

## **Media Enhanced New Employee Orientation Online**

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## **Abstract**

*A best practice in any employment setting is having a new employee orientation (NEO). Leveraging technology and creating NEOs online have been the answer for many post-secondary institutions, however many do not provide any more information than what would be found in paper handouts. This presents a quality problem when employees' benefits, rights and responsibilities are not thoroughly understood or misinterpreted due to weak information or weak presentations that do not take into consideration the way employees may process the information. The practice of enhancing online NEOs with multiple media enriches the learning environment and enhances the knowledge transfer of important new employee information. This best practice instituted by The Florida State University Office of Human Resources, won recognition from Florida's Davis Productivity Award.*

## **Introduction**

Florida State University's Office of Finance and Administration (F&A) recognizes the importance of aligning the functions of its Office of Human Resources (HR) with the goals of the university's business functions. F&A understands that the HR organization can directly impact the performance of the University, either positively or negatively, depending on how HR elects to develop and manage the University's talent portfolio. Keeping this goal in mind, HR strives to insure that new employees are easily transitioned into the FSU work environment.

To support the new FSU employee's transition, the delivery of an ever-present and highly effective new employee orientation (NEO) program became paramount. The resulting online NEO program, utilizing multiple media, enriches the learning environment and facilitates the transfer of important information to new employees.

## **Statement of the problem**

New employee orientations help recently hired employees to integrate smoothly into the work environment by making them aware of their benefits, rights and responsibilities as an employee, and other workplace policies and procedures that will make their job easier. Florida State University's Office of Human Resources provides a comprehensive daylong NEO open to all faculty and staff. In addition, the Office of the Dean of the Faculties also offers an orientation for new faculty every fall. The face-to-face sessions allow a broad and in-depth view of employee benefits, rights,

responsibilities, and policies that affect their work. However, sometimes getting to a face-to-face orientation is problematic, especially when the new employee has a heavily scheduled start or the employee is off campus or out of town. This was especially true for Florida State University. Many faculty and staff simply do not have time to conveniently attend and receive the information they need as a new employee. In addition, numerous faculty and staff work off the main campus in places hundreds of miles away. Travel to the main campus for NEO is expensive. The face-to-face orientations are preferred but sometimes impractical to attend.

Leveraging technology and creating NEOs online have been the answer for many post-secondary institutions in similar situations. However, the quality of knowledge transfer to new employees can sometimes become a problem because many online NEOs are not substantial. Some provide no more information than what would be found in “read only” paper handouts. This quality issue is problematic in that important information may be overlooked or misinterpreted. In addition, this can also be a problem for the disabled who require alternative formats. The result can be last minute signups or worse, missed deadlines that have to be corrected and may result in no insurance coverage or forfeiting their choice of a desired retirement plan. In some cases serious employee relations problems can arise when critical rules, policies, and procedures such as sexual harassment policy, “right to know” training, and time and leave are not understood by the new employees. The problem question became: How could Florida State University Office of Human Resources leverage the efficiency of a web-based NEO that would serve the needs of new employees with demanding schedules while maintaining the quality of a face-to-face experience?

## **Design**

To move forward on the online version, the Office of Human Resources first looked at the online NEOs already in use by other universities of similar size with similar organizational structures. There were many excellent NEO websites from which to benchmark. All the websites benchmarked were examined for the essential information they provided, their functionality, the level of technical knowledge needed to maintain the information on the website, and the websites user friendliness. From these sites we were able to build a straw model for what FSU's NEO online could look like in appearance and functionality.

The second step was to find out from our customers (new employees) if they would prefer or would use a NEO online. This was done via surveys distributed after every face-to-face orientation for 6 months. The survey included questions about their preference in coming to a face-to-face versus going online, feelings about having access to HR benefits professionals, and a chance to meet other new employees. Evaluations collected after the NEO sessions were also used to capture opinions and comments about improving the orientation. Two themes emerged from the surveys and evaluations:

- The first was that approximately 60% of those surveyed would have preferred an online option if it had been available. However, 70% liked the face-to-face in that it allowed for clarifying questions, meeting the HR professionals who take care of their benefits, listening and seeing the sections presented by real people, and learning something about the campus culture.

- The second theme was that although the face-to-face session presented large amounts of information it was hard to remember or absorb all that information in a seven hour session and walk away knowing all they needed to know.

Knowing the preferences and needs of new employees was critical; knowing the needs of the presenters was equally important. Presenting information online in such a way that critical talking points and objectives were conveyed was of the utmost concern with presenters. In the third step, responsibilities and quality of the presentations were discussed. For example: Who would update their material? Who would assure that employees had reviewed their sections online, especially mandatory sections like sexual harassment and “right to know training”? How would we add a more human touch? Another important consideration was the efficiency of presenting everything that the face-to-face session offered. We did not want an online version that took seven hours to complete.

