



“Hi, I’m New Here” – Virtual Onboarding in the Age of Covid-19

August 20, 2020

I can still remember the day my university asked all the students to vacate the hostels due to Covid-19. We did not think much of it then - I simply packed a few clothes and books and shifted to a friend’s apartment, thinking to myself, “I’ll be back in a fortnight. Let me just take my Rubik’s cube!” None of us anticipated that we were at the beginning of a massive pandemic that would stop the world in its tracks.

As time passed, I realised with a jolt that I would be finishing my degree within a month’s time. I wondered if any organisation would hire someone fresh out of college, unsure of her skills and with no experience in the cut-throat corporate world. Yet, I kept applying, hoping for a miracle, and in due time, I had my prayers answered as I received notification that I was being considered for a job application that I had sent just two days ago. No one had ever responded that quickly! I wondered how the interviews and tests would take place given the nationwide lockdown in place, but it was smoother than I anticipated, and I excitedly accepted an offer to join Cerence as a Speech Expert Associate.

Fast forward a few weeks, and voila! I can still remember the excitement I felt when I received the news that my very own office laptop had been dispatched and was on its way to Hyderabad, where I had been staying since the lockdown began. I signed for the package, immediately sanitised the big box and took it out. The setup was done online too, with all the instructions provided very clearly by the IT department.

With that, I had virtually joined my very first office! It was exhilarating! I was the first person to join the team since the start of the pandemic and was excited – and a bit nervous – to talk to my manager sitting all the way across the globe in Aachen, Germany. Since this was my first job ever, I was not sure about how to balance time at work and home, what the proper etiquette was while speaking with a colleague, and, surprisingly, even writing an email would make me nervous! It felt awfully strange to talk to people I have never met online. I kept wondering if I spoke too much or too little, too fast or too slow, and could they possibly hear the washing machine running during a meeting, or my friend laughing loudly in the other room watching Naruto?

But my team welcomed me with a smile and helped me find my place in the virtual world of Cerence. Every call and meeting would start with politely asking how things are in everyone’s respective countries and states. Despite being in diverse time zones (almost everyone I had a conversation with daily was from a different country) and being differently affected by the pandemic, the friendly chatter and the at-ease manner of all conversations helped me feel like I belonged.

Now two months into my time at Cerence, I look back at those moments and am amazed at how smooth the entire process was. For anyone who’s joining a company during this time – and especially those who are fresh out of university, like me – I have a few tips that can make your onboarding experience as seamless as possible:

- Ask questions! The learning curve in any new role is big and made even bigger when you can’t ask a quick question to a colleague sitting nearby. For example, during my virtual onboarding, there were quite a few documents to read for background on my role. As I was getting up to speed, I noticed acronyms and shorthand that I wasn’t familiar with. After making a list of all such entities (and Googling them, of course, to get at least some idea about each one’s domain), I asked my senior colleagues to help define them. While Google and I were almost always wrong, each question and resulting conversation made me feel more confident about myself and helped me build a relationship with my team.

- That leads to my next tip with another potential challenge when onboarding virtually – building a rapport with the team. As with life in general, it is the small things that make a difference. Participating enthusiastically in the different activities organised by the HR department, being genuinely interested in your team members and just trying to get to know one another while waiting for other people to join a meeting and actively arranging calls to foster good relationships with people you work with is all that is needed to bond with a team that you haven't met. With these relationships in place, you won't even feel the lack of an office space, I'm sure!
- As a new employee, it is also necessary to familiarise oneself with the culture and goals of the organisation. In my first few weeks, I spent a good amount of time on The Hub, our Cerence intranet. Not only did I come across various policies about finance, holidays, code of conduct, etc., but I also read about the current and future goals of the company and the new technologies being launched and researched upon and how I, as an employee, could contribute. This helped me get a sense of how my role fits into the bigger picture. Similarly, I dove into reading and research on industry topics to make sure I was staying on top of important news.

Once you've laid a strong foundation, you're well set up for success! For me, the transition from being a student to an employee, while done completely virtually, was seamless. I'm proud to be on team Cerence!