

ONBOARDING AND STAYING ON BOARD: CAREER-ORIENTATION PROGRAM AND RETENTION INTERVIEWS IN HCSO

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Introduction

Challenges of increasing staff turnover as well as attraction and retention of new generation statisticians calls attention to **development of more effective onboarding and engaging activities** provided by HR departments in National Statistical Offices (NSOs).

In recent years we experience that statisticians tend to spend less and less time in the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO). Analysis of recent HR data shows that after time-consuming and often difficult recruitment processes we are often not able to retain our staff for long. Causes of unsuccessful retention is being analysed by the method of exit interviews – the results of which are reported half-yearly to top management – but when it comes to an exit interview, the decision on leaving the office has already been made by the employee, so the timing is too late to take any HRM actions to retain the particular person.

Recognizing these issues we have decided to shift to proactivity from just reactions so we have continuously been developing our career-orientation program for newcomers, which intends to strengthen our „onboarding” activity, since we believe that the initial few weeks of employment is the foundation of a longer career as a statistician. In addition, this year we have introduced the practice of repeated retention interviews with our new staff and we try to use the information gained for better HRM „services on board”. All in all, the **aim is to develop the services of our „cabin crew” (HR staff) to provide a long, comfortable and safe „flight” for talented statisticians, who choose our company to fly with.**

In my paper I describe the above mentioned two practices: career-orientation program for newcomers and retention interviews after 3 months, 1 year and 2 years of work in HCSO.

1. Career-orientation program of newcomers in HCSO

Adjustment of newcomers is associated with important employee and organizational outcomes such as satisfaction, commitment, turnover and performance. A successful organizational socialization process can result in effective employees with positive work attitudes who stay there for longer. Therefore, understanding and managing the process of workplace socialization and career orientation can provide competitive advantages to NSOs. (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011)

Purposes of orientation programs for newcomers include introducing a new employee to the organization and to new colleagues, familiarizing with the organization's objectives, history, philosophy, procedures, HRM policies, requirements and benefits, as well as specific duties and responsibilities related to his job. (DeCenzo & Robbins 2009)

Orientation programs help newcomers to adjust emotionally to the new workplace, to understand where things are, who to ask when unsure about things, to learn about internal regulations and important "cultural messages" regarding expectations. These matters would be picked up by newcomers anyway in their first months of employment, but a formal program ensures that all the information is forwarded officially and more quickly, making them less likely to leave at an early date. (Torrington et al. 2008)

Orientation activities that are structured so people experience them together and have the chance to get to know each other, as well as involving experienced employees as role models, mentors or trainers during the process are making newcomers more likely to stay with the organization,. (Allen, 2008)

In bigger organizations, like in an NSO HR departments are responsible for explaining overall organization matters via induction programs and generally it is recommended that HR departments play a major coordinating role in the orientation process.

Experiencing challenges regarding employee retention in recent years, the HR department in HCSO have proposed to put more emphasis to new statisticians' career-orientation, workplace socialization and integration. Therefore, we have re-considered, re-introduced and expanded our so-called "newcomers training course" of the internal training system. The aim of the new, two-day long course (which is supposed to be the first phase of a complex career-orientation program) is to support understanding the organizational culture, objectives, policies and main procedures by our new employees, shortly after entering HCSO. It also lays the foundation of employee engagement and career management, moreover it strengthens system approach, responsibility for work and it is a great opportunity for networking.

1.1. Target group and tutors

Target group of the course are newcomers, a few weeks or months after entering the office. Participation is obligatory for the two-day long (with pauses and time for Q/A) classroom event. Criteria of completion is presence and test at the end. The Human Resource Strategy and Training Section is responsible for working out the syllabus and organizing the courses. We also provide instructors for specific topics (eg. civil service rules) and we provide facilitators for exercises throughout the course. Prominent experts and managers of certain departments are asked to be presenters or tutors of different topics of the course.

1.2. Scheduling of the courses

Courses have been organized regularly (every half-a-year) since 2015 depending on the number of newcomers. Unfortunately there is no capacity for organizing the course every month – which would be a more feasible way of informing newcomers in time – so we usually have participants with different knowledge levels at the courses. A possible solution for this problem would be providing e-learning content related to the course, which could be implemented any time before participation. Introducing e-learning elements might shorten the overall length of the classroom event as well.

