

These Days: Lessons Learned from a First Attempt at Virtual Onboarding

By Christopher McKenna and Angela Sordi

“Online fatigue is real.”

We are trying to understand these days. Not the pandemic — but the feeling we had after our first virtual onboarding experience. Was our first attempt a success? Were the students feeling it, or were we wasting our time?

A student manager facing a first attempt at virtual onboarding likely experienced a few challenges before kickoff. Apart from whether their program would even go ahead, student managers also had to grapple with whether their approach to training and integration would be the same, different or something in between. Unsurprisingly, the approach taken largely reflected whether the student manager saw virtual onboarding as temporary or here to stay.

We will not try resolving this new, and undoubtedly philosophical, issue in this article. Instead, accepting that virtual onboarding will be part of many student manager’s collective “new normal” for the near future, we wanted to share our post-mortem of lessons learned — things that worked and things that did not — in our first attempt at the virtual onboarding process. As it turns out, our respective approaches, which blended both traditional and new onboarding methods, still need some work. However, we are encouraged by what we saw and learned, and look forward to the next one.

Many thanks to Wallows, who’s perfect pandemic music (<https://wallows.lnk.to/NothingHappens>) inspired the title and framework for this article.

Things That Worked

Only Friend. The role of the student manager took on new significance for onboarding students — friend. Students, at home, miles from the office, sought someone familiar to anchor each of them in the online working world. Connecting and communicating with students early and often provided much-needed clarity and security. It helped forge a deeper relationship between student and firm. Students particularly appreciated independent check-ins, both before and on arrival, and follow up virtual discussions about onboarding, workflow, and different challenges the student was facing. Despite being at home, students knew they were not alone and very much felt like someone was always in their corner.

Sidelines. Virtual onboarding seemed to work better when online learning objectives were clear and existing content was developed and/or evaluated against those objectives. It also allowed antiquated training to meet its welcomed demise. Early and greater integration of key stakeholders — IT, knowledge management, library, support staff, presenters — only helped define the universe of what was possible from a remote learning perspective and improved planning. Meticulous planning allowed for a seamless transition and tangible takeaways for each student post-training, often leading to “flip the classroom” discussions where students shared key learnings with each other.

What You Like. Students arrived with little expectation of what the summer would offer. This, in many ways, played to each firm’s benefit, as students were in-

clined to sit and absorb their new reality (not judging it against years past). Asking students to prepare their goals for the summer furthered training retention and empowered students to set their own expectations. Virtual coaching around these goals allowed for greater integration, reflection and, if necessary, adjustment to ensure students could meet their own expectations. In the process, students went from “I want to close deals” to “I want to learn more about the corporate closing process.”

It Is Only Right. The role of the mentor also took on new significance for onboarding students. Students expected a lot from their mentors: friend, provider of work, and guide to all things practice. The best mentors lived up to their students’ expectations by checking on them regularly (weekly seemed to be preferred), giving them good work, and by actively championing them with others, leading to even greater work, exposure, integration, and trust. If the student enjoyed their summer, their mentor played a big role.

Things That...Did Not Work

Are You Bored Yet? While check-in discussions are important, without structure or purpose, they were ripe for disaster. Questions like, “Are you okay? Do you like it? Do you have work?” all seemed to carry an almost “are you bored yet?” undertone that superimposed the concerns of the student manager onto the student, skewing expectations and creating concern for the student where none existed before (should I be bored?). Oops.

Remember When. Referring to something that was not a “thing” this summer was a wasted exercise. How to use office services or interact with an officemate or how to conduct an in-person client meeting — while useful for future years — should not have found a home in the program. Referencing past social or firm events, particularly as an example of culture, also failed. Fo-

cusing on the present, and how the firm was excited to adapt to new experiences and technologies, like virtual officemates and DocuSign, to enhance their summer, was the way to go.

Ice Cold Pool. Many articles highlighted online social events, like scavenger hunts and cooking classes, as ways to create interaction between students during a virtual summer. However, while appreciated, the students felt these bells and whistles were no replacement for a simple Zoom chat or an online social hour with peers. Unstructured virtual hangouts, not measuring cups or collecting acorns, allowed students to warm to each other and understand a bit more about firm culture in the process. With the popularity of chill, backyard BBQs skyrocketing among 20 somethings, we really should have known better on this one.

I Am Full. Online fatigue is real. There is only so much content a person can retain while watching a computer screen for eight hours a day. While all onboarding content may be “necessary,” the timing and delivery of that content is often within the control of the student manager. Developing meaningful breaks throughout an orientation schedule — that allowed students to get away from their screens to take a walk, eat, or connect with family and friends before going online again — was key to students returning refreshed for further content. It was also key to retention, as students had time to process what they had learned before learning more.

Do Not Wait. Online platforms obscure visibility for student manager and student. As a result, the student manager has less appreciation for how a student is managing work and their general experiences to date. Equally, the student has less appreciation for how hard they are working (often relative to others) and for how to address work issues from a distance, which can lead to self-destructive thinking about their fit or performance at the firm. The struggle to integrate is not something the student manager or student can appropriately wait on and hope to manage during a formal

review at the end of the summer. Regular meetings between student manager and student would have ensured greater accountability as things progressed.

Regardless of approach, as we enter into the next round of virtual onboarding, we hope this cathartic exercise encourages firms, student managers and students to be vocal and to share what is and what is not working in their onboarding programs these days. It will take some time, and a few adjustments to get it right, but your future program and students will thank you for your honesty.

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