

• ONBOARDING • GUIDE

Onboarding new starters *with a skills matrix*

A new starter's first weeks set the tone for everything that follows, yet onboarding is so often a vague blur of shadowing and hoping. A skills matrix turns it into a clear ramp: here are the skills the role needs, here is where you start, and here is the plan to reach competence, skill by skill, week by week. It gives the new starter a map and the manager a way to track progress.



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Reading time 12 min · **Method** Upleashed 0 to 5 capability framework · **Updated** May 2026

THE SHORT ANSWER

To onboard with a skills matrix, start the new starter's row at their real beginning, score the skills the role needs, then plan a ramp: which skills they learn in which order, with a target level and a date for each, mapped across their first weeks. Re-score at the 30, 60 and 90-day checkpoints to track progress and adjust. In short: **the matrix turns onboarding from a vague blur into a clear, skill-by-skill ramp to competence the new starter and manager can both see and track.**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Onboarding is a ramp, not an event.** Full competence takes weeks to months, so plan it skill by skill over the first 90 days and beyond.
- **The matrix is the map.** A new starter's row, current versus target, shows exactly what to learn and in what order.
- **Sequence the skills.** Some skills come first (systems, core process); complex ones come later, once the basics are solid.
- **Set checkpoints.** Re-score at 30, 60 and 90 days, so progress is visible and the plan adjusts to reality.
- **Structured onboarding pays off.** It measurably lifts new-hire productivity and cuts the early attrition that poor onboarding drives.

— START HERE

Onboarding is a ramp, not a *first day*

The biggest misconception about onboarding is that it ends when the induction does. In reality, reaching full competence in a role takes weeks or months, and the journey is a **ramp**, a gradual climb across many skills, not a single welcome event. A skills matrix is the natural instrument for managing that ramp, because it already describes the destination skill by skill.

The matrix is the new starter's map

A new starter's first question is "what do I need to be good at, and how good?" The matrix answers it directly: their **row against the role's required levels** lays out every skill that matters and the target for each. That turns a daunting, formless new job into a clear map, the new starter can see exactly what competence looks like and where they currently stand, which is reassuring, motivating and far better than guessing what is expected.

Sequence and pace the climb

Not every skill is learned at once. Good onboarding **sequences** the skills: the foundational ones first, systems, core process, the basics that everything else builds on, and the complex ones later, once the groundwork is solid. The matrix lets you plan this deliberately, scheduling which skills are tackled in which weeks and to what level, so the new starter is stretched without being overwhelmed, and never asked to run before they can walk.

Checkpoints turn the plan into progress

The widely used **30, 60 and 90-day** rhythm gives onboarding its checkpoints, and the matrix gives them substance. Rather than a vague "how's it going?", each checkpoint is a re-score: which skills have reached target, which need more time, what to adjust. This makes progress visible to both sides, catches a struggling start early, and turns onboarding into a tracked, improving process rather than a hopeful one, flowing naturally into the new starter's first development plan.

— WHY IT MATTERS NOW

A weak start drives *early exits*

The first 90 days disproportionately shape whether a new hire stays and thrives, and poor, unstructured onboarding is a leading cause of early attrition and slow productivity. A skills matrix is how you make those weeks structured, visible and supportive.

50%

SHRM, VIA
TECHCLASS 2026
higher new-hire
productivity
reported by
organisations with a
structured
onboarding
process.

8%

GARTNER, 2024
of organisations
have reliable
workforce skills
data, so most
onboarding runs
without a clear
capability target.

39%

WEF, 2025
of workers' core
skills are expected
to change by 2030,
so structured, skill-
based ramps matter
more each year.

The cost of a vague start is steep and often hidden: a new hire who never quite finds their feet, takes far longer to become productive, or leaves within months feeling unsupported, and early attrition is brutally expensive to replace. A skills matrix attacks the root cause by making onboarding **concrete and supportive**. The new starter knows exactly what good looks like and can see themselves progressing toward it; the manager can spot a stalling ramp early and intervene. Structured this way, onboarding stops being a sink-or-swim gamble and becomes a deliberate climb that gets people productive faster and makes them far more likely to stay.