1.3. Syllabus of the course

As you can see from the syllabus below, topics of Day 1 includes the past (history), the present and the future of the organization, cultural and fundamental issues, extended with some opportunities for socialization and networking between participants, whereas Day 2 concentrates on the most important practical, regulatory, professional topics and ends with a closing test.

Topics	Presenter/tutor/facilitator
Welcome, introduction	Head of HR Department
“Ice-breaking” exercise, getting to know each other	colleagues of HR Section
History of HCSO, guided tour in the building, visit to Library	Director General of HCSO Library
Working in HCSO – personal experiences of a colleague	voluntary colleague
Functions of the Official Statistical Service in Hungary	General Statistical Coordination Department
Act on Official Statistics in Hungary	Legal Affairs Section
Coordination of international relations and the European Statistical Service	International Relations Section
Organizational development of HCSO	Head of Organizational Development Working Group
Networking games/exercises, closing of Day 1	colleagues of HR Section

Data protection from legal, methodological and dissemination aspects	Data Protection Officer and the experts of Methodology Department and Dissemination Directorate
IT Security of HCSO	IT Security Officer
Civil service regulations, labour law issues	Head of HR Section
Training system, Intranet, HR self-service interface	expert of HR Section
Statistical data production process	Head of Methodology Department
Dissemination policy of HCSO	Dissemination Directorate
Information service of HCSO	Head of Information Service
Closing Test, Q/A, closing of Day 2	colleagues of HR Section

Table 1. Syllabus of Career-orientation program of newcomers in HCSO

1.4. Follow-up

After each course all participants are required to fill in two surveys. The first survey is for evaluating the course itself: giving feedback in terms of content, topics, tutors, organizer and overall impact. Results are individually reported to the presenters and summary of the results is concluded by HR Section. Suggestions are discussed internally and with presenters, conclusively the course syllabus and content is continuously being developed according to the proposed actions. The other survey is about personal interest, career plans, motivations and drivers of engagement the results of which are summarized and reported to top management yearly.

228 respondents have filled in our questionnaire since the beginning of the development process and we are glad to claim that have managed to improve all aspects of our orientation program so far, as you can see the summary of results on the comparative chart below.

