WELCOME

A GUIDE TO REFRESHING YOUR ONBOARDING PROGRAM:
THE MOST EFFECTIVE TACTICS TO ENGAGE NEW TALENT

UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

Successfully onboarding new employees begins before they even walk through the doors. Planning is important – **the earlier you can start the process the better.**

We've surveyed students and employers to identify the most effective onboarding tactics. In this guide, you'll find practical tips and best practices to effectively and successfully onboard new talent to your organization.

"The goal of onboarding is to take an outsider and turn them into an insider."
- ANNE FANNON,
Work-Learn Institute Director

POP QUIZ! ORCHESTRATING MEANINGFUL ONBOARDING

We've entered an unprecedented era of remote, in-person and hybrid work experiences. While there is no one-size-fits-all onboarding strategy for today's workforce, there are best practices that you can tailor and apply across your organization.

To set the stage, start by ranking the following onboarding tactics. Answer honestly – no skipping ahead! We'll dig into this data later and you can compare your answers with our findings.

How important are each of the following onboarding tactics to students?
Rank each tactic on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 = very important, 1 = not at all important). Then rank how important you think each tactic is to your organization using the same scale. Circle which are most important and least important in each list.

	WHAT DO STUDENTS NEED DURING THE ONBOARDING PROCESS?	WHAT DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION THINK STUDENTS NEED DURING ONBOARDING?
Welcome messages		
Scheduled introduction meetings		
1:1 time with manager		
Co-worker mentor		
Training introduction sessions		
Goal setting		
Welcome kits (a.k.a. swag)		

SURVEY SAYS...

THESE ONBOARDING TACTICS WORK!

We conducted a study with approximately 700 co-op students and asked them about the types of onboarding tactics they experienced. There were four main tactics that hit home:

- **Send a welcome message**
  Whether an email, letter, call or public announcement from a manager or senior leader within the organization, welcome messages greet and introduce new employees to the organization.

- **Book dedicated time**
  Scheduling meetings with supervisors, leaders and other colleagues can include introductions, goal setting, and training for specific tasks.

- **Host training or introductory sessions**
  Introductory sessions can be group orientation sessions or scheduled sessions with team members, HR or senior leaders. They give new employees an overview of the organization and what to expect in their new role.
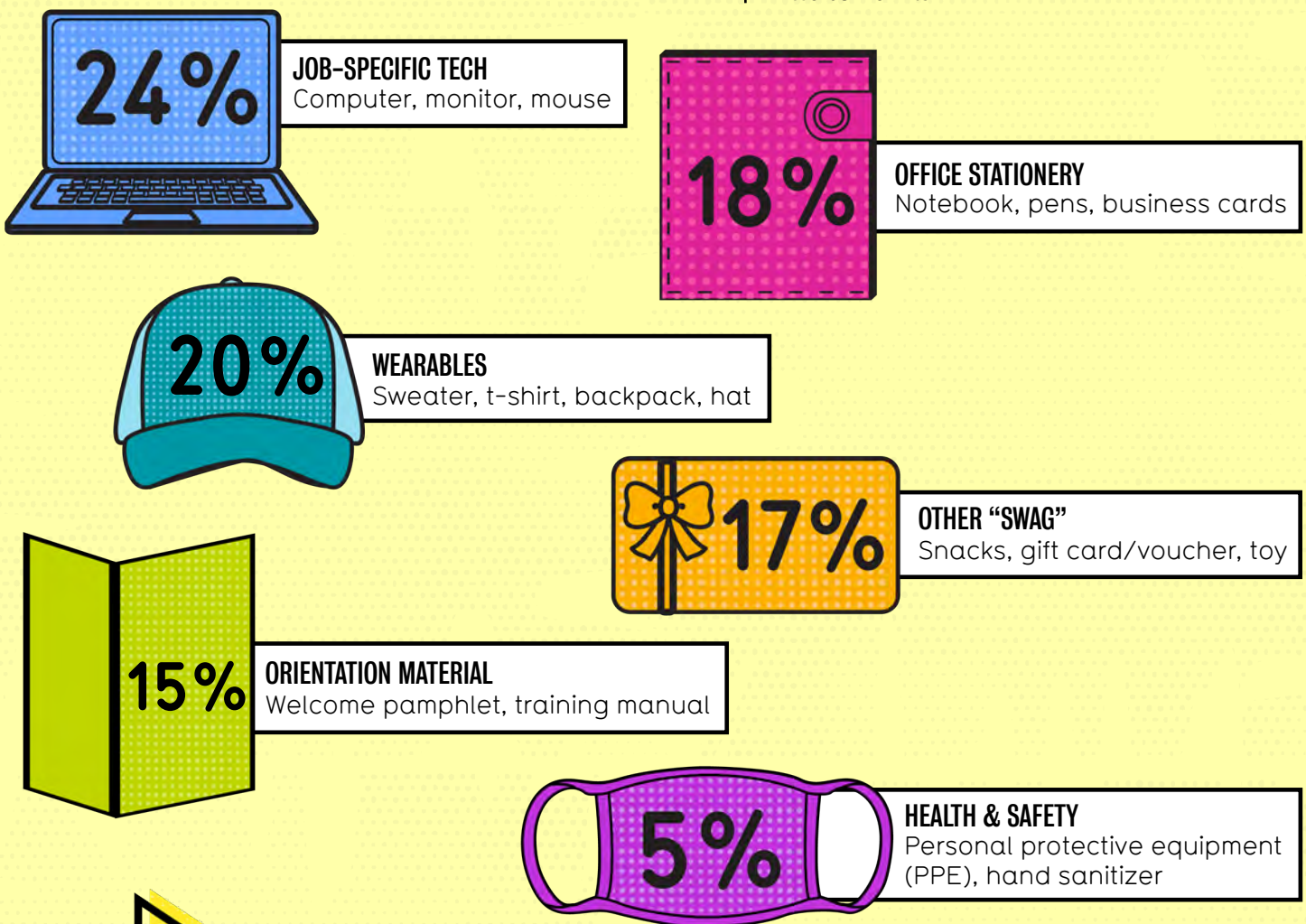
- **Share resources**
  Giving new employees resources can help them get started. Resources may include contact lists, training schedules or plans for the first few weeks, a staff manual or a website to consult for training and organizational information.

