

Starting a New Job During Global Pandemic

Tips to manage the anxiety of a fresh start in times of uncertainty and social distancing

By Rafael Altavini

When I enthusiastically arrived at the Zürich office for my first day at Egon Zehnder on March 2, 2020—after an eight-month career break—the world was still a normal place, and COVID-19 was concentrated in the Far East. One month later, everything is upside down. Like many people, I've been working from home for weeks, social distancing, and living in a house that's morphed into a co-working space shared with my wife and our two kids. Like many others, I've also been dealing with concerns about elderly relatives and friends in coronavirus risk groups, not to mention all of the fears triggered by one of the worst financial crises the world has ever seen.

With all of the devastating events occurring around the world, I feel guilty even thinking about the anxiety or stress surrounding starting a new job: trying to fit in and contribute, to learn quickly, to bond with colleagues, to learn the “unwritten rules” of the Firm, to figure out which behaviors are accepted, and more. However, even if they seem relatively unimportant compared to the larger crisis we are facing, new-joiner anxieties are an additional layer of complexity in our already confusing “new normal.”

What I've learned in the last few weeks is that starting a job in these strange times doesn't have to solely consist of suffering and worrying. As I paused to reflect on my first month, I wanted to share a few things that helped me to have a positive experience starting a new job during the COVID-19 outbreak:

- **Have a “boot-camp” coach:** Having a buddy is a normal feature in good onboarding programs, but in current times it's absolutely crucial. Mine is Edi. He has been my buddy since the interview process, and talking to him almost daily by phone, Zoom, or chat has been an amazing support. Edi listens, gives advice, checks on my mood, asks about my family, and involves me. He cares. While plenty of people in my new job show love and care—both with each other and with clients, I haven't had enough time to really bond with my other new colleagues. With Edi, it's different because we built our relationship during the interview process.

- **Over-network:** After the lockdown started, I decided to cast the net very wide and expand my onboarding program to corners of the Firm that weren't originally planned. I've had dozens of "Meet & Greet" Zoom calls with colleagues I would not have normally met in my first few months, and I always ask them who else I should speak with. That has generated more connections, which is never a bad thing for a newcomer. At times of social distancing, I've found that people do enjoy that extra bit of connectivity, especially if there's an element of novelty to it.
- **Offer to help:** One of the people I talked to during my Meet & Greets gave me some advice that I found extremely insightful. He said, "In each of your onboarding calls, ask people how you can help them." I've tried that out, and it has yielded some surprisingly cool results. Some people just wanted to know where I got my Zoom virtual background from, while others gave me leads to assignments that started filling up my agenda.
- **Stick your head into all available learning resources:** I know it can be dreadful to navigate the "intranet" in your first few weeks, but there's a lot of information and learning resources there. I have leaned on the recommendations from colleagues referred to as "intranet masters" and followed their leads (and links) to find useful information for my start. Plus there have been internal initiatives for online learning in our Firm during these times, and I've tried to jump into each one of them and suck up all of that knowledge. You may not have time like this again, so it's important to use it before it disappears.
- **Tune your radar for insights on the organizational culture:** As a newcomer into an organization in the midst of a crisis, you are given raw materials that can help you get a good and quick understanding of what your colleagues and leaders really value. This is the key-code to decipher the culture of an organization. In "business-as-usual" situations, it would take months—maybe years—to see those signals. What are they saying? What are the key words? Are there fears surfacing? Are colleagues collaborating or fighting? In the Zoom calls I've had with my colleagues and in the video messages from our leadership, the words they say and the sequencing of the messaging all transmit genuine love and care and authentic concerns about employees and our clients. That comes absolutely first and the business talk follows second. Additionally, the level of collaboration that I see is simply overwhelming. People are going out of their way all the time to help others and to join forces—it's really inspiring. It makes me conclude that I want to be here for the long term.
- **Be patient and grateful:** I came to the office hungry for work on March 2. Most newcomers want to "get their hands dirty" and show they were the right choice from day one. Well, we may need to adjust those expectations and understand that we won't be able to quickly ramp-up to 150 percent capacity as we envisioned. Business might slow down, and our fill-up speed might be impacted. It is time to do things more thoroughly and accept that the workload will follow. And that's OK in these

unprecedented times. I've also reminded myself often in the last weeks to be grateful for having a job, for being able to continue working from home, and for working in a Firm where the fundamentals are in the right place. Many out there do not have the same luxury, so I'm trying to keep that in mind.

Going Forward

As another new colleague mentioned in a chat, we probably will never forget that we've started our new jobs in this strange period. We will also likely build the next chapters of our careers in a world that will be much different from what we had expected. We grow more certain that some of the changes we're experiencing now are here to stay. A start into a new job may be the perfect lab to practice those adaptive change skills and find the unseen benefits of beginning a new career chapter in a crisis.

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Covid-19 Micro-Website

We have launched a micro website where this and other informative pieces are posted. This site will be regularly updated: [click here](#) for further details.

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