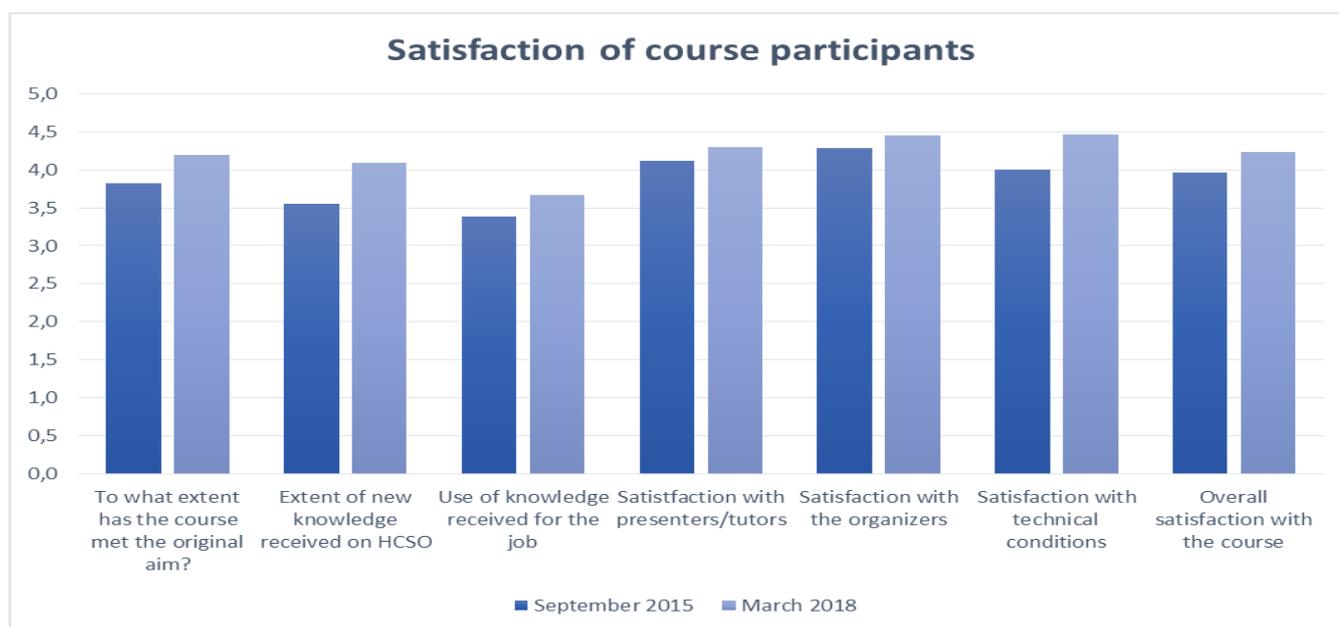


Chart 1. Participants' satisfaction with Career-orientation program of newcomers in HCSO

2. Retention interviews in HCSO

An orientation course like the one described above more belongs to the group of „traditional onboarding methods”, which assume that organizational values are something to be taught to and adopted by newcomers. However, subordinating an employee’s identity and accepting an organization’s identity may not be optimal on the long run. We also need more sustainable socialization practices that get newcomers behave authentically and fully engage them, encouraging them to express their perspectives and strengths on the job from the beginning. (Cable et al., 2013)

Moreover, any decisions on actions related to employee retention require data and analyses rather than impressions of selected situations or panic reactions. An efficient approach is correctly identifying the root causes of employee disengagement and addressing these causes with on-target solutions that increase the engagement of staff. HR departments play an important role in making sure that exit interviews or surveys are done properly by findings are reported to the management as well as in partnering with managers, providing resources for corrective actions. Although, it is also important that HR department is a partner and not the accountable party in the engagement process. (Branham, 2005)

In HCSO the HR Department have been doing exit interviews for a few years, but we have realized that when it comes to an exit interview, we already have the decision on leaving by the employee, so the timing is too late to take any HRM actions to retain the particular person. In order to provide better HR services for our active staff we need to know in time how they feel: we ought to get more feedback and regularly gain better insights directly from them. Actually, an exit interview should not be the first conversation an NSO has with an employee about his feelings and ideas, but they should be asked individually in regular conversations why they stay with the organization and what might make them leave. (Spain & Groysberg, 2016)

Naturally, line managers may collect useful information for example on employee attitudes, relations, job satisfaction or workplace climate anytime informally, and even formally every half year, when performance evaluation interviews take place. However, some questions and topics they obviously do not cover and some questions employees would not discuss with their own line manager. This is the field where HR department may enter and provide support. Just by having an interview with an employee she will likely to be feeling more appreciated, since there is time for her voice to be heard on topics related to her own good. The real clue is though, how we use the feedback that we receive and whether colleagues would sense any changes after telling us their opinions, suggestions?

Some NSOs regularly deliver staff satisfaction surveys, which is good for collecting information from many people and it provides a good picture on tendencies in the whole organization, therefore the results may be important elements of a managerial report. On the other hand, results of satisfaction surveys – especially in the case of anonymous replies – can not be used for solving individual cases and problems. Of course anonymity is often preferred by staff and certainly in some cases you may gain more information from an anonymous electronic survey, but for example if someone claims in a survey that he feels really bad in his job now and would like to change we obviously will not be able to help, since we do not even know his name. That is the main reason why we chose the method of retention (or in some sources it is referred as “stay”) interviews in case of newcomers, which are structured one-on-one discussions to learn specific actions that must be taken to strengthen the individual engagement and retention and to discover why a current employee continues to work for the organization. (Jeffries, 2014)

2.1. Objectives of retention interviews

- increasing efficiency of recruitment, employer branding and selection
- finding the right job in HCSO for the right person in the right time
- follow-up and supporting onboarding, career-orientation and workplace socialization of newcomers
- supporting individual career-management of talented statisticians
- receiving feedback and analyzing satisfaction levels of employees

2.2. Target groups and scheduling of interviews

Interviews are done with all newcomers (except for physical workers) three times:

1. Within 3 months after entering HCSO
2. 1 year after entering HCSO
3. 2 years after entering HCSO

Part I of the interview is only done with newcomers within 3 months of arrival, Part II is done on all three occasions. Participation is voluntary by the newcomers but we have not experienced any refusals so far.

