



● FREE GUIDE

THE COMPLETE

# EMPLOYEE JOURNEY

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**From first hello to final farewell**

Every moment in between  
deserves to be seen.



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Think about the last time you started a new job. Not the first week's excitement, but the first quiet Tuesday, when the novelty fades and you wonder whether anyone actually sees you. Now think about the last time you left one. Whether it was a tearful last day surrounded by people you loved working with, or a clock-out where nobody said a word. Both experiences get filed away. And they shape what you say about that company for years.

We've spent a lot of time in HR circles talking about onboarding. We've built software for it, written playbooks, held webinars. But somewhere between Day 90 and the exit interview, the thread goes quiet. The middle gets forgotten. And the ending, that final chapter of someone's time with you – is almost universally botched.

This guide is about the whole arc. Onboarding with intention. Sustaining momentum and recognition through the middle. And maybe most importantly, offboarding with dignity, because that last impression is the one that sticks.

# ONBOARDING THAT ACTUALLY WORKS

Here's the uncomfortable truth: only 12% of employees strongly agree their company did a great job onboarding them. Twelve. Percent. That means 88% of people walk into a new role and, at some level, feel like they've been left to figure it out. That's not a gap. That's a crater. And it has consequences that show up in your retention data six months later.

**88%**

rate their onboarding as sub-par, poor, or a failure.  
(Gallup)

**82%**

stronger retention with a solid onboarding experience.  
(Brandon Hall Group)

**70%**

of new hires decide if a new job is the right fit for them within the first month. (Bamboo HR)

**1 in 3**

new hires leave within the first 90 days, due to poor onboarding.  
(Jobvite)

## The First 90 Days Are Not a Formality

There's a version of onboarding that a lot of companies run. It looks like this: a welcome email, an IT setup ticket, a stack of compliance videos, and a calendar full of introductory calls with people the new hire will forget by lunch. Then on Day 5, they're expected to produce. **This isn't onboarding. It's abandonment with paperwork.**

Real onboarding is an act of recognition before any work is done. It says: **we saw you. We chose you. We're going to invest in making this work.** The data bears this out consistently, employees who experience exceptional onboarding are 2.6x more likely to be extremely satisfied in their roles (Gallup). And companies with structured programs see 82% higher retention. That's the difference between a team that stays and one that quietly churns.



## What Great Onboarding Actually Looks Like

It starts before **Day 1. Pre-boarding:** the period between offer acceptance and first day, is an underused gift. A welcome note. A team introduction. A 'here's what your first week looks like' email that shows the new hire someone thought about their arrival. Aberdeen Group found that best-in-class organizations are significantly more likely to engage with new hires before they start.

The message it sends is simple: you already matter here. The 90-day mark is not a finish line. Almost half of organizations provide only general guidelines for a 30-60-90 day plan, leaving execution entirely to manager discretion (Enboarder, 2025). That's a problem, because managers vary enormously in how they welcome new team members. When they're actively involved (really involved) new hires are 3.4x more likely to describe the experience as exceptional (Gallup). Manager involvement should be the mechanism and not optional.

**The onboarding experience is a recognition moment before a single deliverable exists. It tells someone: you were worth the effort of being welcomed well.**



*The employee journey: from welcome to retirement, and every recognition moment in between.*

Peer recognition platforms like **Enkourage** can play a genuine role during onboarding, not as a tool that gets turned on after six months, but on Day 1. When a teammate sends a 'welcome to the team' shoutout publicly, that new hire immediately understands two things: what good looks like here, and that they're seen. That's a cultural signal you can't fake, and you can't manufacture it with a Slack channel alone.

## INTEGRATE PEER RECOGNITION INTO YOUR DAY 1 EXPERIENCE

Include public shout-outs and recognition posts on a feed that new hires can scroll to understand your culture before they even start contributing.

TALK TO AN EXPERT →

# The Manager's Role is *Not* a Nice to Have

Research consistently shows that the manager relationship is the single most influential variable in an employee's experience, and yet 28.8% of HR leaders have watched a hiring manager provide a new hire with zero guidance or training (Enboarder, 2025). Zero. Not 'insufficient' guidance. Nothing. This is the gap the **Orange Program** was built to close.