CONSIDER HANDING OUT WELCOME KITS

Welcome kits are a package of small items or gifts employers give to organizational newcomers early on. They are often put together on a modest budget and contain things like practical items that students need to work, branded clothing or office wear, and sometimes even near-cash gifts.

STUFF WE ALL GET (SWAG!)

Compared to those who did not receive a welcome kit, students who received swag felt stronger feelings of support from their manager, a stronger feeling of friendship from co-workers and even a greater organizational commitment. It makes sense, right? A welcome kit shows you are willing to invest in your new employees and value them being there. **Here are some of the most popular types of items students received in welcome kits:**

24%
JOB-SPECIFIC TECH
Computer, monitor, mouse

18%
OFFICE STATIONERY
Notebook, pens, business cards

20%
WEARABLES
Sweater, t-shirt, backpack, hat

17%
OTHER "SWAG"
Snacks, gift card/voucher, toy

15%
ORIENTATION MATERIAL
Welcome pamphlet, training manual

5%
HEALTH & SAFETY
Personal protective equipment (PPE), hand sanitizer

According to our research, **only 1 in 7 students received a welcome kit.** How did your answers from the quiz line up with our findings? Do your onboarding programs align with what works for students? Think about how you could adapt your onboarding practices after this exercise.

WORKING REMOTELY? WE'VE GOT YOU

Traditionally, onboarding involved in-person activities ranging from one-on-one meetings to social events like excursions. The global pandemic forced many organizations to onboard new employees remotely. Our research helped us to identify what students thinks about remote work. These insights can help you build a plan with the onboarding supports students need.

THE BENEFITS OF REMOTE WORK:

- flexibility in their schedule
- comfort of working from home and relaxed dress code
- increased independence
- no commute (reduced time and cost)
- new skill development in the remote setting

CHALLENGES OF REMOTE WORK:

- lack of in-person interaction with their supervisor and colleagues
- the impact on productivity due to technology problems or lag in response time from supervisor
- anxiety around performance evaluation in remote settings
- decrease in meaningful work assigned due to gaps in supervisors' knowledge of employee capabilities
- blurring of home and work space

SKILLS STUDENTS' NEED TO ADAPT TO REMOTE WORK:

- formal and informal communication skills
- maintaining and building professional networks
- remaining flexible in the face of ongoing change
- emphasis on organization and time management
- independence and initiative while supervisors navigate their own schedule changes
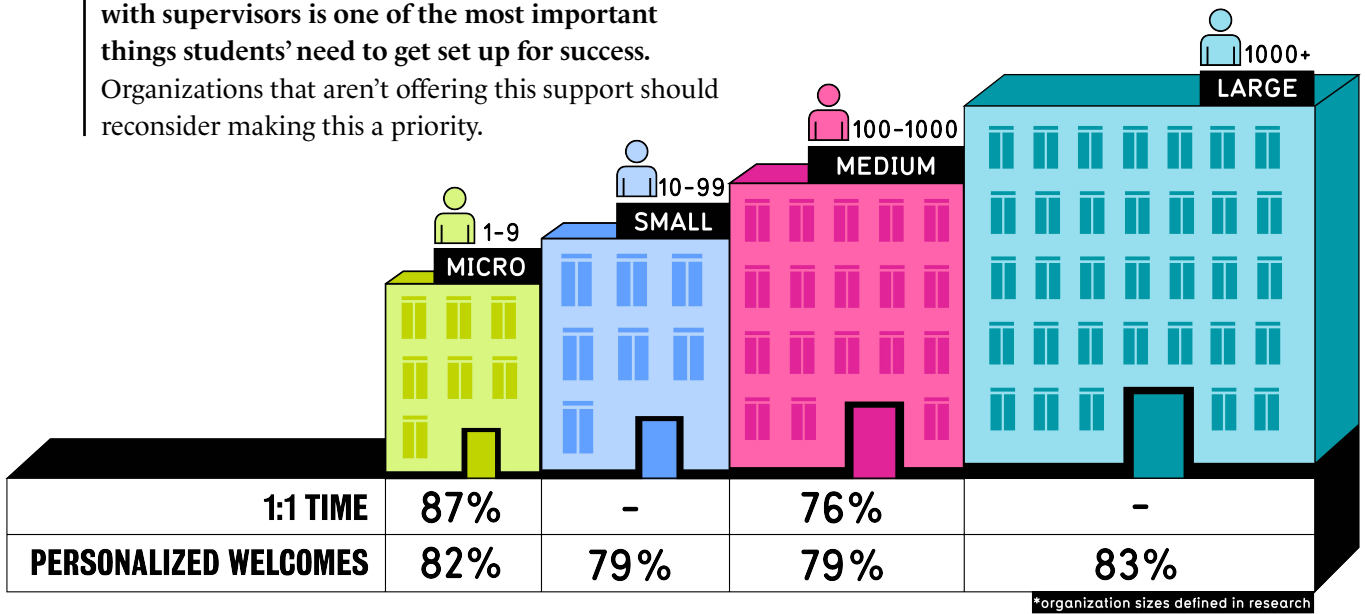
"To ensure students and new hires are well supported, we pair the student or new hire with a senior engineer for mentorship and the team offers support by providing hands-on access to ongoing projects."

- KIMBERLEY BUTTARO,
talent acquisition team lead, Hatch Ltd.

We wanted to know what organizations were doing to onboard newcomers in this new remote work context and whether remote onboarding differed based on organizational size. Of the co-op students we surveyed, there were two key findings:

1. The two most popular onboarding tactics were **uninterrupted one-on-one time with one's manager** and **a personalized welcome.** One-on-one time was especially common in micro-sized organizations* (87% received) and less common in medium organizations (76% received). Personalized welcomes were more common in micro (82%) and large (83%) orgs and less common in small/medium ones (79%). Importantly, this suggests that about 15-20% of students do not receive a welcome or get one-on-one facetime with their supervisor in those first crucial weeks of the term. This is a big miss! **We know that time with supervisors is one of the most important things students' need to get set up for success.** Organizations that aren't offering this support should reconsider making this a priority.

2. The least common onboarding tactic, according to students surveyed, was being **assigned a co-worker mentor (on average 57% received).** This was especially uncommon in micro-organizations (36%) and increased in prevalence as organizations got bigger (small medium large was 61, 64 and 67% respectively). Peer mentoring is a big deal. Peer mentors are often viewed as more accessible and provide greater empathy to the newcomer, offering support on a day-to-day basis.

	MICRO 1-9	SMALL 10-99	MEDIUM 100-1000	LARGE 1000+
1:1 TIME	87%	–	76%	–
PERSONALIZED WELCOMES	82%	79%	79%	83%

*organization sizes defined in research

You get a peer mentor!

Almost half of organizational newcomers enter the workplace without a mentor. Peer mentoring is particularly effective in creating satisfaction amongst students due to the ongoing support provided by the mentor. It also creates value for the mentors and organization. The incoming employee receives coaching and an introduction to the role, while the mentor gains leadership and coaching experience. This process can also help to relieve the mentor's workload as the new employee takes on more responsibilities. **Student employees want peer mentoring and it improves your chances of successfully onboarding new talent.**

WORLD'S BEST BOSS (PRETTY MUCH SUMS IT UP)

Both employers and employees are responsible for a successful work experience – but it starts with the supervisor. When a supervisor begins the working relationship in a positive, helpful and encouraging way, employees, especially students, are more likely to reciprocate and contribute positively to the relationship.