We have begun work in May 2018 and to date we have done 21 interviews the results of which have already been analyzed. Interviews are done by colleagues of the Human Resource Strategy and Training Section. After each interview the interviewer (HR colleague) is required to note their conclusions in a short summary report that answers four main questions:

- What support the HRM section could provide in this particular case for the employee?
- What HRM functions could be strengthened at the particular department or emphasized by the line manager and how?
- Could I provide any support for the employee during the interview or propose my support later?
- Did the employee show open attitude for another (next) retention interview?

Obviously, the content of every interview is managed confidentially by the interviewer. Many actions may be taken individually by the HR colleague, after consultation with the Head of HR Section, so revealing names are not necessary. Experiences of interviews without names are regularly changed at HR section meetings, however, in some cases it is not possible to hide the name and consultation is needed with the mentor or line managers, for example when the suggestion is preparing an internal mobility action.

2.3. Structure, content and outcome of interviews

Part I. Questions on recruitment (within 3 months after entering HCSO)

Question	Use of information	Possible HRM actions
1. How did you get to know HCSO's job opportunity/advertisement? (<i>a list of forums is provided for choice but any new might be named</i>)	Follow-up of job advertising policies, measuring efficiency of recruitment methods	Re-defining or changing scope of recruitment methods, moving to new forums or development of new tools
2. How and where did you search for jobs?	Getting to know where the people we want to reach are looking for jobs	Re-defining or changing scope of recruitment methods, moving to new forums or development of new tools
3. Did you have any other job offers or opportunities to choose from?	Getting to know our competitors on the job market better and the offers of other companies	Development of more attractive and more competitive job offers
4. Why did you choose HCSO? (<i>list of preferences is provided for 1-7 vote but any new might be named</i>)	Identifying our strengths and the motivations of newcomers	Development of employer branding activities, putting more emphasis on strengths in advertisements and defining our offers more accordingly to motivations of newcomers
5. Why did you change job? (if you had any other before)	Recognizing motivations of newcomers and getting to know our competitors better	Trying to provide what the newcomer was looking for here when choosing HCSO

6. <i>Do you think any of your previous colleagues would like to change job and come to HCSO for similar reasons?</i>	Getting to know our competitors better and gaining information on possible new applicants	Headhunting
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Table 2. Retention interview questions, use of information and possible actions (Part I.)

**Part II. Questions on expectations and satisfaction
(within 3 months, 1 year and 2 years after entering HCSO)**

Question	Use of information	Possible HRM actions
1. To what extent has HCSO met your previous expectations so far? <i>(voting on 1-7 scale)</i>	Getting to know the image of HCSO from the outside and from the inside, analyzing strengths and weaknesses	Corrections of employer branding activities, painting a more realistic but still attractive picture. Clarification of expectations better at job interviews and during recruitment process.
2. How long do you think will it take to learn all important elements of your job to become self-employed?	Analyzing job complexity, knowledge transfer, learning skills and mentoring activities	Suggestions for line manager, proposals for mentoring or trainings
3. Are you satisfied with your progression in learning your job so far?	Analyzing knowledge transfer, learning skills and mentoring activities	Suggestions for line manager, proposals for mentoring or trainings
4. Do you have any results or achievements already, which you are proud of?	Analyzing personal motivation and follow-up of career-development	Individual career management
5. What do you like the most in your job and in HCSO?	Analyzing strengths of HCSO and of certain jobs/departments as well as analyzing personal motivations	Reporting on strengths to leaders and top management, promoting action plans
6. What do you like the least in your job and in HCSO?	Analyzing weaknesses of HCSO and of certain jobs/departments as well as analyzing personal motivations	Reporting on weaknesses to leaders and top management, promoting action plans
7. Are there any other fields of work or departments in HCSO, which you are interested in, or would like to learn better, or even work there?	Analyzing personal interests	Offering a study visit, rotation period, consultation, or training courses, later discussion with leaders on internal mobility possibilities
8. Do you have a mentor or leader who continuously monitors and supports your development and whom you may ask anytime for help? From whom would you prefer this kind of support?	Analyzing mentoring, onboarding, knowledge transfer and talent management practices of a certain department	Providing a mentor or other individual career management support, suggestions for line manager

