

The My So-Called Career Guide to Remote Starts.

Welcome back to the *My So-Called Career Guides To...* series; a set of free resources for you to download at any time, giving you access to career support whenever you need it the most.

Covid-19 is forcing us to rethink so many of the things we take for granted, and none more so than how we start new jobs, so in this guide we are going to focus on how to set yourself up for a positive remote start.

Your first day in a new job is always going to feel mildly terrifying, but if you're starting something new during lockdown, chances are you'll have a whole world of extra worries nagging at you. With no clear idea of whether or when things might return to anything vaguely resembling normal, new starters and their managers have a lot of unstable ground to navigate, and while some companies will have experience with remote workers, many don't; and even the most remote friendly companies don't have experience of onboarding new starters in the middle of a global health crisis.

"We've never experienced this much uncertainty in such a short period of time. And the health component of being worried for the physical well-being of yourself, your friends and your family adds on another emotionally stressful layer," - Liz Fosslie, Liz and Mollie

Whether you are the employer or the employee, keep in mind that this is not normal, and we are not 'just' working remotely; we are working out how to work during a generation defining crisis. Starting a new job is a time when you want to be your best, but the emotional stress of our current reality will make that extra challenging, and as much as you might want to maintain a professional exterior, that's pretty hard when your new colleagues can see right into your home from day one.

Things will take longer. With no visual cues to work from it will be harder to interpret and contextualise the information you are taking in and assign meaning to people and things. Relationships will take longer to develop. This is all to be expected. Be prepared to be flexible, patient and compassionate (even more so than usual) as neither side will be operating from a place of strength.

I spent last week speaking to some remote starters and their managers to put together this set of top tips for any of you needing some remote start scaffolding.

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The My So-Called Career Top Tips for Successful Remote Starts

If you are the new starter:

Speak up.

Don't be afraid to ask many more questions than you might otherwise feel comfortable with.

Don't feel you need to save them all up for more formal structures either - chat or slack functions make it easy to ask the kind of ad hoc questions you would ask directly in the office.

Pull back on your expectations.

Don't expect perfection from yourself or your employer. Chances are this might be the first time they've done this too. Take the opportunity to talk openly about what's on your mind and how you feel you're progressing. Don't allow imposter syndrome to sneak in and suggest that you should be able to nail this with no wobbles.

"There's never been another time when it's been this safe to get vulnerable at work. You're stressed, anxious, isolated and terrified – but everyone else is too."

Liz Fosslie, Liz&Mollie

Find ways to connect with people outside of your direct team.

Quick 'induction' calls will help you build new relationships but also create context on your role, team and wider organisation. If they haven't set these up for you, ask your manager for a list of people you are likely to come across in your role and a bit of insight into each to help you. A broader set of relationships will help you feel more independent and prevent you from becoming overly dependent on your manager or team.

Don't forget about boundaries.

Don't fall into the trap of trying to prove yourself by working all hours to try and speed things up, or make an impact. Set work hours and stick to them. Make sure you're taking breaks, eating and sleeping well. Set positive and sustainable work habits that you can maintain.

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Keep urgency in check.

There is A LOT of urgency in our lives right now. Don't allow work to add to that unnecessarily. Think twice about whether you need to respond to email/slack/whatsapp etc right now, or can you take some time to think about it and give a more considered response later?

If there is something that would make life easier for you, ask for it.

If this is the first time your employer has done a remote induction, they will miss things. Whether it's hardware, software, furniture, background information or contact time, don't assume it's not available to you because it isn't there.

Ask questions like 'how would this have worked before?'

One thing that came up a lot from our remote starters is a lack of visible benchmarks around work load, cadence, communications, culture that help you work out not only whether you are on track workwise, but also how well you feel you are fitting in. You have a dual challenge here; while everyone is trying to adapt to the new situation, you don't have a baseline to work from when judging the impact it has.

Take advantage of social options.