Properly nurtured, these reciprocal relationships are characterized by mutual respect, trust and diminished hierarchies. The resulting partnership fosters empowerment and increased motivation for both the supervisor and employee. These positive, productive and reciprocal partnerships lead to increased job satisfaction, performance, retention and organizational commitment.

"I was very lucky that my team was very supportive. Our supervisor was very involved. We would have bi-weekly meetings or weekly check-ins. They would ask things like, 'How are you doing? How are you acclimatizing?' I felt like I joined a family, I never felt like I was alone."
– ALEX CHAN,
a third-year Biomedical Engineering student

Supervisors with reciprocal mindsets want to ensure that their employees benefit from the work experience as much as they do. They demonstrate this by:
- Empowering their employees, especially students
- Providing necessary and additional support to accomplish tasks
- Ensuring the role includes learning opportunities or making time for professional development
- Helping the employees create meaning and relevance in their jobs

Successfully onboarding student talent may very well come down to the supervisor's mindset. A supervisor spending time with new employees is crucial and something new employees desire – but it doesn't always happen. Our research shows experienced workers spent 21.7% more time with supervisors than inexperienced workers (an additional 30 mins/week). However, it is more important for inexperienced workers to have this dedicated time with their supervisor.

TEND TO YOUR CULTURE: GROW FRIENDSHIPS

Workplace friendships are more than just fun, they can be helpful for your organization! When employees make friends with their colleagues, they experience improved career development and job satisfaction. At the same time, the organization benefits from better work performance and stronger organizational commitment. We've analyzed the factors that foster these friendships and have tips you can incorporate into your onboarding processes and workplace culture so workplace friendships can flourish.

Onboard new hires as a group

It's a great opportunity to incorporate some fun team-building activities to kickstart those friendships.

"The culture at Questrade is inclusive, welcoming and diverse. With this shared value, I could see myself enjoying the workplace and doing well in the position."

– TIAN DENG,
financial analysis and risk management co-op student

Showcase shared values and interests

We know shared interests and values can motivate supervisors and their employees to build reciprocal partnerships, but there are major benefits to fostering these personal connections among colleagues as well!

Offer opportunities for informal socialization

Create break and lunch spaces where staff feel comfortable eating and socializing together. Consider getting out of the office for a staff picnic, forming an intramural sports team, or scheduling optional outings outside of work. Don't forget about the hybrid staff as well - take an hour out of your Friday to play a virtual game or host online trivia events for the whole department. Gaining new workplace friends is one of the fastest ways for new employees to feel comfortable and, in turn, add to the overall productivity of your organization.

"Our workplace experience team, along with our campus recruitment program gives students opportunities to connect in a non-formal setting. This includes virtual (during COVID) lunches, social events and games."

– DANIEL LEONE,
early careers talent acquisition lead, Questrade Financial Group

"We have a virtual meeting for current co-op students, incoming co-op students, and the students of the previous two terms. Current and past co-ops who join share their experiences and answer questions. Many have commented that this social helps to make them feel more comfortable during the early days with Axonify."

– ANDREA VRBANAC,
vice president of people & culture, Axonify

Design shared tasks

Collaboration is key to the development of friendships at work. Ensure your new hires know about all the opportunities to share tasks with new co-workers, collaborate on projects, attend meetings, or get involved in committee work.

"Not only was I able to make valuable contributions through the work I was performing, but I got to collaborate with extremely knowledgeable individuals in the industry. Without a doubt, creating a network of connections is crucial for our future careers."

