

Why Starting a New Job Feels So Awkward

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Summary. When you're first starting out in a new job, it can feel awkward. Even if you have effective onboarding, you might not be sure what to say, who to talk to, or how to figure out what you need to know. And you're not alone. Most people struggle with discomfort in the... [**more**](#)

Starting at a new job in a new workplace is exciting, but it can also be uncomfortable. Regardless of how many jobs you've had before, you may suddenly feel like the new kid in class, with all eyes on you. How can you overcome the awkwardness of those

first few weeks? Is there any way to feel at ease when you're brand new? And if you're the one welcoming a new person to your team, what can you do to smooth the way for them?

It's helpful to know a bit about what makes these transitions so difficult so you can mitigate the awkwardness.

Your prediction engine fails.

The most significant source of awkwardness is that you just aren't sure what to expect. The brain is a prediction engine. It wants to accurately forecast what's going to happen, and a lack of confidence about the future creates anxiety. (That's the same reason why foreign travel is often more fun in retrospect than it is in the moment.)

When we're uncertain about what will happen, we default to inaction. This is for two reasons. One, our anxiety motivates us to avoid potential threats or calamities. Two, when we do experience bad outcomes, we're more likely to blame actions we take rather than things we fail to do. So we convince ourselves that not doing anything is less likely to cause problems. As a result, when you're not sure what's going on, it can be difficult to start conversations with new colleagues or to speak up.

This tendency to remain silent is made worse by concerns that you'll say the wrong thing. Even when we're talking to people we know well, we tend to avoid saying things we think might be misinterpreted. As it turns out, in reality, people focus mostly on the intent behind what you say rather than the specific words you use to say it. So, new colleagues are unlikely to form a negative impression of you, because they rarely notice the things you were concerned would be awkward. It really is ok to chat with your new colleagues and to ask questions when you're confused.

To help ease the way for a new colleague, try to make things feel more certain. Introduce them to others in the office. Let them know how the workday ebbs and flows. If you're working

remotely, leave yourself a note to reach out to your new colleague at least once a day so that they don't get lost in the shuffle.

You don't know the language.

Even if you're ready to speak up at work, there's a whole set of jargon you're probably unfamiliar with. Every organization has its acronyms for particular departments or processes — not to mention its own terms for people, places, and things. Those first few weeks at a new job can feel like you've been dropped into a country in which you speak enough of the language to feel like you ought to understand more of what's being said around you.

It's uncomfortable to stop people whenever they use a new term to get them to define it. And people who are fluent in their office jargon can spit out sentences that are completely incomprehensible to the uninitiated. (“I had to get EVPP and VPR to approve a PAR before sending it to OSP.”) So, it's useful to get a translator. See if a colleague can put together a cheat sheet for you of commonly used acronyms and phrases in the company. (Some smart organizations even include this in their onboarding materials.) Then, get their permission to email or text them when a new phrase comes up that you don't know. It will be reassuring to know you have a lifeline when you're not able to fully follow ongoing conversations.

If you're working with someone new, try to wrap your head around the beginner's mind. It can be difficult to remember how steeped you are in your organization's way of speaking. When you find yourself using some of the local jargon, use the term (so that your new colleague gets used to hearing it) and then define it (so that you don't confuse them completely).

You don't have a squad — yet.

Perhaps the hardest part of starting a new job is that you don't have a group of people you feel comfortable with yet. Research suggests that having positive social connections at work is crucial to happiness and job satisfaction. You may see groups of people

spending time together and talking about shared experiences, which can make you feel like an outsider, or even isolated. And, chances are, you don't have a lot of practice integrating yourself into a pre-existing social structure, unless you've relocated a lot in your life. We generally only meet a lot of new people when everyone is in the same boat and creating a new social group (such as arriving at college as a first-year student).

Remember that it takes time, and everyone else there was new at one point too. You can start out by having conversations with a few people. Get to know them, and find out how the group engages. Are there coffee breaks or shared lunches? An easy way to meet a group of people is to get someone to serve as your ambassador and to introduce you to others. Don't be afraid to ask someone to help you to meet your new colleagues. People are generally happy to agree to simple favors like this for their colleagues, especially new ones.

When you have a new colleague at work, help them to get settled into the social scene. You don't have to commit to being a close friend or to spending time with them outside of work. Just help them to meet a few other people and include them in workplace conversations. It's particularly valuable to make these introductions when people in the organization are working remotely. Most social interactions in remote workplaces have to be explicitly arranged, so it is easy for a new person to get left out entirely. Ensuring that new hires get connected to others also helps to improve retention.

Ultimately, remember that you are more worried about the awkwardness of being new at the job than anyone else is. The rest of your new colleagues are just going about their daily routines. The best part is that in six weeks or so, most of your anxiety will fade. You will develop new habits, you'll discover you understand at least half of the new jargon that gets thrown at you, and you'll have a couple of people who can guide you through the social scene.

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