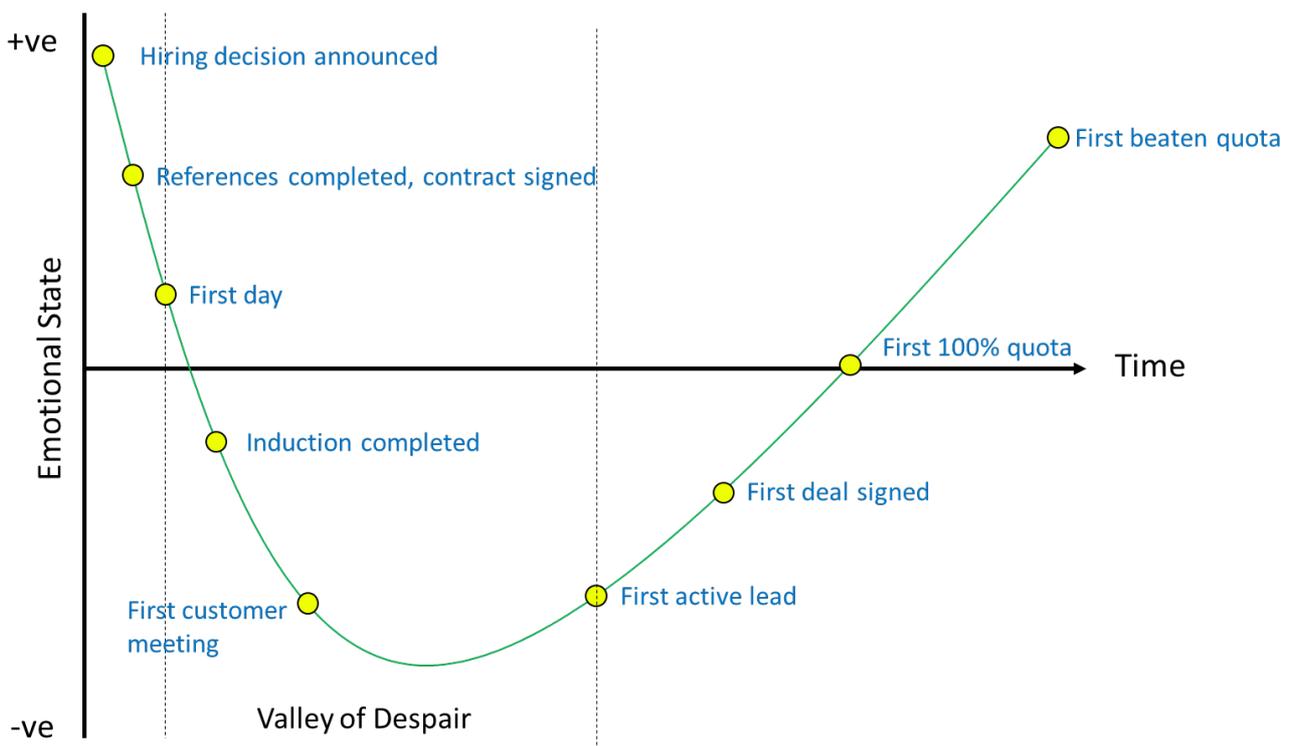


Conquering the J-Curve: Onboarding Salespeople Successfully

THE CHALLENGE

Like all sales leaders, we're very conscious of the need to get new people on-boarded effectively, a.k.a. "up the ramp". This is pretty much a constant concern for any sales organization either growing or in transformation – there is always churn, and running under strength leads to a whole host of undesirable outcomes.

One-way to visualize this is as a "J-Curve", tracking the emotional state of the recruit as they pass through the various stages of the recruitment and on-boarding process. Typically, it looks like this:



The challenges are pretty well known:

- ✓ Attrition before the first day (good people often get a counter-offer from their existing employer, among other things)
- ✓ Attrition after hire. Lots of stats on this but generally something like 15% quit within 3 months and 30% within 6 months. But they're 60% more likely to be there in 3 years if they've completed a structured onboarding process.

- ✓ Time to hit quota. This can become a rate-limiting factor for business growth given the cash flow implications.