Four things the matrix gives onboarding

Brought into onboarding, a skills matrix contributes four things an unstructured start cannot. Each helps the new starter get competent faster and feel supported doing it.

GIVES 01

A clear destination

The required levels show exactly what competence looks like for the role, so the new starter knows the target from day one rather than guessing what is expected.

GIVES 02

A sequenced plan

The matrix lets you order the skills, foundations first, complex later, so learning is paced and the new starter is stretched without being swamped.

GIVES 03

Visible progress

Re-scoring at each checkpoint shows the ramp climbing, which motivates the new starter and tells the manager exactly where support is needed.

GIVES 04

An early-warning signal

A skill that is not progressing to plan flags a struggling start early, while there is still time to add coaching, practice or a mentor.

Together these turn onboarding into something you can **manage rather than merely hope through**. The destination and the sequenced plan give the first weeks a shape; the visible progress and early warning make that shape responsive to how the new starter is actually doing. And because it is the same matrix the team uses thereafter, onboarding flows seamlessly into ongoing development, the ramp simply becomes the new starter's first development plan, with no gap and no re-starting from scratch.

The 0 to 5 capability framework

Onboarding needs a scale that describes the climb from beginner to competent. This framework, developed by Dr Alex J. Martin-Smith, maps that journey precisely: a new starter typically begins at Level 1, and the

ramp is the planned rise to Level 3, the point of unsupervised competence, on each required skill.

-
- 0** **Not required for the role** EXCLUDED
- The skill is not part of this role within the next year. In onboarding, it keeps the ramp focused on what the new starter actually needs, not everything the team can do.
-
- 1** **In training / New starter** WEIGHTING 25%
- The typical onboarding starting point: learning under supervision, up to 75% of the way to competence, not yet across the quality bar. Where most of the ramp begins.
-
- 2** **Developing** WEIGHTING 50%
- More than 75% trained; can do the task alone but with quality not yet consistent, so work is still checked. The mid-ramp stage for a foundational skill, and a realistic 30-day target.
-
- 3** **Capable** WEIGHTING 75% · THE RAMP TARGET
- Fully trained, consistent quality, works unsupervised. The usual destination of an onboarding ramp: the point at which the new starter genuinely carries the skill alone.
-
- 4** **Subject Matter Expert / Trainer** WEIGHTING 100%
- Prolonged expertise; works autonomously and can train others. Beyond onboarding for most, a destination for the development plan the ramp flows into.
-
- 5** **Strategic ownership / Leadership** WEIGHTING 100%
- Defines processes and standards and shows leadership. Well beyond onboarding, the longer-term horizon a strong new starter may eventually grow toward.

The ramp is the climb from 1 to 3

An onboarding ramp is simply a planned rise on the scale, usually from Level 1 (new, supervised) to Level 3 (capable, unsupervised) on each required skill, sequenced over the first weeks. Some skills reach Level 3 quickly; complex ones may only reach Level 2 by day 90, with Level 3 set for later. The weightings, Level 1 = 25%, 2 = 50%, 3 = 75%, let you watch the new starter's overall capability percentage climb as the ramp delivers.

A worked example. One skill's ramp, with a realistic target:

```
Core process  day 1 1 (supervised) → day 30 2 → day 60 3
              (unsupervised)
Complex cases starts week 6 → day 90 target only 2, Level
3 set for later
sequenced and paced – foundations first, complexity once they
are solid.
```

[— SEE THE RAMP](#)

A new starter's *onboarding ramp*

Here is a new starter's first 90 days planned as a ramp. Each bar shows when a skill is actively trained, and the diamond marks the target level it should reach by the end of that period. The phases across the top, learn, contribute, perform, give the climb its shape: foundations first, complexity once the basics are solid.

