

A close-up photograph of a young man with light brown hair, wearing a dark pinstripe suit, a light blue shirt, and a dark tie. He is looking down with a focused expression. In the background, another person's face is partially visible on the left, and a blurred office environment is on the right.

# The Thirty-Day Plan for Bringing Emerging Professionals Up to Speed

by Robert W. Wendover

It is no secret that many of today's recent college graduates are coming out of school lacking the problem-solving and decision-making skills employers assume come with their diplomas. At more than half of the 77 American colleges and universities surveyed by *The Wall Street Journal*, at least one third of seniors were unable to assess the quality of evidence in a document, make a cohesive argument, or interpret data in a table. This, and numerous other studies have illustrated the problem.

But with the unemployment rate hovering around four percent, firms are faced with a dilemma. Do they turn away graduates with good training who lack "common sense?" Or do they hire these individuals and spend time and treasure instilling these common-sense skills into book-smart graduates? For obvious reasons, firms are

choosing the latter course. So, allow me to offer a three-part strategy that will help you bring these new contributors up to speed within 30 days. Don't believe me? I challenge you to give it a try.

**Number one, refocus your hiring energies on simulations.** Short of hosting interns for a summer or semester, it is extraordinarily difficult to gather enough information about a graduate's skills to make a \$40,000 decision with a few interviews and a personality assessment. And that's just for the first year of employment. The interview process has never worked all that effectively and with today's on-line resources, new graduates can game the system better than ever. While larger firms have the resources to implement internship programs that provide for on-the-job evaluation, most smaller firms lack this option.

The solution to this is simulations. A simulation can be something simple. You might ask applicants to call a “customer” and resolve an issue. You might ask them to produce a planning document based on a provided scenario. You might ask them to complete an in-basket exercise where they are required to prioritize documents, respond to phoned-in questions, and develop a quick cost estimate.

Preparing these simulations requires more time and thought than sitting down for an interview. But the insights you can gather will be significantly more detailed. It is one thing, for instance to ask applicants how they would approach a particular project. It’s quite another to hand them a detailed scenario and ask them to develop an implementation plan. From an exercise like this, you can observe organizational skills, confidence, problem-solving, ability to recover from mistakes, general demeanor, and the use of all that knowledge they learned in school.

Will having to “perform” in front of the prospective employer dissuade some “top” applicants from “top” schools from pursuing a

job with you? Perhaps. But if they don’t want to submit to this scrutiny, what challenges might you face after they’re on board? Seasoned employers tell me they’d rather narrow the field up front and spend more time screening each applicant than the other way around. Need ideas for how to construct these scenarios? Ask a few of your rising professionals to gather around a table for an hour and come up with a half dozen based on their experiences.

**Number two, provide an orientation video before they come to work.** The first day for most new hires is a whirlwind of meeting new people, completing forms and drinking from a firehose of information. As hard as this is on those who have held previous employment, it can be overwhelming to someone who has never held a wage paying job. In spite of US Census reports indicating that 60 percent of those ages 16-24 are employed, it is quite possible that you’ll be hiring emerging professionals who have never received a regular paycheck before securing a job with you. Not only do they have to adapt to your way of doing things, they have to learn how work works.





Providing them with a fifteen-minute video overview before their first day allows them to gain familiarity with company routines and customs. For many, this might be their first exposure to a full-time, professional environment. What do they wear? Where do they park? What equipment will they receive? What will their workspace look like? What about social media use on the job? When do people take lunch? Where? Don't be afraid to get granular. Not sure what to include? Ask last year's hires to make a list of what they wish they would have known before starting.

Make sure the video "stars" one or more of the people they'll meet in the workplace. These should be individuals roughly their age, not the HR director or president reading from notes or cue cards. Make it lively. Shoot it in the office and other environments where these people might be working. The content is more important than the production, so a smartphone camera will do as long as the sound is good. Ask a couple of your young staffers to produce it. Load it to YouTube or Vimeo and send the link about a week ahead of a new hire's start. That way, they can watch it more than once and feel more comfortable beginning with their first day.

### **Number three, teach them the "top fifteen."**

In most jobs, there are fifteen or so decisions that the position holder makes routinely. In a project management position, for instance, these might be decisions about timetables, deliveries, inspections and permitting, to name a few. The project manager will be implementing the details of an overall plan. But there are dozens of little problems and questions that need to be resolved every day. Seasoned managers have experienced these and are able to anticipate many of the inevitable disruptions that will arise, thereby saving time and resources. In short, they possess the confidence to act on these issues without thinking them through or consulting others.

If you ask seasoned contributors to list the routine decisions they make every week, you'll find they fall into certain categories and there are 15-20 that are made over and over due to the nature of the work. If you ask those same contributors how they make those decisions, they will recite a certain cadence to the process. Codify these processes and teach them to new hires using scenarios. You will shorten the time it takes for them to acquire these insights and develop the confidence to act.



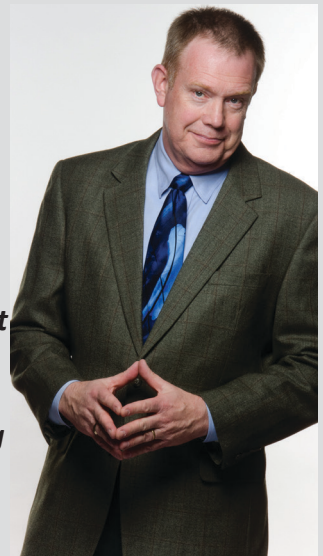
A portion of this has to do with intuition. Seasoned decision-makers rely on their “sixth-sense” to act with ease and speed. This is because their brains recognize patterns in how they make decisions and apply these patterns to novel, but similar situations. (Consider, for example, the last time you were faced with a decision and your little voice said, “Oh, this is just like . . .” and guided you to act based on that experience. That’s pattern recognition.)

No matter how much training and education new graduates have, nothing can match on-the-job experience. But by introducing the decisions they will be making routinely from the get-go, they will get a jump start on this pattern recognition that is so essential to developing their confidence to act. Couple this with solid mentoring and you will enable them to contribute in a meaningful way in a shorter period of time.

Add simulations to your selection process. Send new hires an orientation video and teach them the Top 15. These three steps will shorten the learning curve and add to your bottom line.

### **Robert W. Wendover**

has been researching and writing about workforce trends for more than 30 years. He is the award-winning author of ten books including *Smart Hiring*, *Two Minute Motivation* and *Figure It Out! Making Smart Decisions in a Dumbed-Down World*.



He is a regular contributor to print and electronic media. He has served as a special advisor to the American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC) and on the management faculty of the University of Phoenix for more than ten years.

Contact him at [bobw@commonsenseenterprises.net](mailto:bobw@commonsenseenterprises.net)