

Extend that “job honeymoon:” acknowledging it is hard to start a job can help

Stephanie Franklin, Heidi Binder-Matsuo and Shuba Gopal

Stephanie Franklin is Senior Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer at Vertex Pharmaceuticals Incorporated, Boston, Massachusetts, USA. Heidi Binder-Matsuo was Senior Director, People Strategy and Analytics at Vertex Pharmaceuticals Incorporated, Boston, Massachusetts, USA. Shuba Gopal is Principal at Glean Signals LLC, Concord, Massachusetts, USA.

Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this study was to assess whether a simple intervention could sustain new hires' high engagement levels beyond the first six months. This case study illustrates how a simple intervention can extend the “job honeymoon” – a brief period of high engagement – up to a year post hire.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This study reports the results of a randomized, controlled study in one organization using a “wise intervention,” a method derived from social science research in educational settings.*

Findings – *This case study illustrates that it is possible to extend the job honeymoon up to a year post-hire. Acknowledging to new hires that transitions are challenging produced a statistically significantly higher sense of belonging and higher employee satisfaction up to 9+ months post-hire.*

Research limitations/implications – *This work was inspired by research from Gregory M. Walton, and it illustrates the potential value for application in the workplace. However, its generalizability to all organizations will require further study.*

Practical implications – *This work is most relevant for human resources leaders and managers who want to ensure new hires are well supported. This study found that acknowledging the difficulty of a transition increases the engagement of new team members substantially and likely enhances productivity and team effectiveness for months to come.*

Originality/value – *The highly counterintuitive but critically important idea of this study is that people need reassurance that transitions might feel hard but are a shared experience. Providing that reassurance is a simple, easy-to-apply approach to support the newest members of a team or organization and sustain their engagement for months to come.*

Keywords *Belonging, Employee satisfaction, Wise interventions, New hire onboarding*

Paper type *Case study*

1. Introduction

Nearly 76 million workers started new roles in the USA 2021 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022), the flip side of the Great Resignation that has dominated headlines. Many of those individuals left the workforce during the pandemic, but they are rejoining traditional workplaces now (De Smet *et al.*, 2022). They are likely experiencing a “job honeymoon” – a period of high employee engagement and commitment (Chadi and Hetschko, 2018). Unfortunately, it may not last; research shows employees are never more engaged than in the first six months (Sorenson and Garman, 2013). As the honeymoon wanes, these employees are more likely to leave again (De Smet *et al.*, 2022). At Vertex Pharmaceuticals, we found a way to extend that honeymoon significantly. It is so simple it might sound ridiculous: acknowledge to your new hires that transitions are hard, and everyone struggles. In a randomized, controlled study, we found that doing so increases employee engagement to near honeymoon levels and sustains those effects over 9+ months post-hire.

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Why would something as simple as saying that everyone faces challenges starting a new job matter? It has to do with research from social science on “wise interventions,” designed to target specific psychological processes that have been shown to contribute to social problems. This particular intervention helped people reinterpret negative experiences as expected occurrences instead of a sign that they are not a good fit for the organization. By doing so, these interventions drive self-reinforcing processes that allow individuals to reap the benefits in a multitude of circumstances long into the future (Walton, 2014).

The wise intervention we designed was inspired by research focused primarily on students. It showed that an increased sense of belonging can dramatically reduce educational achievement gaps. In one study, black or African American college students participated in a set of activities designed to foster a sense of belonging, even when those students faced adverse events such as critical feedback from a faculty member. By boosting their sense of belonging, this wise intervention nearly doubled these students’ grade point average, among other outcomes (Walton and Cohen, 2011).

At Vertex, we know a sense of belonging is essential to our employees – it is the top driver of employee satisfaction based on analyses of our employee pulse survey data. Research backs that up: employees with a high sense of belonging are also higher performers, less likely to take unnecessary sick days or leave the organization (Kellerman and Reece, 2019). When organizations do not foster a sense of belonging, it leads to loneliness in the workplace (Murthy, 2017) and lowers employee performance (Ozcelik and Barsade, 2018). Evidence from neuroscience even suggests that a lack of belonging is interpreted as physical pain in the brain (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2003). Fostering a sense of belonging is clearly an important action organizations can take to support and retain employees.

In our historical data, employees with less than three months’ tenure had the highest scores for belonging. However, that effect was not sustained. Belonging scores began to drop and plateaued at a lower level after six months. Not surprisingly, employee engagement dropped as well. We wanted to know what would be needed to sustain that initial “high.” We thought it might be a wise intervention, like the one that demonstrated such astonishing benefits for black or African American college students (Walton and Cohen, 2011).

