

Remote onboarding: What every employer should know

 By [Johan Botes](#)

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Flexibility is currency in the new working world. Organisations and employees alike are eager to capitalise on the opportunities offered by technological advancements and shifts in working culture. We are witnessing a significant evolution in the types of work people do, and where and how work gets done, as work moves beyond traditional paradigms. The ability to onboard staff remotely is of immense benefit to organisations grappling with standardising practices across jurisdictions.



Image source: Matilda Wormwood from [Pexels](#)

Remote working requires a massive overhaul of employment contracts, policies, and workplace rules and practices. It requires us to think differently about how we welcome new joiners into the business. The usual first-day, in-person jitters might have been replaced by remote onboarding jitters, but it also brings with it a feeling of reduced employee connection within the new organisation. The onboarding process has now become the first real test of an employer's readiness to provide cutting edge, modern digital solutions in our increasingly complex and connected world.

The value of a quality onboarding experience can hardly be overstated. In respect of retaining new joiners, a study by O.C Tanner concluded that 69% of employees are more likely to stay with a company for three years if they experienced great onboarding. Another survey by the Wynhurst Group found that where organisations conducted a structured onboarding programme, new employees were 58% more likely to be with the organisation after three years.

Getting it right

So how does an employer ensure they get onboarding right? It's about more than replacing a welcome handshake with an online wave on Zoom. Remote onboarding is the digitalisation of the offer management, welcome and induction of new employees and contractors. Employers should therefore be clear and deliberate in what they want to achieve with onboarding, then adapt their standard processes to ensure the company's remote onboarding process is capable of hitting these markers.

Managing this process is no less daunting when doing it remotely – if anything, it is more difficult to create the same experience for the new joiner. New employees don't have the relative intimacy and excitement of seeing the new premises, and shaking hands with legendary leaders and industry stalwarts. As a result, employers have to find additional mechanisms and employ new tricks to generate the comfort of the workplace for the latest member of the team. Employers want new employees to feel part of the team, not like a spectator who got a lucky ticket to watch the game whilst the team is playing to win. Employers will want this person to immediately start training with the team, and absorb the atmosphere and winning culture of the organisation.



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Mistakes were made during lockdown, where many employers and new joiners found that time whooshed past as both parties tried to find their feet in the new normal. Before they knew it, months had passed by and the rest of the team were looking at the new joiners and wondering why they were not making target, or contributing to the success of the collective. The new joiners had been thinking that it was a wonderful place to work because everyone was left to their own devices and nobody micro-managed them. Meanwhile, the rest of the team were chugging along and doing what they have been doing for years, whilst the new joiners were oblivious to how they are falling behind, because they could not observe how everyone worked as they would have been able to do in the physical workplace. They had not yet picked up on the subtle clues left by team members who were in need of assistance, they didn't volunteer for work because they didn't want to upset this new order with which they were not familiar, and they ended up isolating themselves from the team. Promising new talent flounders under these conditions because the onboarding system does not provide the level of integration and support that we all took for granted during in-person onboarding, before lockdown.

Importance of structure, interaction, creativity

Employers must therefore introduce more structured knowledge to reduce first-day nerves and allow employees to feel welcome and confident from the start. The remote onboarding process should touch at least the same points as the in-person process, but also makes additional accommodation for extra sessions to build rapport, interact socially and allow the new person to pick up important aspects of team and social culture. It is up to the employer to deliberately create online social interaction where the new person can discover that Bob is the company's karaoke champion and that Cathy has run 10 Comrades marathons. This how we can break down some of the additional barriers that remote onboarding can create.

Further, companies are now increasingly using creative onboarding processes like video-based and virtual reality onboarding. AI chatbots, for example, are digitally transforming the recruiting and hiring processes. Chatbots can quickly answer frequently asked questions, notify new hires of upcoming events, sessions and meetings, and send automated reminders for important deadlines. This saves time, money, and could even enhance the overall employee experience. During remote work, unstructured knowledge that needs to be transferred can often get lost in translation. Chatbots are a great tool to easily avoid miscommunication. Then there is virtual reality training, with many large multinationals having

already taken the exciting leap to VR onboarding and extended reality services for things like holiday parties. It's a fun way for new employees to immerse themselves in the company's digital workplace and get to know their new team on a different level.



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Legal pitfalls

There are legal challenges to going fully remote, however. A recent Baker McKenzie report concluded that companies should prepare for a predicted increase in pay equity and discrimination claims, as more employees return to the office for in-person interaction and those logging on remotely find themselves at a disadvantage in terms of pay, promotion, and opportunities.

This echoes the 2013 Stanford University study that found that remote workers, whilst often more productive than their office-based counterparts, are 50% less likely to be promoted in a corresponding period. It is therefore important for employers to ensure that those going through the onboarding process have knowledge of the opportunities available to them. Employers should make sure that they pay equal attention to those employees who are out of sight. This is true when considering promotions, but also when exercising managerial discretion in general in decisions, such as salary increases and bonuses granted, training and secondment opportunities, and who gets leave in December.

It is only a matter of time before remote working employees challenge the fairness of their employer's labour practices. The unfair labour practice relating to the provision of a benefit in terms of s186(2)(b) of the Labour Relations Act is wide enough to encompass all of these claims and many more. Similarly, different treatment meted out to remote workers may qualify as unfair discrimination on an arbitrary ground in terms of ss6(1) and 6(4) of the Employment Equity Act. Employers should consider their employment practices to ensure they don't, directly or indirectly, discriminate unfairly against remote workers, and that they exercise discretion fairly when considering benefits applicable to them and office-bound workers.

The net result is that the effort you put into your remote onboarding programme has a direct bearing on the retention of the candidate and their successful integration into the business. It is worth the effort!

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