

## NEW HIRE SAFETY ORIENTATION Box-Ticking Exercise or Vital Tool?

By Jean Ndana

Is your new hire safety orientation a box-ticking exercise, a one-person show, a 1-day event or all the above?

Statistics show that new hires are more likely to be injured than their veteran counterparts. In 2020, 114,430 workers with a tenure of less than 3 months sustained an injury or illness serious enough to require time off (BLS, 2020).

**Companies often** rush through new hire safety orientation (NHSO), effectively treating it as a checklist task rather than a vital component of an organization's safety and health management system. Providing an effective NHSO is key to reducing workplace injuries, increasing productivity and ensuring worker participation in the organization's safety and health program. Considering all these potential positive effects, workplaces of all sizes should prioritize the development of a robust, engaging and potent NHSO program.

The author's former employer developed such a program and, in addition to effectively promoting worker safety and health, reaped the benefits of improved communication and safety culture that went well beyond avoiding injuries, incidents and OSHA fines.

### The Case

The employer was a 350-person, round-the-clock plant specializing in manufacturing steel tubes and pipes. Upon joining the organization, the author found that, like many such facilities, the plant had an NHSO program. While the intentions behind it were good, the program itself was mediocre. It was a box-ticking exercise: unengaging, inconsistent, lacking real goals and inadequately designed to meet the plant's specific needs.

The orientation, which was performed on an ad hoc basis and lasted several hours, was a download of information via slideshows and off-the-shelf safety videos. The program was delivered solely by the safety department, consisting of a safety manager and two safety coordinators. The orientation was mostly delivered by the safety coordinators, who took turns to complete it. Because there was no solid framework, everyone had their own way of doing things. The quality of the orientation depended on the individual presenting and the amount of time allotted, which was inconsistent.

New hires were inundated with safety information, some of which was good but the majority of which was

not relevant to the plant. The relevant information was generic and not specific to that plant's operations. The structure and delivery method made it difficult for new hires to retain the information. The result was an NHSO that was boring and left new hires feeling overwhelmed and confused, rather than armed with the knowledge necessary to help them work or navigate the plant floor safely. In addition, the plant's OSHA recordable incident rate was 3.5 times higher than the industry average. Incidents that involved new hires contributed to about 60% of the plant's OSHA recordable incidents. Not surprisingly, the plant had a high turnover rate. How can a manufacturing plant achieve its safety and financial goals if it is constantly in the cycle of hire-lose-hire?

The underperforming NHSO program was later revamped. Tailor-made initiatives were developed and implemented to turn the program around. The program transformed from a box-ticking exercise to become a vital component of the plant's safety management system. Formerly indigestible, the program became not only digestible, but engaging, effective and fun. Bite-sized, relevant and specific safety information delivered in a targeted, stimulating and challenging way replaced the lengthy, unstructured presentation-heavy approach. The refined NHSO became not only a co-owned process, but also one that took place over several days or weeks, sprinkled with frequent assessments and weekly one-on-one follow-ups. Before long, concrete results started pouring in. Incidents involving new hires dropped dramatically from 60% to 1%. The revamped NHSO was not only about safety anymore; in addition to arming new hires with the knowledge and skills necessary to work safely, the program also became an environment for fostering human connection, commitment to excellence and effective teamwork.

In a unionized manufacturing plant, how can an OSH professional transform

a poorly designed, low performing NHSO? This article presents three strategies used to revamp the plant's program with demonstrable results: conducting employee interviews; rebranding; and changing the structure.

### 1. Employee Interviews

The first action was to conduct two sets of interviews. The first set of interviews was with recent hires (< 1 year) and other employees willing to share their experience with those in the orientation. The second set of interviews was with frontline supervisors and managers. The interview with employees sought to evaluate what they retained from the orientation and their perception of how well the orientation equipped them to remain safe and to be prepared for their job. Interview questions covered information they remembered, information that was not provided but that they wished they had learned, and information they received but was not necessary for their safety and job performance. In addition, employees were asked if they felt welcomed, valued and supported when they arrived, and whether they were introduced to the plant's safety culture during their orientation.

