



THE PLAYBOOK

The Arrival

Your own first ninety days in a new job, particularly when the company has no onboarding. What to ask, what to produce, and the conversation to request at day thirty.

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The tool: the first ninety days plan

Nobody is running your onboarding

In a small business there is usually no onboarding programme. There is a start date, a laptop, and an assumption that you will work things out, which is what people who did work it out believe is normal.

You can wait for that to be run for you, or you can run it yourself. The second is more work in the first month and considerably less work in the six after.

This playbook is the employee's side. There is a companion on this site written for whoever should be onboarding you; if your employer has read that one, this becomes easier. If they have not, everything here still works.

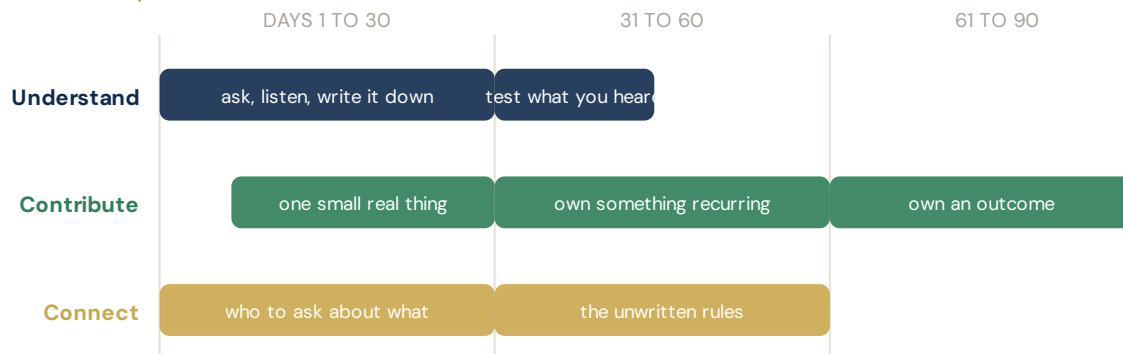
ONE THING TO UNDERSTAND FIRST

Your first month is the only period in which you can ask anything without it costing you anything. That window closes gradually and completely, and most people spend it being quiet in order to seem competent.

What the first month is actually for

Not learning the tools. Those take a fortnight and you will pick them up regardless.

NINETY DAYS, THREE LANES



The middle lane is the one people delay. Contributing early buys the standing to ask harder questions later.

Figure: three parallel tracks rather than three sequential phases. The contributing lane starts in week two, not month two.

Three parallel tracks, and the mistake is treating them as sequential phases.

Understand. How the business actually works, as distinct from how the org chart says it does. What is broken that everybody has stopped mentioning.

Contribute. Something small, real and finished, early. This is the lane people postpone until they feel ready, and postponing it is the error. Contributing buys the standing to ask harder questions later.

Connect. Who to ask about what. In a small company this map is the most valuable undocumented thing there is, and nobody will hand it to you.

Questions to ask in week one

Ask these of several people, separately, and write the answers down verbatim. The divergence between answers is often more informative than any single answer.

01 What should be happening that is not?

The single most useful question available to a new person. People answer it honestly because it is about the business rather than about them, and the overlap across several answers is your work list.

02 What wastes your time?

Surfaces the process problems everyone has normalised. Frequently the fastest route to an early, visible contribution.

03 Who do you go to when you are stuck?

Builds the real map, which rarely matches the reporting lines. The names that recur are the people who actually hold the business together.

04 What should I know that nobody would think to tell me?

Produces the unwritten rules: which client is sensitive, which deadline is real, what not to raise in a group. This is the question that saves you a month two mistake.

Ask your manager one more, on its own: **what does a good version of this role look like in six months?** Most people never ask, and consequently invent a target and then fail to meet it.

Producing something small, early

The instinct is to spend the first month absorbing and then begin contributing. Resist it.

Finish something small and real within the first fortnight. Not a project. A tidied process, a document nobody had written, a recurring task taken off somebody. It matters less what it is than that it is finished and visible.

Three reasons this matters more than it appears.

It converts you from a guest into a participant, for you as much as for them. Being new is uncomfortable and producing something ends that faster than any amount of settling in.

It earns the standing to ask harder questions. A person who has contributed something can ask why a process is the way it is without it sounding like criticism from a stranger.

It gives you an early read on how work is received here. How it is reviewed, whether it is reviewed at all, what the standard is. That information is worth more than the contribution.

Choose the thing everybody complains about and nobody owns. It is available, it is visible, and nobody will mind you taking it.

