



## 6 Chicago Companies Cultivating Belonging Among New Employees

*These workplaces empower employees to forge deep connections with colleagues starting on day one.*

By Olivia Arnold

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During their earliest days at a company, an employee is like a newly planted seed.

Through intentional orientation and onboarding efforts, leaders nurture that seed, enabling it to sprout, grow strong and thrive. If initially neglected, however, the plant may never fully take root and will instead wither away.

In other words, helping employees acclimate and adjust to a new workplace is critical for their long-term career success and retention. The Society for Human Resource Management found that, when done effectively, new hire onboarding results in higher job satisfaction, increased employee performance levels and lower turnover rates. At one organization, new employees who received a structured orientation program were nearly 70 percent more likely to stay at the company for up to three years, according to SHRM.

Teams from the six Chicago companies featured below are dedicated to crafting inclusive workplaces where employees feel considered and cared for through onboarding and beyond. With regular check-ins, team-building activities, buddy programs and more, these workplaces empower new hires to forge deep connections with their colleagues starting on day one.

Through professional development, coaching and mentorship opportunities, employees are encouraged to develop their skill sets and careers. Stressing the importance of open communication and robust diversity, equity and inclusion programming, these companies also work to ensure that all employees, regardless of their backgrounds, feel seen, valued and heard.

From Strata Decision Technology to Echo Global Logistics, Peapod Digital Labs and more, these employees connected with Built In Chicago to share tips on cultivating a sense of belonging among new team members that allows them to flourish.

### **Strata Decision Technology**

Grace Nieslawski, People Operations Specialist

Strata Decision Technology offers software and service solutions that help healthcare providers reduce the cost of care.

**How does Strata Decision Technology welcome new hires?**

Onboarding at Strata is designed to build community for our new hires. We celebrate what makes each new team member unique while also creating a shared purpose in our work.

Pre-arrival, new hires meet their manager and onboarding buddy, who have clear sets of expectations about their roles in supporting new team members. Starting a new job can be overwhelming, and we ensure that our new hires have resources from day one.

Upon arrival, new hires receive a checklist of relationship-building activities, including using our team directory to schedule time with various people across the company. We provide discussion topics to help create connection points between team members.

In week one, our new hires introduce themselves to the company. When sharing about their interests or recent travels, new team members find things they have in common with others at Strata. They are also introduced to ways they can get involved at Strata, such as joining the diversity council or one of our many interest-based Slack communities. It is important that new hires feel that they are contributing to our culture in meaningful and authentic ways.

### **How do these efforts build the foundation for new hires to succeed during the initial onboarding period and beyond?**

By encouraging relationship-building and opportunities for meaningful connections during our onboarding process, we strive to create a sense of belonging for all new team members. A culture of belonging cultivates an inclusive atmosphere where all team members feel embraced and valued for their contributions, which are always priorities at Strata.

As they make connections with fellow team members, new hires start to see our core values in action. Beginning as early as the recruitment process, new hires are not only introduced to “the Strata way” but they are given examples of what our values look like in practice. Rallying around a set of shared values establishes expectations and drives accountability on how we work toward the same goals as a team.

As our new team members get their footing, they are able to build on the foundation they have created and use the Strata network to grow their careers. We offer resources — such as dedicated career coaches, mentor programs and learning paths curated to one’s role — so new hires have the tools they need to achieve their career goals and find success at Strata.

### **What happens when there is a disconnect between the two teams?**

Various issues can arise when the finance and IS teams do not communicate and collaborate. Other departments do not always have visibility into the work that these teams do, but without them organizations would be facing multiple inefficiencies and gaps in their operations.

For example, the IS team can support the finance department by helping them implement tools that provide data and analysis around spending, budgeting and allocations. When finance has insight into this information from across the organization, they can identify ways to save and redirect funds to the departments or initiatives that need them most.

Once a strong working relationship is formed between the finance and IS teams, conversations surrounding budget allocation and high-level priorities will become easier. For example, the teams can align on technology investments that can benefit the entire organization by increasing efficiency and security or can determine whether they need to reconsider their staffing or supply needs based on available finances. Rather than working in parallel, cross-

team collaboration can solve inefficiencies and problems that will result in a better experience for everyone involved.

**Can you tell us about how technology can be implemented to better inform decision-making? How does it benefit the organization as a whole?**

Previously, in many situations, one would find the finance and IS teams working in silos, which sometimes prevented finance departments from getting access to the technology and information they needed. Organizations are now finding, though, that working together and bringing new technologies in can improve operations. Technology has allowed many processes to be automated, with information to drive our decision-making now readily available to help streamline processes like forecasting.

For example, my IS team at Deborah Heart and Lung Center recognized the finance department's need for a solution to help them, so we worked closely with them to implement technology to best suit the unique requirements for financial performance analytics. We now partner with Strata Decision Technology, which provides access to key data throughout the organization.