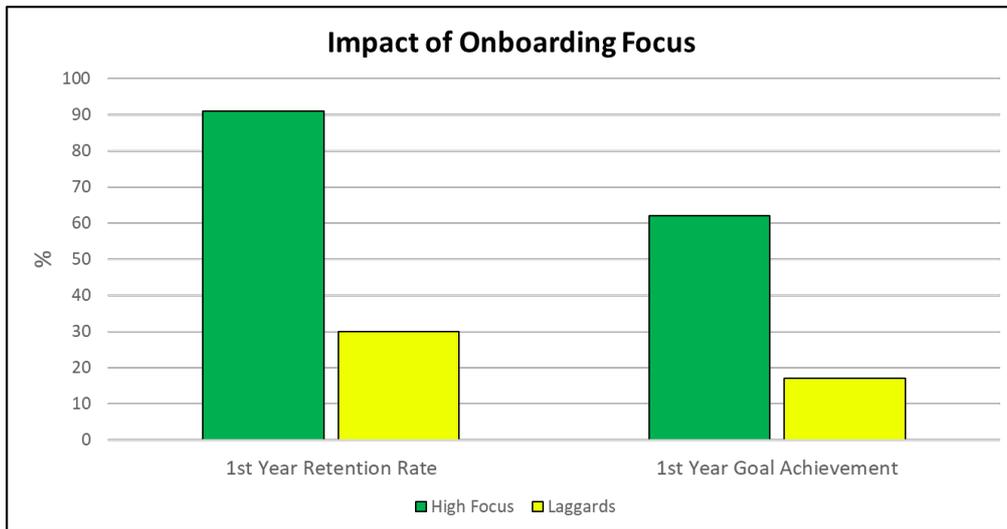
So obviously the goal is to make the “Valley of Despair” both narrower and shallower.

THE DEFAULT STATE

We all know what bad looks like:

- ✓ Protracted and obscure pre-hire discussions, complete with long periods of no feedback that make the (finally) selected candidate feel like they were second/third best.
- ✓ A final negotiation where the hiring company backs away from the originally advertised compensation package while promising that the new hire “can make it up” by over-achieving against quota.
- ✓ Complex bureaucracy that puts the onus on the hired candidate to provide acres of documentation to third party agencies before the offer will be confirmed, combined with pressure from the hiring company to cut their notice period back as far as possible despite having no signed contract.
- ✓ A shambolic first day where nothing is ready – no desk, no computer, no phone, no e-mail address, no pass – but there’s a one hour handover with the departing salesperson who’s delighted to be moving on and explains that all the customers/prospects in the patch are worthless and the quota is impossible. No-one takes the new hire for lunch; they find a local sandwich shop and eat alone in the coffee area.
- ✓ A harried 20-minute meeting with the hiring manager that afternoon who keeps saying “Welcome aboard” and “Great to have you on the team” while glancing down at their e-mail. And promising to spend more time with the new hire “Later in the week”.
- ✓ An on-boarding process set-up by HR which consists of filling in paper forms and watching compliance videos that are very obviously designed to protect the business rather than making the employee successful.
- ✓ An agenda set-up by the sales manager’s PA that has the new hire shuttling around different functional managers (none of whom are very interested in meeting the new hire) for an “introduction” – which gives the new hire a confusing picture of the organization and conflicting information on strategy and priorities.
- ✓ A 15-minute call with an assigned “buddy” at a remote location who tries to quickly show a few short-cuts on the CRM system while commiserating with the new hire on having a tough territory/difficult manager.
- ✓ An Inbox that – when finally accessed – is full of mails from customers complaining about unresolved service issues and demanding price concessions, and wanting to know why their salesperson has been changed for the third time in six months.
- ✓ An introduction to the product portfolio that consists of invitations to attend a series of webinars at inconvenient times hosted by product managers in remote locations with no knowledge of local market conditions/product availability.
- ✓ A chaotic first sales team meeting with long and tedious product presentations pilloried by the tenured salespeople as undeliverable pipe dreams and angry discussions about the retroactive implications of the sales comp scheme that has finally been announced 4 months into the financial year. Followed by a bitching session in the pub.

This may sound comical, but the impacts are huge¹; firms that focus on onboarding versus those who consider themselves laggards reported these results:



THE PATH TO IMPROVEMENT

Our goal is to help our clients do much better. The key principles are:

- ✓ Understanding that this needs a holistic approach focused on the individual sales starting at the recruitment process and running right the way through to their first annual appraisal and ongoing L&D goal setting.
- ✓ Sticking to the SBR Sales Effectiveness triangle model that insists that Skills, Systems and Incentives have to be well aligned to deliver sustainable high performance.



