
From First Contact to Long-Term Success

The Strategic Value of Robust Onboarding and Recruitment in Life Sciences

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Executive Summary

Life sciences organizations lose roughly one in five employees every year. Nearly half of those departures happen within the first twelve months. The financial cost is significant — up to 150% of annual salary when recruitment, training, lost productivity, and team disruption are fully accounted for. But the more consequential cost is institutional: the embedded expertise that leaves, the compliance continuity that fractures, and the scientific momentum that stalls.

This is not a talent market problem. It is a systems problem. Organizations that treat onboarding as an administrative process rather than a strategic function are not experiencing bad luck. They are experiencing a predictable outcome.

This brief examines the evidence on what drives early attrition, how the recruitment lifecycle shapes retention before a new hire ever walks in the door, and what institutional-grade onboarding looks like in practice. The conclusion is not complicated: the organizations that build these systems deliberately retain the talent density required to advance science. The ones that do not cycle through it at significant and largely avoidable cost.

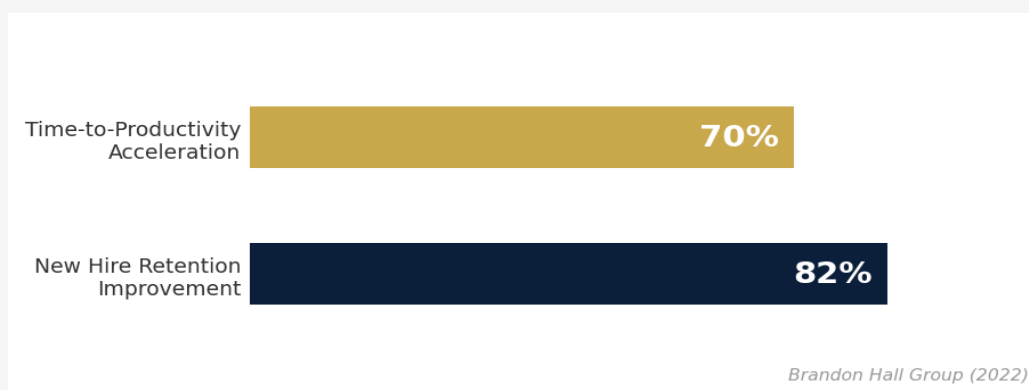
I.

What the Data Actually Says

The case for onboarding investment is not a matter of opinion. It is a matter of measurement.

Organizations with structured onboarding programs report improvements in new hire retention of up to 82% and time-to-productivity acceleration of up to 70%.¹ These are not marginal gains. They represent the difference between a workforce that compounds institutional knowledge over time and one that continuously cycles at organizational expense.

FIGURE 1 | Impact of Effective Onboarding on Retention and Productivity



Reported improvements in retention and productivity associated with structured onboarding programs; results vary by organizational context. Brandon Hall Group (2022).

The mechanism is equally well documented. Research modeling indicates that onboarding quality explains as much as 65.4% of the variance in turnover intention, primarily through its effect on organizational identification and psychological well-being.² When onboarding is shallow or transactional, disengagement follows with predictable reliability. The new

hire does not leave on day one. They decide to leave on day one, and spend the next several months confirming the decision.

In life sciences specifically, this dynamic is amplified by the complexity of the work environment. Roles span bench scientists and regulatory affairs specialists to clinical operations managers, and each requires distinct technical competencies and cultural integration pathways. A generalized orientation program does not serve these needs. Harvard Medical School's approach reflects this reality, emphasizing structured check-ins and dedicated resource allocation within the first 90 days to ensure specialized talent has the support necessary to contribute in high-stakes environments.³

II.

The Recruitment Lifecycle Does Not End at the Offer

Most organizations treat recruitment as a discrete event bounded by a job posting and an offer letter. It is not. It is a continuous lifecycle that begins with how an organization presents itself in the market and does not conclude until a new hire is fully integrated into their role and team. Every stage of that lifecycle carries retention consequences that extend well beyond the hiring decision itself.

FIGURE 2 | The End-to-End Recruitment Lifecycle

Stage	Focus Area	Outcome
Attraction	Branding & Scientific Sourcing	Talent pipeline quality
Selection	Screening & Interviewing	Precision match and cultural fit
Offer & Acceptance	Negotiation & Onboarding Prep	Candidate engagement and clarity
Onboarding	Integration & Training	Accelerated readiness and retention

Each stage carries reputational and retention consequences that extend well beyond the hiring decision itself.

The candidate experience is among the most underestimated retention levers available. Transparent, responsive, and personalized recruitment processes directly shape new hire engagement before day one. Failures in process efficiency — delayed responses, unclear role communication, disorganized interviews — predict early disengagement with measurable reliability.⁴ Organizations that move candidates through the process with clarity and efficiency signal respect. Those that allow timelines to drift signal indifference. In a sector where top scientific talent operates in a constrained market, that signal carries real weight.