**What is your advice for other CIOs looking to better collaborate across teams and with other C-Suite members?**

A good place to start is streamlining review cycles. For instance, I used to report to the CEO, but after some internal organizational changes were made, I began reporting to the CFO and the organization began to realize immediate benefits from having us directly collaborate.

Through this change, workflows were optimized and we have been able to significantly streamline operations. This change improved cross-team communication and allowed for a better approval process for the entire organization's IS needs. We now have more transparency across teams along with improved communication so that everyone can understand the risks and possible outcomes of the decisions we make.

It's also important to note that implementing new technology to create change is a step in the right direction, but utilizing it and clearly understanding the tools it can provide is essential to drive the greatest improvements within the organization.

Leadership must also encourage teams to collaborate and implement specific processes to ensure that the communication does happen, or else the siloed system will persist.

One example of these processes could include delegating a group of individuals led by executive leadership and spanning across departments to ensure that new financial performance initiatives are seen through and goals are met. Including people in higher-level conversation to then oversee what is actually happening on the floor will lead to the most accurate route for identifying areas for cost improvement—saving the organization money and identifying areas of cost reduction in a continuous and accountable way.

Without the executive team in support of a cross-team initiative, the needle will only move so far. This kind of communication will not only help individual teams run smoother, but with the essential nature of both the finance and IS team and the power they hold over organizational operations, they have the opportunity to provide strategic optimization in many untapped areas.

## **After the initial onboarding and new hire period, how do you continue fostering a sense of belonging for team members?**

While we embrace a remote-first work environment, we also recognize that coming together in person to build relationships matters. After the initial onboarding period, new hires visit our Chicago campus for a two-day retreat, during which they have the opportunity to meet other new hires and learn more about our company from subject matter experts at Strata. They also attend a leadership panel where senior leaders share their career journeys and give advice for starting and building careers at Strata.

Our onboarding efforts would not be possible without the cross-collaborative efforts of many teams at Strata. Our onboarding steering committee — comprised of members from our recruiting, people operations, training, campus care and IT teams — partners with new hire managers. With the support of a new hire roadmap and checklist, these teams ensure that new hires have consistent, supportive and positive experiences and are afforded opportunities to find their Strata community throughout their onboarding journey and beyond.

## **Echo Global Logistics**

Sharmila Fowler-Pos, Head of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

### **How does Echo Global Logistics welcome new hires?**

Our employees are our greatest asset, so it is vital to create a sense of belonging from the moment a candidate accepts an offer of employment from us. All new Echo Global Logistics employees, regardless of role, receive a welcome swag pack that includes a backpack, umbrella, notebook, pen and letters from our CEO, president and chief operating officer.

Along with this package, every new hire is welcomed into the “freight life” via a new hire orientation, which includes a thorough review of Echo, our industry and R.I.D.E., our diversity, equity and inclusion framework.

For client-facing, support and IT roles, we offer extensive training. Our industry-leading sales training program offers new hires eight weeks of introductory education, followed by months of continued coaching and mentorship. I love that these classes enable new hires to develop relationships that contribute to their sense of belonging.

In addition, one of our business resource groups, Women at Echo, holds quarterly orientations for all new hires who identify as women and allies, providing additional opportunities to network. It is really exciting when a new hire reaches out asking for more information on DEI or provides their perspective.

### **How do these efforts build the foundation for new hires to succeed during the initial onboarding period and beyond?**

Building a firm foundation for new hires to succeed is all about building skills and connections. In addition to our onboarding programming, we offer a variety of training workshops to foster soft-skill and career development on topics such as inclusion, empathy and bias.

We also recommend that our new hires get involved with at least one of our five business resource groups, either as a member who self-identifies or as an ally. Many business resource

group leaders have talked about how their involvement in the groups has vastly expanded their internal networks, increased their visibility to senior executives and honed their leadership skills.

Last year, we introduced our “Viewpoints External Speaker Series,” which focused on a diverse range of topics designed to inspire employees to think outside the box. We also rolled out our “drive-in” movie series aligned with specific holidays, observances and celebrations that are meaningful to our business resource groups and employees. Employees watch the selected movie at home and sign up for a virtual discussion. When we come together to share our perspectives, we are also able to gain a deeper understanding of our colleagues.

### **What tips do you have for other leaders looking to foster a sense of belonging for new hires?**

There is a significant amount of research that states that a manager’s behavior is linked to an employee’s experience of inclusion. This means we need to continuously provide training and education to all employees, especially managers.

The best managerial relationships are built on introspection and self-awareness. People managers should honestly assess who they are, how they see the world and what their biases may be. As you know, we all have biases. Once you understand yourself and how you feel a sense of belonging, you can then take steps to create inclusion for others.

