



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Sponsor Guide



Sponsoring
New
Employees

Sponsor's Guide

Introduction

This guide has been developed to help sponsors in their roles with new employees. We want to help you be effective and successful in this role. Ideally, sponsors will:

- Help new employees feel welcome and reduce anxiety.
- Project a positive perception of the USDA and the employee's new team.
- Help create a bond between the new employee and the USDA.
- Help ensure an understanding of the structure, culture, policies, procedures, and practices of the USDA.
- Support new employees during their first year of employment.

By bringing new employees into the organization in a well-planned and organized manner, they are much more likely to:

- Be more successful and satisfied in their jobs.
- Be able to quickly contribute to the success of their work.
- More quickly assimilate into the culture of the team, the Agency, and the USDA as a whole.

To assist you in your role as a Sponsor at USDA, we have created a fun and practical Sponsor Training Program through AgLearn. We highly recommend you complete this training prior to starting your Sponsor relationship. It is interactive and should take no more than 30 minutes.

In essence, you get to be a part of helping someone be happier and more productive in their new job. If you have any questions regarding your role as a sponsor for new employee orientation and onboarding, please contact your Agency's Human Resources Office.

Before we get started, let's review a few aspects of the program.

Orientation vs. Onboarding

New employee orientation generally involves a first-day session or a first week of activities that familiarizes the employee with the Agency's structure, mission, and policies. It typically includes the review and completion of necessary paperwork.

Onboarding is a much more comprehensive approach that starts before orientation and extends well beyond the first few days. In fact, the onboarding process will extend throughout the employee's first year of employment.

Onboarding is the process of integrating and acculturating new employees into the organization and providing them with the tools, resources and knowledge to become successful and productive.

Why Onboarding?

According to the Society for Human Resource Management, new employees decide within the first 30 days whether they feel welcome in their organization. As many as 1 in 25 people leave their job just because of a poor or non-existent onboarding program, while 4 percent of new employees leave their new jobs after a disastrous first day.

Research published by the Gallup Organization, a global research-based consultancy, has shown that engaged employees are more productive employees. Gallup's findings suggest that engaged employees are more profitable, more customer-focused, safer, and more likely to withstand temptations to leave.

Employees arrive at their new jobs excited and engaged. The supervisor's job is to channel that energy toward success by helping them become embedded in the organization. Onboarding provides a framework for this.

Effective employee onboarding serves three interrelated purposes. First, it ensures that the employees feel welcome, comfortable, prepared, and supported. Second, these feelings increase the new employees' ability to make an impact (be productive) within their role, both immediately and over time. Finally, this employee success leads to satisfaction and retention, which allows the USDA to continue to meet its mission.

While onboarding is a yearlong process, the first 90 days are critical. During those 90 days, your role as sponsor is very important.

What is a Sponsor?

A sponsor is someone who partners with a new employee during the first year of employment to offer advice and guidance that help foster and promote the skill and professional development of a new employee.

As a sponsor, you have been identified by your supervisor or Agency as a superior performer with strong people skills. You know the ropes and, more importantly, you know what actions to take to be successful in achieving our mission. You're a source of advice and encouragement who can succeed in

steering new employees in the right direction, as well as help create and maintain a positive and productive culture of excellence.

You are someone the new employee can trust. Part of your role is to create a comfortable, more informal environment in which the employee can ask and receive information about the Department's culture and norms, including those everyday procedures and policies, written and unwritten, that help to explain how things really work.

Finally, a major goal for you as a sponsor is to establish a sense of belonging. With an effective sponsor, each new employee will quickly become a contributing member of their new organization.

Role of the Sponsor

As mentioned above, your role is to help new employees understand how they fit in the organization, what is expected of them and the best practices to ensure that they will succeed.

An important point to remember is that your role is not meant to be a substitute for the employee's supervisor. While you may be able to help the employee work through discussions they would like to have with their supervisor, it is not your job to have those discussions with them yourself. Topics such as conditions of employment, work assignments, performance, time, and attendance, leave, career opportunities, training, conduct, etc. must be discussions that are held between the employee and their supervisor. If you get specific questions about these areas, please direct the employee to their supervisor.

Listed below are sponsor responsibilities and tips, as well as possible new employee expectations.

SPONSOR RESPONSIBILITIES

1. **Meet and greet:** When possible, meet the new employee on their first day and go to lunch together. If this is not possible, ensure that you are able to meet for lunch in their first few days.
2. **Provide information:** Be an informational resource for the new employee on policies, procedures, work rules, norms, etc.
 - Provide your contact information so they can reach out to you with any questions.
 - Set up regular meetings or lunches to continue the discussions.
3. **Offer insight and feedback:** Provide insight, feedback, and information that support the new employee's social involvement in the Agency.

4. **Be a “tour guide”:** Give a tour of the facility where the employee will be working and make introductions.
 - Show them where equipment is and how to use it (e.g., copiers, printers, etc.).
 - Show them the location of the restrooms, cafeteria, credit unions, and other service areas.
 - Introduce them to administrative support staff and explain their roles and procedures, such as ordering, supplies, requesting repair services, arranging travel, etc., as appropriate.
5. **Training support:** If appropriate (and agreed to by the supervisor), assist in training the new employee.
6. **Resource support:** Identify resources to help the new employee.

