

Seven strategies for when you start a new job

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When you are successful in getting a new job, at first you are elated, but then you might also feel a sense of anxiety. Starting a new job is a bit like travelling to a foreign country for the first time – there is so much you don’t know and so much that you can’t assume. You might think “I won’t be able to do the job”, or “I have no idea what the culture is like” and “Maybe my new work colleagues won’t like me”.

However, there are strategies you can use, and constructive attitudes you can adopt, that will make the induction period easier. You have been appointed to the job, and that suggests two things – you are capable of doing the job, and you are interested in, even passionate about, the job. Accordingly, your new role can be exciting and enjoyable.

Note that the seven strategies discussed here are aimed at work roles in general. Managers and leaders, in addition, need to consider their leadership role, and specific guidance on that topic should be sought. (For example, *The First 90 Days* by Michael Watkins (Harvard Business Press, updated edition, 2013) is a respected book on the topic.)

1. Map out the issues.

Firstly, recognise that there are four different aspects of learning your way into a job:

- Learning the physical environment
- Learning and becoming part of the people environment
- Learning the general work and business context
- Learning the specifics of your job role.

It helps to identify these different aspects, because then you can make sure you give sufficient attention to each of them. Bear in mind that your knowledge in each area will grow at a different pace. For example, you will learn basic things about the physical environment on Day One, such as where your workspace is located in the building. It will take somewhat longer to learn about the people in your environment – their work roles, the interactions you will have with them, and their personal dispositions.

Mapping out these different aspects should make it clear that you will not acquire all there is to know about the job role on the first day, or in the first week, and your knowledge of some aspects will only build over a longer period of time. So allow yourself grace to build up your knowledge and competency at a rate that is feasible. Pace yourself and reduce the stress.

2. Determine priorities in relation to the job.

One of the first priorities is to establish some credibility with your manager and work colleagues. You have been appointed into the role, and they will want some indication that you are able to fulfil the role competently. To a large extent, they will have to take this on faith to begin with. You may have paper qualifications and/or previous work experience that indicate you have the skills and knowledge needed, but depending on the nature of the job, it may take a while before your competence or prowess can become evident.

You will want to provide some indicators of your knowledge and competence. But remember, when we are nervous we tend to try too hard to impress, with the result that we annoy or offend our new colleagues. And a negative first impression is difficult to shake off. It's best to be comfortable in the knowledge of your own competence, and confident that it will become evident as you begin to take on the workload of the job. There is no gain in boasting.

The best way to show your competency is to listen to explanations given to you about the job and the tasks you will have to do, and to ask intelligent questions. You are not expected to know everything on Day One, and your aim should be to gain a thorough understanding of the work tasks and their purpose, and the working context.

3. Establish good relationships with your work colleagues.

You need the support of people around you in order to do your job well. This is probably true at a practical level, but even if your job is relatively autonomous you are affected by the atmosphere around you, and others are affected by your presence. Of course you are there for work purposes, this is not family or a recreation club, but you and they still have to be present as human beings, and it is best to try to build a climate of warmth, trust and friendliness.

There are some specific things you can do to help build positive relationships. Make the effort to learn your coworkers' names, and ask them about themselves (without making unwelcome intrusions into their personal lives). Be positive and enthusiastic, and show this with your smile. Be helpful to others and play your part as a member of the team. Be appreciative of any help that you receive, particularly as in your early days you may need quite a bit of help.

Dressing appropriately is part of how you begin to establish good relationships with your work colleagues. There is a balance you need to find between being an individual and showing that you belong to the team or the organisation. Every context is different, and you need to exercise your

judgement, but bear in mind that dress is a form of communication, and people make assumptions about you based on your dress. So, while it may be possible to wear an outlandish tee-shirt or torn jeans and still work efficiently, work colleagues who don't know you very well yet may be drawing negative conclusions about you. Bear in mind that it's all the evidence they've got to go on. Dressing in a way that tunes in to the work environment helps you to build trust with your colleagues.

4. Show initiative and commitment.

Attitudes reveal themselves to others quickly. If you are passive and reactive, waiting for things to be provided to you when there are actions you could already be taking, your work colleagues will get the impression that you will not be a great asset to the team. If you are not sure about something, ask questions and work out what needs to be done. You were given the job in order to fulfil some purpose for the organisation, so show initiative and commitment in getting to the stage where you can fulfil on that purpose.

Initiative can be displayed by covering the induction materials you will have received, finding out more about the organisation and the workplace, practising new skills and familiarising yourself with routines. Make notes about who the key people are in the organisation, the organisational structure, and the key features of the business and the culture (what's important?).