The key here is to develop a curiosity mindset. Simply ask, learn and observe. Curiosity can lead us to form more meaningful connections, which in turn can create a better sense of belonging.

## **Peapod Digital Labs**

Michelle Berin, Onboarding Specialist

### **How does Peapod Digital Labs welcome new hires?**

One week before a new hire starts, we send them a welcome email with all of the information and meeting invitations they will need for their first week. They also receive a fun swag box full of branded grocery-themed items for their kitchen.

During their first few days with Peapod Digital Labs, the new hire’s manager will set up one-on-one meetings with other members of the team, making the first week a sort of “syllabus week.” We then have 30-, 60- and 90-day check-ins to share relevant information with the new hire about their progress, and we invite them to participate in group meetings with other new PDLers to create a sense of camaraderie.

### **How do these efforts build the foundation for new hires to succeed during the initial onboarding period and beyond?**

We can lessen the tension and worry that new hires might experience by creating a warm, encouraging environment. This promotes greater productivity and lower turnover rates by making new recruits feel connected, valued and involved right away.

A positive onboarding experience also defines expectations, clarifies job duties and sets the tone for future performance, all of which can contribute to long-term success.

## **What tips do you have for other leaders looking to foster a sense of belonging for new hires?**

To foster a sense of belonging for new hires, leaders should make sure to provide regular feedback, recognize accomplishments and celebrate team achievements. They should also encourage open communication, actively listen to employees' concerns and suggestions, and create opportunities for professional growth and development.

Providing opportunities for employees to connect with each other — through mentorship programs, employee resource groups, social events and more — can also contribute to a sense of belonging. Finally, leaders should strive to create an inclusive culture that values diversity and respects all employees, regardless of their background, experience or position within the organization.

## **MoLo Solutions**

Joshua Coleman, Corporate Trainer

### **How does MoLo Solutions welcome new hires?**

We welcome every new hire with the MoLo service mindset. We want to make everyone feel like we are there for them, both professionally and personally.

In order to create strong continuity in our culture, we allow new hires to shadow colleagues and speak to leadership across all departments. We create an environment in which people can be their authentic selves and communicate openly and honestly. To ensure that every representative is confident and empowered in continuing their MoLo journey, we also meet and communicate one on one with new hires throughout their time in training and beyond.

### **How do these efforts build the foundation for new hires to succeed during the initial onboarding period and beyond?**

Everything we do in our training program is designed to make representatives of all experience levels ready to take on their individual day to days.

We complete daily activities to make sure the fundamental building blocks of industry knowledge stay at the forefront of every new hire's mind. As we continue to work through weeks of content, we circle back to meet with each new hire individually to ensure these crucial pieces are still firmly in place.

These efforts build a firm foundation by teaching new hires to look at and understand things from a conceptual level first and then apply that knowledge to navigating any process that may present itself.

## **What tips do you have for other leaders looking to foster a sense of belonging for new hires?**

The first step in making people feel like they belong is creating an environment in which they can communicate in ways that are true to themselves. Once a person feels like they can speak and be heard, they will start to reveal their genuine personality.

When fostering that, begin with how well you are able to connect with someone outside of work-related communication. If you are actively involved in considering people when they are not working, it makes it much easier to manage when they are.

## **CSC Corptax**

Brian Billett, Senior Director of Tax Team CDMS Operation

### **How does CSC Corptax welcome new hires?**

CSC Corptax places great emphasis on creating a warm and welcoming environment for new hires. During the onboarding process, we pair each newcomer with a mentor from their team who helps them learn the ropes. We organize team-building activities and informal meet and greets, so they can get to know their colleagues in relaxed settings. We also hold cultural orientation sessions to help our newest teammates understand our company values and expectations.

### **How do these efforts build the foundation for new hires to succeed during the initial onboarding period and beyond?**

These efforts provide new hires with a strong support system, which helps ensure they're comfortable asking questions and seeking help when needed. We empower them to actively contribute to the team by fostering relationships and promoting open communication. This foundation helps new hires build confidence and accelerates their integration into the team, leading to higher satisfaction and retention rates.

### **What tips do you have for other leaders looking to foster a sense of belonging for new hires?**

For leaders looking to foster a sense of belonging for new hires, it's essential to prioritize open communication, provide a robust support system and actively involve newcomers in team activities. Encourage existing team members to be approachable and invest in building strong relationships. Finally, ensure that company values and expectations are clearly communicated and demonstrated by leadership, setting the tone for the entire organization.

Fostering a sense of belonging doesn't end after onboarding. We continue to support team members through regular check-ins, professional development opportunities and cross-functional collaboration. By recognizing and celebrating individual and team achievements, we strive to create an environment where everyone feels valued and connected to the organization's success. Additionally, we organize team events and activities to help maintain strong relationships and promote open communication across the company.