OK, so what does this look like in practice.

- ✓ Every recruitment assignment should start with a short consult phase that covers all 3 sides of the triangle.
- ✓ **Skills:** obviously based on the Job Description but also on the underlying competency model.
- ✓ **Incentives:** obviously the sales compensation plan (and overall compensation package), but also the specific arrangements during the ramp-up phase.
- ✓ **Systems:** obviously getting the new recruit on e-mail and CRM but also the full range of other systems (from vacation booking to expenses – a map to the “land of a thousand portals”).

So, the new hire experience should now look something like this:

- ✓ A first round interview/discussion which provides clarity around both the competences required for the job and the commitment being made by the firm to making every new hire a success (which is not a small selling point)
- ✓ An assessment centre process which consistently focuses in on the desired competences (competency-based interview questions) as well as testing a number of the key skills through the chosen assessment exercises, e.g. role play, presentation
- ✓ Structured feedback on results to all participants, including those not selected: there is strong evidence that this is well-appreciated and felt to be very professional, and helps to maintain/improve the recruiting company’s brand as an employer. Feedback should ideally be delivered on the day, or very shortly after.

- ✓ A job offer to the selected candidate that includes a tailored development plan. The goal here is to have something clearly customized, reflecting the outcomes of the assessment process (including psychometric testing, verbal/numeracy testing etc.) that shows the different formal and informal elements that will be put in place.
- ✓ Alongside this, an incentive plan for the onboarding period, reflecting the individual goals in the development plan. This may sound radical – typically new starters in sales roles either get a guarantee (for a limited period, usually shorter than the real sales cycle) or some generic objectives to achieve. But integrating the incentives makes the whole process much more “real”, a commitment to be met from both sides.
- ✓ Once the offer is accepted, pre-work begins to clear away as much of the compliance bureaucracy as possible before the start date. Bizarrely, almost no organizations integrate the recruiting and onboarding processes, so there’s a great opportunity to deliver a differentiated experience for candidates.
- ✓ On Day 1, a “Welcome” message for the new hire on the screen in reception, their pass ready for collection at the front desk and their work area all set up with the necessary kit. A pack of business cards all ready, a branded note pad with their name on it and IT support on-site to get their passwords loaded and their Inbox configured.
- ✓ An initial meeting with their manager to review progress on all the pre-start work and discuss and tune their initial development plan. **NB** The research shows that those who receive individual onboarding have **157%** less turnover than those who do not.
- ✓ A welcome lunch with their manager, manager’s manager and their assigned buddy. With proper food, sitting down.
- ✓ A buddy with their own incentive plan in place to support the new hire – covering both milestone achievement and end of year retention. This is not just a “please give a helping hand”, the firm clearly signals it as a priority activity via the compensation plan. It’s particularly important in a high-pressure sales environment where being assigned as a buddy can otherwise be seen as a distraction from achieving the salesperson’s own goals.
- ✓ A well-structured Sales Playbook – ideally on-line and linked to the CRM system – that guides the new hire through the company’s sales process and provides simple access to the company’s sales tools and guidelines.
- ✓ A first team meeting that includes a special welcome activity in the evening to help the new hire get to know everyone. Make sure there’s a particular emphasis on getting the new hire emotionally “connected” to their new team and the company.

THE PAY-OFF

The rewards for conquering the Valley of Despair are self-evident: more successful salespeople, more quickly. But taking a structured approach has other less obvious benefits.

There’s strong evidence² that people are more driven by culture & values, senior leadership and clear career paths than they are by compensation. An onboarding process that shows the recruiting company’s commitment to understanding new recruits’ needs and making them successful is much more attractive than one based on salary/OTE alone – and it’s also more difficult for their existing employers to easily replicate

It’s hard to prove to prospective candidates that a new employer has a great culture or leadership – but a robust recruitment process that includes a great individual onboarding plan can absolutely serve as a proof point that they are committed to providing a career path, not just a job.

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You can [sign up](#) to receive regular updates and join over 4,000 others who enjoy access to our unique research insights, expert guidance and advice.



¹ "Onboarding 2013: A New Look at New Hires", *Madeline Laurano, Aberdeen Group, April 2013*

² "Company Mission & Culture Matter More Than Salary", *Glassdoor's Mission & Culture Survey, July 2019*