

'WELCOME ABOARD'

Successful Onboarding Vital to Early Retention

By Matt Ottinger

Cory Simon's email signature reveals he has a rather unique job title for Summers Plumbing Heating & Cooling (of Marion/Kokomo/Huntington/Peru): "hiring consultant." Based in Marion, he's been with the company, which has several locations on the 2026 Best Places to Work in Indiana list, for nearly a decade.

He reveals he's had a few title adjustments and now primarily focuses on talent acquisition and onboarding.

"It's about finding the right people and as I'm talking to them, being their main touchpoint before they come on board, trying to make sure their expectations are clear – making sure their early experience with Summers really sets the tone," he relays.

With main hiring targets in skilled trades like HVAC, plumbing and installation, it's a competitive environment for Summers, so retention – once hired – is paramount.

In fact, a recent report from onboarding software company Enboarder reveals 86% of new hires decide how long they will stay with a company within their first six months.

First impressions

Brent Tilson began his Greenwood-based professional employer organization (PEO) Tilson three decades ago after realizing, as a CPA, how otherwise savvy business leaders were struggling with the human resources functions of being an employer. It's a niche he's filled well through the years, getting employers to focus on their people.

"The largest investment companies make is employees," he quantifies. "So, if you're going to spend a lot of money on people, why don't you start off and make sure you're doing a really good job on the front end?"

For industry veteran Jeremy York, lead consultant and president of InvigorateHR in Indianapolis, "first impressions are lasting impressions." And it's not just what the employer thinks of the employee, but vice versa.

"What the employee experiences during that onboarding is critical because that new

hire is still making a decision within their first 30, 60, 90 days on whether or not they've made a good decision about taking this job," York asserts. "They (could be) experiencing maybe that buyer's remorse, so that first impression is important.

"Onboarding actually begins before day one, before that person shows up and the way that communication goes out to them, how we prepare them for the first day, what their experience is going to be once they get here," he adds.

Maybe not what you think

A critical concept to understand, according to York, is that "onboarding is not orientation."

"When we think about orientation, it's usually a day or a half day, or in some cases it's just a couple of hours where people say, 'Here's your new hire paperwork, here's benefit information. Here you go ...,'" he shares. "And then they turn people loose. That doesn't really work. Yes, those things are important, but we really have to think about more of a long-term approach in onboarding."

Simon agrees that onboarding "definitely isn't just the first day."

"It's really the whole experience of integrating you into the company and our values and things like that," he reports. "We

try to be very structured in how we approach it. We try to focus on clarity in that first 90 days, making sure they understand what success looks like in that role, how they fit into our bigger picture as a company, and then who they also can rely on, their chain of command, who their support functions are."

He adds, "With all of our branches, we've really tried to standardize the onboarding experience."

Investing early on

Washington, Indiana-based True Rx Health Strategists, a pharmacy benefit manager (PBM), believes strongly in "investing early on the front end (of an employee's tenure) and knowing that'll pay dividends as the employee grows," according to vice president of people + culture Wendi Pence.

"We have a very robust training program that we have all new hires partake in, and it's called 'foundational training,' she imparts. "And it's not just your typical training of what's going on in their department ... It's really dialed into what a PBM is, how they operate, how you speak about what our company does and your role as a health strategist in the company, and dives into how benefit models are made for companies."

This thorough approach helps staffers succeed, with the foundational training lasting approximately four to six weeks.



Jeremy York and the team at InvigorateHR know onboarding is a critical part of helping clients get their staffers started on the right track for a long tenure.

“We don't expect someone to just be thrown right into a role,” Pence adds. “In fact, we want to give them time to just come in and catch their breath, assess, understand what the department needs are and what their expectations are.”

She contends this helps ease the stress and anxiety of starting a new position.

“Another thing that's really cool about it is it's done in cohorts, so we're kind of picky about what days we let people start, which can sometimes be frustrating for hiring managers, but it works better whenever we know we can have a group of four or five individuals in a training program because that cohort then kind of forms a bond that they have as a resource and as a peer,” she says.

Buddying up

Building camaraderie with other staffers is certainly a popular onboarding concept, with some implementing a “buddy system” – pairing new hires with current employees.

“You've got a buddy who takes them to lunch, who's there for them, walks them around the office,” Tilson explains. “We used to do cross-department buddy systems because we wanted somebody in an entirely different field from what they're doing.”

He also adds that sometimes companies may have “unwritten rules” spanning different aspects of the workplace, for example, and it's a great way for a new employee to learn about the environment.

York concurs that the concept of the buddy system is popular,

noting, “Maybe (an employee has) questions about how to work with a manager that they aren't feeling comfortable asking the manager yet that they can ask that buddy.”

It's important to find a current staffer who can serve as a strong ambassador for the organization, York believes.

Pence, who is new to her role with True Rx and often works remotely from St. Louis, says that interaction – in her case starting in the interview process – helped solidify an early bond.

“I interviewed and I felt a lot of passion from the recruiter's voice; she was very passionate about liking the work and enjoying the company and the ownership – and you can't fake that,” she reflects. “I think that it was very genuine, so I continued through the process and got the same feeling from everyone else.”

York chides himself in retrospect, humbly admitting he once scoffed at a question on Gallup's Q12 Employee Engagement Survey: “Do you have a best friend at work?”

“I remember hearing that and thinking, ‘Gosh, what a ridiculous question.’; no one comes to work to get a best friend,” he recalls. “But I realized that I was wrong in looking at that question because there's a deeper meaning for that, which is about the connection.

“What people really want in their workplace is to feel that there is connection,” York concludes. “Whether it's with the culture, with the mission of the organization or with their coworkers, that's something that is really, really important.”

RESOURCES: Wendi Pence, True Rx Health Strategists, at www.truerx.com | Cory Simon, Summers of Marion/Kokomo/Huntington/Peru, Inc., at summersphc.com | Brent Tilson, Tilson, at www.tilsonhr.com | Jeremy York, InvigorateHR, at www.invigoratehr.com

The Nicest Care in Indiana

Simple, accessible care your employees will actually use



- Unlimited in-home and virtual primary care
- Mental health care services
- Virtual physical therapy
- 550+ free medications
- \$0 fee for employees

Add a \$0 copay clinic without changing your company's health plan

Lower your health plan costs while improving employee satisfaction and retention

Connect with Benefit Innovations for a custom savings estimate

☎ 317-663-4041

✉ wanzas@benefiti.com

🌐 www.benefiti.com

 Benefit Innovations

 nice

Watch a 30 second video to learn more