WHAT A NEW EMPLOYEE EXPECTS FROM A SPONSOR

1. Advice, guidance, encouragement, and a positive attitude.
2. Confidentiality – information shared with you stays between you and the new employee.
3. Open and honest communication, especially if feedback is requested.
4. Help in understanding the culture of the Agency and the Department.
5. Help in understanding how to get things done.
6. Assistance in building networks and relationships within the work group and team, and with internal clients.
7. Insight into how to make relationships with people effective and productive.
8. How to balance office communications – e-mail, telephone, in-person, etc.

TIPS FOR SPONSORS

1. Don't worry about being perceived as the "expert." Your experience is important to the new employee. At the same time, you don't have to have all their answers.
2. Be patient and positive. It takes time to develop a relationship. Don't try to cover everything right away. Sponsors need to allow enough time for the new employee to learn and grow.
3. Don't try to force a relationship.
4. Look for a preferred style of communication.

5. Realize and respect that the new employee may have a different style from your own. Let them develop in their own way.
6. Remember that listening may be more important than giving advice in some instances.
7. Don't be judgmental and be careful not to draw conclusions without exploring why someone feels or acts the way they do. Keep in mind that there is another side to the story. When the new employee comes to you with a problem or complaint, this is the time to listen and ask questions. These questions help the employee solve their own problems and gain confidence. You can supplement their ideas with your own. Here are some suggestions:
 - What do you want to achieve? What is your desired outcome?
 - What is the hardest/most challenging part of this for you?
 - What are the possibilities? If you had your choice, what would you do?
 - What are your options? What seems to confuse you?
 - What criteria are you using? How important is this?
 - What are other angles you can think of? What is just one more possibility?
 - And then what will happen? What other ideas do you have about it?
 - What if that doesn't work? And if it fails, what will you do?
 - If you could do it over again, what would you do? What will you have to do to get the job done?
 - What seems to be the main obstacle? What information do you need now before you decide?
 - What actions have you taken on this issue so far? What were the effects of these actions?
 - What support do you need to get the job done? What is stopping you?
 - What concerns you most about...? If you could wipe the slate clean, what would you do?
 - What will the consequences of this outcome be for you or others?
 - What will that get you? Where will this lead?
 - If the obstacle didn't exist, what would you do then?
 - So what? What does success look like?
 - Where do we go from here? What will you do next? By when?
 - Who needs to know?

8. In the event that the new employee experiences setbacks, don't take it personally. You can't always ensure success, but you can help that person begin again more intelligently and see a failed experience as valuable by helping them identify where it went wrong. This helps prevent failure from happening a second time.
9. Keep a positive attitude and maintain your role as a sponsor.
10. Conduct the exercises outlined in the next section.

Exercises to Conduct

As a sponsor (called a "buddy" in some organizations, though the USDA term is sponsor), it may be helpful to run through some exercises to create a greater comfort level for you and the new employee. Below are two exercises. The first one is just for you. This one is particularly helpful if you are new to being a sponsor. The second one is for you and the new employee to do together. It is another way to set clear expectations.

Exercise 1: Remember When...

Do you remember what it was like on your first day of work? We often forget what it's like not to know what we know now! So take a minute and think back to that first day at USDA for you. As you think about it, answer these questions:

- How did it feel to walk into the building on that first morning? Were you excited? A little nervous? Overwhelmed?
- How did you feel about the paperwork you had to complete?
- What was it like meeting all the new people? Your new boss? Your new colleagues?
- How did you figure out where to go for what you needed?
- Was your desk set up? Was everything else ready for your arrival?
- What did you do for lunch that day?
- How did you feel at the end of your first day?

The point of this exercise is to remember what it's like to be new. By doing this, you can better empathize with the new employees and show patience and compassion as you help them integrate into the organization.

Exercise 2: Design the Sponsor/New Employee Alliance

Designing the alliance means taking the time to discuss HOW your sponsoring relationship is going to work. This is about building agreements and setting the stage for a successful relationship by explicitly articulating expectations, needs, wants, logistics, etc.

Important topics include:

- Contact and response time
- Meeting logistics
- Confidentiality
- Focus
- Feedback

Use the chart on the next page to help guide your conversation.

TOPIC	DISCUSSIONG AREAS	√
<p>Meetings—we realize as a sponsor you may sit in the same area as your new employee, but you will still need to have a conversation about both informal and formal meetings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will you meet – in person or on the phone? • If in person, where will you meet? (Take into account whether you’ll need a room with a door that closes) • What ground rules will you put in place for the meetings (phones off, etc.)? • How often will you meet? How far in advance will your meetings be planned (schedule for next six months or schedule the next one at the end of each meeting)? • How long will your meetings last? 	
<p>Confidentiality</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidentiality must be discussed and is an important element of this relationship. Provide clear guidance and have clear expectations around what is confidential and what is not. 	
<p>Focus</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You need to decide if your relationship is work-centric only or are you both comfortable /willing to discuss personal issues. 	
<p>Feedback</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the new employee receive feedback in a way that s/he can hear it best? (e.g., be direct and say what needs to be said or sandwich the negative with a positive, etc.) • Consider the Keep, Stop, Start model: At the end of each session, each person gives keep/stop/start feedback that sounds like this. “I’d like you to keep doing this or acting this way; I’d like you to stop (fill in the blank) and I’d like you to start (fill in the blank). • How will the sponsor get feedback on the process? 	

Onboarding Portal

From the moment you are assigned as a sponsor, please check-in on the onboarding website. This website is the first major introduction that the new employee has to the USDA and is a single source for most of the information the employee will need in their first year. Knowing what resources and requirements they have will help you to help the new employee work through any of the questions they may have on the more formal aspects of their orientation.

Here's the link: <https://www.usda.gov/da/ohrm/onboarding>