldstein & Ford, (2002) defined new employee orientation as a planned and systematic attempt by the organization to introduce new employees to job duties, organizational expectations, policies, and procedures. Reese (2005) found that although strong models exist, many top companies still leave new executives to find the way through early days - not doing as much as they should to pave the way for the new executive to succeed.

There are studies which established links between new employee orientation and other HRM practices. Feldman (1988) conducted a study which linked organizational socialization programs and policies with other HRM practices. Baker and Feldman (1991) presented a framework to link socialization tactics proposed by Van Maanen and Schein (1979) to HRM. They argued that organizations can achieve the corporate goals by following a three-step approach which includes 1) identifying the corporate strategy being pursued; 2) identifying what types of employee behaviors are requested; and 3) developing a socialization program that can produce the desired behavior types. Klein and Weaver (2000) found that employees attending the orientation training had significantly higher levels of affective organizational commitment than non-attendees.

Bauer, Morrison and Callister (1998) and Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2006) provided a broad literature review from a psychological perspective of induction and socialization. Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo and Tucker (2007) tested a model

of antecedents and outcomes of new hires adjustment using 70 unique samples of new hires with meta-analytic and path modeling techniques. Specifically, they proposed and tested a model in which adjustment (role clarity, self-efficacy, and social acceptance) mediated the effects of organizational socialization tactics and information seeking on socialization outcomes (job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance, intentions to remain, and turnover).

Contrary to psychological perspective, Antonacopoulou and WolfgangGüttel (2010) offered a practice perspective including a range of additional themes in relation to HRM, organizational memory and organizational routines. They paid attention to the importance of exploring the connections between staff induction, socialization, and organizational recreation by focusing in particular on learning and knowledge. They highlighted inter-and intra-practice dynamics of staff induction and socialization. According to them, a practice perspective embraces tensions as a natural part. Acevedo and Yancey (2011) argued that although western organizations are revamping their orientation programs, western culture still seems to foster a mediocre orientation process. In a comparative study, Liao, Handayani and Chien (2011) found that most Japanese companies have more structures and formal orientation training for newcomers than Indonesian companies. In the Indian context, Billimoria (1970) considered induction, a technique by which new employees are rehabilitated into the changed surroundings. Chatterjee (1978) opined that no person-

nel function is perhaps more neglected in Indian industries than induction. VenkataRatnam and Srivastava (1998) viewed that proper induction would enable the employee to get off to a good start and to develop overall effectiveness on the job and enhance potential.

Methodology

This study aimed at exploring the practices relating to designing new employee orientation programs conducted by different organizations in India. A questionnaire was created to elicit information from the sampled organizations on the prevailing policies, procedures and practices pertaining to various aspects of designing new employee orientation programs in their respective organizations. This questionnaire consisted of some open ended questions for which the respondent organization has to give descriptive information, two-way questions for which the respondent organizations have to give 'yes' or 'no' answers, and multiple-choice questions. The latter part of the questionnaire covered questions relating to organizational details. The HR/ learning and development professionals of the respective organizations who were involved in designing orientation program, were requested to fill-up the questionnaire. The information was collected from 73 organizations using random sampling method in July and August 2013. However, only 46 organizations could give complete information. These 46 organizations were considered as the sample for the purpose of the study. Nearly three-fifths of the respondent organizations belonged to the manufactur-

ing sector covering different types of industries such as automobile, cement, chemicals, consumer products, engineering, pharmaceuticals, and steel. About one-fourth of them belonged to service sector such as banking, consulting, financial services, retail and telecommunications. Less than one-fifth of them were in the business of IT and IT enabled services. Ownership-wise, an overwhelming majority (87%) belonged to the private sector and the rest of the sampled companies were equally distributed to public and joint sectors. As far as geographical orientation is concerned, about three-fifths of the organizations were foreign multinational companies. The rest of the sampled companies were, by and large, equally distributed to Indian local companies and Indian multinational companies. A majority of the companies employed more than 1000 personnel. The information collected from these sampled organizations was analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively using percentages.