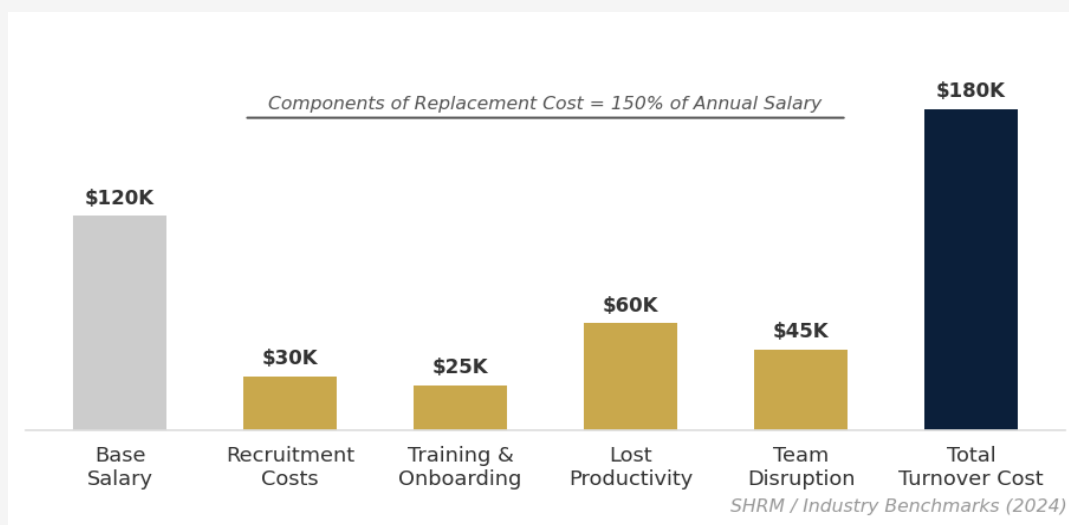
The implication is direct: the quality of the pre-hire experience determines the starting point of the retention curve. Organizations that invest in a disciplined recruitment lifecycle are not just filling roles more efficiently. They are beginning the retention process earlier.

III.

The Business Case

Turnover costs organizations up to 150% of an employee's annual salary when all costs are fully accounted for.⁵ For a mid-level scientist earning \$120,000 annually, a single departure carries a potential cost exceeding \$180,000. In an early-stage life sciences company operating under capital efficiency constraints, that is not a human resources statistic. It is a burn rate risk.

FIGURE 3 | Components of Employee Turnover Cost



Illustrative cost model based on industry benchmarks; actual costs vary by role complexity and organizational structure. SHRM / Industry Benchmarks (2024).

Beyond cost avoidance, well-onboarded employees contribute to innovation and operational goals more rapidly. Long-tenured employees reinforce institutional knowledge and serve as cultural anchors for subsequent hires, creating the organizational continuity that enables scientific programs to survive leadership transitions and funding cycles. In life sciences, the regulatory dimension adds further urgency. Onboarding that embeds GxP training and role-specific regulatory protocols from day one is a risk management function, not an administrative courtesy. A new hire who does not understand the compliance requirements of their role is a regulatory exposure, not just a productivity gap.

IV.

What Institutional-Grade Onboarding Looks Like

Effective onboarding in life sciences is role-specific by design. Protocols tailored to the competency requirements and cultural integration needs of each function consistently outperform generalized orientation programs. This is not a preference. It is what the data supports.

The architecture underneath effective onboarding and recruitment rests on three interdependent elements. The first is institutional infrastructure: the compliance frameworks, governance mechanisms, and policy architecture that must be embedded from the start to ensure audit-readiness and legal defensibility. The second is precision talent deployment: every hire is a deliberate decision enabled by domain-fluent recruitment that understands the scientific and regulatory demands of the role. The third is strategic capital alignment: total rewards strategy and workforce planning coordinated with onboarding to ensure that human capital investment delivers measurable returns at every stage of organizational growth.

These are not aspirational standards. They are operational requirements for any life sciences organization that intends to scale.

Conclusion

Human capital is the most consequential investment a life sciences organization makes. The science depends on the people who conduct it, the regulatory standing depends on the people who maintain it, and the enterprise value depends on the continuity of both.

The organizations that recognize this build onboarding and recruitment systems that reflect it. They treat the candidate experience as a retention instrument. They onboard for role-specific competency rather than generic orientation. They measure the output — retention, time-to-productivity, compliance readiness — rather than the activity.

The pathway from breakthrough science to commercial achievement runs directly through these systems. Organizations that build them deliberately position themselves to retain the talent density that clinical advancement requires. The ones that do not will eventually build them anyway, after absorbing the cost of not having them.

Build the people systems with the same rigor you apply to the science. The return is not theoretical. It is documented.

References

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