FIRST 90 DAYS · SKILL-BY-SKILL RAMP TO TARGET



Targets on the 0 to 5 scale; most reach Level 3 by day 90.

90

days to core competence, foundations to Level 3 first, complex cases to Level 2 with more to follow

Illustrative ramp on the Upleashed 0 to 5 framework. Bars show when each skill is trained; diamonds mark the target level for the period.

HOW THE RAMP IS BUILT

- **Foundations start on day one.** Systems and core process begin in week 1, because everything else depends on them. They reach Level 3 early, freeing the new starter to build on a solid base.
- **Complexity waits its turn.** Complex cases only begin around week 6, once the basics are secure, and target just Level 2 by day 90. Asking for that in week one would overwhelm; sequencing prevents it.
- **Each bar has a target and a date.** The diamond is the level to reach by the end of the period, so "ramping up" becomes concrete milestones the new starter and manager can both track.
- **Checkpoints fall on the phases.** The 30, 60 and 90-day reviews line up with the learn, contribute and perform bands, each a re-score against the plan, and a chance to adjust if a skill is behind.

BUILDING THE RAMP

Five steps to onboard with the matrix

Turning the matrix into an onboarding plan takes one short session at the start, then a light check at each milestone. These five steps keep the

ramp clear, paced and supportive.

1

Set the destination from the role

Start with the required levels for the role: the skills that matter and the target for each. This is the new starter's destination, agreed and visible from day one, so they know exactly what competence looks like rather than guessing at expectations.

2

Score the honest starting point

Score where the new starter actually begins on each skill, usually Level 0 or 1, with credit for any genuine prior experience. An honest baseline makes the ramp realistic and gives you the before-picture against which progress will later show.

3

Sequence and schedule the skills

Order the skills, foundations first, complex later, and map each to the weeks it will be trained, with a target level for each milestone. Pace it so the new starter is stretched but not swamped, and set realistic targets, not everything at Level 3 by day 30.

4

Support the climb

Pair the plan with the right support for each skill, shadowing, a mentor, structured practice, real tasks with backup. A ramp is a plan to learn, not a test; the support is what turns the target dates into reachable milestones rather than pressure.

5

Re-score at 30, 60 and 90 days

At each checkpoint, re-score against the plan: what has reached target, what needs more time, what to adjust.

Celebrate the progress, address any lag early, and at day 90 roll the ramp straight into the new starter's first ongoing development plan.

— AVOID THESE

Six mistakes when onboarding with a matrix

MISTAKE 01

Treating it as an event

Onboarding is a ramp over months, not a first-day induction. Plan the whole climb, not just the welcome.

MISTAKE 02

No clear target

A new starter who does not know what good looks like flounders. Set the required levels as a visible destination from day one.

MISTAKE 03

Everything at once

Loading every skill on week one overwhelms. Sequence foundations first and bring in complexity once the basics are solid.

MISTAKE 04

Unrealistic targets

Expecting Level 3 on everything by day 30 sets people up to fail. Pace the targets to how long competence really takes.

MISTAKE 05

Plan without support

A ramp with target dates but no coaching is just pressure. Pair each skill with shadowing, mentoring or practice.

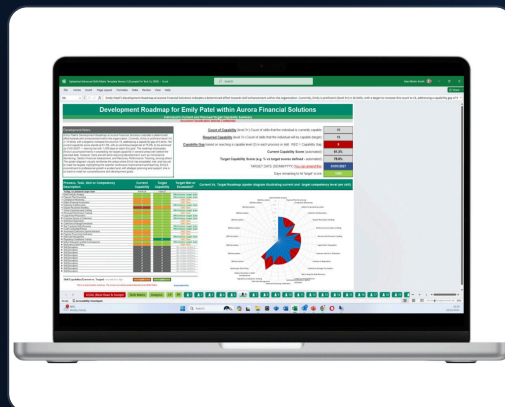
MISTAKE 06

No checkpoints

Without re-scoring, a stalling start goes unnoticed. Review at 30, 60 and 90 days and adjust the plan to reality.

