

Into the swing of things

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By ANGELA McCARTHY

After four months of unemployment, Adrian Smith, who has just finished his fourth week in a new marketing job at the University of Auckland Centre for Continuing Education, was delighted to be back doing the nine-to-five.

Although he'd done some contracting and had only been out of the workforce a few months, he had to readjust to office life.

Readjusting the body clock to the working week is the biggest transition, says Smith. Waking regularly to an alarm clock was a shock to his system, as was the sheer exhaustion of an eight-hour day.

So he was heartened when a friend explained the body usually takes three weeks to get used to a physical transition.

"To compensate, in my second week of work I was crawling into bed at 7pm," he confesses.

Lynn Leech, NZ Works employment co-ordinator, describes the first few weeks of employment as similar to moving to a foreign country.

"Your work, life and family have all been altered, and you're dealing with that and trying to learn lots at the same time," says Leech, who runs a programme that helps people to find work, then supports them in the role for six months.

Her advice is to watch energy levels and pace over the first few weeks and have plenty of early nights.

This is particularly important if you left your past job because of burnout, says SQ Executive Management Consultancy business psychologist Jasbinder Singh.

"Burnout can leave a person feeling a lot more sensitive, vulnerable and not as tough as they used to think of themselves," she says.

People who have become internally aware of their physical and psychological "trigger points" will manage themselves better and avoid burnout again.

For Smith, getting used to workplace dynamics and communication was another big adjustment. "With any new role you feel your way, and I'm still doing a lot of sitting and listening."

Smith is reticent around workmates. But others, especially if coming from redundancy, may talk constantly about their previous role - and that can really annoy new work colleagues, says Iain McCormack of the Executive Coaching Centre. You have to be humble, observe and listen, he says, because that's how you learn.

The newly employed can also struggle with workmates of vastly differing ages, ethnicities, religion, and tastes. Says Leech: "When you're used to hanging out with people of a certain age and type, it can be a real shock having to mix with people you don't automatically get on with. That can be initially scary."

Another major readjustment for Smith was keeping focused on the job through the day. To help with this, he used the strategies suggested by career/analyst coach Anne Fulton for job searching - which were to set small, achievable targets and goals.

So Smith would mentally list, as soon as he woke, everything he wanted to achieve that day. Once in the office, he put the list on paper.

Such strategic approaches can be a huge asset for employers, says Singh. "After a lengthy period of job search, when people do find a job they like they can be highly motivated employees."

Remember, too, that it isn't just you adjusting to change. Families and friends need to adjust as well. Unemployed mates' invites can be enticing when you're trying to get through the first few weeks of a new job and feel insecure and friendless.

If you have been helping your family a lot, you need also to prepare them for changes, points out Leech.

"It is hard to turn people down when you've been the person relied upon to get things done. You need to look and think, whose problem is it? Do I want to play a role in this person's problem for the rest of my life?"

Time management is a major issue for many newly employed, says Clive Thomas, Enterprise East work-based training tutor and employment co-ordinator.

"It is the little things: turning up on time, letting the employer know if you'll be late, and being sensible over [personal] appointments."

Taking a day off to go to the dentist isn't good enough, says Thomas.

Leech says six months is the magical hurdle people need to leap to make employment permanent.

"Statistics show that if someone can stay six months in a job, they're more likely to stay."

Still searching?

While unemployed, putting some sort of structure around your job-search day helps you to get on track once in a job, says Adrian Smith.

He followed the advice of career/analyst coach Anne Fulton and put aside regular hours each day to search for jobs.

Fulton advises job searchers to set small achievable targets, such as making a list of possible target organisations, then getting their contact details.

They are, she says, "small steps that keep you moving ahead and give you the satisfaction of ticking things off your to-do list, so you feel you're making progress."

Also, include frequent and regular rewards for your efforts, says Fulton, such as having your coffee and biscuit after you've made that scary phone call - rather than using your coffee as a means of further procrastination.