9. Have you had the chance to be personally trained for your job in any form, or have you already had the chance to develop some specific competencies needed for your job?	Analyzing performance evaluation and training at a certain department as well as internal knowledge transfer and talent management practices	Consultation with line manager, offering training courses in individual training plan according to identified competency gaps, providing a mentor
10. What makes you engaged the most?	Finding out individual “drivers” of engagement and motivation	Proposing individual retention and motivation actions for line managers
11. Do you feel anything is really missing now from the above mentioned?	Finding out individual “drivers” of engagement and motivation	Proposing individual retention and motivation actions for line managers
12. How satisfied are you with your tasks, challenges, work environment, motivation, colleagues and leaders? (1-5 scale)	Data for managerial report on overall job satisfaction	Managerial report, proposals for changes in organizational HR strategy
13. What are your career plans for short- middle- long-term? (where would you like to be in 1-2, 3-5, 10-20 years of time?)	Data for managerial report on overall job satisfaction	Managerial report, proposals for changes in organizational HR strategy

Table 3. Retention interview questions, use of information and possible actions (Part II.)

2.4. Experiences and actions

Retention interviews have been more than welcomed by colleagues in all 21 cases so far. All of them replied honestly even regarding their difficulties. They were open to further interviews next time. Generally, we noted that HCSO is chosen by many because they find statistics interesting, they have the ability to use past experiences at work and they find the organization family-friendly. Time needed for learning their job varies but many would prefer more support on this field. Many new colleagues have no career plans for middle- or long term, or they are not familiar with career possibilities but they seem to be interested in other fields within the organization. In one case for example, we actually found out and supported an internal mobility action of the colleague to another department after the interview. Other actions taken were like informing the colleagues about different possibilities, incentives, services that they lacked information about, giving support in choosing trainings, in actions regarding problems with work environment, reporting and supporting line managers about mentoring needs.

Retention interviews brought the following “hidden benefits” as well for the HR Section that had originally not been considered as aims of starting this project:

- involving all HR colleagues as interviewers in this project was a motivational factor for them, their normal jobs were improved with an interesting new task;
- HR colleagues got closer to the staff personally and developed trust to become contacts for any other HR issues later.

3. Summary and future developments

Employee retention becomes a strategic priority of HRM in national statistical offices these days, especially in those organizations that face skills shortages and that are not competitive enough on the job market to keep their staff for long. Actually, all offices may be challenged since the length of time that young generation workforce tends to spend at one workplace is getting shorter than ever before. A straightforward answer to the problem of how to retain staff is to provide them with a better deal than they perceive they could get by working for alternative employers. (Torrington et al. 2008, p. 200)

However, there are lots of approaches, good practices, recommended strategies that deeply explain the clues but not any of them would work in all cases or all organizations. I described two practices of HCSO, which we consider as important, new, or renewed elements of retention management, although we would not claim that these are solutions that we are completely done with, or that they would be useful for long years in the same form but they are rather subjects of continuous efficiency measurement and further development.

Regarding our career orientation program the future plans are to have this two-day course only as a **collective first phase of a later personalized, modular, introductory program**, which may consist of other different modules with formal and informal professional training, on-the-job training or job-shadowing, consultations, document packages as well as offered mentoring or job rotation. An important direction of development is making the course itself a blended-learning course so substituting some topics with e-elements to make it accessible for newcomers right after entering HCSO. Pilot project of the civil service mentoring system is also planned to start this year in the Hungarian public administration in the framework of which HCSO has 6 mentors. They could definitely play important roles in following phases of career orientation and integration of our newcomers by mentoring activities.

Retention interview is still a new method used in HCSO but we have already collected lots of information and we have received useful feedback from those who were interviewed so we know that we would like to use it regularly in the future, though the structure of questions and the processing of results will be subjects of continuous improvement.

All in all, I believe that development of both the above described practices make our retention activities more effective by supporting individual career management (possibly adjusted to the employee's personal needs and life-cycle) of statisticians starting immediately after onboarding and throughout the whole flight. Improvement of these practices and our cabin crew are crucial to make our on-flight services better and our passengers more satisfied, consequently winning competitive advantages for our NSO among other "flight companies".

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