Linking Orientation with Business Strategy and Company Culture

When asked 'did the orientation link with overall business strategy', two-thirds of the companies replied on the affirmative. A majority of the organizations which did not link orientation with the business strategy were privately owned manufacturing companies. Every alternative organization in this category was found to be a foreign multinational company. All organizations, except three, made attempts to design their orientation programs in such a way that they reflect the unique culture of their respective organizations.

The three companies which did not make this attempt were privately owned in three sectors of business. Again, two out of three companies under this category were foreign multinational ones.

Objectives of Orientation Program

It is interesting to note that all respondent organizations reported that they defined the role of new employee orientation. When asked to state the objectives of the new employee orientation programs, the organizations gave multiple responses which are presented in Table 1. Based on the list of objectives of new orientation programs, it may be inferred that organizations took new programs seriously with multiple objectives ranging from inducting the new employees with the company's business to giving a better first impression of the organization with a view to retain them for a longer period of time. However, making new employees aware of the business, organizational structure, processes and functions, completing joining formalities, communicating HR policies, inducting into the organizational mission, vision and culture and familiarizing with organizational ethics and values were found to be the core objectives of the orientation programs.

Organizations took new programs seriously with multiple objectives.

Identifying Orientation Needs

This is the first step in designing an orientation program. Feedback data of previous programs, exit interview data and

Table 1 Objectives of the New Employee Orientation Program

<i>Objectives of Orientation Program</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Objectives of Orientation program</i>	<i>%</i>
Make new employees aware of the business, organizational structure, processes and functions	100	To avoid early departures	20
To complete joining formalities	100	To enable to reach their full productivity level early	11
To communicate HR policies	100	To build a positive image of the company	9
To inform the organizational mission, vision and culture	100	To make new hires feel at ease at the beginning stage	9
To familiarize with organizational ethics and values	85	To make employees feel more valued, wanted, interested and excited	7
To socialize new employees	83	To facilitate their ability to contribute in the new role	4
<i>To interact with the top leadership</i>	52	To create a positive first impression	2
<i>To clarify on organizational expectations</i>	43	To bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application	2
To familiarize with useful resources within the company	24	To provide information about social life in the campus	2

Note: Data sorted in descending order. Percentages do not total 100% due to multiple responses.

focus group discussions with recent hires emerged as different methods to analyze orientation needs. As presented in Table 2, an overwhelming majority (87%) of the companies considered feedback given by employees who attended the past orientation programs while assessing the orientation needs. 33% of the organizations considered exit interview data while analyzing orientation needs. 15% of them conducted focus group discussions with recent hires to get inputs to the program design. When inquired about the personnel involved in identifying the orientation needs, about two-thirds of the organizations reported that HR/learning and development professionals and key line managers were associated with this activity. 17% of the organizations informed that their HR/learning and development professionals only were involved in this process. Another 15% of the companies asserted that they involved HR, key line managers and some of the newly hired personnel in this process.

Table 2 Methods of Assessing Orientation Needs & People Involved in the Process

<i>Methods of assessing orientation needs</i>	<i>%</i>
Feedback from earlier participants of orientation programme	87
Exit interview data	33
Focus group discussions	15
<i>People involved in the process</i>	
HR/L&D only	17
HR/L&D & Line Managers	67
HR/L&D, Line Managers & Recent Hires	15

Principles of Program Design

Orientation needs provide the basic inputs for the program design. Westwood

and Johnson, (2008) suggested that aligning the program with recruitment messages, linking the program to organizational culture, designing orientation as a process, not as an event, making the program timely and fresh in terms of up-to-date content, designing something memorable to the new employees who attend the program, creating a good first impression, involving line managers, designing inclusive program, and using a blended approach as guiding principles may be considered while designing a new employee orientation program. An attempt is made in this study to find out to what extent these principles were taken into consideration while designing the orientations programs by various organizations.

