
The onboarding checklist

Every line of the first ninety days, with the one column most checklists leave out: who owns it.

How to use this. Print it, or fill it in as you go. Each row names an owner, because the item that fails is rarely the item nobody thought of. It is the item everybody assumed belonged to someone else.

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Before you start

Three things decide whether a checklist works. None of them are the list itself.

Ownership. A row that says "set up accounts" with no name beside it gets done on day two, by whoever notices. Every row here carries an owner: HR, the manager, or IT.

Timing. Half of a good onboarding happens before the person arrives. If your list starts on day one, day one becomes paperwork day, and the new hire spends their first eight hours reading policies instead of meeting the people they will work with.

The list has to reach the new hire. Not this copy, with its internal notes. A version that says what happens to them and when. Most of the anxiety in a first week is not about the work. It is about not knowing what is supposed to happen next.

Where the process ends

At ninety days, with two events on the same day: a review against what the manager wrote before the person started, and the question "what did onboarding miss". A process without an end never gets reviewed, and a checklist that is never rewritten describes tools that were replaced and people who left.

Who owns what

SUMMARY

Contract, payroll, benefits	HR	Fails as: a month worked on the wrong tax code
Start date passed to IT	HR	Fails as: accounts created on day two
Which access this role needs	MANAGER	Fails as: IT copies the last person and grants too much
Accounts, hardware, second factor	IT	Fails as: day one spent waiting
The first task	MANAGER	Fails as: week one has no work in it
The ninety-day statement	MANAGER	Fails as: review has nothing to measure against
Buddy assignment	MANAGER	Fails as: buddy finds out by being asked a question
Compliance training	HR	Fails as: crammed, resented, forgotten
Rewriting this list	WHOEVER ASKS AT 90 DAYS	Fails as: never happens

Stage 1. Before day one

The half that decides the rest, and the half most often compressed into the morning of the start date.

Paperwork and payroll

HR

ITEM	DONE BY
☐ Signed offer sent back with start date, start time and where to be, in one message rather than four	
☐ Contract, tax forms, bank details and ID collected and checked before day one, not on it	
☐ Background and reference checks closed, with a decision recorded either way	
☐ Added to payroll before the first cutoff, not after it	
☐ Benefits enrolment window explained in writing, with the deadline stated as a date	
☐ First-week schedule sent to the new hire two or three days ahead	
☐ Start date passed to IT and to the manager, in writing	

The work itself

MANAGER

ITEM	DONE BY
☐ A written statement of what this person will be doing in ninety days. One paragraph. Used twice: in week one and at the ninety-day review	
☐ The first task chosen and written down before the person arrives. Small, real, finishable in a day or two	
☐ A buddy assigned by name, and told they are the buddy, with what that means and for how long	
☐ Calendar invites for week one sent before day one	
☐ The team told who is joining, what they will do, and when they start	
☐ The access list for this role written down and sent to IT	

Accounts and hardware

IT

ITEM	DONE BY
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- ☐ Accounts created and tested, dormant until the start date: email, SSO, chat, calendar, and whatever the role actually uses
 - ☐ Access built from a role template, not copied from the last person who held the job
 - ☐ Hardware ready, or for a remote hire shipped with a tracking number and a delivery date before the start date
 - ☐ A password reset and second-factor enrolment path that works before the account does
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The one that catches everybody

That last IT line sounds pedantic until the first morning, when a new hire cannot enrol their second factor because the enrolment link goes to the mailbox the second factor is protecting.

Stage 2. Day one

The goal is not coverage. It is that the person leaves having met people, having done one real thing, and knowing what tomorrow looks like.

ITEM	OWNER	DONE
☐ Someone meets them by name at a stated time. In an office, at the door. Remote, on a call that starts on time	MANAGER	.....
☐ Laptop works, they can sign in, second factor enrolled, password changed	IT	.....
☐ A tour: of the building, or of the tools. For remote, a map of which conversation happens where	BUDDY	.....
☐ Manager, thirty minutes: what the team does, how this role fits, and the ninety-day statement read out loud	MANAGER	.....
☐ Buddy, thirty minutes: how things actually work here. A different conversation, and not the same person	BUDDY	.....
☐ Lunch with somebody. Not alone at the desk on the first day	TEAM	.....
☐ One small thing finished and shipped by the end of the day	MANAGER	.....
☐ What happens tomorrow, said out loud before they leave	MANAGER	.....

"One small thing" depends on the job

For a developer, a merged pull request or a closed ticket. For support, one ticket answered with somebody watching. For a salesperson, sitting in on a live call and writing the follow-up note. For a lawyer or a finance hire, one clause or one line item reviewed on something real rather than a training file. The test is not whether it shipped. It is whether they went home having contributed something instead of having been shown things.

What does not belong on day one

Eight policy documents, the full compliance suite, and systems training for tools they will not touch for a month. The first day is for people and for one piece of real work.

Stage 3. The first week

Orientation in the real sense: learning where things are, who does what, and how decisions get made here.

ITEM	OWNER	DONE
☐ Fifteen minutes each with every person they will work with weekly. Booked by the manager, not left to the new hire to arrange	MANAGER	.....
☐ Read access to the last quarter of decisions: docs, tickets, and the channel where arguments happened	IT	.....
☐ The first real task, the one chosen before they arrived, started and finished	MANAGER	.....
☐ Compliance and mandatory training booked into slots, not crammed into one afternoon	HR	.....
☐ Expenses, holidays and sick leave explained once by a person, then linked	HR	.....
☐ End of week: ask what was confusing, and write the answer down	MANAGER	.....

The cheapest improvement you will make

That last line is the only mechanism most companies have for improving onboarding at all, and it costs ten minutes. New people learn a company from its arguments faster than from its handbook, and they can see what is confusing for about three weeks before they stop noticing.