Learning who to ask

In a business of any size the org chart tells you who reports to whom and nothing about where knowledge lives.

Build the real map deliberately in month one. For each area, who actually knows about it, and who is easy to interrupt. Those two are frequently different people, and knowing the second is what makes you fast.

Notice who gets asked. In every small business there are one or two people whose names come up constantly. They are load-bearing, they are usually overloaded, and they are worth being considerate with.

Ask people about their own work, not just about yours. Fifteen minutes asking somebody what their week involves is the cheapest relationship-building available and it produces context you will use for years.

And find out who has been there longest. They hold the reasons. Most things that look irrational have a history, and knowing it before you propose a change is the difference between being useful and being the new person with opinions.

When onboarding is bad

Sometimes there is genuinely nothing: no plan, no time from your manager, no clarity about what you are for. Four moves.

Write your own plan and send it. One page: here is what I understand my priorities to be for the first ninety days, is this right? Most managers will correct it, which is exactly what you want, and it takes them five minutes instead of an hour.

Book your own introductions. Do not wait to be introduced. A short message asking for twenty minutes is almost always accepted and almost nobody minds.

Ask for one recurring slot with your manager. Even fortnightly. If they are too busy to onboard you, they are too busy to be interrupted at random, and a scheduled slot is easier for them than availability.

Keep the confusion list. Everything that took longer to work out than it should have. This is useful to you now and genuinely valuable to them later, and offering it at day sixty is one of the better impressions a new person can make.

THE QUESTION WINDOW CLOSES



Write down everything confusing in month one. It is the only month you can see it and ask about it freely.

Figure: the same question costs almost nothing in week one and something real by month four.

The thirty day conversation you request

Almost no small business runs a thirty-day check-in. Ask for one.

Request it in week one, for week four. Framed simply: could we spend half an hour at the end of my first month going over what I have found and whether my priorities are right?

Bring three things. What you have observed, phrased as observations rather than criticisms. What you have done. And what you are unsure you are allowed to do, which is almost always something and is the highest-value item on the list.

Ask for correction rather than approval. "Here is what I think matters most, what am I getting wrong?" gets you a real answer. "How am I doing?" gets you reassurance.

And ask what you should stop doing. Rarely asked and often answerable. New people frequently inherit tasks that were parked with them because nobody else wanted them, not because they belong to the role.

WRITE DOWN WHAT YOU AGREE, AND SEND IT

Two lines afterwards. Same habit as everywhere else on this site, and it starts paying at month six when priorities have quietly drifted and there is a record of what was agreed.

At ninety days

The point at which you stop being new, whether or not you feel it.

Own something outright. Not a task list. One area where decisions inside it are yours. If nothing has been handed over by day ninety, ask for it explicitly, because it will not arrive on its own.

Write down what confused you, before you forget. You are the only person who can see what is unclear about this business, and that ability expires. Hand it over: it is genuinely useful and it costs you an hour.

Compare what you were told against what you found. If the role turned out different from the description, that is worth raising now, calmly, while it is still framed as clarification rather than complaint.

And start the evidence log. Whatever you did in these ninety days is the clearest material you will have, and it will be gone by the time anybody asks. There is a separate playbook on this site about building that case; ninety days is the right moment to begin.

Ask early, contribute early, write it down

If your employer runs a good onboarding, everything here still applies and takes less effort. If they run none, which is the more common case in a small business, this is the difference between a slow first year and a fast one.

Ask four questions of several people in week one and write the answers down verbatim. Finish something small and real inside a fortnight. Build the map of who actually knows what. Request the thirty-day conversation nobody will offer. Keep the list of everything that confused you, because that ability expires in about three weeks.

And ask your manager, once, what a good version of this role looks like in six months. Most people never ask and then spend a year working toward a target they invented.

The plan overleaf is one page. Send a version of it to your manager in week one and ask them to correct it.

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My first ninety days

Write it, send it, ask for corrections · v1

WEEK ONE · ASK THESE OF SEVERAL PEOPLE, SEPARATELY

- ☐ What should be happening that is not?
- ☐ What wastes your time?
- ☐ Who do you go to when you are stuck?
- ☐ What should I know that nobody would think to tell me?
- ☐ To my manager: what does a good version of this role look like in six months?

By when

What I will have done

Day 14

something small, real and

finished

Day 30

conversation I requested in

week one

Day 60

something recurring that is

mine

Day 90

an outcome I own, with

decisions inside it

Running list

everything that confused me

The confusion list is worth more than it looks. You can only see what is unclear about a business for about three weeks, and handing that over at day ninety is genuinely useful to them.