An overwhelming majority (89%) of the sampled companies reported that

the orientation program was designed taking into consideration the organizational values and culture (Table 3). They also took into consideration, messages given about their organizations while recruiting (75%). A majority of companies which did not consider recruitment messages while designing orientation were predominantly manufacturing units in the private sector with a graphical orientation of India and abroad. Nearly two-thirds of the organizations designed orientation programs in such way that some of the module were taught online. Thus they ensured a blended approach in orientation program design. A majority of the organizations which did not use blended approach to design orientation programs were Indian manufacturing companies in the private sector.

Table 3 Principles Considered while Designing New Employee Orientation Program

Principles of orientation programme design	%
Program is designed considering organizational values and culture	89
Program is designed keeping in view the messages given while recruiting	75
Program is a blend of on line and face-to-face learning	65
Program designed is inclusive	65
Program is flexible, adaptable and easy to update	65
Program is designed as a process that unfolds over an extended period of time	46
HR/learning and line managers are involved in designing program	46
Program is freshly designed	28
Program design addresses language issues	07

Every new hire from worker cadre to senior executive cadre, should get proper orientation. About 65% of the organizations reported that their orientation programs were inclusive, covering all categories of new employees with appropriate changes in the content and duration of the program. The organizations which did not design their orientation with

inclusiveness were distributed, by and large equally among all types of businesses, ownership and geographical orientations. With respect to flexibility, 65%

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of the organizations stated that they created orientation programs with flexibility, which were adaptable and easy to update. The organizations which did not design their orientation with flexibility were also distributed, by and large equally among all types of businesses and geographical orientations.

Less than half of the organizations only mentioned that they designed the programs as a ‘process’ that unfolds over an extended period of time, not as an ‘event’ that is completed in a few days. A majority of them in this category were foreign multinational companies in the manufacturing sector. It is significant to note that only 46% of the organizations reported that the programs were created with active involvement of line managers. It seemed that many of the organizations involved line managers and even employees, in some cases, while assessing the orientation needs, but not in designing the actual program. The actual program design was predominantly carried out by HR/learning and development professionals in a majority of the organizations.

Only 28% of the organizations stated that they created fresh orientation programs for every batch. It appears that a majority of them created standard formats of program design and made changes whenever required. It is significant to note that only 7% of the organizations could address language and literacy issues while designing the programs. Interestingly, an overwhelming majority in this category belonged to the manufacturing sector. This might be be-

cause of the fact that manufacturing sector employs workers with low level of educational qualifications. It is better to teach them in their native language, rather than in English which is generally used in office communication. In the others, particularly IT sector that employs, generally, graduates, language might not be a problem.

Program Design Features

A new employee orientation program is generally designed in such a way that makes the program relevant, interesting and exciting to the new employees. Westwood and Johnson (2008) suggested that tours, scavenger hunts, team-building activities, values games, and themes are the different features that may be used in designing new employee orientation programs. When inquired about different features the organizations incorporate in the programs, multiple responses were received. They are presented in Table 4. It seemed that team-building activities were widely used while designing orientation program. 85% of the organizations reported that they incorporated these activities in their programs.

Table 4 Programme Design Features

Program design features	%
Team-building activities	85
Plant/work place visits	63
Values games	43
Themes	17
Scavenger hunts	11
Lunch/dinner meetings	7

Note: Data sorted in descending order. Percentages do not total 100% due to multiple responses

These activities allow the new employees to interact highly among themselves, which may help in creating a bond among the new employees. This is followed by plant/office tours. 63% of the organizations mentioned that they incorporated this feature in their programs. Visiting to the plant/office, observing the operation process and visiting all other relevant locations allow new employees to get to know the place of work and its surroundings and help to reduce anxiety which surfaces out of newness. Another important feature is values games. They help new employees gain a deeper understanding of the organizational values (Westwood & Johnson, 2008). As mentioned earlier, one of the major objectives of the orientation programs in the organizations was familiarizing the new hires with the organizational values. But values games were not widely used while designing orientation programs to impart values. 43% of the organizations only stated that they incorporated this feature. It seemed a majority of them followed lecture and discussion method to impart the organizational values. 11% of the organizations only reported that they incorporated scavenger hunts in orientation program design. They used this feature while conducting plant tours. Another interesting feature identified in this study was organizing formal lunch/dinner meetings with senior leaders for the benefit of the new hires. But only 7% of the organizations used this feature.