Training managers to onboard well is a structural investment, not a nice addition to their to-do list. When managers understand that their first 90 days with a new hire are shaping that person's entire trajectory at the company, the check-ins stop being optional. The clarity around expectations stops being assumed. The recognition of early wins stops being forgotten. Great managers onboard with intention because they know: this is where trust is built or broken.

## EQUIP MANAGERS WITH THE FRAMEWORKS AND HABITS

to support and lead with emotional intelligence from Day 1 through the entire employee lifecycle.

TALK TO AN EXPERT →

A photograph of three people in a professional setting. A woman with long dark hair, wearing a blue and white checkered sleeveless top, is seated at a desk and smiling while typing on a laptop. Two men stand behind her, looking at a document she is holding. The man on the left is wearing a pink shirt and a dark vest, and the man on the right is wearing a light blue button-down shirt and glasses. The background is bright and slightly blurred, with some bokeh light effects. The overall mood is positive and collaborative.

# **THE MIDDLE: PROGRESS, MILESTONES & THE ART OF BEING SEEN**

If onboarding is the opening chapter, then the middle years are where the story actually lives. They're also where most companies go quiet. The new hire welcome fades. The structured check-ins become irregular. The recognition shifts from 'we're so glad you're here' to 'we noticed you when something went wrong.'

And the numbers are damning. In 2024, U.S. employee engagement hit an 11-year low, with 4.8 million fewer engaged employees than the year prior (Gallup, 2024). Only 23% of employees reported thriving at work. The other 77% are either coasting, disconnecting, or actively looking elsewhere. That is a recognition failure at scale.

**51%**

are watching for or actively seeking a new job. (Gallup)

**22%**

of employees feel they get the right amount of recognition. (Gallup)

**45%**

fewer employees leave when they receive high-quality recognition. (Gallup)

**\$8.8T**

lost annually to disengagement worldwide. (Gallup)

## Recognition is Not a Soft Metric

There's a persistent belief in a lot of organizations that recognition is the 'feel good' part of HR, nice to have, hard to measure, easily cut when budgets tighten. The **Gallup longitudinal research** from 2022 to 2024 dismantled that argument cleanly. Employees who receive high-quality recognition are 45% less likely to have turned over after two years. And those currently receiving recognition that hits at least four of five strategic pillars are 65% less likely to be actively looking for a new job right now.

This is not about birthday cards and years-of-service plaques. It's about the quality and frequency of being acknowledged for specific, meaningful contributions, by peers, by managers, by the organization itself. The research is clear that all three matter. Peer recognition builds horizontal trust. Manager recognition builds psychological safety. Organizational recognition anchors people to something larger than their role.

## Milestones Matter More Than We Admit

We underestimate how much people pay attention to whether their milestones get noticed. A first work anniversary passed without acknowledgment sends a message: your time here is a transaction, not a relationship. **A five-year mark celebrated with intention**, a real moment, not an automated email, says the opposite.

Research from Gallup and SHRM consistently shows that anniversary recognition, milestone gifts, and experience-based rewards create disproportionate emotional impact. These are not moments of performance management. They're moments of belonging. The employee is asking, quietly: does this place remember me? The answer you give shapes the next chapter of their story here.

## The Great Detachment and What to Do About it

Gallup has named 2025's defining workforce trend 'The Great Detachment.'

Where the Great Resignation was visible, people leaving, the detachment is invisible. People staying, but checking out. Showing up, but not showing up. It's the employee who used to have ideas in meetings and now just nods. The one who stopped responding to the team Slack with any urgency. The one who, if you asked, would say 'fine, everything's fine.'



Learn to Offer  
Meaningful  
Recognition at  
Every Stage of  
the Employee  
Lifecycle