In any company, creating a welcoming atmosphere and introducing safety culture components as early as the new hire's first day can enable new employees to safely ramp up to full productivity in their new role. The interviews with supervisors and managers focused on what they needed most from new hires that they were not currently getting from the orientation. Information from these interviews was used in the development of the new structure of the NHSO and its elements or components.

### 2. Change the Name to Set Expectations

Inspired by the insights gained throughout the interview phase, the second action in the revamping endeavor was to rename the program. It may not seem prudent to spend time and

resources thinking about a program's name. However, names matter because they send a message and create expectations. It was important for the program's name to reflect its objective and its two main components, orientation and training. The name should be appealing to those involved in conducting the orientation and training and should convey not only intuitive meaning, but also a dose of vitality.

The name that captured all these traits, reflected the renewed commitment to proper training and symbolized the transformation of the new hire program from a box-ticking exercise to a learning and training tool was new hire safety orientation and training (NHSOT). It was a subtle but important change. Adding the word "training" conveyed the message that the refined program will, from now on, incorporate not only practical hands-on training before the on-the-job training that will occur later, but also frequent knowledge retention assessment checkpoints and an early mechanism for feedback.

Orientation accompanies training, but the two are not identical. Orientation focuses on the big picture (why). All new hires should be introduced to certain fundamentals of the organization's safety management system: safety vision and its significance, where the organization stands on its safety journey, why achieving the safety vision is key in reaching the organization's financial goals, and how each employee contributes to these efforts. Training emphasizes the specifics (what and how), the practical and the hands on.

### 3. Change the Structure to Broaden Its Scope & Benefits

The next challenge was to change the orientation structure. Due to the uniqueness of the two key elements of any such program—the new employee and the organization—there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all approach to developing, formalizing or refining an existing orientation program. The NHSOT structure should consider many factors, including the organization's uniqueness, leadership and management styles, work culture, history, facility population, worksites and hazards present. The ideal structure would neither impose a hardship on the plant nor be difficult to deploy. The new structure had the following elements: safety objectives, an ongoing and co-owned process, a

**TABLE 1**  
**OBJECTIVES OF REVAMPED PROGRAM**

	Objectives
1	New hires believe that the plant is serious about safety.
2	New hires understand the plant's safety vision, how the plant is working on achieving the vision, how they fit into it all, and how they can help the plant and themselves be safe and successful.
3	New hires feel safe, comfortable and empowered to speak up when asked to do a job or task that they believe is not safe or they have not been trained for.
4	New hires feel safe and empowered to stop work for any safety concerns.
5	New hires feel safe, comfortable, empowered and capable of speaking up when they see an unsafe act.
6	New hires feel safe, comfortable, empowered, and capable of identifying and reporting unsafe conditions or hazards.

welcoming atmosphere, facilitating personal connections, and accommodating diverse learning styles.

### Elements of a Highly Effective NHSOT Safety Objectives

Like most such programs, the previous NHSO had the implicit safety goal of zero incidents involving a new hire. Such a safety goal based on lagging indicators can hinder an organization's effort by inhibiting learning; luring frontline supervisors into unproductive, uncaring and uncollaborative behaviors when handling a workplace incident; and sending the wrong message that the company cares more about numbers than about people (Ndana, 2021). Therefore, objectives related to this goal based on leading indicators were written. These objectives help plant management understand the strengths and weaknesses of the revamped program as it is being implemented or deployed. Also, these objectives help measure safety activities that equip new hires with safety-related knowledge and skills and lead to safer work. Table 1 shows some objectives of the revamped NHSOT.

### Ongoing Process

Instead of one big event, the safety orientation became known as an ongoing process that took place over several weeks, making it more engaging and effective. The refined NHSOT also did away with the old model of classroom

time and videos, replacing them with a combination of classroom instruction, videos and on-the-job training.

### Co-Owned Program

To make the safety orientation less boring and more engaging, the refined orientation was changed from a task delegated solely to the safety department to a co-owned program instead. What is the ideal mix of players that can be involved in an orientation program to make it memorable, engaging and effective? Each organization is different, and the answer will vary. In addition to the safety manager, other employees invited to be part of the process included the general manager, human resources (HR) manager, hiring managers and coworkers.