Delivery Methods

A wide variety of delivery methods may be incorporated in the new employee

orientation program design so that the deliverer may implement them appropriately during the delivery phase. Westwood and Johnson (2008) classified these methods into group orientation, one-to-one orientation, buddy system, self-directed orientation, online orientation, email, videos, checklists and orientation kits. When asked to mention various delivery methods incorporated in orientation program design, the organizations gave multiple responses as they used different methods of delivery. It appeared that group orientation was a popular method of imparting orientation. All organizations reported that they designed their programs incorporating this method. It is natural that the organizations generally conduct orientation to a bulk of new hires at a time. This is the only method appropriate to provide orientation to a large number of participants at a time integrating lectures, discussions, case studies, demonstrations and simulations. This is followed by checklists. A checklist of items such as welcome letter, program schedule, information about the organizations' service rules, employee benefits and services was created and the list with all items was given to the new hires in the beginning of the orientation program. Generally it was kept in the orientation kit. The percentage of organizations that used checklists was found to be more than the companies which gave orientation kits to the new hires (Table 5). The organizations which did not give orientation kit, probably, simply handed over the items in the beginning of the orientation program. Demonstration of company videos and documentaries was another popular method of de-

Table 5 Delivery Methods of Orientation Program

Delivery methods of orientation program	%
Group orientation	100
Checklists	87
Orientation Kits	83
Videos	72
Buddy Programme	67
One-to-one interaction	65
Online orientation	65
Email	33
Self-directed orientation	13

Note: Data sorted in descending order. Percentages do not total 100% due to multiple responses

livery. About two-thirds of the organizations reported that they used buddy system as a part of delivering orientation program. This is an effective system for organizational orientation to the new hires, in which one of the senior colleagues would help the new hire. One-to-one interaction between the new hire and HR professional or a supervisor or trainer requires elaborate arrangements, especially, when a large group of new hires are orientated. However, a majority of the organizations reported that they in-built this system too in their new employee orientation programs. It is important to note that 65% of the organizations followed a blended approach for program design, a mix of face to face orientation and online sessions. These organizations kept some online modules about its' values, goals and processes. The least used method of delivery was found to be self-directed orientation. In this method, the new hire receives a checklist or a worksheet. This guides new hires from one resource person to another (Westwood & Johnson, 2008).

A few manufacturing organizations reported that they used this method for the new hires at the lateral level.

Duration

The duration of orientation programs may vary from one cadre of new hires to another. This study found that the number of days of orientation for managerial cadre varied from 0.5 days to 24 days with an average of 7.5 days. When it came to supervisory cadre, the range was the same i.e. 0.5 days to 24 days. However the average number of orientation days was reduced to 7. With regard to associate/employee cadre also the range was found to be the same (0.5 to 24 days), but the number of days of orientation was reduced to 5.5. From the number of days fixed, it can be inferred that the higher the cadre, higher is the number of orientation days. It is calculated, on an average, that the orientation days for all cadres of employees were. 6.6. It is important to note here that there were variations in conducting the program. Some organizations conducted in a block at a time and some others conducted it in intermittent phases such as a few hours every day or two days of immersion program followed by a few hours of orientation every day.

Higher the cadre, higher is the number of orientation days.

Issues and Concerns

The HR/learning and development professionals who are responsible for

designing the new employee orientation programs were asked to state the issues and concerns they faced while designing the program. The issues stated by them were:

Top leadership support was an issue of concern for a few of the orientation program designers. Inadequate budget support, frequent changes in the schedule of senior leaders' sessions in the orientation program, their unwillingness to address the new hires in the orientation program, particularly when it was scheduled in a remote location to which there was no direct flight connection, were specific challenges faced by a few of the program designers.

