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Employee Experience

Onboarding buddy programme: pros, cons and how it compares with a mentor

A buddy answers the daily questions, a mentor guides a career, and the manager stays responsible. When a buddy programme pays off, when it fails, and how to set one up.



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The short answer: an onboarding buddy is worth it when new hires must learn how things really work here, and when the buddy is given time to help. It fails when it is a name on a checklist. A buddy answers the daily questions, a mentor guides a career, and the manager stays responsible. Start with the buddy.

Buddy, mentor or manager only: how do they compare?

Option	Pros	Cons	Best when
Onboarding buddy: a peer, same team or shift, for the first 90 days	Safe to ask "small" questions. Explains the unwritten rules. Gives the new hire a first friend. Costs little	Takes real hours from the buddy. Quality varies. A bad buddy teaches bad habits	Most hires, most of the time, and above all frontline and shift roles
Mentor: a senior colleague outside the reporting line, for six to twelve months	A wider view of the organisation. Career guidance. A sponsor in rooms the new hire is not in	Too senior and too busy for daily questions. Takes months to pay off. Hard to scale	Graduates, future leaders, and people changing field
Manager only: no extra role	Simple. One clear line of responsibility	The manager is the person new hires least want to look foolish in front of. Managers are busy in the weeks that matter most	Very small teams, or senior hires who need access more than help

A buddy and a mentor do different jobs, and neither replaces the manager.

What does a buddy do that a manager cannot?

A new hire has three kinds of question. Where is it? How do we do it here? And is it normal that I feel lost? The manager rarely hears the third.

A meta-analysis of 70 samples found that how well newcomers adjust, measured as role clarity, confidence in doing the job and feeling accepted by colleagues, carried the effects of how organisations bring people in, and of how much newcomers ask, through to job satisfaction, commitment, performance, intention to stay and turnover (Bauer and colleagues, 2007). A buddy works directly on two of the three: knowing what is expected, and being accepted.

What does the research say about buddy programmes?

Not much that is rigorous, and we would rather say so. We found no controlled trial of onboarding buddies.

- **The best-known account comes from a company, not a journal.** Authors from Microsoft's HR insights team reported that, in a pilot, buddies helped in three ways: they gave organisational context, boosted productivity and improved new employees' satisfaction. They add what buddies need: workloads that leave room for the role, clear timing, and a clear line between buddy and manager (Klinghoffer, Young and Haspas, 2019).
- **The mechanism is well supported.** The Bauer meta-analysis above shows that clarity and social acceptance matter for whether people perform and stay. That supports what a buddy is meant to deliver. It does not prove that a given scheme delivers it.
- **The starting point is low.** Gallup has reported that only 12% of employees strongly agree that their organisation does a great job of onboarding new employees.

So treat a buddy programme as a low-cost practice with a good rationale, and measure it yourself.

When should you choose a buddy programme?

- New hires need local knowledge that no manual holds: who to call, which system really matters, how the shift handover works.
- You hire in groups, or often enough that the same questions come up every month.
- Early leavers say they never felt part of the team.
- Managers have many direct reports, or work a different shift.

When is a mentor the better choice?

- The hire is a graduate or a future leader, and the question is "where can I go here?" more than "how do I do this?"
- The person is senior or is changing field, and needs a network more than directions.
- You can commit senior people for a year.

You can use both: a buddy for the first 90 days, and a mentor from month three.

How do you set up a buddy programme that works?

1. **Choose buddies who want the role.** Ask for volunteers who are good at the job and known for patience. Never the manager, and not the newest person on the team.
2. **Match on the same team and the same shift,** so help is there when the question comes up.
3. **Give a one-page brief:** what a buddy does, what a buddy does not do (appraise, or do the new hire's work), and who to tell when something is wrong.
4. **Free the time.** Take something off the buddy's plate in the first two weeks. This is the step companies skip.
5. **Set a rhythm:** lunch on day one, ten minutes a day in week one, a weekly check to day 30, every two weeks to day 90.
6. **Close it properly** at day 90, and thank the buddy in front of the team.

Our guide to an onboarding program for new employees puts the buddy inside the full first year and has the 90-day checklist.

What does it cost in effort?

There is almost no budget line, and that hides the real cost.

- **The buddy's hours,** concentrated in the first two weeks.
- **The manager's attention:** choosing and briefing the buddy, and still holding their own weekly conversation with the new hire.
- **HR's part:** a brief, and a check at day 30 and day 90.
- **Recognition.** If buddying never counts in a review or a thank-you, your best people stop volunteering.

How do you know it works?

Compare hires with a buddy against earlier hires on three things: a short check at day 30 and day 90 (do I know what is expected, do I have someone to ask, do I feel part of the team), how many leave in the first six months, and how many meetings actually took place. If the meetings did not happen, you tested a list of names.

Our view

We design onboarding programmes for clients, so weigh this page with that in mind.

In our work the buddy is one part of a designed first 90 days: messages before day one, a welcome kit, an induction venue and film, onboarding games and a digital journey. Our pre-boarding and onboarding page describes it, and etisalat Egypt's onboarding space is a published example.

You need none of that to start a buddy programme: a brief, a rhythm and protected time are enough. The free onboarding readiness check scores your onboarding from before day one to the end of the first year and shows where new hires are left to chance, so you fix that first.

Frequently asked questions

What is an onboarding buddy?

A colleague at a similar level, usually on the same team, who helps a new hire through the first weeks: where things are, how things are done, and who to ask. A buddy does not assess the new hire.

What is the difference between a buddy and a mentor?

A buddy is a peer for the first 90 days and handles daily, practical questions. A mentor is more senior, sits outside the reporting line, and guides development over months.

How long should a buddy programme last?

Ninety days suits most roles, with most of the contact in the first month. End it on a set date, so the buddy is released and the new hire knows the support has changed, not vanished.

Do remote and shift workers need a buddy?

They need one most. Remote hires cannot overhear how things are done, and night shifts often start with no manager present. Put the buddy on the same shift, and for remote hires fix short calls in the calendar from day one.

Sources

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