The method is free. A ready-made matrix just makes the ramp *easy to plan and track*.

Everything here works in a blank spreadsheet, and that is a fine place to start. A purpose-built template just makes onboarding effortless: the required levels give the new starter their destination, scoring the starting point and re-scoring at each checkpoint shows the ramp climbing, and capability rises visibly toward target, so onboarding becomes a tracked, supportive climb rather than a hopeful blur, flowing straight into the first development plan.



The Advanced Excel Skills Matrix turns a new starter's row into a ramp, current levels against target, climbing at each checkpoint, so onboarding is tracked and supportive, all on the same 0 to 5 framework used throughout this guide.

TRY IT FREE	MOST POPULAR	WHEN YOU ARE READY
£0 The online 5x5 builder maps a small team in your browser, with no sign-up. Plan a new starter's first skills fast.	£199 The full Excel template: required levels, current scores, capability tracking and analytics, up to 30 people and 30 skills. One-off, yours forever.	£1 Upgrade to PulseAI in your first year for a living, web and mobile version with AI skill suggestions and reminders.

— COMMON QUESTIONS

Quick *answers*

Q How do I use a skills matrix to onboard a new starter?

Set the role's required levels as the destination, score where the new starter actually begins, then plan a ramp: which skills they learn in which order, with a target level and a date for each across their first weeks. Re-score at 30, 60 and 90 days to track progress and adjust.

Q What is an onboarding ramp?

It is the planned climb from a new starter's starting point to competence, skill by skill, over their first weeks. On the 0 to 5 scale it is usually the rise from Level 1 (new, supervised) to Level 3 (capable, unsupervised) on each required skill, sequenced so foundations come first and complex skills later.

Q How long should onboarding take?

Longer than most expect. Formal induction is usually the first few weeks, but reaching full competence commonly takes three to twelve months depending on the role's complexity. The 30, 60 and 90-day checkpoints structure the early climb, and the ramp then flows into ongoing development beyond day 90.

Q Which skills should a new starter learn first?

The foundations: systems and tools, core process, and the basics everything else builds on. Complex skills should come later, once the groundwork is solid, so the new starter is stretched without being overwhelmed. Sequencing the ramp deliberately is what prevents the common failure of expecting too much too soon.

Q How does it help retention?

By making the first weeks clear and supportive rather than a sink-or-swim gamble. Poor onboarding is a leading cause of early attrition; a structured ramp shows the new starter exactly what to aim for, lets them see progress, and helps the manager catch a struggling start early, all of which help people stay and reach productivity faster.

Q What happens after the 90-day ramp?

It becomes the new starter's first development plan. Because onboarding uses the same matrix the team uses thereafter, there is no gap: any skills still climbing toward target carry forward, new development goals are added, and the person moves smoothly from onboarding into the normal cycle of one-to-ones and re-scoring.

— ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Alex is the creator of the Upleashed capability framework that powers Skills Matrix Template, the award-winning Excel skills matrix. A Chartered Manager with an MBA, an LLM and a doctorate in business administration, he has spent more than two decades helping operations, HR and quality teams turn capability from a gut feel into something they can measure, manage and prove.

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alex J. Martin-Smith".

Dr Alex J. Martin-Smith

— SOURCES

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Martin-Smith, A. J. (n.d.). *The 0 to 5 capability framework*. Upleashed Limited.
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World Economic Forum. (2025). *The future of jobs report 2025*. World Economic Forum.

Give them a *map, not a maze*.

You now have the onboarding method. The quickest way to start is to take your next new starter's role, set the required levels as their destination, and sketch a skill-by-skill ramp across their first 90 days. A clear climb gets them competent faster, and shows them, from day one, that their growth is planned and supported.

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