

VIEW FROM THE CUBE

For a newcomer in the office, the pressure is on Different job means new friends, duties -- and lots of stress

By Amy Yelin | December 12, 2004

On a recent trip to the Costa Rican rainforest, I learned something interesting about monkeys. Some species aren't particularly welcoming when it comes to newcomers. In fact, when a new monkey tries to enter such a group, he risks being injured or even killed by the strangers he longs to join.

This got me thinking about the new job I would be starting. In the thick of the excitement about landing gainful employment, most of us forget that starting a new job, like entering any new situation, is one of life's more stressful experiences. We are nervous about failing, about being accepted by a new group of people, about getting lost on the way to our next meeting.

I read recently that most employees who leave a company within the first six months of a new job make the decision to leave within their first week. And who can blame them? The first week is never fun, and all that stress leaves many of us ready to flee, or even longing to return to the familiarity and comfort of an old job. Once, I actually performed such a "rebound." I had given my new job only two months before deciding it was time to go back to the old one. When the colleagues I hardly knew took me out for a goodbye lunch, one of them told me about the \$2,000 bonus I would have received if I had made it to six months. It was a low blow.

I started my most recent new job last May, and I'd be lying if I said that being the new girl was any easier or different this time around. Only the outcome has changed.

Day One

After more than a year of working as a freelancer in sweat pants and slippers, I actually have to get up in the morning and get dressed. This is the first shock. I browse through my closet and come up with a once hip but now ill-fitting outfit that I fear will not make a good first impression. Then, instead of walking three giant steps from my bedroom to my office across the hall, I must get in my car and join the anxious herd on Route 128. I find myself in traffic that begins and ends and then begins and ends again without explanation.

I arrive at my new office and am directed into a windowless corner cube. The computer is a dinosaur that moans and then dies if I try to open the Internet more than twice. As I curse it, I notice that I am surrounded by pictures of someone else's kids, two boys and a girl. They are an attractive lot, but nonetheless, they unnerve me. So they end up face down, positioned in a manner I hope will make it look like an accident.

Next, I struggle with my voice mail. Attempting to leave the right message, I have now recorded and deleted myself nine times. I decide to take a break. Occasionally, colleagues walk by and introduce themselves. I try to remember who is who but I am bad with names, so for the first few days, I just say 'hey . . . you,' which is not much of an issue, as no one is really talking to me yet.

Day Three

I am feeling slightly more confident. I have now been given my first real responsibility and, having just left the boss's office, am walking with a skip in my step when the receptionist stops me to tell me a price tag is hanging off the collar of my shirt.

"Oh," I say, embarrassed. I attempt to make like the girl in "The Exorcist" and spin my head around, but I only succeed in pulling a muscle in my neck.

"Here, I'll get it for you," she says. She cuts it off and hands me a ticket for \$19.99. A bargain, yes, but now it simply screams "cheap." She smiles at me as she hands me back my ticket and says, "I do it all the time."

But I know what she is really thinking: "She must be crazy. Only a crazy person would come to work with a tag still on her clothes." Had this happened after I had at least one year of employment under my belt, this incident would have been amusing. But, now, during the crucial period when new co-workers are determining 'friend' or 'freak,' I had just scored a big point in the 'freak' column. I thanked her and hurried back to my dark, lonely corner of the office.

Day Four

I discover the secret bathroom. Like a rite of passage, most new employees eventually stumble upon this tucked-away sanctuary somewhere in the building or, if lucky enough, are directed to it by a colleague. Later that day, someone remembers that I exist and asks if I want lunch. This is progress! I am feeling much better about things.

Day Five

On Friday, my colleagues order lunch for the office but forget about me. I pretend I need to run an errand and go out and get my own food. Somehow I take a wrong turn and get lost on my way back. I spend a teary-eyed 20 minutes driving around in circles until I recognize something. The rest of the afternoon I pose existential questions to myself such as "what am I doing here?" and "what is the meaning of life?" I return home that evening exhausted and depressed. I curl up on the couch, pull a blanket over my head, and announce that I will never again return to my new office.

My husband rubs my back and reminds me of the Costa Rican monkeys. "Hey, it could have been worse," he says. "At least you didn't get beaten up or killed on the job, right?"

We laugh. He is right. I have survived my first week. That alone is an accomplishment. Still harboring some doubts, I return to work the following Monday, and then the Monday after that.

Seven months later, I am still at this job. Although I received no \$2,000 bonus on my six-month anniversary, at least I remember people's names and, on most days, have a pretty good handle on where I'm going