



Starting a New Role in a Pandemic: The Totally Virtual Workplace

The changing nature of the workplace in 2020 has been notable for all employees. Colleagues who are usually only at the end of a desk are now completely separated, with only a zoom link keeping them together. However, for those starting a new position, there is an entirely different scenario. These people are working for an organisation within which they have most likely never seen a colleague or building in person.

My name is Kerris, I have just joined TICL and when I started I had not met anyone, bar one team member, in person. Every step of the process, from interviews to work, was conducted online until I was lucky enough to meet the rest of the team. With the changing nature of the working climate, I know my experience is in no way unique and by most standards I am lucky to have met my team at all. For new starters in businesses who have only had digital interactions, some questions must be asked. What is different about their experience? What can be understood and improved and what lessons are there for companies with new digital starters? As a new online employee with a very good experience of this process, I thought I would share my insights.

What makes the experience different?

The difference between general working from home and new digital starters comes down to a few distinct areas; communication, connections and content.

Communications

As our work from home survey showed, the opportunities for communication in our digital world of work decrease. With non-verbal communication estimated to be above the 90% mark for our total interactions, there is a lot to be lost in the translation of emails that could limit relationships created online. Despite the frequent use of video and phone calls, this equally has its issues. From surfing other tabs on video calls, to grainy cameras missing the nuances of someone's body language, quality time can be threatened. Essentially, quality and quantity of communication is being limited. This can create a number of issues including; adjusting to the business at a slower pace, being limited to the ideas developed within their spheres and other numerous effects of reduced quality communication channels. Whether they are unaware of private work chat groups or email chains,

new starters may face limited communication from their firm, employees and managers that original employees will have a better chance of accessing and consequently coping with.

Connections

For those starting out in a new business, the preestablished connections and relationships have to be created entirely virtually. Due to the nature of working from home, there are often less points of contact for new employees. Where initially sharing a coffee would have been an opportunity for business ideas as well as connectivity, these experiences are significantly limited. This could ultimately result in limited connections for newbies, limiting their immersion in the firm. Original employees already have established connections and thus may fare better under these circumstances than new starters. All this amounts to a potential difficulty in creating new relationships for the digital starter. Relationships are a vital part of the business process and are inherent to the makings of a successful team, so these problems for new starters must be considered and addressed.

Content

Content may also provide an area of contention for digital starters. With new employees having less of a grasp of their role within the business, their workload and the contents of their tasks, the digital divide may affect them disproportionately. With many roles going online, there is already huge upheaval in the way that firms and individuals are working in these circumstances. Established employees working from home have the luxury of experience and understanding of their roles that new employees don't. Digital starters may face undefined duties, with concerns over what their roles actually entail, only further highlighted by lack of communication and connections. For some positions and employees, this may actually work in their favour, allowing them to craft bespoke content for their role, but for others it may demotivate them and increase stress levels during an already stressful time.

Whilst I have been rather doom and gloom in discussing the problems, I can say from personal experience that this can be dealt with and many positives can come from it. I have personally benefited from a significant amount of 1-2-1 time, the comfort of being in my own environment and also the creation of relationships through fun informal meetings; covering everything from recipe sharing to fun and interactive games. I want to share what TICL has done to make my experience an easy and enjoyable one, in the hope that it may help other businesses with their digital starters.

Communication

Set aside time for regular check-ups, 1-2-1s and group meetings to keep your newbies engaged and integrated. Make sure this is more time than traditionally would be allocated to account for the lost learning in an office environment. I had facetime for at least an hour every day of my first week and it got me up to speed very quickly.

Connections

From a managerial perspective, create channels, tasks and content for your original employees to engage with your new starters and vice versa. Never underestimate the small details in creating connections between the team. From shared tasks to a shared hobby, facilitate these connections as much as possible because a connected team is a better team.

Content

There are two ways to deal with this issue, two points of a spectrum within which your new starter should fall. The first end has a clearly defined role, tasks and a step by step of what tasks to be doing and how. The opposing end has a blank canvas within which a starter can create the role within the parameters of their experience, what they think is needed and what the business aims are. It is important to note that this style requires attentive managers who are willing to listen and be flexible to make this successful. The reality is often somewhere in the middle, but will vary from person to person. Make sure your new team member has the correct amount of definition and creativity within the content of their role to engage them in the best possible way.

Ultimately, integrating digital starters effectively comes down to care. When I finally met my boss in person, she made sure to wear heels to bridge our height gap, something that made me and the team laugh as much as anything else. The commitment to a whole day of meetings and presentations in 3-inch heels shows the care and consideration that has driven my integration as a digital starter. This care, combined with targeting the difficult areas of connections, communications and content has ensured that despite starting digitally during a pandemic, I feel connected, valued, supported and very much part of the TICL team.