



## HOW TRANSITION PROGRAMS ACCELERATE EXECUTIVE ONBOARDING AND INTEGRATION

THE REAL REASONS WHY NEWLY-HIRED EXECUTIVES FAIL OR  
UNDERPERFORM HAVE TO DO WITH POLITICAL AND CULTURAL  
INTEGRATION CHALLENGES

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In “[Onboarding Isn’t Enough](#),” a 2017 *Harvard Business Review* article co-authored with Mark Byford and Lena Triantogiannis from #EgonZehnder, we showed that many companies think they are doing a good job of onboarding newly-hired executives when they actually aren’t.

This is the case because (1) there has been no good definition of what “excellent onboarding” actually involves, (2) the real reasons why newly-hired executives fail or underperform have to do with political and cultural integration challenges for which few company onboarding systems provide support, and (3) transition acceleration support is best provided by advisors who have specialized skills, not by the leadership development coaches used by many organizations.

### **Why new hires fail or underperform**

In 2013, Egon Zehnder surveyed more than 500 experienced executives, exploring why new hires struggled when onboarding. The results showed that the biggest reasons were about politics and culture, not competence or experience. Executives failed when they didn’t understand “the real rules of the game” and/or failed to build critical relationships, especially with peers.

The importance of peers was validated in a subsequent survey of onboarding executives conducted jointly by Genesis Advisers and Egon Zehnder in 2016. The newly-hired leaders were asked to assess the degree to which they received support from key stakeholders, including their hiring managers, teams, and HR business partners. The results showed that they received the least support from peers. The implication is that while it is failure to build effective working relationships with peers is one of the biggest reasons for onboarding failure, newly-hired leaders can’t expect their peers to spontaneously provide them with support.

Cultural adaptation and political connection are, of course, very difficult challenges for newly-hired executives to meet on their own. Figuring out how to operate in a new cultural/political system without support is like sailing through dangerous waters in a fog without radar, sonar, or GPS. The implication is that company onboarding systems that don’t explicitly support new hires in *integrating*, by adapting to the culture and building critical relationships, are setting them up to fail.

### **What (many) company onboarding systems don’t do**

Given that it’s so important to help new hires integrate effectively, it’s surprising that few companies, even large global ones, do a good job. A series of surveys of senior HR executives conducted jointly in 2015/16 by Genesis Advisers and Egon Zehnder showed that most companies did a good job of getting new hires into the company but few helped leaders integrate into the culture and build critical relationships.

The direct and opportunity costs of failure or underperformance by outside hires are very high, and studies have shown executive onboarding failure rates of 25 to 40%. This is a surprising finding. One explanation is that senior management (including HR leadership) don’t understand that what they are doing for “onboarding” today isn’t sufficient. Other explanations including “sink-or-swim” cultures that discourage providing support for leaders in transition—I call this leadership development through Darwinian evolution—and a lack of clarity for who is responsible for integrating new leaders. On the latter issue, recruiting and talent acquisition groups are often responsible for getting leaders on board but not for getting them integrated and fully up to speed.

To assess the effectiveness of onboarding systems, we created an online [Organizational Onboarding Effectiveness Assessment](#), which is available free of charge. Use it to see how your company rates relative to the global sample of companies we studied.

### **The power of providing (the right type of) support**

We undertook this research, in part, to test a hypothesis that skilled transition acceleration advisors were a powerful way to help newly-hired executives get up to speed faster and better. We surveyed a sample of executives who received this type of support, as well as their hiring managers, HR business partners, and the advisors providing the integration advice.

This was not a controlled experiment with some groups receiving integration support and others not. Also, there are significant issues in getting good measures of impact. So, the research was exploratory and the findings indicative and provisional. At the same time, the reported impacts were so high that the question seems to be not whether it helps to provide this type of support, but how much it does so and in what ways.

Concerning impact, we asked each group—the executives, their hiring managers, HR business partners, and the advisors—to make estimates of the percentage reduction in time for the executives to become fully effective. The results suggest that support for integration can halve the time it takes for newly-hired leaders to get up to speed. Given the speed at which business is moving, success in realizing a 50% reduction for all new hires would create very substantial benefit to the organization. Interestingly, the advisors underestimated their impact, likely because they would rather err on the side of conservatism in self-assessment.

Then, there is the question of what transition acceleration advisors do that actually helps. We asked the same four groups to assess the impact of the various activities and interventions undertaken by the advisors.

The results show that much of what the advisors did appears to have had a significant positive impact, validating the design of the support process and the quality of the advisors. Both the executives and their hiring managers agreed that the interventions that had the biggest impact had to do with (1) helping the newly-hired leaders understand the challenges they faced and set the agenda for their first 90 days, (2) getting feedback from and providing insight into key stakeholders, and (3) helping the leaders think through key decisions. Here, too, we see that the hiring managers assessed the impact of the integration advisor as being significantly more than did the leaders themselves, perhaps the result of a natural inclination on the part of the leaders to not give too much credit for their success to others.

### **How transition acceleration advice differs from development coaching**

Beyond having a well-designed process for providing transition acceleration advice, the other biggest driver of effectiveness is the quality and experience of the advisors themselves. Here, it is important to understand that transition acceleration advice is very different from leadership development coaching and that great transition advisors have different skill sets than great development coaches.

The most important factors concern the degree to which transition acceleration advice is provided through a more structured, front-end-loaded, and time-bound process, that the output is a very detailed first 90 days plan, and that the advisors must be able to work through significant business issues and trade-offs with the executives, and so need a high level of business acumen.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Our research provided rich insight into the limitations of many companies' existing executive onboarding systems.
- If your company has a weak system for onboarding and integration, evaluate potential ways to strengthen it, looking specifically at the benefits of providing newly-hired executives with transition acceleration advisors—either by training HR business partners/internal consultants or by engaging with external providers.
- As you do this, recognize that it's essential to have a well-designed integration advisory process and advisors who have both the business acumen and the behavioral insight required to provide superior support.

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