

The Power of NEON: YSI's New Employee Orientation Network

What does a model new employee orientation process look like and what difference does it make to the company?

Yellow Springs Instrument (YSI) specializes in testing instruments to meet a variety of environmental and health needs. YSI is headquartered in Yellow Springs but has additional facilities and affiliates in the U.S., Europe and Asia. There are 209 employees in Ohio, and 370 worldwide.

Its ESOP was established in 1983 and the firm is 48% owned by 320 employees.

A decade ago, YSI established its New Employee Orientation Network (NEON), committing a large investment in employee time to introducing new employees to the company.

Sheila Henderson, the HR Staffing/Training Coordinator at YSI, is chief recruiter for the company and administers the NEON program. Her responsibilities include recruiting and retaining well-qualified employees and providing in-house training for all of YSI's employee-owners. Karen Thomas interviewed Henderson on November 12, 2001.

What is NEON?

Henderson: NEON is a two-week process in which we introduce new employees, as a group, to our organization.

We assign a buddy to each new employee. We ask each new employee to fill out an information sheet about themselves which we then circulate on neon-colored paper, to fit our NEON acronym.

Why did you start the New Employee Orientation Network?

Henderson: We began NEON ten years ago as a way to help new employees develop a sense of loyalty and commitment to YSI. Malte von Mathiessen had great vision for what could be done with ESOPs when he became our CEO in 1987. He got people interested in doing all the things we now do. NEON plays into our whole ownership culture.

How does NEON fit into your recruiting process?

Henderson: NEON is an extension of our hiring process. We are a team-oriented organization and our whole hiring process reflects "us" as an organization. Applicants are interviewed by three or four people at one time because we want applicants to know that the hiring decision is made by a team of folks who work together and that we use a team approach at YSI.

What do new employees learn in NEON?

Henderson: We want them to know what is going on at YSI, though the content of the orientation is not as important to us as helping employees feel a part of our organization. We want them to feel free to ask questions.

The first day we get acquainted. We talk about our history,

our core values, where our affiliates and wholly owned subsidiaries are located, and the products that we make. Over the two-week process, each group of new employees meets for 2-4 hours daily on eight workdays. We discuss our ESOP, our 401K, and our standards for safety, ecological sustainability, and quality. Our marketing staff presents information about our customers and our products. We visit each manufacturing area and meet the people who build our products in each of our business units.

This morning the NEON group met with Malte and Rick, our CEO and COO, for forty-five minutes. The new employees introduced themselves and discussed their families, their backgrounds, how they got to YSI, and what they believe in. Malte and Rick talked about our company's core values and their visions for YSI.

We want new employees to get a feel for who the leadership of YSI is. It is important to us that employees feel comfortable talking with our leaders; not to only see them when there's a problem. It makes a real impact on new employees to sit down and talk with our CEO.

Your NEON program is a big investment in time. Does this investment pay off?

Henderson: Those who present information to the NEON groups see the orientation of new employees as an important part of their job. New people really like the process because they make contact with folks and get information. This costs a little time and money, but we have seen that results outweigh the cost. Where we see the impact is in attitudes about transferring within the organization; success at maintaining open communication and keeping a sense of community as the organization has grown and diversified.

What's the role of a buddy?

Henderson: The buddy gives the real low-down: is it really like this at YSI or is this just the company line? New employees lunch with their buddies twice during that two-week period. Buddies often bring the new employees into their work units for lunch and invite other folks from the department, so others get to meet the new employee too.

How do you match new employees with a buddy?

Henderson: I do this. A buddy has to be somebody who's been with YSI at least a couple of years, knows about YSI, and has a good attitude about the company. We don't want their buddy to be someone they will work with on a regular basis, so sometimes we pick their buddy from another business unit. If the new person works in administration, we may pick someone that's non-exempt to give a different perspective. This shows the new employees that everyone's job is important here.

You mentioned the NEON information sheet. What is it?



YSI Headquarters in Yellow Springs, OH

Henderson: The NEON questionnaire is an opportunity to make a connection. It's a way of making the workplace atmosphere more like a community. We try to pull information from people, based on what they want to share. We're not asking them to bare their personal lives. Some people share very little; others share a lot. It's whatever they're comfortable sharing.

For example, the last person we hired, a vice president and general manager of our life sciences group, wrote on his NEON: "I am a Michigan fan. Go Blue! Looking for people who want to play ping pong, and chess players. I'm looking for a challenge."

The information they provide helps other people in our company to learn about them and make connections based on common interests. We have friendly rivalries among sports fans. We have people teaching other people how to play guitar and who go skiing together. A lot of people share an interest in charitable work and volunteer in the community. Our Beaver Creek facility has adopted a nursing home.

There are all kinds of connections people make.

What is YSI's turnover rate?

Henderson: We've had a low turnover rate. But you know the world we're living in now, people don't stay. When I tell people I've been at YSI for 33 years, they are amazed!! We're not aiming to keep people forever, but we're concerned about the quality of their experience and the quality of their commitment to YSI while they're here. We've had some people who have only been there a short time but who made a

commitment and a contribution. They added value, and the NEON program played a very big part in that.

In what ways have you seen this happen?

Henderson: We move people around a lot as they gain experience that can help in other units. People are very familiar with what's going on in other areas and feel that they can make a contribution.

Have you changed NEON over the years?

Henderson: Yes. Now our CEO meets each January or February with everyone who was hired during the previous year and talks with them about how their view of the organization has changed, and how well they feel acclimated to the organization. We call this NEON Tier 2.

This year we expanded into a global NEON, and we connect to our new employees worldwide through our intranet. Most of the people who work at YSI worldwide will never get to Yellow Springs to see the corporate headquarters, so we have pictures and all kinds of information that provides a similar orientation to our global locations.

Each year we have a corporate-wide Global Summit. One emphasis is how YSI can become a global team with an ownership culture. NEON supports this focus. **OAW**



Sheila Henderson speaking at a past Ohio Employee Ownership Conference

NEON Schedule

Week One

Monday

12:00 Noon – Cultural Orientation Lunch

Tuesday

8:15-9:00 am – Life Sciences Marketing
9:15-10:00 am – Tour in Life Sciences

Wednesday

8:30-9:00 am – YSI Environmental Marketing
9:15-10:00 am – Tour of YSI Environmental Manufacturing areas

Thursday

8:30-9:00 am – Ecological Sustainability Overview
9:00-9:15 am – Tour of Automatic Thermistor Manufacturing (ATM) area

Friday

Free Day

Week Two

Monday

9:00-9:45 am – Meet Your COO
9:45-10:30 am – Tour of West Building, Research & Development, Information Technology, Production Development Model Shop, Disc Fabrication, Corp. Admin., PDM and Maintenance Building
10:30-11:00 am – Quality/Environmental Management System
11:00-11:45 am – Safety Training
11:45-12:30 am – Info Session

Tuesday

8:30-9:15 am – Tour of Metrology and Repair Center

Wednesday

9:15-10:00 am – Tour of Materials, Shipping & Other Functional areas in East Building

Thursday

9:30-10:00 am – Temperature Marketing
10:00-11:00 am – Tour of YSI Temperature facility

Friday

1:30-3:30 pm – Team Model Orientation and NEON Wrap-up