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## Upfront

Turning Over Without Going Belly-Up: *New hires need more relationships, as opposed to more training.* By Alana Conner Snibbe

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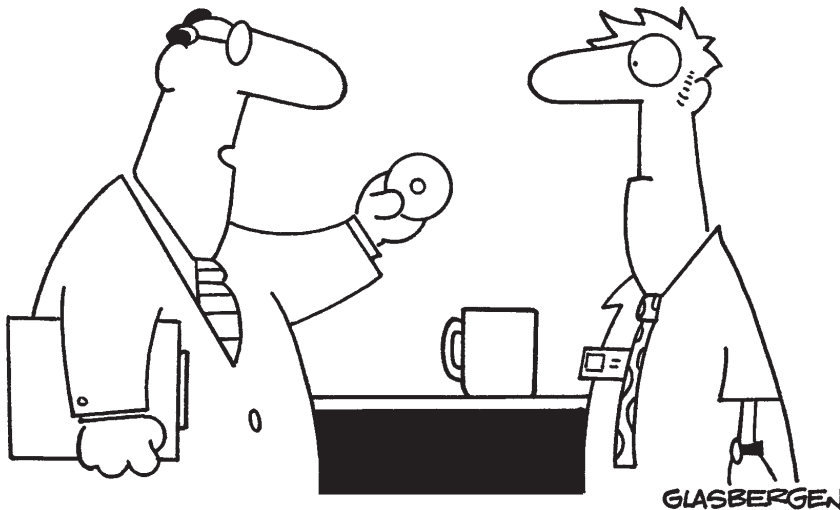
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**“We’re implementing a simplified employee training program. Lick all the data off this CD.”**

## Turning Over Without Going Belly-Up

*New hires need more relationships, as opposed to more training*

Kelvin H. Taketa, president and CEO of the Hawai‘i Community Foundation, tells the story of a Honolulu nonprofit that conducted a particularly arduous executive search. After many difficult months, the nonprofit hired and installed the best candidate.

“And then no one from the board spoke with the person for three months,” reports Taketa. “Needless to say, the person didn’t do very well.”

This nonprofit’s story is an extreme example of a mistake many organizations make: failing to plug newcomers into the relational networks that they need to thrive. Instead, write Keith Rollag and Salva-

tore Parise of Babson College, and Rob Cross of the University of Virginia’s McIntire School of Commerce, “Most firms tend to use an informational approach to orienting new hires, providing them with a smorgasbord of information about company routines and technologies.” They conclude that the better way to bring new hires up to speed quickly is a relational approach, through which organizations help new hires establish a broad network of relationships with people they need to be productive.

Rollag explains that most organizations rely on the informational approach because “giving people

information is easier than giving them relationships.” He also points out that “old-timers are already embedded in the network, and so they forget what it’s like not to be in a network.”

The authors’ findings may be particularly relevant to the independent sector, where high employee and executive turnover rates translate into a near-constant stream of neophytes. Taketa points out that turnover is all the more damaging to nonprofits because they usually “lack the infrastructure to build a knowledge base, and therefore have limited repositories of information that new employees can reference.”

In other words, “A lot of the key information at nonprofits is trapped inside people’s heads,” says Rollag. “In many cases,” he continues, “nonprofit employees’ effectiveness will be entirely dependent upon them building the right networks.”

The article, which was published in the Winter 2005 issue of the *MIT Sloan Management Review*, synthesizes findings from several of the authors’ studies, including interviews, diary studies, and social network analyses of a variety of firms. Across these studies, the authors found that newcomers rarely complained about needing more information. “Instead, their complaints almost always had to do with their lack of relationships,” says Rollag. The authors also found that newbies who were able to build the right interpersonal webs performed better and liked their work more than did those who took longer to connect with needed people.

Based on his research, Rollag suggests that managers take the following steps to put a tailwind behind new hires:

*Before new employees arrive, managers should make a list of the keys experts and*

*contacts they will need to know.* Taketa points out that “networks aren’t just training conduits. They also present opportunities to do things differently or creatively.” He therefore tries to connect newbies with a diverse group of people.

*Get newcomers comfortable with approaching people, and then set up the introductions.* “Managers should think to themselves, ‘How am I going to help this person meet these people?’ and then start the process,” says Rollag.

*Develop an assignment that forces new hires to interact with others within the organization.* Rollag observes that managers often give newcomers “a first project working with people outside of the organization, or isolated assignments where they sit in a cubicle for six months and write a report or do an analysis. That’s where a lot of frustration comes in.”

*Assign newcomers a buddy who is not a mentor.* “It’s amazing how valuable it is to have one person whom

you can ask dumb questions like, ‘Where’s the bathroom?’ You often don’t want to ask your mentor that,” says Rollag.

Although Taketa generally agrees with Rollag and colleagues’ ideas, he cautions: “You can have the best systems in the world [for rapidly on-boarding newcomers], but if turnover is high, you still won’t be able to innovate. Turnover is the killer issue facing the non-profit sector.” —Alana Conner Snibbe