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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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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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