

Integrating into the organization:

Hitting the ground running, or jumping over potholes

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The chairman of the board said to me, "We want the new fundraiser to raise \$200,000, obtain two corporate sponsorships and recruit volunteers for our advisory committee all in the first six months. We want this new person to hit the ground running."

There are now greater demands on fundraisers to translate the needs of the charity into cases for support, write compelling winning proposals, raise money faster, and integrate and build relationships with donors and volunteers more quickly. And even though organizations may have gone through a period of flattening in the '90s, the infrastructures of many remain large and complex, incorporating national, regional and local offices with layers of visible and invisible bureaucracy. Even smaller organizations have structures – boards, advisory councils, clients and substructures, volunteers, employees – that have to be deciphered.

In spite of this multi-layered, high-pressure complexity, after reviewing results of two separate surveys, I question how well organizations are working to help new employees integrate fully into the work, life and culture of their organizations so they can genuinely hit the ground running. In many cases, I fear, new employees are spending too much time dodging large muddy potholes.

In one recent survey carried out by the Canadian Policy Research Network on behalf of the Association of Fundraising Professionals, the potholes that fundraisers identified and the reasons why they would change jobs, were:

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| Frustrated by work environment | 46% |
| Lack of recognition | 36% |
| Unsupportive environment | 29% |

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| Unrealistic expectations | 28% |
| Personality Conflicts | 18% |
| Values not same as organization's | 14% |

What can we do to change these staggering statistics?

Clearly these are employees that wanted to do a good job; they wanted to 'hit the ground running'. The cost to organizations to recruit, hire and ramp-up employees is merely immense; the cost of failure to fully integrate them, however, is staggering, both in lost human capacity and revenue.

There's lots of talk about competencies for leadership, recruitment and, more recently, retention, but a missing link has been integration. "Well," you say, "I got two days of orientation when I started, so what's the difference?" The difference is that orientation is the initial stage where employees are introduced to colleagues, tour the facilities, sign up for employee benefits, find out where the lunchroom and washrooms are, and begin to learn who really has the power. Integration is the deeper, longer-term process of understanding their role, building their relationships and understanding and adapting to the culture to help people succeed in their position. Successful integration includes achieving credibility, alignment, and acceptance, and, of course, making a contribution.

RHR International, a firm of management psychologists who coach and consult to senior executives worldwide, recently conducted a study to understand why, after executives were hired, they continued to struggle in organizations. What steps, they asked, could be taken to address the startling figure of 70% of newly hired senior executives who leave their position within the first two years?

Interestingly, their results parallel our experience in the voluntary sector as described in the AFP/CPRN survey.

What RHR found in their study of 100 companies from Canada, the USA and United Kingdom was that integration takes longer than people think, and much longer than organizations want it to. Organizations want integration to happen within six months, but nine to 18 months is usually more realistic. Early on, people often feel they're integrating successfully, only to find after hitting one of those significant organizational potholes that they really didn't understand how things worked at all.

How you can *Hit the Ground Running*

As a new employee, you have an opportunity to take charge of the process, and there are several steps you can take to get started right away. In our experience, there are four components to an employee's success in hitting the ground running and becoming fully integrated into the culture:

Credibility: bringing knowledge and skills relevant to the organization

Alignment: between the organization's goals and the individual's plans and actions

Acceptance: people within the organization treat the new hire as one of their own, encouraging him or her to identify with the organization

Contribution: integration only truly happens when results are achieved

The RHR survey identified three factors that will contribute significantly to successful integration, and help avoid the potholes.

Role, relationship and culture

The first category identifies your role as an individual. It is one thing to go through interviews but quite another to move into the organization. Understanding the boss's expectations is the key. Sit down with your supervisor and agree on key success factors. Don't assume that because your methods and manner of working were successful in the past you are guaranteed success in this organization. To integrate successfully, set yourself the following objectives:

1. Achieve clarity around your role, mandate, and expectations.
2. Resolve conflicting expectations.

3. Understand the organizational strategy and direction.
4. Translate your knowledge and experience into results with new people in a new context.
5. Find an early win that the organization values.
6. Assume effective leadership of, or participate in, the team.

The second category focuses on interacting and building relationships with others. This is key in voluntary organizations, and one of the biggest challenges. When starting with a new organization, we have all found and gravitated to people who will help us navigate political and social minefields. It is critically important for successful integration to find someone in the organization to help you interpret what you are seeing and hearing. To speed your integration and build relationships, the following are key:

1. Establish trusting relationships with key stakeholders.
2. Build a network inside and outside the organization.
3. Access and gain the support of people who can help with the transition.
4. Understand the extent to which your style is, and needs to be, consistent with that of the organization.
5. Get feedback from trusted sources.

The third category looks at the individual as part of a larger structure. It's about understanding the corporate culture, and learning to operate effectively within it. Potentially, this is the area in which people may have the most difficulty. Organizations, when they hire, often state they want fresh ideas, new blood, doing things a different way. But as we know, as soon as change begins, so does resistance. You need to know how things are done, what the norms and political environment are, and how decisions are made: in other words, how things actually operate. That's the key challenge: to learn not only the formal organization but also the informal structures. To successfully navigate the challenges of culture:

1. Accurately assess your culture fit by understanding where your style is consistent with the culture and where you need to adapt.
2. Understand the "unwritten rules" – the norms and values of the organization – preferably by getting involved in significant projects as soon as possible.
3. Understand the decision-making and political environment.
4. Figure out how to get things done in a complex environment.
5. Step back and observe to gain perspective before making radical changes.

How organizations can help employees *Hit the Ground Running*

Like fledglings thrown from the nest, most of us look after our own integration, because organizations just don't do it well. Many organizations have good orientation sessions, but then fail to carry the ball on to true integration, and the most critical aspect generally missing is ensuring that the new employee has the opportunity to interact with the right people in the organization.

Although organizations invest huge amounts of time, effort and financial resources on recruitment, few give much thought and consideration to integrating the employee. A few simple steps, however, will pave the way to a more successful relationship between the organization and a new employee:

Foster awareness

- Explain the culture; is the organization highly bureaucratic, open door policy, or casual?
- During the recruitment stage, be open and honest about the position, its expectations, time frames and organizational issues the new person may have to face. Encourage candidates to conduct their own due diligence about the organization and speak to a variety of people before making a decision to join.
- Schedule meetings with key stakeholders. Think about having a meeting or lunch ahead of the start date so that the new employee can meet the team on a more informal basis.

Plan integration

- Plan the integration rather than leaving it to chance.
- Build structure around the integration process. Know what challenges the new employee will face and what will be needed to overcome them.
- Clarify the mandate and timeframes.
- Provide a coach or mentor to help the employee gain insight into the organization.
- Assimilate the new employee into the organizational team.

- Help the new person find an early success.

Provide feedback

The RHR survey showed that organizations that created integration programs were able to dramatically improve retention rates, reduce recruitment costs, increase productivity and decrease time to peak performance.

To really help the new hire 'hit the ground running,' the organization has to play its part by working with the employee to remove the potholes. An integration program will do just that.

*Deborah Legrove, CFRE, is President of
crawfordconnect
(www.crawfordconnect.com),
an executive search firm connecting
nonprofits with the fundraisers and
executives they need to succeed.
You can reach Deborah at 416 977 2913 or
deborah@crawfordconnect.com*



Recruiting excellence for the nonprofit sector

Toronto: 416-977-2913

20 Toronto St., Suite 420
Toronto, ON M5C 2B8