2. Wise intervention – translating social science insights to the workplace

Our wise intervention involved asking new hires to watch one of two videos in their first week at Vertex. Intervention arm participants watched a video in which other Vertex employees shared their own challenges as they started roles at Vertex and how they overcame them. New hires assigned to the control arm watched a video focused on Vertex’s corporate values. Participants were randomly assigned to the intervention (153 participants) or control (144 participants) arm.

Intervention arm participants watched the video again at three months post-hire and were invited to write a reflection of their onboarding experience at that time. This served to reinforce the message, an essential aspect of wise interventions (Walton and Cohen, 2011). Just over half of the participants (54%) shared a reflection of their onboarding.

All new hires in the study were invited to complete surveys as part of our regular onboarding process and were included in regular pulse engagement surveys. In each of the surveys, we asked employees whether they agreed with the statement: “I feel a sense of belonging at Vertex” (to measure belonging) and with the statement “I am happy working at Vertex” (to measure employee satisfaction). We tracked the scores for these two questions over time to measure whether our wise intervention had a meaningful impact.

In the intervention arm, we saw the expected pattern: initial high scores and then a downward trend (orange line in Figure 1). But then something unexpected happened. At the six-month mark, scores in the intervention arm surged upward. Most striking of all, the scores for belonging rose again at nine months and remained high through the one-year mark. These differences are statistically significant (p -value < 0.05), meaning the impact of the intervention is real and not random. Employee engagement scores also surged upward for participants in the intervention arm at six months post-hire and were sustained beyond the nine-month mark (Figure 2, orange line).

Given that belonging is a key driver of employee engagement, this would be expected. What might be surprising is that the effect is longer term and sustained for those in the intervention arm of the study. However, that is borne out by social science research – normalizing the challenges encountered during a transition leads to mindset shifts that pay dividends for months and years afterward (Walton and Cohen, 2011).

We also saw that the effect of the intervention had a higher impact overall on younger employees (those under the age of 35) as well as those from underrepresented groups. That tracks with what we know from the research as well. These groups are historically more vulnerable to interpreting challenges as indictments of personal ability instead of a common, to-be-expected experience (Walton and Cohen, 2011).

Figure 1 Wise intervention has an impact on new hires' sense of belonging 6+ months after the intervention