It may feel really awkward to take part in the company zoom quiz, or department virtual lunch, but you will not be alone. Take advantage of the fact that no one has quite got their head around virtual socials yet and treat them in the same way you would team drinks. It's a great way to observe how your new colleagues interact, to show a less formal side to yourself, and to kick start some new relationships. Ask what social events have been set up already and make sure you are on the distribution list.

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If you are the line manager:

Make time for different kinds of interaction.

In the office you would have structured one-to-ones and ad hoc, informal interactions and they are equally valuable. Make sure that your remote onboarding allows for both.

Role model the behaviour you want to encourage.

I can't stress this one enough. If you want your new starter to feel that it's ok for their child/cat/dog/lizard to stray into a zoom meeting, or to feel comfortable telling you if they are feeling worried, exposed, vulnerable etc then the best way to do that is by example. That doesn't mean you have to share every intimate detail of how you're coping, but in all team situations, psychological safety comes from shared vulnerability, and this is absolutely no exception.

Think twice about sending stuff out of hours.

This goes hand in hand with the role modelling, but a lot new starters we spoke to reported struggling with boundaries. Sending things outside working hours, or scheduling early or late meetings, even if it is helpful for you, will be more intrusive than normal with no physical distance between home and work.

Create an induction programme that goes wider than the team.

Don't forget that you will most likely be your new starter's sole connection to the wider business. All the people that they would have connected with by osmosis will now need a more proactive approach. Challenge yourself to think creatively about who this person will benefit from knowing and help them connect. Don't fill their schedule with back to back induction calls though - virtual meetings are draining enough when you know the person at the other end. The impact is doubled if you have zero context and want to make a good impression.

Consider putting a buddy system in place.

This gives them someone other than you and their immediate peers to call on for context, social introductions and help with processing all the information that they are being bombarded with.

Make extra time to give guidance and feedback.

Right now, the risk of over communication is far preferable to under communication even if it's not your usual style. Make time to give guidance and input into work, to give

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regular feedback and make sure they and their work are getting the right level of exposure to the wider business to succeed in their role.

Be wary of accidental micromanaging - think about making sure you are 100% clear on the what of their role, but allow your new team member to set their own how and support them in that process.

Remember what you hired them for, and help create the circumstances for that to shine.

On the following page, we've included some quotes from our community who are experiencing this right now!

We hope you found this helpful and would love to hear from you about your experiences of remote starts, whether you're the new starter, the manager, or if you're in an HR team trying to make this work for an entire business.

If you have tips you'd like to share with the My So-Called Career Community, a story you'd like to tell, or if there is a topic you'd like us to create a My So-Called Career Guide To, you can reach us at hello@mysocalledcareer.com or @socalledcareer on instagram.

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From the My So-Called Career Community

On not meeting colleagues face to face:

"It feels like those times that you message people on dating apps for too long before you meet them in person."

On zoom overload:

"My manager is brilliant and has scheduled loads of meetings for me, but possibly too many. I feel overloaded and not sure I'm getting enough work done."

On boundaries:

"I'm part of an international team and it's hard to switch off at the end of my day because other colleagues are still online. I feel like I need to prove myself to them and end up spending half the evening on slack."

On workload:

"I have no idea whether the amount of work we're doing is normal; it doesn't feel in any way sustainable."

On the little things that make a big difference:

"I was told I could expense a desk and chair if I needed, which was great because I live in a flatshare with no real workspace."

"There are team and division breakfasts and lunches that anyone can drop into."

"GYM CLASSES!"

"My boss calls me on the phone, not always on video."

From a manager:

"I've been talking about my experience working from home - the real stuff, not the edited highlights - and she's started to open up a bit about how she's feeling."

"I've been very visibly signing off for the day so everyone can see, and asking everyone what they are doing in the evening."

"I have no idea how she is doing this, but she is amazing and I really hope she realises."

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