– JESSICA LIAO,
architectural engineering co-op student
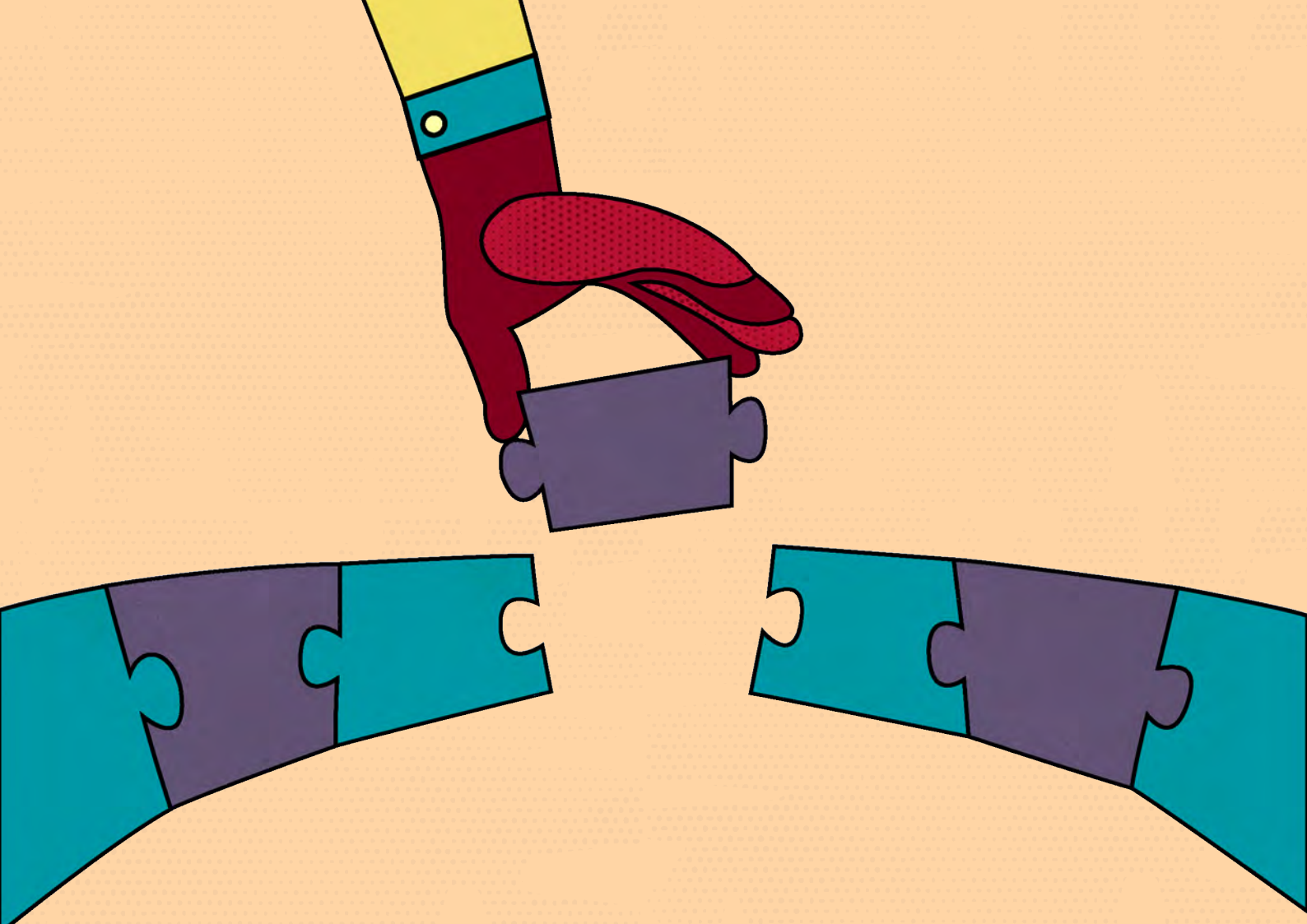
IT'S ALL ABOUT MAKING A CONNECTION

Here are some tips to improving workplace engagement with students:

- **Build and maintain strong relationships**
  Offer a mix of social and professional networking. Bringing those workplace friendships into the fold will help student employees engage with their work responsibilities.

- **Enable contributions to meaningful work**
  Provide tasks that balance higher criticality/lower complexity with higher complexity/lower criticality. Students want work that will challenge them appropriately, and continue to challenge them as their comfort and knowledge grows within your organization.

- **Provide opportunities to innovate**
  Enable employee experimentation to solve complex, real-world problems and identify solutions. Employees with an innovation mindset have the curiosity and courage to dream up new ways of tackling problems.

GET FUTURE-READY

Onboarding student talent is a unique task for your organization. Complex challenges come with onboarding talent, but that is because we are building toward a complex future of work. A successful onboarding process depends on your organization identifying the right tactics to take.

Ensuring your mindset as a supervisor is empowering your employees is crucial to your onboarding success. I hope you see the value in creating things like workplace friendships from the outset.
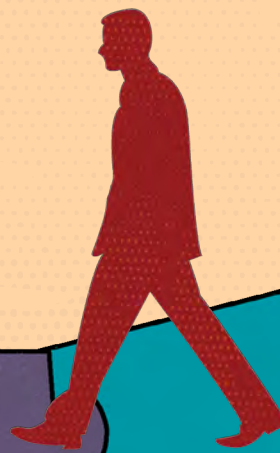
"If we get this process right, we contribute positively to organizational newcomers' performance, their job satisfaction, their organizational commitment and a whole range of other outcomes that matter to both the newcomer and the employer."

-DAVE DREWERY,
Work-Learn Institute Associate Director

Learn more about how you can recruit, motivate and retain the next generation of talent at:

uwaterloo.ca/hire/employer-resources