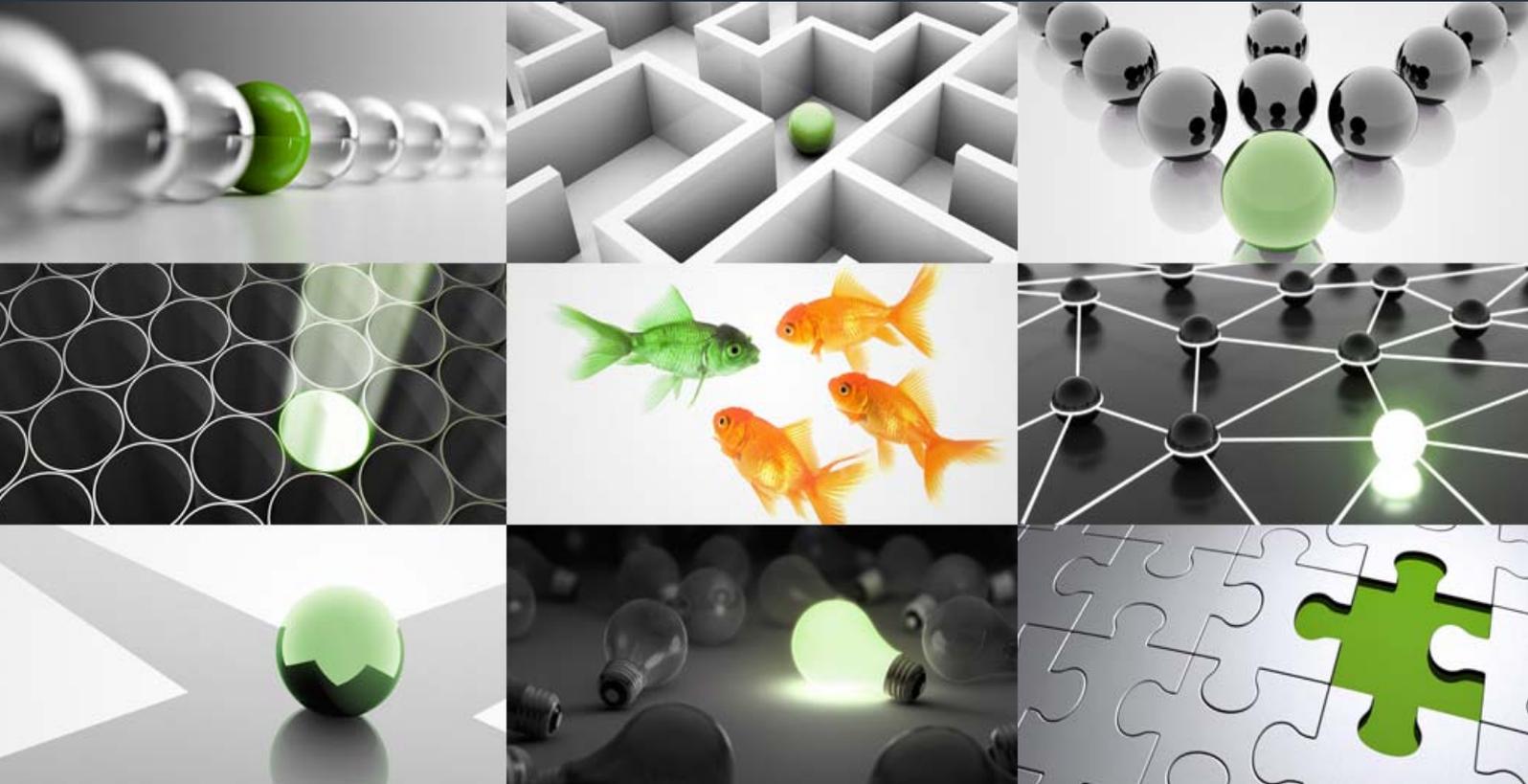




people solutions for business



# Rialto White Paper: Executive Assimilation (“Onboarding”)

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# 1. Introduction

A senior executive has been appointed to the organisation. The recruitment and selection process has been expensive and time-consuming but the consensus is that the right person has been chosen. Despite this, numerous studies show that there is a roughly even chance that the expensively appointed executive will either fail or resign within two years and the whole process will have to be repeated. The real frustration is that a key component in the failure is highly likely to be lack of appropriate support and guidance from the organisation during the crucial settling in period.

The financial implications of failure tend to be understated. The focus will usually be on replacement costs – perhaps two or three times the executive's annual salary – but the true costs will be much higher. The indirect costs resulting from bad decisions, low morale, customer disengagement and the knock-on impact of lost opportunities is probably incalculable. Estimates of the overall costs, however, range from ten times salary to, for those earning between £100,000 and £250,000, forty times salary.

The right support not only improves the chances an executive will integrate successfully but also reduces the time before the net impact of the appointment is positive – the 'break-even point' which according to Michael Watkins (2013) is otherwise usually only reached after 6.2 months. The form that support takes will vary according to the individual, the post and the organisation. It will, however, be designed to prepare both sides beforehand by identifying and filling any knowledge gaps, developing an understanding of the organisation's dynamics and culture, and building key relationships. In that way expectations will be aligned and success criteria agreed, and in general increasing the chances of the new arrival getting up to speed rapidly and without encountering unnecessary resistance.