Read now

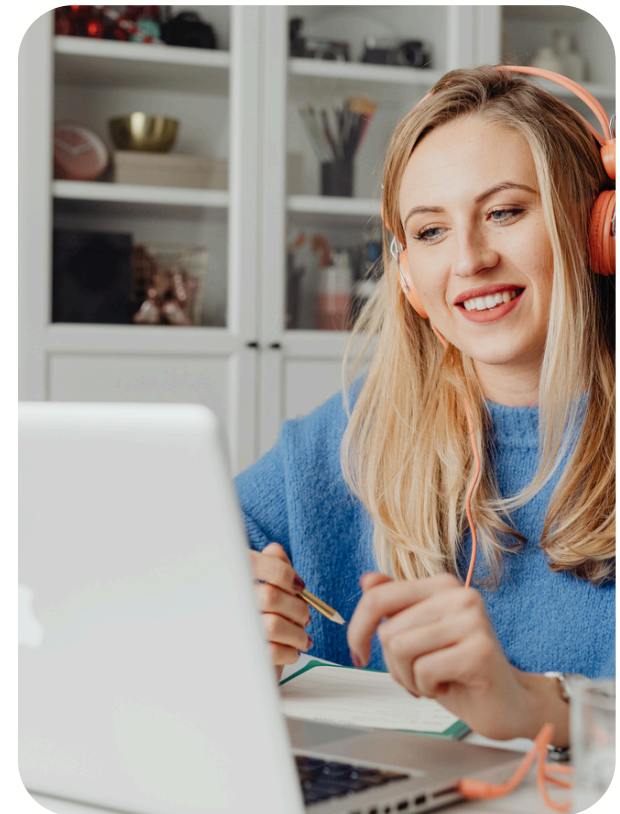
The antidote to detachment is specificity. Not a company-wide 'great work team' email. Not a quarterly engagement survey that disappears into a deck. It's a peer who says 'the way you handled that client call on Thursday was exceptional, you turned a complaint into a case study.' It's a manager who remembers what someone said mattered to them in their six-month check-in and acts on it. It's an organization that treats progress, not just performance, as worth celebrating.

**People don't leave jobs. They leave managers who stopped seeing them.  
And they stay for companies that never did.**

## Continuous Recognition as Infrastructure

Here's how we'd reframe recognition in the middle years: it's not a program. It's infrastructure. Like your performance review cycle or your payroll system, it needs to be reliable, accessible, and embedded in daily work, not reserved for annual moments. Platforms like Enkourage make peer recognition a behavior, not an event. When any employee can recognize any other employee in 30 seconds, with specificity and visibility, you've made appreciation a daily act rather than a quarterly ceremony.

Combine that with manager training through the **Orange Program**, so that managers are consistently equipped to have the recognition conversations that matter, and you've built a culture where the middle years feel as intentional as Day 1.



# OFFBOARDING: THE CHAPTER NOBODY PLANS FOR



Let's be honest about something: most offboarding processes are an afterthought. A departing employee gets a calendar invite for an exit interview that HR is filling in from a template. Their manager sends a farewell Slack. Someone from IT shows up to collect the laptop. And then, nothing. The person walks out, and the company moves on. Here's why that's a mistake that costs more than most companies account for: the exit experience is the last thing that employee will ever feel about your organization. And according to Gallup research, only 45% of employees say they're satisfied with how their exit was handled, and just 24% are truly satisfied. The last impression is the one that travels furthest. That person will go on to be interviewed, to mentor others, to post on LinkedIn, to recommend, or not recommend, your company to future talent. You shaped that narrative in the final weeks.

**45%**

of employees report being satisfied with how their organization handled their exit. (Gallup)

**2.9x**

more likely to recommend your organization after a positive exit experience. (Gallup)

**71%**

of organizations have no formal employee offboarding process. (Zippia)

**78%**

say a seamless offboarding experience impacts their likelihood to recommend the company. (LinkedIn)

## Why Offboarding Is a Recognition Moment

There's a concept in psychology called the peak-end rule, coined by Daniel Kahneman: people judge an experience not by its average, but by how they felt at its peak and how it ended. This is directly applicable to employment. A person can have three excellent years with your company, but if their final two weeks feel dismissive, rushed, or cold, that's the story they'll tell. Conversely, an exit handled with genuine care, appreciation, and ceremony can reframe even a difficult tenure.

Offboarding done right is a recognition act. It says: the time you gave us mattered. The work you did mattered. You mattered. And it opens the door to what PeoplePath and Cornell research shows: companies with formal alumni programs have Glassdoor ratings that average 16% higher than those without. Former employees who feel valued become brand ambassadors, referral sources, and in a market where 'boomerang hires' are increasingly common, potential future colleagues.