5. Organise yourself in the job.

When you come into a job, you generally walk into an existing information architecture, and it can be difficult to make sense of at first. Many people come into a new role and make snap judgements about the existing structure, and want to sweep everything away and start from scratch. You find that computer files or paper files are organised in a certain way, and it doesn't seem like the best way to you. Moreover, you may not be sure about the status of the information – is it accurate, complete, relevant, up-to-date?

It is helpful to make your own mind map of the information, and to also map the information you have received. Compare the two maps and you will begin to develop your own sense of what is important, and where to find things. Remember there is no perfect way to organise information, and that the way we structure information is not static either; it tends to evolve over time. This is what was happening before you came into the job, and it is probably best for you to take an evolutionary approach to the structure rather than throwing it all out and starting again.

One useful tip is to work out ways of validating the information you have. Don't assume that it is all complete and correct. Work out reality tests so that you can gradually build a strong foundation of knowledge, ordered in a way that enables you to work quickly and efficiently.

The task of organising your information is one that you should begin as soon as possible, but it is not a task that will be finished for good at the end of Week One. It is an ongoing task – coming back to the information you received, and modifying its structure so that it works better for you over time.

6. Discover the culture and participate in it.

As well as getting to know the people around you and the people across the organisation you have to interact with, you need to learn about the culture of the organisation. This learning is about getting a feel for the organisation, not just learning facts about it. The questions to ask are like these:

- What are the great stories of the organisation?
- Who are the significant people in the history of the organisation?
- What are the dominant values that are talked about? Are honesty and integrity evident? Excellence? Passion? Customer or client focus? Fairness? Compassion? How are these values exhibited and put into practice? What are the significant incidents and milestones of the organisation?
- What behaviour is evident in relation to the taking of responsibility? Do people in the team and the organisation take responsibility for what happens? Are discussions free and open, or cautious and guarded? How are decisions made?

7. Reflect on your experience and cycle through the areas of learning.

Starting a new job is an exciting and challenging experience. To get good value out of your experience, you should stop at intervals and reflect on your experience. Consider the four areas of learning – the physical environment, the people environment, the general work context and the specific job role. For each area, ask yourself if things are going well, if you are feeling confident yet, and what an external observer might think if they were watching you (compassionately!).

Establishing yourself in your new work role is a process that takes time and goes in stages. In some aspects you might step in and be instantly at home. In other aspects it might be like the slow soaking in of water, and yet other aspects might be like climbing a set of stairs to get to where you can see clearly.

What is the experience like for you? What are your accomplishments? How is your competency building? How are the relationships in the workplace taking shape?

You may find it helpful to write down your reflections on these questions.

In this reflective exercise, also ask yourself: who can help me? Ask for help when you need it; others will understand this and most people are prepared to be helpful. Use the help to gradually build your independence in your work role, and return the favours when you can. These early interactions are the beginning of your building your own network in the organisation.

You may have been assigned a buddy, who will be available to provide you with help, but as time goes on you may have the chance to find a mentor in the organisation. As you get to know people around the organisation, start thinking about who could be a mentor for you. Mentoring has many benefits; it gives you an objective sounding board, and it can provide you with support for advancing your career within the organisation.

When you reflect periodically on what has been happening, consider your progress over the first week, the first month, and the first three months. Are you satisfied with how you have developed and how you are performing now? What do you need to be focusing on now?

Look at each of the four areas, and start looking further ahead. After a month, or three months, you may be ready to start thinking specifically about your career path in the organisation. Then it is time

to be reading about career development, thinking about further training and development, and talking to people who can help you.

Activities

Here are two activities for you to do. They will help you to know your workplace and to set personal aims for this initial period of your employment.

Activity 1: What I'm aiming for

Reflect on what you are doing in your job role, and what you would like to achieve personally in the first six months – what you want to learn, what you want to establish in relationships, what you want to be able to do in your job.

Write down three (or more) personal aims for the first three months. This will make your time more purposeful, and will also make it easier if you need to formulate work objectives for the performance appraisal system. Set aside a time in six months to read these aims again, and reflect on how you have progressed and grown.

Activity 2: A great place to be

Many employers are big, diverse workplaces with exciting and worthwhile projects and activities happening. Your quest is to find two such projects or activities – one in your own area, and one from somewhere else in the organisation.

Describe the two projects or activities – what they are about, and why they inspire you. It's a good idea to write this down. You may have the opportunity to share your thoughts on these projects when you attend an Orientation for New Staff session.