Ideally, for any organization to make an orientation program effective and valuable to new employees, the highest-ranking member of management should begin most, if not all, orientation sessions with a short but inspiring, motivating and empowering message. After welcoming the new hires and sharing the plant's history, evolution and impact on the community, this leader can discuss the safety culture and expectations. Specifically, the leader can talk about the organization's safety vision and guiding principles (e.g., treat people as human beings first, employees second; if we get safety right everything else falls into place) and how employees work collectively to achieve the safety

**TABLE 2**  
**VARK LEARNING EXAMPLES**

The VARK model can help OSH professionals accommodate different learning styles: visual (V), aural (A), read/write (R) and kinesthetic (K).

Learning style	Preferred learning method examples
Visual	Maps, charts, graphs, diagrams, highlighters, different colors pictures, word pictures, different spatial arrangements
Aural	Discussions, stories, guest speakers, chats, use of a tape recorder, attending lectures, using jokes
Read/write	Lists, essays, reports, textbooks, definitions, printed handouts, readings, web pages, taking notes
Kinesthetic	Senses, practical exercises, examples, cases, trial and error, hands-on approaches, collections, samples

**Note.** Adapted from *Teaching and Learning Styles: VARK Strategies*, by N.D. Fleming, 2001.

vision. This leader can also explain how new hires fit into this vision and how they can contribute to helping the plant and themselves be safe and successful. The leader can close by telling new hires that safety takes priority over production and empowering them to stop work for any safety concern, to speak up when something does not seem safe or right, and to bring any safety concerns or issues to management's attention without fear of retaliation. When words of inspiration, encouragement and empowerment come from the highest-ranking member of management on their very first day, new hires understand that safety is taken seriously at this organization.

The second person invited to participate in the safety orientation was the plant's HR manager. HR is a key partner that is often overlooked or not leveraged to their full potential in creating a comprehensive safety and health system. There are many functions HR professionals can perform during an NHSOT. HR professionals can reinforce the message to new hires about the precedence of safety over production and remind them that they should not fear anything when they speak up and stop work for any safety concerns. They can also discuss the organization's cell phone policy (especially use on the production floor) and how tardiness or absenteeism can negatively impact the organization's safety efforts. They can also review and discuss the organization's cardinal safety rules.

In the author's experience, many NHSOs do not involve the hiring

manager. Everything is done by the safety department and the new hire is sent out to the floor for on-the-job training. That is a big flaw because the hiring manager plays an important role in keeping a new hire safe and productive. Even if technical or procedural portions of an NHSO are provided by a safety professional or safety trainer, it is important for the hiring manager to convey that safety is important to them and that it should be important to the new hire. More specifically, the hiring manager should clearly state that safety is their personal highest priority, that they expect everyone to observe the safety procedures and safe work practices, and that the new hire's safe behavior is one of their primary considerations when evaluating their overall job performance.

A comprehensive road map of priorities, expectations, and evaluation criteria gives hiring managers and new hires a mutually agreed-upon set of actions to take and milestones to reach for a safe and successful ramp-up period.

### Creating a Welcoming Atmosphere

OSH professionals can provide a welcoming space for new hires in many ways. Imagine how welcomed, special, important and valued new hires will feel when they enter a room that is clean and organized and where thematic safety banners are strategically placed. On the table in front of each seat, OSH professionals can include a tent name tag, a personalized notepad or safety notebook, a pen and a few PPE items (e.g., safety glasses,

hearing protection, hard hat) that are required to enter the production floor.

### Creating a Personal Connection

The refined NHSOT provided new hires with necessary safety information about their job and specific details about workplace hazards. However, it did not stop there; it also provided the author with an opportunity to connect with new hires on a personal level. OSH professionals can use an orientation program to start building connections because they need to have a solid sense of who new hires are—not just as workers, but as people—to keep the program engaging, fun and effective. One method that OSH professionals can use to accomplish this is to keep the content high energy and utilize storytelling. To do this, they can ask new hires to share details about themselves such as their work history, whether safety was taken seriously by their previous employer, their hobbies, the names of the most important people in their lives and the main reasons they come to work. OSH professionals can also ask new hires to share a unique or interesting fact about themselves.

