

# The Guardian Office hours

## The story so far . . .

When you start a job, there's always somebody who came before you. They may be a hard act to follow and, writes **Emma Lunn**, their old friends may make it extra hard for you

**P**icture the scene. It is your first day in a new job. You are busy simultaneously executing a full-on charm offensive, mastering new systems, getting to know new colleagues and introducing yourself to customers, when you realise that, as well as being the new person, you are also the successor to someone who could soon become your nemesis.

Stepping into someone's shoes is never easy and you may find yourself fighting the spectral presence of the person who did your job before you. Call centre team leader Jon Atkinson, 27, found it hard to measure up to the standards set by his predecessor. "I soon realised Pete was the most popular guy in the office - one of the lads, adored by women, could drink everyone under the table and was a champion at every sport going," he says. "On top of that, he managed to double the team's sales figures in six months. How could I live up to that?"

Sophie Relf, head of campaign management at Workthing.com and

author of *The Right Career Moves Handbook*, says the key is not to compete with your predecessor and to aim to disrupt the office as little as possible. The dynamics of the group will change with the loss of a former member and the addition of a new one. She advises people to get as much information about the new role as they can, such as job description, person specification, business objectives, and reporting structures. "It's more important to quickly establish an understanding of procedures and processes and how things are done so that you don't rock the boat, or appear to threaten anyone else's position, than it is to try and win in the popularity stakes," she says.

Relf advises anyone taking over leadership of a team to find out what motivates people and to provide staff with both short and long-term objectives to help them prioritise. She also says it is vital to make them feel secure and that they have a future with the company and shared ownership of business achievements.

Journalist Mira Crompton, 25, found herself in a demoralising situation when she took over a new role. Her new manager was quick to tell her how incompetent and useless the previous incumbent had been. "She was so quick to criticise [him] that it made me think she had no respect for the people in her team," says Crompton. "I thought it was really unprofessional. On the positive side, I didn't have a lot to live up to and I knew the kind of mistakes I had to avoid to stay on the right side of her."

Why the person before you left and where they went on to are good indicators of how your new role

---

**'I became determined to be the first to succeed in the job'**

---

could shape your career. Crompton's predecessor left journalism to go back to college and study something different while the employee before that left to go travelling. "It worried me that neither of them went on to a more senior role," said Crompton. "After a while I realised that my manager was very cynical and would not be a good mentor. But I worked it to my advantage and became determined to be the first person that succeeded in the job and went on to better things."

Relf says it is best not to talk just about what is lacking when you start a new job - what's past is past. She advises convincing colleagues that you can improve on what your predecessor started and emphasises that it is a bad idea to blame your predecessor when things go wrong. "It's not forward-looking. You want to get people to focus on now and tomorrow." It's also advisable not to change systems and processes until you are convinced that the new way would work better and you have gauged the buy-in. Small changes and their publicised successes work better than massive alterations in the first few weeks.

Katy Nicholson of Reed Employment says: "Taking over from a predecessor can have a lot of impli-

cations; you may be following on from someone who could do no wrong, or no right. Be yourself and take time to settle in, don't charge in determined to be the best thing since air conditioning. You will soon be an essential part of the team."

Both Nicholson and Relf agree that a structured handover is vital if you are going to succeed when you step into someone else's shoes. If you are the one moving on, Relf advises organising information in a clear way and sharing knowledge, if necessary involving your successor in the decision processes that led to where you are now. If you can forecast for them, do so and make sure they know which supplies and partners it is important to make contact with as soon as possible. Relf counsels firmly against passing on prejudices or personal differences.

Nicholson advises successors to talk to their line managers and find out what is expected of them, where their predecessor went right or wrong and how the line manager's contribution fits into the scheme of things. She also advises people to investigate how their predecessor worked, how they did things and any shortcuts they took but above all recommends "Being yourself - they gave the job to you and that is what matters."