

On Boarding at Mason: A One Stop Shop

Michelle Lim
George Mason University

Abstract:

Research tells us that the way an employee on boards in a new position is instrumental to how that employee engages in the workplace. First impressions matter greatly and they can have a profound economic impact on the employer. When new employees fully engage, they are committed to both the university and their role in it. Creating a first step to a career at Mason that provides personalized attention, promotes the collegial and collaborative community at Mason, improves compliance and accuracy with regard to new hire paperwork, and contributes to new employee engagement was the goal. The Mason New Employee Welcome (NEW) Center provides all this and more.

Introduction:

Recognized internationally for its innovation, diversity, and entrepreneurial spirit, George Mason University offers 168 degree programs, some 5000 enterprising faculty and staff, and a student body of just over 30,000 in a distributed university model over multiple campuses/locations including Arlington, Fairfax, Prince William and Loudoun counties in northern Virginia and Ras Al Khaimah in the United Arab Emirates. With its primary location in northern Virginia, only minutes from the nation's capital, Mason provides unparalleled opportunities in research, internships, and work experience through strong alliances with area businesses, government, and the community. Mason draws upon its diversity to harness a creative energy and drive to be the best it can be. Defining community in as broad a term as possible, Mason weaves itself into the educational, cultural, and business community fabric around the region and around the world.

Statement of Initiative:

Mason has long had an orientation program as part of its on boarding process. However, the university wanted employees to complete new hire paperwork, obtain a Mason ID and a parking pass (if needed), and learn the basics of PatriotWeb¹, preferably on their first day of work.

The challenge for a new employee was that in order to accomplish these first few steps at Mason, they needed to put on some real mileage. Mason is a distributed university with multiple campuses and hundreds of offices. New employees needed to visit three different offices on their first day. But the three offices were not near each other and generally not near the employee. Parking could be a challenge and when you aren't familiar with the campus, it could take all of one day, or part of 2 to 3 days to get it all done.

Design:

In January 2007, the Office of Human Resources & Payroll launched the New Employee Welcome (NEW) Center. The NEW Center is a one-stop shop for most² faculty and classified staff on their first day of employment at Mason. At the NEW Center, employees complete their new hire paperwork including their direct deposit, tax forms, their I-9, 403(b) auto-enrollment, and conditions of employment. They also receive their Mason ID and a temporary parking pass. Between January 2007 and August 2008, the NEW Center has welcomed 840 new employees, 421 faculty members and 419 staff members.

¹ PatriotWeb is Mason's on line database management system and is where employees enter their timesheets, direct deposit information, emergency contacts and more.

² Some departments at Mason are decentralized and, as such, may choose to welcome new employees directly. Decentralized departments include police, facilities, and the law school. Wage employees also complete their new hire paperwork within their respective departments.

The NEW Center opens at 8:00am to permit new employees to stop by on their first day before work. There are dedicated parking spaces outside the building so parking is easy. Each employee receives one-on-one attention for approximately 30 minutes as they complete their paperwork and receive their preliminary introduction to employment at Mason. While each employee undergoes a more extensive orientation later on, the NEW Center provides a successful first step to a career at Mason. The office is cheerful, vibrant, and is full of information on the university, its resources, culture, and opportunities. Because the attention is individual and personal, the new employee feels welcomed into a community rather than introduced to a bureaucracy. Therein lays the innovation of the NEW Center. In an organization with over 5000 employees, a new employee's first day starts with one individual, our talented NEW Center Coordinator, providing personal, individual attention.

The focus of Mason's NEW Center is not on the completion of a checklist of new hire forms and tasks, but as a critical step in the process of encouraging new hires to think of themselves as members of the Mason community. Our vision is that an engaged, motivated, and productive faculty and staff at Mason begins with a positive on boarding experience.

Survey information from employees who have used the NEW Center has been 100% positive. They appreciate being able to address all their new hire issues within one office and report that, generally, that had not been their experience in previous organizations. At the NEW Center, everything is completed in a half hour and the employee receives additional information and has a single point of contact who can address any of their questions. A very positive first impression is created.

Additionally, compliance with federal and state law as well as state and university policies has increased dramatically because it is a single stop entity and the processing of

paperwork is controlled. In addition to completing new hire paperwork, the NEW Center also provides an overview of PatriotWeb, Mason's online database management system. This overview includes a tutorial on how to enter direct deposit information and how to complete online timesheets. The use of technology during the on boarding process has not only increased accuracy and timeliness of data collection, but has helped to improve the new hire experience.

Implementation:

The NEW Center came about through the partnership between HR & Payroll and University Services (the Photo ID office and Parking & Transportation Services). Additional support came from the Office of the Provost, the Office of International Programs & Services, and a working group from the various academic departments. Primary costs were covered by our partner, University Services, which donated the photo ID camera and printer. Parking & Transportation Services provides temporary parking passes at no cost to HR & Payroll. HR & Payroll houses and staffs the NEW Center. As the NEW Center has grown, additional departments have contributed generously to the effort.

- Center for the Arts and Intercollegiate Athletics contribute brochures, booklets, flyers, and other promotional materials.
- The University's Aquatics & Fitness Center (Fairfax) or Freedom Center (Prince William) provides a complimentary pass to each new employee.
- Local vendors have also contributed promotional materials as a way of welcoming new employees to the wider Northern Virginia community as well.

Each new employee receives a folder chock full of information about every new employee's first questions. How do I, where do I, when do I access email and voice mail, complete my timesheet, sign up for benefits? They also receive a welcome package that includes information

on commuter options, maps, dining services, and banking information. Included in the welcome package is information on some of the work/life, cultural and athletic opportunities that are available as well as a range of other helpful Mason-related information.

Benefits:

A positive on boarding experience is instrumental to the employee. It reinforces their decision to join the Mason community and it provides them with the initial tools they need to be successful. During that first pivotal week our new employees save gas and time as well as experience a positive, helpful introduction to the Mason community rather than a bureaucratic one. It is the University's belief that employees who feel empowered and welcomed are more likely to be engaged and find a fulfilling and rewarding experience in their career at Mason. A positive on boarding experience is also instrumental to Mason. Data completion and accuracy has increased because the paperwork is completed one-on-one with a trained specialist. A positive first impression starts the process of employee engagement which, we believe, will contribute to greater retention of employees.

Retrospect:

The NEW Center is a resounding success for the University. It ensures that new employees have a smooth, personalized, accurate, and consistent introduction to Mason and their new role as a member of our vibrant university community.