Onboarding in a Pandemic: Perspectives from a New Hire in the Library

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(My surname is a happy coincidence)

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The views expressed in this presentation do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis or the Federal Reserve System.
Background

• Finished library school at University of Michigan in May 2021; moved to STL later that month after getting hired.

• Volunteered to work on site 2 days/week May to September.

• Division-wide return to working on site 3 days/week in October.

• Responsibilities: serve as product owner for a Research Division web application; maintain publication process of working paper series through RIM system; lead annual citation analysis project; process user-support requests for economic data; conduct technology-implementation work; and much more.
Agenda

• As the final presentation today, my goal is simply to provide some food for thought that you can take home to your institutions/teams.

• I’ll answer questions about my experience related to…
  – Personal successes and challenges of “hybrid” onboarding
  – Physical space and unwritten organizational culture
  – Getting to know people

• Final observations and recommendations
Hybrid Onboarding:  
Personal successes and challenges
What has worked well with hybrid onboarding as a new employee?

• **New employee orientation.** Concise, approachable, all-remote. Improved my understanding and retention of key concepts (compared to my previous, in-person orientation experiences academically and professionally).

• **Flexibility.** Extra time afforded by the lack of a morning commute 2 days per week has made adjusting to life in a new city much easier.

• **Development of marketable skills.** People regularly ask *me* to help them understand key functionalities for Microsoft Teams!

• **A “leveling” experience.** The new organizational culture does not long predate my own time at the Bank. Everyone is thus “new.”
Where is the in-person component of working life unmatched by remote work?

• Learning about the whole person.
  – Eating together, body language, family, hobbies, goals, interests

• Enjoying serendipity.
  – Exchanging information over the cubicle walls.
  – Learning institutional history/memory/purpose experientially.

• Demonstrating approachability.
  – “Your friendly neighborhood librarian.”
How might a new employee harmonize expectations and preferences with supervisor?

• Where serendipity is lost, **intentionality must fill the gap.**
  
  - Err on the side of caution with early judgment calls, but don’t get paralyzed by fear of doing the wrong thing.
  
  - When in doubt, just ask.
    
    • “May I…”, “Should I…”, “Would you…”
  
  - Demonstrate an interest in transitioning to independence.
    
    • “Be quick, but not in a hurry.”
  
  - Good teammates can pass *and* catch the ball.
    
    • Be able to ask for help in a pinch, *and* be able to give help on short notice.
Physical Space and Unwritten Culture
How might the lack of daily spatial proximity to colleagues impact the informal knowledge sharing that orients a new employee to the (implicit) office culture?

• What was once implicit or informal must become explicit or deliberate, when circumstances beyond our control necessitate rethinking/reinvention.
  
  – Strong relationships are difficult to cultivate from scratch all-virtually, but regular video chats can make a big positive difference.
    
    • Eye contact and body language = rocket fuel for empathy?
    • Teammates need to know each other’s circumstances.

• What did I learn about only by coming into the Bank?
  
  – Tight-knit research associate culture. (Inviting myself to lunch to learn more.)
  
  – Coffee is a HUGE part of the Research Division economists’ culture!
Getting to Know People
In a remote working environment, how might a new employee go about building relationships with important “secondary contacts” in a library organization?

• Build a mental map of the organization by asking for fifteen-minute coffee breaks with people two or three times a week for at least your first couple of months on the job.  
  – Each person is sort of like a book filled with helpful information.
  • Helpful rule for talking to academics: when in doubt, ask about their work!
  • Just as you consult the bibliography for more books to read after finishing one, ask your colleagues to whom you should speak next.
  • Don’t hesitate to visualize, in your head or on paper. Who knows whom?
Final Observations and Recommendations from a New Hire in the Library
Review and Final Thoughts

• For new hires
  - Be coachable.
  - Be intentional.
  - Be direct, even when it means showing vulnerability.
  - Know how to pass and catch the ball.
  - When in doubt, choose to be on site.

• For managers
  - Be approachable.
  - Cultivate opportunities for serendipitous encounter and exchange.
  - Illustrate and emphasize the ongoing transformation of the organizational culture. Give examples.
  - Weekly check-ins are great.
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