In step 4 all the considerations in the first three steps were used to create criteria for the design:

- The online experience had to give a virtual experience of the face-to-face orientation session with both audio and visual media with a human factor that was as close to the face-to-face presentation as possible.
- The orientation had to take into consideration different ways participants would process the information presented on the website.
- The website had to be appealing; offering general information about FSU and a welcome from the university president.

- The site had to be easy to navigate with easy instructions and all modules linked from the front page.
- The media used had to be simple enough that any presenter could change material as needed.
- There would be consideration for the time it took to take the online version. Audio could not be streaming, but synchronized with visual material. The orientation could be stopped and started at any point without starting over. Material could be revisited if the information was not clear the first time it was viewed.
- All links to forms and contacts would be embedded in the presentations.
- The audio/video files had to be compressed to address any bandwidth issues.
- The website had to supply alternative formats for those with disability.
- The website would provide essential and mandatory new employee information for both staff and faculty.
- Available resources had to be used for the project.
- A certification form downloaded from the website, signed by the employee, and faxed to HR would allow HR to verify the employee's successful completion.

Based on the criteria a website was built using PowerPoint presentations as the foundation of all the orientation presentations. Each PowerPoint slide provided information, contacts, and links and an embedded audio narrative by the professional who does the face-to-face presentation. This provided a richer experience and took into consideration that multi-media would help both those who prefer visual processing of information and those that prefer auditory processing of information. Using PowerPoint

also allowed presenters to change the material themselves with using complicated html programs. The audios were recorded off of scripts that also appear as text in an alternate format. The presentations were then compressed to assure that the information and narrative could be reasonably downloaded to any FSU computer on or off campus. Streaming videos that included a personal message from the president and information about “right to know” training were also linked to the web page and presentation respectively. To help compress files and utilize streaming video, the design team partnered with distance learning and media experts on campus (Office of Distance and Distributed Learning and FSU Communication Group) to address technical aspects of instructional design and audio and video production.

The website was piloted by FSU Medical School’s newly hired employees while the design team observed and took notes about possible glitches and the pilot group’s thoughts about the experience. Feedback was highly positive. From the pilots group’s suggestions for improvement, changes were made in verbiage and terms on the front page to make navigation easier and instructions clearer.

### **Implementation**

The website was formally launched as an alternative to the face-to-face NEO in July of 2003. At first, almost all of the users were employees who worked on out of town campuses. The initial cost savings was realized in travel expense to the Tallahassee campus for those who could do an orientation from their offsite campuses. Reducing the number of face-to-face NEOs has also reduced cost of putting on the orientation. In the past if there was an increase in hiring at FSU, extra face-to-face NEOs were scheduled. This put a stress on presenters and budgets for food and drinks provided at the face-to-

face. As a result of reducing the need for additional face-to-face orientations, cost savings were realized in minimizing the time presenters and new employees were off their jobs and the money spent on lunches provided in the face-to-face NEO.

The NEO online version's effectiveness in delivering essential information was assessed through evaluations after the orientation and the number of missed deadlines for new employees. Ninety-five percent of the evaluations were positive for satisfaction and user friendliness and participants who use the online version did not miss any insurance and retirement deadlines compared to face-to-face orientations where about 4% of the deadlines were missed. The most common positive comments were the user friendliness, ease of use, and hearing a human voice during the on-line experience.

NEO users on the main FSU campus have increased as awareness of the availability of the online version was diffused. Now it is thoroughly recognized as a viable option to the face-to-face version. Use of the online version has increased over the last two years from approximately 9% of all NEO participants in 2003 to approximately 37% of all NEO participants so far in 2005. In addition, 80% of the NEO online users this year were from the main campus.

### **Benefits**

Creating an online web-based version is not a new best practice but creating an engaging and media rich NEO online is. Increased usage as an NEO option and positive feedback about the experience from users supports the notion that the practice of enhancing online NEOs with multiple media enriches the learning environment and enhances the knowledge transfer of important new employee information. Increase use of the online NEO by off site campuses and the reduction of face-to-face NEOs on the

main campus reduced cost through reduced travel expenses, reduced logistic expenses of putting together a face-to-face orientation, and increased time on the job for both presenters and new employees. The online version is also available 24/7 for new employees to review all materials at their leisure.

The NEO on-line will not take the place of the face-to-face at FSU but it will serve as a viable option for employees allowing them and their supervisors to choose the best option for them at the time. Keeping the NEO online fresh and appealing will most likely drive the current trend to use it as an option over the face-to-face version. Aside from providing any time any place access to the NEO, the true key to its success has been its ability to recognize that participants have a variety of preferred methods in processing information and accommodating those preferences.