## What a Recognition-First Offboarding Looks Like

It starts with the announcement. How a departure is communicated internally signals how the company values that person's contributions. A genuine, specific acknowledgment, 'Sarah built our client onboarding process from scratch, and that infrastructure is still running', is not just kind. It's true. And it models, for every remaining employee, what it looks like when this company says thank you.

The exit interview deserves a serious rethink. Only 27% of organizations actually use exit data to improve workplace culture (Workplace Analytics). Most gather it and file it. The conversation should feel more like a career retrospective than a compliance checkbox, an honest dialogue about what worked, what didn't, and what the company could do better. And critically, 42% of turnover is preventable according to departing employees themselves (Gallup, 2024). Exit interviews aren't autopsies. They're intelligence.

**The last thing someone feels about working for you is the first thing they'll say about you. Offboarding isn't closure. It's your legacy in their memory.**

## The Farewell Moment

There's something that happens when a long-tenured employee leaves and nobody marks the moment. It doesn't just affect the person leaving, it affects everyone who stays and watches. They file it away: 'so that's how this place says goodbye.' Retirements, in particular, represent the most underserved exit ceremony in most organizations. A person gives twenty-five years of their career and gets a Zoom call and a gift card.

Recognition-first offboarding means that a departure, whether it's a two-year resignation or a thirty-year retirement, receives a moment proportional to the contribution. A team gathering, a curated memory book, a thoughtful experience gift, a public acknowledgment from leadership that goes beyond 'we wish you well.' These aren't expensive gestures. They're profound ones. And they create the kind of organizational memory that shapes culture long after the person is gone.

## The Alumni Relationship Is a Strategic Asset

The most forward-thinking organizations have stopped thinking of departure as an ending. They build alumni networks, maintain warm relationships with former employees, and treat that community as a pipeline for referrals, boomerang hires, and brand advocacy. Employees who receive exit interviews are 62% more likely to stay connected as alumni (SHRM). That connection has tangible value, and it starts with how you made them feel on the way out.

Think about the employees who've left your organization in the last two years. Are they ambassadors? Are they quiet? Or are they the ones telling their networks what it's really like to work there? The answer is largely determined by what happened in their final weeks with you.

# **BUILDING A RECOGNITION- FIRST CULTURE ACROSS THE WHOLE ARC**



Onboarding, the middle years, and offboarding are not three separate programs. They're one continuous act of attention. When recognition runs through all three, when new hires feel seen from Day 1, when growth is acknowledged along the way, and when departures are honored, you've built something that most companies haven't: a culture of consistent human dignity.

The organizations that do this well don't have recognition as a department. They have it as a practice. It lives in how managers talk to their teams. It lives in the peer-to-peer culture where people lift each other up publicly. It lives in the ceremonies around milestones that say 'we remember your contributions.' And it lives in the final conversation with a departing employee that says 'you built something here, and we won't forget it.'

## Three Questions to Ask About Your Own Organization

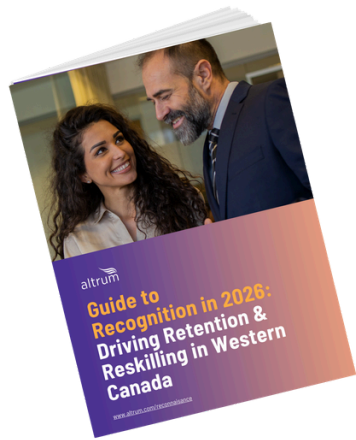
**First:** when a new hire walks in on Day 1, do they feel like the whole organization was ready for them, or do they feel like their arrival was a surprise? The answer tells you whether your onboarding is a real system or a hope.

**Second:** when a mid-career employee does something genuinely great, solves a hard problem, shows up for a colleague, runs a project that matters, does anyone notice publicly and specifically? Or does it disappear into the inbox of their annual review? The answer tells you whether your recognition is strategic or ceremonial.

**Third:** when someone leaves your organization after years of contribution, do they leave feeling like they mattered, or like they were managed out of the system? The answer tells you what kind of company you'll be remembered as.

**The complete employee journey is a recognition opportunity at every stage. The question is whether you take it.**

# Resources & Tools to Take it Further



The ultimate guide to understanding the importance of recognition, with actionable strategies and a clear action plan.

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Discover innovative and effective strategies to boost employee engagement in your organization with this free guide!

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The guide to gaining leadership buy-in for a recognition program.

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