New Hire Onboarding: A Team Effort with Results You Can Replicate!

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Challenge
Onboarding and training of new employees can be inconsistent and inefficient without a strategic plan in place to guide the process. This can lead to redundancy of effort, miscommunication, incorrect training, gaps in training, and a missed opportunity to onboard a new hire in a meaningful and dynamic way.

Solution
The Institutional Review Board (IRB) Operations unit within the Harvard Longwood Medical Area (HLMA) Office of Human Research Administration (OHRA) created the New Hire Process and Onboarding Manual to mitigate this challenge when onboarding new staff. This manual describes best practices for standardizing the process of hiring, onboarding, and training new employees. It has successfully guided the process for two new incumbents, allowing for further manual refinement.

Manual Format
The manual describes:
- new employee candidate search (job posting, application reviews, interview process)
- general onboarding plans (first day, first week, etc.)
- job-specific training modules with checklists and tools
- general departure plans (employee departure process, transition planning)

The manual does not duplicate formal Human Resources procedures; it is office-specific.

Key Components Training

Building on a Solid Foundation
The IRB Review Specialist role is not an entry-level position. It is one that requires robust foundational knowledge of federal regulations and the Belmont Report. These pre-requisites are defined within the job description; OHRA requires that all staff have obtained the CIP credential, or acquire it within one year of hire.

Structural Integrity
New employee training content is structured in such a way that the institution-specific information is front-loaded in weeks 1-2. Hands-on application review then begins in weeks 2-3, after the new employee has been instructed on the fundamentals.

Providing the new hire with a base layer of institution-specific policies and procedures at the outset facilitates hands-on application training. The outcome of this strategy has been quite successful based on a strong 90-day orientation period, peer review, and customer feedback. The new hire can focus their initial learning on institution-specific requirements and then apply them in tandem with their existing regulatory knowledge when they begin to conduct reviews.

Collaborative Delivery
New employee training is delivered collaboratively by all team members in an “all-hands” manner, rather than solely by the new hires’ manager.

The all-hands nature of the onboarding addresses several common challenges when training new team members.
- First, it connects the new employee to the entire team immediately, which facilitates relationship building, provides a wider network of resources, and promotes the collaborative culture of the team.
- Second, it exposes the new hire to individual differences in review style and communication methods, and the various ways the IRB team executes OHRA’s mission and interprets the federal regulations.
- Finally, it reduces the need for the new hires’ manager to provide 100% of their training, which keeps day-to-day IRB operations running normally.

Onboarding Checklists
Checklists accompany the manual, which outline all training content areas, the schedule of delivery, and who administers them.

Training Workflow

Conclusion
For new hires, learning the culture and environment at a new job is always an adjustment. For managers, acclimating new employees to the institution’s expectations and the responsibilities of their role can be onerous if the information is not presented in a systematic way. It is even more complex in the IRB world, as we navigate and interpret the regulations governing human subjects research. Our onboarding and training paradigm has transformed this once-arduous process into a success. The outcome of this model is a sense of mutual responsibility; when onboarding and training is shared among the team, each staff member has a role and investment in their new team member’s success. Our new hires build skills with confidence, gain a deep understanding of OHRA’s policies and procedures, and thrive in a team-work focused environment. Strong regulatory review, institutional compliance, and excellent customer service are the main results.

Overall, having a robust manual and a multi-dimensional training strategy has ensured the smooth, efficient, and consistent onboarding of new hires. The main benefit has been a clearly defined set of responsibilities and outcomes for both the new hire and the entire team.

Further Information: https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/ohra/2018-irb-onboarding-poster/