

Onboarding for Success

by **Camille Nicita**, Chief Operating Officer, Gongos Research

Camille discussed Gongos Research's approach to onboarding at the CASRO Management Conference, May 16-17, in Chicago.

Talent attraction and retention are arguably two of the most important aspects in running a business. They are part of an engine that must continuously churn in order to fuel the growth of an organization. Now, imagine needing to kick that engine into overdrive because your business is growing at a faster pace than what your employee base and recruiting process can manage. Great problem to have, right? The answer is “yes,” but not without the risk of client dissatisfaction and employee burn-out.

Throughout the past 18 months, Gongos Research has personified this kind of growth dilemma. We had added 35-40% capacity to our employee base to align with our ever-increasing project demands. However, as many managers know, an influx of new people is not an immediate fix in a situation where revenue is growing in tandem. In fact, adding new employees during a time of escalating sales can actually be a conflicting force for an organization because the time needed to train the newcomers places more responsibility on an already over-worked staff and adds a risk of losing talented and more seasoned people. In addition, we realized that we were spending considerable time and money on recruiting “just the right people,” but that we had nothing formal in place and no consistency when new employees arrived to begin working with us.

But from challenges, new ideas are often born.



From Left: Danielle Brinker, Senior Project Coordinator, Financial & Diversified | Curtis Kaisner, Director of Qualitative Research | Dave Loney, Senior Project Coordinator, Transportation & Technology

“I began my marketing research career at a small company—just me and the owner—so going from a company of two to 100+ was a huge adjustment. Our onboarding phase not only helped me adjust to the dynamics of working with a much larger group of people, but it put me in an advantageous position to grow individually and excel within the company.”

*– Dave Loney,
Senior Project
Coordinator*

Because we didn't have a formal or centralized structure in place—and no continuity with each employee's first 90 days, we sought another route. We created an official role of an Onboarding Manager to put rigor around those first crucial days of employment.

Our objectives were simple:

- Accelerate the learning curve for each new hire.
- Ensure consistency for new employees no matter where they land within the organization.
- Gain efficiencies by centralizing training with a single manager while simultaneously lifting the burden of training from current employees.
- Ensure that we preserve our core values and culture amid the flood of new personalities entering our company.

While a role such as onboarding may traditionally be thought of as a Human Resource function, for us it was not. An experienced fellow researcher and tenured colleague with a passion for training, who exemplified our company values, became our answer to this need.

THE COMPROMISE

For Gongos Research, a role such as this comprises roughly 30-60% of a typical work week, depending on our hiring situation. Of course, a company must be willing to sacrifice critical billable hours to support an onboarding function. For us there was a clear advantage—this person had walked in the day-to-day shoes of our researchers—and that's very important.

THE EXPERIENCE

The onboarding experience is a great balance between learning and doing. Like most companies, it's not effective to have employees solely "in training" for any great length of time – and most new employees do not want that, either. Prior to an employee's start date, an Onboarding Manager works with the employee's designated team to identify initial work assignments for the new hire. Once the employee starts, he or she spends a good portion of

the first few days in in-depth, on-site training. After that, this training becomes a backdrop to more team or disciplinary-specific training that is matched to the work assignments given. Of course, there are times when new employees are brought in midstream on a project. In this case, the goal becomes to provide specific training—to be quickly followed by an opportunity to apply it—in order to increase comprehension.

An Onboarding Manager is also responsible for establishing and facilitating mentoring opportunities for each new employee. Our objective is to be proactive in order to accelerate learning, so identifying an initial mentoring opportunity occurs prior to the employee start date. That mentorship involves pairing a new employee with an experienced peer and identifying shadowing opportunities. The mentor trains the new employee through every step of his or her first project. In turn, the Onboarding

“Our onboarding role has allowed my team to focus on our top priority—serving our clients. Plus, it gives me great peace of mind. I can count on the fact that each employee is receiving consistent training and messaging relative to our culture and processes – which provides added harmony and efficiencies for my team and the company as a whole.”

– Cheryl Halverson, Vice President, Retail & Services

Manager regularly monitors the relationship to ensure the process is working and the new employee is getting the feedback necessary for growth.

THE RESULTS

We have had this system in place for a little over a year now, and early feedback tells us that our onboarding process is working. When new hires begin with us, they can feel the pre-planning that went into preparing for their arrival. We continue to hear unsolicited feedback that this proactive effort is resulting in a consistently positive experience for new employees.

In addition, the impact of designating an individual whose sole mission is to train, manage and mentor new employees to their 90-day potential is clearly efficiency. Project staff can focus on producing rather than closely monitoring and coaching the new employee, or coordinating and facilitating training.

There is another key benefit: peace of mind. We now are ensuring that our most precious resource is being handled with care and attention during the critical first 90 days of employment.

MORE RESIDUAL BENEFITS

Longitudinal learnings from a single perspective make possible the anticipation of roadblocks and/or challenges, as well as adjustments in processes and trainings in an effort to get new people over the hurdle more quickly.

- Speedier and more consistent assessment of new employees' post-hire fit within the company.
- An immediate feeling of "team" and camaraderie aids in the focus to help new employees build relationships with each other, and learn the ropes of working with current employees.
- Preservation and perpetuation of a strong company

culture, as new employees witness it and have a better chance of modeling these new behaviors themselves.

- Perceived reality by new hires that they are a significant addition to our company, and that they have an internal champion whose goal is to help them become successful in their new role.

While a decision to add a company position like this requires planning, collaboration, and cost investment, it's surely a means of "short-term pain for long-term gain." And until the option of cloning our best employees becomes a reality, we're willing to make this trade-off.

As business owners and leaders forging new growth in marketing research, I hope you, too, can find ways to think outside the proverbial box. Get that "think engine" running and continue pondering ways to foster employee growth and company culture to meet the challenges of our ever-evolving industry.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Camille Nicita

Formerly head of the Retail & Services group, Camille's philosophy of managing to people's strengths created a model for success throughout the entire company. Promoting collaboration, consistency, and synergy among cross-functional teams, Camille has worked to optimize the company's capacity and performance for our clients. In 2008, Camille began to drive an even more progressive approach to fostering talent within the company. Forging new practices in recruitment, development and retention helped to further support organizational growth. As a member of the Leadership Team, her contributions to Gongos Research include providing insight on company strategy. As a leader, she helps propel the company to a position of strength

in the marketing research industry. As a practitioner, she understands client needs and works with the teams to enhance the scope of the client-team relationship. Camille's passion for the research industry is evident through her collaboration with industry peers to help shape a new Master's level program at Michigan State University, and through supporting the University of Michigan's Institute for Survey Research. She is also a frequent speaker at industry events for IIR, PDMA, QRCA, and CASRO. She earned her BBA at the University of Michigan and her MBA at Wayne State University.