

Onboarding During a Pandemic: Notes From the Field



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By Osazenoriuwa Ebose | **April 14, 2021** | **The Legal Intelligencer**

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Despite the constraints of the pandemic, many organizations—including my own—have continued to hire new additions to their teams. We represent the optimistic horizon on this pandemic, a sign of potentially brighter days ahead. Accordingly, the onboarding process has evolved to reflect this new environment. Over a year later, despite the surrealness of this time, I have discovered some keys to success when integrating into a new workplace.

First, many organizations generally begin with some level of onboarding. You will meet various people, sign multiple forms and a whirlwind of information will bombard you. I found my onboarding to be a success because my organization kept it simple, made it clear and kept it easy. Let's break that down.

Make it simple. In this pandemic the bane of everyone's existence is downloading and mastering the endless number of video call platforms. When you keep onboarding localized on a single call line, however, and have the presenters switch, it lessens the new hire's learning curve for unfamiliar platforms. It also helped me alleviate new-job jitters and anxiety.

Make it clear. Use schedules delineating presenters, times, and leave room for breaks to occur. I received a PDF schedule informing me of who I was meeting with, why, and for how long. It took into consideration and built in time for me to take bathroom breaks, stretch my legs, and, most importantly, eat. Always helpful!

Make it easy. Keep block onboarding short and sweet. The reality is that it's hard to stay focused on a screen with someone talking at you for more than a couple days. Ensure new team members have a designated access point for questions and concerns, but keep full-day onboarding to three to four days. Then spread any additional required training over the following months. I had three days of actual block onboarding. After that, additional trainings have continued, well into my six-month mark, teaching me everything from navigating the online filing system to using new research platforms.

Once onboarding is over, however, the onus switches from the organization to the individual— you—to chart your new future. The most important part of being a new team member is to stay intentioned and stay connected, especially true while working remotely.

Walk in your purpose. Never forget why you said yes to your opportunity! You decided to make a move during a worldwide pandemic; it was not a decision you made lightly. Whenever the going gets hard, remember your “why” and use it to propel yourself forward. When I feel like I am floundering, overwhelmed by the newness of everything, this helps me remain focused. You are your own business (wise words from a mentor; I always cite my sources), so I actively choose to believe in myself. Don't lose sight of your end goals—whether that be to gain more trial experience, become a better writer, become partner, or change the world.

Isolation does not mean being disconnected. It's important to *actually* connect with colleagues when you're new. Be purposeful about how you do it. Make a list of people you want to meet and set up times to meet them. If they don't respond, contact them again ... and again, and again, until they respond. Don't just speak these goals to yourself and mentors; actualize them onto a calendar reminder for yourself every week or every month to meet someone new or connect with an old friend. Set calendar check-ins to cultivate and sustain relationships, as well as periodic check-ins for yourself. At the three- or six-month mark, see if you pushed to handle a billable deposition, wrote that appellate brief, or single-handedly closed that six-figure deal. It's hard to achieve what you don't quantify.

After you're settled, it's still on you to remain engaged and connected, even when remote. This doesn't just apply to how you to connect people, but also how you take on new assignments, ask questions of colleagues, network with new clients, and sustain relationships with established ones.

Sometimes an email doesn't cut it. When you don't yet know someone's tone or style of speaking, it can be difficult to interpret words and gauge reactions. A partner may say an assignment is needed “ASAP.” When you make a frantic phone call, however, you may discover that partner's definition of “ASAP” means whenever you have time to do it by the end of the week. Suddenly you can breathe again, and all it took was picking up the phone! Our takeaways:

- Don't be afraid of picking up the phone to ask clarifying questions. This doesn't mean cold calling people, instead send a short email asking for a time to speak about whatever issue is at hand—and follow up if necessary.
- Don't forget about the “office drive-by”—“pop in” via instant message or a quick call for intelligence on partner temperaments, pet peeves and other things to consider for assignments. Informal conversations are still possible, even in the virtual landscape.

Reconsider norms and repackage them. If you used to connect with colleagues over happy hour, take it virtual! Allocate money for colleagues to pick up a six-pack from a local brewery, host a whiskey tasting, or partner with a local restaurant and have at-home cooking classes. These are just a few examples of fun activities to maintain bonds with colleagues, and clients. Last month, the women’s group at my organization hosted a cocktail tasting. We partnered with a local distillery, received small bottles for our “class,” and made iconic drinks like an old fashioned and a whiskey sour. We had fun connecting over new happenings, old jokes, and delicious drinks. We all actively participated, in a defined time period, and a clear agenda. This helped everyone stay engaged, promoted conversation, and left a clear exit time. As many of us have found, nothing is worse than a video call with no apparent end.

At every step into a new organization, flexibility and creativity are key to well-intentioned success—and accordingly, are key to success as a lawyer. The pandemic has turned our lives around, and this singular—and ongoing—experience has essentially revolutionized the workspace, changing how we do, think, and value work. While an end is in sight, the lessons we continue to learn from this experience remain—and should be retained to chart a new legal future.

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