Who provides that support? There is a strong argument for using external coaches as they can offer greater objectivity and expertise in facilitating transitions and managing tricky group dynamics, but a substantial onus still needs to fall on those within the organisation itself to share information and provide feedback. Both sides tend to assume that an approach that worked well in one organisation will unfailingly be effective in the next. This assumption ignores the fact that superficially similar organisations will invariably have fundamentally different internal characteristics. Failure to acknowledge corporate history, to conform to internal procedures and above all to recognise the people politics can lead to disappointment and disillusionment all round. To someone accustomed to succeeding almost effortlessly this can be devastating. Timely feedback from a formal or informal 'culture coach' or sympathetic insider can avoid a knee jerk reaction which may be counter-productive.

It may seem obvious but is sometimes overlooked during the recruitment process that different skills are required at different stages of a company's development. Leading an entrepreneurial start-up is clearly not the same challenge as taking over a successful department but the difference between a turnaround and a re-alignment may not be so immediately apparent. Early recognition of any mismatches in skills or styles before stepping into the limelight will make the transition easier for everyone.

## 2. Planning & preparation

The new senior executive needs to start preparation and planning as soon as the offer is accepted. A key problem is that people seldom know what they don't know! This is compounded by the tendency of interviewers to present the organisation in a more favourable light than reality supports. Retention of a coach experienced in transitions and in a position to keep channels of communication open starts to pay dividends at this stage.

The coach can not only guide and help inform the senior executive's research and theorising but can also ensure the right preparations are made for the new arrival by the organisation. These must include previously arranged meetings within the first few days with all the people and groups who can impact results in any significant way – positively or negatively.

Ideally, introductions to the most important contacts should take place before the start date. This will not only facilitate the senior executive's entrance to the organisation but will increase 'buy-in' by potentially useful allies. This should start the process of establishing common objectives and agreeing realistic timetables so that the expectations of all concerned can be managed. It will also facilitate the planning of early wins that matter to those that matter!

During this period the opportunity may be taken to conduct a formal assessment of the views of key members and groups in the new department. The focus will vary with the situation and may influence the decision as to whether this is done by a standard instrument, survey, focus group or a series of individual or group interviews.

### **3. Entrance – The first day and first week**

One aim of the preliminary planning is to make a favourable first impression. While much of the time will be taken up with pre-arranged meetings and presentations the schedule should also allow the incomer to visit as many of the organisation's departments and sites as possible. As well as familiarising the new executive with the physical environment this will make him or her recognisable while everyone is still curious.

While it is probably unrealistic to arrange meetings with future peers beforehand the importance of lateral relationships needs to be recognised and any opportunities to make such contacts taken.

The first week or two will prove hard work if done properly. While the apparent aim of the introductory visits is to be seen and heard so that an impression of the newcomer can be formed, the real aim is for the newcomer to see and to listen carefully. At the end of each day time needs to be devoted to reflecting on impressions formed so that theories about the organisation formulated during the planning stage can be refined and further questions identified. A common and often fatal mistake is to start making decisions and pronouncements too early without input from the real world of the organisation's history and current situation. The consequence is likely to be alienation of potential allies which may prompt disengagement or in extreme cases sabotage later. The catchphrase for these first few days is to listen and learn

## 4. The first 90 days

The focus of the first three months is to assume leadership by early wins to establish a pattern of successful achievement. Underlying this is an understanding of the organisational dynamics and identification of those able formally or informally to advance or hinder progress. Often there will be recognised opinion leaders or de facto resource controllers whose influence will not be evident from organisation charts but whose co-operation makes for much easier progress. Until alliances within the organisation are developed and a clearer idea of the business, situational and cultural contexts formed, the coach can act as a sounding board and a safety valve when needed.

During this period the evolution of relationships upwards, downwards and sideways need to be managed consciously to ensure communications flow smoothly and strong alliances are formed. The motto for this period should be to manage expectations, deliver early and avoid surprises.

## 5. Consolidation

Once the initial three months have passed successfully with a reputation developing for reliability and achievement, momentum needs to be maintained by continuing to communicate with stakeholders, to identify further easy wins which will progress their aims and so formulate and engage reports in strategy plans which are equally clear, realistic and time-bound. The lessons learnt during the first three months should not be forgotten and periodic reviews with the assimilation coach can help to maintain the necessary overview and grounding.

## 6. Conclusion

From the foregoing it should be apparent that each situation is unique but that as the seniority of the executive position being filled increases, so do both the complexity and the importance of ensuring a smooth assimilation into the organisation. One suggestion is an online tool that all new employees can access prior to starting work. A fairly simple induction programme which includes some follow-up may be adequate for ground level recruits and relatively minor departmental or role variations to predominantly standard core elements should provide what middle managers need. For a new senior executive or CEO, however, the assimilation programme needs to be specifically tailored and strongly supported by others within the organisation.

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