Stage 4. Thirty, sixty and ninety days

Integration: the move from being shown work to owning it.

Thirty days

LEARNING

ITEM	OWNER	DONE
☐ One piece of work delivered end to end, however small	MANAGER	.....
☐ Feedback in both directions, scheduled, not "my door is always open"	MANAGER	.....
☐ Access list reviewed against reality: what did they have to ask for. Every one of those is a line missing from the IT template	IT	.....
☐ Probation criteria restated in writing, so nobody is surprised later	HR	.....

Sixty days

CONTRIBUTING

ITEM	OWNER	DONE
☐ Owning something small outright, with the decisions that come with it	MANAGER	.....
☐ Meeting people outside the immediate team	BUDDY	.....
☐ Second feedback conversation, which is usually the honest one	MANAGER	.....

Ninety days

OWNING

ITEM	OWNER	DONE
☐ Review against the statement written before day one, word for word	MANAGER	.....
☐ Probation confirmed or addressed, on time, in writing	HR	.....
☐ Ask what onboarding missed, while it is fresh and they are no longer afraid to answer	MANAGER	.....
☐ This checklist updated from that answer	HR	.....

The ninety-day statement

Write this before the person starts. It is used twice, in week one and at the review, and it is the single most useful thing on the whole list.

Write each line so that at the end of the period there is a yes or a no. "Can explain what the team owns and who asks for what" is checkable. "Understands the product" is not.

NAME AND ROLE

START DATE

MANAGER

BUDDY

At thirty days, this person can

LEARNING

At sixty days, this person owns

CONTRIBUTING

At ninety days, success looks like

OWNING

Two rules that keep it honest

Write it before the person starts, because a plan written after they arrive gets shaped around what they turned out to be good at. And keep it to one paragraph per stage: the version that survives to the review is always the short one.

Remote hires

Not the same list delivered over video. Four things change.

ITEM	OWNER	DONE
☐ Hardware ordered when the offer is signed, not when the contract comes back. A day of slack built in, and someone confirms it arrived and switches on	IT	.....
☐ Working hours and time zone written down, on the calendar and in the team channel. Not "she is in Europe"	MANAGER	.....
☐ Written-first norms explained: where decisions are recorded, what gets a document and what gets a message, which channel is read within the hour	BUDDY	.....
☐ Day one starts on a call with cameras, not a chat message saying "let me know when you are on"	MANAGER	.....

Internal moves

Someone moving between teams usually gets nothing, on the grounds that they already work here.

ITEM	OWNER	DONE
☐ Access to the new team's systems granted	IT	.....
☐ Access to the old team's systems reviewed and removed, on a date	IT	.....
☐ A first task in the new role	MANAGER	.....
☐ A buddy in the new team, because their old network answers the wrong questions	MANAGER	.....
☐ The ninety-day statement, same as any hire	MANAGER	.....
☐ An explicit conversation about what they are no longer responsible for	MANAGER	.....

The one that gets skipped

That last row. It is why internal movers spend their first two months doing both jobs.

What to measure

Four numbers are enough, and three of them are free.

Time to first shipped work	Days from the start date to the first thing that reached a real user, customer or colleague who was not onboarding them. Measured in weeks means day one is doing paperwork.
Access tickets in the first fortnight	A proxy for how wrong the role template is, and the cheapest signal here. Every ticket is a line somebody should have added to the IT checklist.
Ninety-day retention	And its uncomfortable sibling, ninety-day regret, which you only get by asking, and only if the answer feels safe.
The confusion answers	Asked in week one and again at ninety days. Not a score, the actual sentences. They are the raw material for the next version of this document.

Who keeps this document true

The ninety-day answers need one named owner and one review a quarter. Without that they stay interesting, go into a file nobody opens, and within a year this checklist describes tools that were replaced and people who left.

A worked example

The same checklist, filled in for one real shape of hire: a first engineering hire at a company of eleven people, starting remote on a Monday.

ITEM	OWNER	DONE
☐ Offer signed, start date confirmed as Mon 6 Oct, 10:00 her time	HR	18 Sep
☐ Laptop ordered the day the offer came back, tracked, due 1 Oct	IT	18 Sep
☐ Ninety-day statement written: "owns the deploy pipeline, and we find out about routine releases afterwards"	MANAGER	24 Sep
☐ First task chosen: fix the staging seed script, half a day, already in the backlog	MANAGER	24 Sep
☐ Buddy: Marek, told on 25 Sep, asked for two weeks of first-answer duty	MANAGER	25 Sep
☐ Access list written from the backend role template, sent to IT	MANAGER	26 Sep
☐ Accounts created dormant: email, SSO, repo, staging, error tracker, on-call rota (read only)	IT	1 Oct
☐ Laptop arrived, switched on, second factor enrolled from a recovery code posted separately	IT	2 Oct
☐ Week one calendar sent: six fifteen-minute introductions, two blocks of quiet time a day	MANAGER	2 Oct
☐ Day one, 10:00: video call, cameras on, thirty minutes with the manager, statement read out	MANAGER	6 Oct
☐ Day one, 15:00: seed script fixed and merged. First commit on day one	NEW HIRE	6 Oct
☐ Friday: "what was confusing" produced three answers, all about where decisions get recorded	MANAGER	10 Oct
☐ Thirty days: four access tickets raised in week one, all four added to the backend role template	IT	3 Nov

What the example is really showing

Nothing here is expensive. The laptop was ordered three weeks early, the first task came out of a backlog that already existed, and the buddy was asked rather than assigned in a spreadsheet. The only line that took real thought was the ninety-day statement, and it is the line the review runs on.

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