### Accommodating Diverse Learning Styles

Everyone processes and learns new information in different ways. Different learning style models have been developed and used for years. One such model that worked well at the author's former employer is the VARK model. Proposed by Fleming (2001), VARK stands for visual (V), aural (A), read/write (R) and kinesthetic (K). As depicted in Table 2, Fleming says that visual learners prefer maps, charts, graphs, diagrams, highlighters, different colors, pictures, word pictures and different spatial arrangements. People with a strong aural preference for learning enjoy discussions, stories, guest speakers, chats, use of a tape recorder, attending lectures and using jokes. Read/write learners appreciate lists, essays, reports, textbooks, definitions, printed handouts, readings, web pages and taking notes. Kinesthetic learners prefer using senses, practical exercises, examples, cases, trial and error, hands-on approaches, collections and samples.

OSH professionals can implement the VARK model in several ways:

- Visual (past incidents videos):** Videos of past incidents that have occurred at the plant, a sister plant or any other

plant can be shown. Afterwards, new hires can engage in a discussion about the different mistakes that were made and draw some key lessons.

•**Aural (guest speakers):** What are the most common injuries that occur at the organization? Ask one or two workers who suffered such injuries to share their story at the meeting. At the author's former employer, most injuries were hand related, so a portion of the orientation was about hand injuries, pinch points and other related hazards. Two experienced workers who had suffered severe hand injuries shared their personal stories, answered questions and drove home the training about pinch points, proper hand placement and machine guarding.

Also, the most recent hires were brought in to share their personal experience, insights, tips and tactics that they had developed and used to get acclimated to the new workplace smoothly and safely. These speakers were not meant to be mentors or buddies. Having recent hires speak with new hires builds a social element into the NHSO. New hires listened to their coworkers' experience, absorbed their advice and valued their guidance.

•**Read (safety pledge):** A safety commitment pledge was developed and printed on a large banner. New hires read, discussed and signed it to signify their willingness to commit to a safe work environment.

•**Kinesthetic (hands-on training):** Before on-the-job training, some practical training took place in the classroom. For example, synthetic straps and chains were used to lift bundles of steel tubes. New hires were trained on how to conduct a strap or chain preuse inspection, then practiced how to identify damaged straps, chains and hooks.

### Success of the Revamped NHSOT

This approach was effective because of six factors: preparation, repetition, bite-sized information, integrating knowledge retention assessment, a feedback loop and a mechanism for early feedback.

### Preparation

Do not improvise a new hire's first day; prepare in advance. For a successful orientation, it is important to remember that a new employee walking in the door will need a little extra confidence that first day and week. So, having materials prepared and organized for the first day is crucial. It helps give the new hire confidence and makes them feel at home.

### Repetition

Use repetition to solidify training. OSH professionals can apply repetition in different ways, such as during knowledge retention assessments. For example, when it is time for an assessment, ask new hires to take a few minutes to jot down their answers first. Second, ask them to share their answers with you or the audience and, lastly, write those answers on the board. With this tactic, they engage with the same piece of information at least three times.

### Bite-Sized Information

In his book, *Works Rules!*, Laszlo Bock (2015) posits, "You learn the best when you learn the least" (p. 205). Do not try to cram weeks' worth of information into one day. People do not learn that way. Instead, give workers small, digestible chunks of information over time. For example, do not give new hires detailed training about lockout/tagout or confined space on their first day; give them taglines instead. For example: "if you see a tag or device on a piece of equipment, do not touch or operate." For confined spaces, this can be "if you see a sign that reads 'confined space,'

do not enter." During an NHSO is not the right time to give detailed, in-depth thematic training. As Bock says, "It's a better investment to deliver less content and have people retain it than it is to deliver more hours of 'learning' that is quickly forgotten" (p. 208).