A few of the program designers had issues of concern with respect to support of line managers in orientation programs. It was observed, in some cases, that line managers did not give proper inputs to be incorporated in the program design. They expected the new hires to be placed on the job immediately, without spending much time on orientation. Adding to this, their expectations on orientation program also differed. They expected that their process specific orientation should be given more priority, which was not practically possible because when new hires joined in bulk, with some adjustments in the content, se-

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quence and duration, a common agenda was arrived at and the program was designed to address the new hires of different functional groups. A few of the program designers complained logistics support as another issue of their concern.

It was found that the new hires did not take into consideration the orientation program as an important process of their organizational life. They were not involved in the learning process. On the other hand, some of the new hires had extravagant expectations from the orientation program. When program designers created the orientation program for a huge number of new hires at a time, they faced the problems associated with infrastructure, logistics, program scheduling and sequencing. The speeches of senior leaders were tending to be deep and extensive. New hires from different disciplines were unable to appreciate the intricacy of issues. This led to fading away of interest and focus of the program. A few program designers alleged that the new hires did not give proper feedback which would help them to revise the program content, methodology and sequence.

This study also found a contradictory issue of concern for program designers. According to a few of them, addressing the needs of a large number of new hires in orientation program was a challenge as they had to arrive at a common agenda for all new hires. Contrary to this view, a few program designers felt that it is easier to design an orientation program for a large number of new hires as they come in batches, but it becomes difficult

to design the program for a small number of new hires before they go for their functional training.

Finally a few of the program designers admitted that they did not have enough knowledge, skills and abilities to create a good orientation program. As a result, programs were designed with high percentage of lecture mode delivery, which did not keep the new hires engaged.

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From the above, it can be inferred that program designers faced challenges from almost all stakeholders in the process. It seemed that many of the issues are operational in nature. A clear communication of the expectations and limitations of the program may resolve some of these operational problems. Program designers who felt that they require some additional knowledge, skills and abilities may acquire them as a part of their professional development. Benchmarking studies, online learning and management development programs may be sources of learning the competencies for designing programs.

Summary & Conclusions

Whatever might be the issues and concerns with respect to designing new employee orientation programs, the important trend that emerges from the

analysis is that organizations link the program with the overall business strategy. Every organization defines the role of its new employee orientation program. The programs are designed in such a way that they reflect a unique culture of their respective organizations. The objectives of this program range from making new employees aware of the organizational mission, vision, culture to creating a good first impression in the minds of new employees.

It is observed that designing the new employee orientation program is considered predominantly the responsibility of HR/ learning and development department without much involvement of line managers. While assessing the learning needs of the program, HR/learning and development department considers feedbacks given by employees who attended orientation programs in the recent past. Some of them consider exit interview information too to assess the orientation needs. While designing the program, in addition to learning needs, organizations consider their organizational values and culture and messages given about themselves while recruiting. A majority of the programs are designed with a mix of online and face-to-face elements and thus ensured a blended approach in the orientation program design.

Though the design features range from team-building activities to lunch/dinner meetings with top leaders, the most popular features are team-building activities and workplace/plant visits. When it comes to delivery methods, it is observed that the most commonly used method is

group orientation in which lectures, discussions, case studies, demonstrations and simulations are integrated. This helps the organizations to provide orientation to a large number of new hires at a time. However, it appears that many of the organizations attempt to use buddy system and one-to-one interaction also whenever possible.

Many of the organizations attempt to use buddy system and one-to-one interaction also whenever possible.

Coming to issues and concerns of HR professionals who design the programs, it seems that many of them come out of the perception that designing the program is exclusively the responsibility of HR professionals. Ideally it is a joint responsibility between line and HR departments. Line managers may be involved in each phase of orientation program design. This helps to resolve some of the issues. A clear communication of the expectations and limitations of the program to the new hires, line managers and senior management may resolve many of the issues and concerns. Finally, new employee orientation programs have evolved over a period of time and it is no more considered as a neglected management function. Efforts are made to design the programs professionally. But are the programs effective? Are they able to meet their objectives? Some studies (Schmidt & Akdere, 2007; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Zahrlly & Tosi, 1989) are conducted in other countries to address these questions. As far as India is con-

cerned, this may be the area of future research.

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