

The Buddy System: No Employee Left Behind

W. Cunningham, M. Gosky, K. Oram, T. Roberts

UK Markey Cancer Center

1. Background

Effective onboarding is critical to employee engagement, retention, and long-term performance. This is particularly important within complex departments that have on-site, hybrid, and remote employees. Traditional onboarding focuses heavily on the task-based training, while overlooking the social and cultural integration that helps new hires feel connected and engaged. The Markey Cancer Center-Clinical Research Office (MCC-CRO) addressed this gap by implementing a “buddy system”.

2. Goals

Our main goal was to engage the new hire with not only training but with their peers. The buddy serves as a peer resource- separate from their formal training – providing guidance on workplace culture, informal norms, day to day navigation and inclusion within the team.

3. Solutions and Methods

We developed a simple program called the “Buddy System”. The Buddy System purpose is to ensure that our new hire has a friend from day one. This person is separate from their trainer.

The buddy helps the new hire with the following:

- Shows them the ropes and workplace “basics” (water, coffee, supplies, etc.)
- Gets them up to speed on the culture
- Shares the unwritten rules, social norms, traditions, and communication styles
- Shows them they have a stable person to turn to for guidance and general (non-technical) questions
- Helps ensure their training is being completed

Through intentional check-ins, workspace preparation, team introductions, and ongoing support during the first weeks of employment, this model is designed to enhance early engagement and foster a stronger sense of belonging from day one.

4. Outcomes

- Increased new hire engagement during onboarding as measured by weekly survey responses and participation in check-ins
- Improved onboarding satisfaction scores, with new hires reporting feeling more welcomed, supported, and connected to the team
- Faster integration into team culture, with new hires demonstrating understanding of departmental norms, workflows, and expectations within the first 60–90 days
- Improved training completion rates within designated onboarding timelines

Category: Training, Career Development and Staff Retention – Work in Progress

- Increased peer-to-peer connection, resulting in stronger cross-team collaboration early in employment
- Improved communication between trainers, managers, and new hires through feedback gathered in buddy check-ins
- Early identification of onboarding gaps, allowing leadership to adjust training materials or processes in real time
- Higher confidence levels among new hires, as reported in 30, 60, and 90-day assessments
- Enhanced sense of belonging, contributing to a more positive workplace culture within the MCC-CRO

5. Lessons Learned and Future Directions

- The Buddy System is to expand to all departments (Finance, Regulatory, Clinical, etc.) with the “buddy” being someone from a different department
- Being a “buddy” is a commitment
- Consistency is best, try to stick to the same time/day to check in with your buddy
- Over-all well-being improved for both the “buddy” and new hire

Figure