### Integrated Knowledge Retention Assessments

When conducting any training, assessing knowledge retention is a necessity. OSH professionals need to know whether new hires are attentive and that their message is getting through. In the author's experience, most NHSO programs do not incorporate a knowledge retention assessment. Those that do typically conduct it at the end of the program. This is a mistake. By doing so, a company misses several opportunities throughout the learning and training process to engage new hires in a discussion, thereby missing chances to increase retention and cement important concepts. When passively absorbing information, retention is minimal and learned concepts are fleeting. It is important to sprinkle the orientation with frequent points of knowledge retention assessment.

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## Feedback Loop

Daily or weekly feedback from new hires were used as inputs to improve not only the NHSOT program itself, but other important documents such as job safety analyses (JSA) and job-specific training checklists as well. A feedback loop is a mechanism that elicits new hires' periodic feedback and uses it as an input to improve the orientation program as well as other components of the safety management system such as JSAs and job-specific training checklists. There are many ways OSH professionals can gather new hire feedback. One way is to ask questions such as:

- Is there anything you wished you knew or were trained on before hitting the floor?
- Based on your first days or week on the floor, what do you think are the main hazards or risks associated with your job?
- How do you like your training so far?
- Are you comfortable with the pace, content, sequencing and trainer?

## Mechanism of Early Feedback

In their orientation process, OSH professionals should include a requirement for a periodic one-on-one meeting between the hiring manager and the new hire. A weekly cadence for these meetings is ideal. The goals of these meetings include: identify and address any questions, concerns or confusion new hires may have; promote the culture of feedback (hiring managers soliciting feedback from new hires by asking questions); and provide constructive feedback and instruction. This allows the hiring manager to address whether the new hire is on pace with learning, putting safety first in their daily actions and behaviors, and aligned with the organization and team's safety-related expectations and values.

## NHSOT Held in Different Rooms

At the author's former employer, the general manager and HR manager conducted their portion of the orientation in a room located in the main office building. When these were completed, the next phase of the orientation and training was held in a different building where the safety manager took over. Each room was purposely set up for the occasion. The first room had pictures of former general managers as well as the plant's history and awards. The second room had thematic safety banners, the plant's safety vision and the safety

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strategic plan road map. This change of room was intentional since a change of scenery can help people feel invigorated and more creative, as it forces the brain to process new surroundings and think in new ways. Whenever possible, OSH professionals are advised to hold orientation in different rooms.

## Additional Results

In addition to human connection, commitment to teamwork and excellence, and equipping new hires with knowledge and skills to remain safe, the refined NHSOT also yielded the following unexpected results:

1. The turnover rate dropped significantly, especially for production floor employees.
2. The refined NHSOT helped plant leaders identify workers who were skilled at training others. Later, these workers attended formal train-the-trainer classes and were trained as OSHA 10- and 30-hour instructors so they could become in-house trainers.
3. The program helped improve JSAs and job-specific training checklists. When they elicited new hires' periodic feedback, leaders found that they were bringing forth hazards that were overlooked when some existing JSAs were developed.
4. New hires helped develop a sufficient profile for each job.
5. The NHSOT helped workers learn best safety practices from other companies.
6. The revamped program informed the development of an employee safety handbook.

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## Conclusion

Providing an effective NHSO is key to reducing workplace injuries, increasing productivity and ensuring worker participation in the organization's safety management system. If employers do not take time to develop an NHSO that uniquely meets their needs and those of the new hires, they may find new hires' performance in safety and other areas (e.g., production, quality) to be subpar or they may prematurely return to square one, advertising for a new employee. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, for an organization to achieve its safety and financial goals if it is constantly mired in the hire-lose-hire cycle. An effective NHSO is creative and thorough. It is not only a co-owned process but also an ongoing process, taking place over several days or weeks. It does not stop there; an effective orientation program goes beyond safety. It also focuses on human connection, commitment to excellence and effective teamwork. An effective program is a work in progress. To ensure necessary evolution, it must incorporate a feedback loop. This feedback loop ensures that the safety orientation is appropriately refined over time so it is improved as the organization itself changes and evolves. This feedback loop also, and perhaps more importantly, makes workers cocreators of the organization's NHSO program. **PSJ**

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