

Culture shock for new graduates: Making the transition from school to work

By Sarah Perrin

The transition from library school to one's first position in the profession can be a trial. New graduates don't come "fully formed" with all the knowledge and skills required to immediately succeed in their new positions. While adjusting to a workplace, an individual often goes through a whole gamut of emotions, and it can take up to a year before they feel comfortable in their position – or even longer if they start as part-time or on-call.

So what can be done to ease this often rocky transition? That was the topic of the session, "School to Work – Culture Shock and Response Tips for New Graduates", at this year's BCLA Conference. Leading the session was Dr. Alvin Shrader – a professor and former director of the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Alberta. Originally the session was paired with Gail Haya's complimentary topic, "Executive Coaching – Help with Learning to Lead from Within", however due to illness Gail was unable to attend.

Session attendees weren't solely new graduates, but consisted of a variety of professionals at different stages in their career. As Dr. Schrader explained, the topic of transitioning from school to work is of interest to all because it is everyone's responsibility to make new graduates quickly become efficient and feel comfortable.

The key is in the culture

Alvin speaks from 40 years of "checkerboard experience" in professional practice, teaching, and supervision; and it is through the lens of these varied experiences that he contemplates a students' transition to professional life. His unique and powerful approach to the subject involves considering the cultural differences between the school and work environments. He identified some of the key differences as including the following.

Cultural differences between work and school

- In school, hierarchies are relatively flat, involving only professors and students, while a workplace can have a much deeper hierarchy.
- Students most often receive important information in written form through a syllabus or textbook, while many requests and orders in a workplace are given verbally by supervisors.
- Similarly, while students are used to information being explicitly outlined or written down, much organizational knowledge is tacit, or understood without being formally expressed.
- In a workplace, being a "good fit" is essential to succeeding, while in school one can exhibit "anti-social behaviours" and still receive good marks, honours, and awards.



Session participants discussed ideas for making the school to work adjustment easier.

Recommendations for new grads and employers

Participants formed small groups and shared ideas on best practices for ensuring a smooth transition for new hires. Some suggestions for new graduates and employers included:

- Have a mentor or consider being one. The relationship doesn't have to be assigned, but can be found within the workplace, at other workplaces, or through conferences.
- Implement a year-long orientation plan, listing all of the things you want to learn (or want your employee to learn), and when it should be accomplished by. If your employer doesn't provide one, create one yourself.
- As a new employee, keep a journal telling of the learning curve and emotions you experience. The journal can be helpful when adjusting to future positions, or when you eventually train new graduates yourself.

Encouraging signs

As a soon-to-be new graduate, I find it encouraging that researchers such as Alvin Schrader are considering the topic of school to work transitions. The fact that so many experienced professionals would attend such a session also seems to indicate that the profession has identified an area for improvement and isn't taking it lightly. After all, it is in the best interest of everyone – new graduates, supervisors, *and* coworkers – that a new employee quickly finds their place in an organization. The sooner a new graduate becomes comfortable in their profession, the sooner they can utilize that fresh-from-library-school innovation and enthusiasm!

[For further reading on this subject, see Alvin Schrader's article in *Feliciter* 54(2), 43-46.]

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