

ORIENTATION TRAINING OVERSEAS

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Orientation is often overlooked or oversimplified as an integral phase of training. In facing the problem of adjusting its personnel to unusual overseas conditions, the Panama Canal Company here provides an example of a thoroughly planned and developed orientation program.

THE EMPLOYMENT and retention of skilled, technical and administrative personnel to work at the job of operating Uncle Sam's big waterway in the tropics presents manifold and complex problems. The recruitment and orientation of personnel from the United States is carried on by the Personnel Bureau of the Panama Canal Company.

Need for Orientation

The employment of people in the United States to work in the Canal Zone is not only a complex procedure, but it is also expensive. Every company recognizes the loss in production, the necessity for training, and the need for indoctrinating and orienting a new employee when he joins the organization. The Panama Canal Company and its adjunct, the Canal Zone Government, have all of these problems connected with the replacement of an employee plus the fact that in accordance with Public Law 600, enacted by the Congress of the United States in 1946, it assumes the financial responsibility of transporting a new employee, his family and his household possessions from the United States to the Canal Zone, and after two years' satisfactory service of

returning him under the same conditions if he wishes to terminate his employment. Obviously, then, it is considerably to the advantage of the administration of the Panama Canal Company-Canal Zone Government to employ and retain career personnel who are satisfied with their conditions of employment.

Therefore, it is imperative that considerable attention be paid to the adjustment of new employees to living and working conditions in the Canal Zone. Beginning at the time when an application for or inquiry concerning employment is received the orientation process is begun.

Introduction by Air Mail

If it appears that there is some prospect that the services of the writer of a letter of inquiry may be utilized, he is immediately sent by airmail Standard Form 57, "Application for Federal Employment," and an orientation manual entitled "Living and Working in the Canal Zone." This manual, a 40-page booklet, was prepared by the training staff and employee relations members of the Personnel Bureau in cooperation with other offices of the Panama Canal Company-Canal Zone Government. The

booklet, with a foreword by the Governor-President, contains a large number of pictures and text illustrating various activities of life in the Canal Zone. It deals with such topics as history of the Panama Canal, geographic facts, relations with the Republic of Panama, health services, commissaries, housing, recreation, schools, organization of the Company-Government and policies and practices.

Once the individual has been tendered an appointment and has accepted the offer the process of employment is given full impetus. A wide variety of forms is air mailed to the individual covering instructions as to physical examination, proof of citizenship and transportation. Included in this material, all of which may be construed as orientation, is a 3-page informal greeting from the Personnel Director, Panama Canal Company, entitled "Notes to a New Employee." This greeting is a follow-up to the manual which was sent upon the receipt of the original letter concerning the possibility of employment. It is strictly informative in nature, chatty, and informal, beginning, "Congratulations on your decision to join us in the Canal Zone in the important and satisfying work of operating the Panama Canal and its adjuncts." The greeting contains additional comments concerning the Canal Zone, offering advice about baggage allowance in traveling by air, humidity of the climate in the Canal Zone and bringing bed linen, towels, cooking utensils and clothing.

While this correspondence is being conducted via air mail considerable ac-

tivity is undertaken in the Canal Zone by representatives of the Personnel Bureau and by representatives of the division wherein the new employee is to work in order to insure that adequate provisions are made for his arrival. Of primary concern in these activities is the provision for quarters, and the installation of stop-gap rental furniture, there being no private homes in the Canal Zone; housing facilities are provided through the Housing Division, Community Services Bureau, Panama Canal Company.

Employee Reception

The employee relations counselor of the Personnel Bureau then assumes the responsibility of receiving the new arrival either at Cristobal, Canal Zone, on the Atlantic side of the Isthmus, if he comes by ship from New York, or at Tocumen Airport, Republic of Panama, on the Pacific side of the Isthmus. Frequently the employee relations counselor is assisted by a representative of the new worker's employing division.

The process of reception eases the new employee and his family through customs and immigration facilities and involves making baggage arrangements, and transporting the new worker, his family, and luggage, to their first residence on the Isthmus—either a government guest house for the first night, or to their first housing assignment, if the arrival takes place during the day and their quarters have been prepared for them.

The reception provides an early opportunity for indoctrination and orientation. The receptionist is able to com-



Employee relations counselor pointing out murals painted in 1914 to a new employee, in the rotunda of Administration Building, Balboa Heights, Canal Zone.

bine the expected conversational amenities during the trip from the airport or at other steps of the reception with the conveying of useful information and the development of favorable attitudes all of which are continued later under more formal circumstances.

One of the objectives during the reception is a conditioning of the new employee and his wife, while they are in the most receptive of moods, toward areas of known adjustment difficulties such as housing and the cost of living. Although all employment information, both printed and oral, is aimed at complete factualness concerning living and working conditions in the Canal Zone, experience with new arrivals has demonstrated that last-minute reminders of what they are about to see are positive contributions to adjustment.