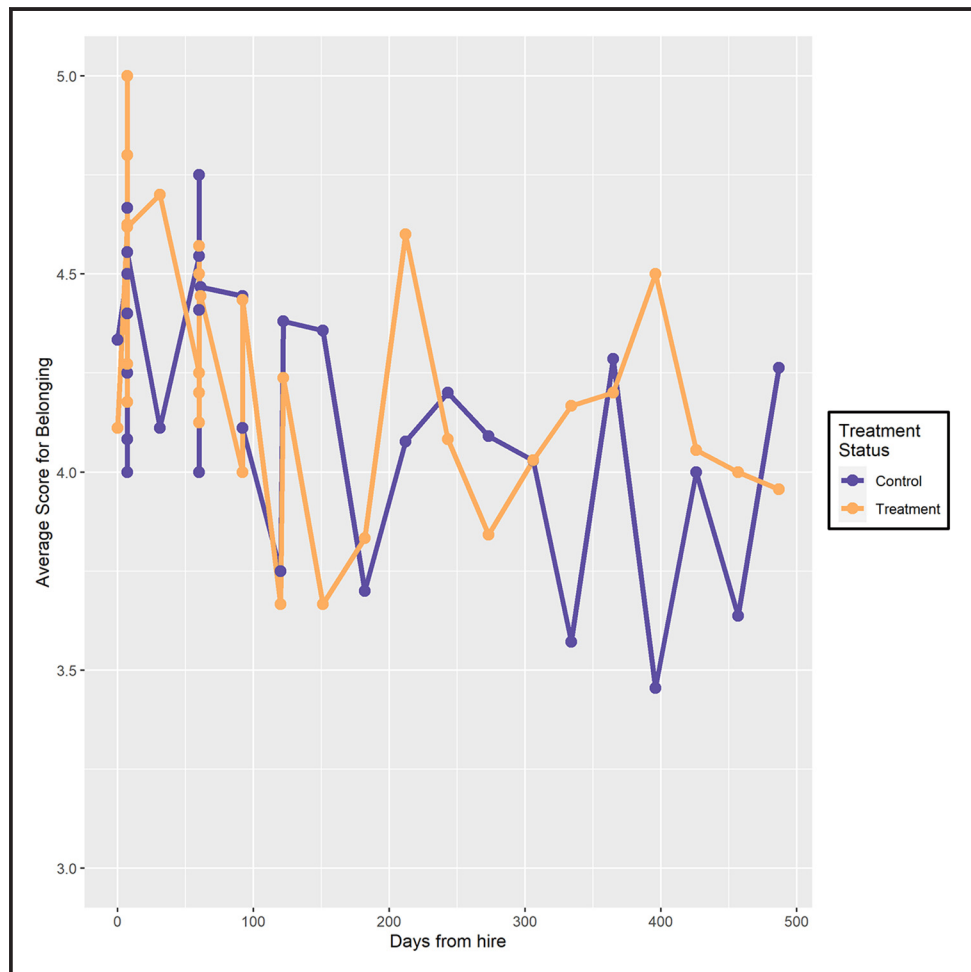
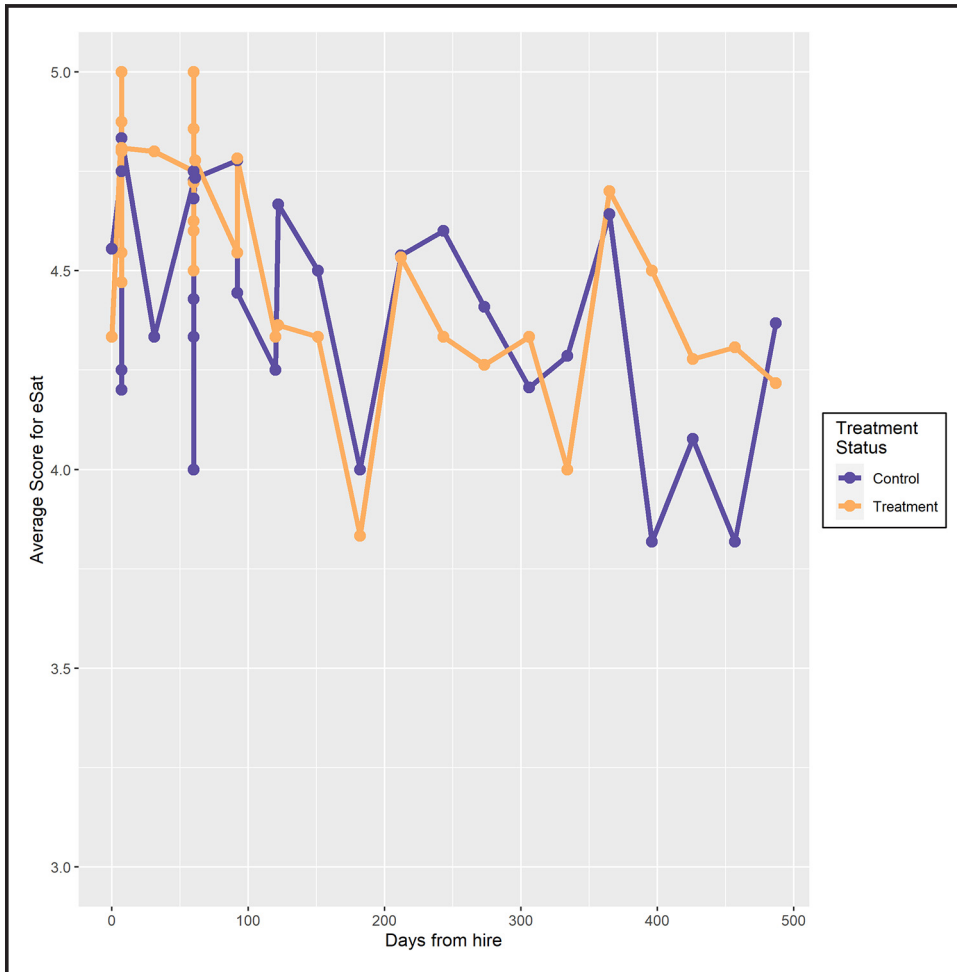


Figure 2 Employee satisfaction also increases for those new hires who had the wise intervention



3. Conclusion: acknowledging it is hard helps make it less so

What our study shows is the power of normalizing: it is hard to start a new job. When managers take the time to say this is hard and they understand, they signal that it is normal and expected. It shifts the burden from individuals managing these challenges on their own to a collective effort. In doing so, managers reduce or eliminate the interpretation of those challenges as specific to some individuals. The payoff in the workplace can be substantial, as demonstrated by our study. And we believe wise interventions will likely work in other moments of transition too, such as employees returning from parental leave or first-time managers.

For us, the most exciting aspect of our results is that it offers a new way for managers to show empathy and connect with their employees. Those actions ensure employees feel valued, a critical need right now (De Smet *et al.*, 2021). But instead of vague words of reassurance or support, our study suggests a more impactful action. Managers can acknowledge the challenges of the transition (whether that is starting a new role or another transition). Then they can offer substantive perspectives – what challenges have they encountered and how did they overcome them? Doing so normalizes those challenges. It makes it possible for each employee to recognize these challenges for what they are – an expected bump in the road to new ways of working – rather than a personal failing. That is essential if we want to translate that new job honeymoon into sustained employee satisfaction, ensuring everyone can thrive in the workplace.

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Further reading

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Corresponding author

Shuba Gopal can be contacted at: sgopal@gleansignals.com

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