Orientation Information

Indoctrination and orientation are combined during the final employment steps when the new worker is processed for employment in the offices of the Personnel Bureau. The actual employment process, reduced largely to the filling out of the required printed forms, is conducted by the induction clerk and is supervised by the employee relations counselor.

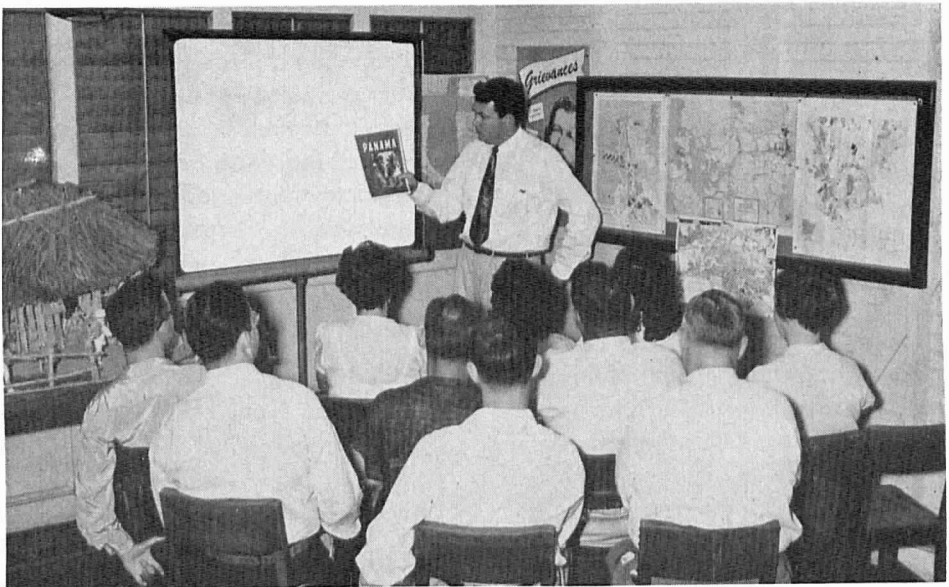
Although the emphasis during this process is on orientation—the new employee's relation to people, places, and practices—the element of indoctrination is also involved principally through the employee relations counselor's evident attitude toward the Company-Government. The new employee is given full information concerning salary, pay deductions, leave regulations, housing

policies, prices, and other living conditions, and the relationship of the employee to supervision and to employee relations as a service. In addition, the new employee is provided with extensive printed and mimeographed orientation material. This material includes maps of Central America, Panama, the Canal Zone, the Zone's terminal areas (including one marked to show the new employee's worksite, residence, and nearby shopping centers), library lists of books about the Canal Zone and Panama, the Company-Government organization chart, local tourist material with folders and pictures, current and back issues of the Company-Government's monthly house organ, current and back issues of a monthly informational magazine published in Panama, welcome letters from various local organizations and a directory of employee organizations including thirty-three churches, ninety-one service, social, and

recreational groups, and thirty-four unions. At the conclusion of the period devoted to induction, indoctrination, and orientation the new employee is escorted to supervision.

Weekly Meetings

The formal orientation process is continued in two activities carried on by the training staff of the Personnel Bureau. One of these activities is the weekly orientation session attended by the new employee on Company-Government time. Silent and sound 16mm pictures of the Panama Canal during the construction period and present day, respectively, are shown. It is customary, also, to have a bureau head or the head of a major division present to extend an official welcome on behalf of the administration. There is a question-and-answer period and additional orientation literature is provided.



Training staff member conducting weekly orientation session for new employees.



Evening social orientation program for new employees conducted by training staff member.

Entertainment

The other planned activity is an informal evening gathering of new employees and their families held quarterly or more often as the number of new employees dictates. These programs vary considerably in nature; the most recent program consisted of the delivery of an official welcome by the Lieutenant Governor of the Canal Zone, an exhibition of Panamanian folk dancing and singing supplied by the Panama National Tourist Commission, and the showing of colored camera slides of scenes from the interior of the Republic of Panama supplied by a local camera club. Other programs of a similar nature have included talks on international relations by officials of the United States Embassy in Panama, lectures by local authorities on Isthmian history, and displays of handicraft produced in Panama.

Orientation Results

In conclusion, it may be said that the Panama Canal Company-Canal Zone Government is truly orientation-minded. Because of the emphasis on orientation, personal adjustment and counseling the Company-Government, employing some 4200 United States personnel, was able to keep its voluntary separation rate for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1952, to slightly less than 11%. At the end of the first quarter of the current fiscal year, even during the summer months when a higher turnover is normally expected the figure is only 2% higher.

It is believed that planned orientation at every stage of employment and initial work plays an important role in thus retaining personnel satisfied with their conditions of employment.