



How to Survive Probation.

Debra Bela

A CAREER, like that perfect pair of shoes, must be test-driven before being given unlimited access to your pressure points.

Sometimes your foot doesn't stop aching, sometimes the shoe rejects you and bursts at the seams.

It's also worth remembering that the most comfy pumps can give you blisters in the beginning.

So we come to the work probation period. That three to six months at the beginning of a new job where you find out if this is the career for you, and your employer finds out if you're everything your CV says you are.

As a national probation advisory consultant, Kylie Hammond says about 50 per cent of probation periods fail to secure a permanent member of staff.

"It's quite high and not just because the employer pulls the pin. I feel an awful lot of employees haven't done enough checks or due diligences on a company and they get in and find they've made a career mistake," says Hammond, managing director of Kylie Hammond - Executive Search and Coaching.

According to Hammond, ensuring the successful completion of a probationary period can be as simple as asking the right questions during the job interview.

"This is your opportunity to interview them but a lot of people get swept up in the interview process. You're not a detective but you have to ask the hard questions: Is the company profitable? Where are they getting the funds for that future project they're talking about? What is staff turnover like?"

"It is still a tight labour market, a candidate market. There are opportunities but on the other hand we have a lot of mortgage stress, we can't afford to be jumping in and out of jobs in a hurry. It never pays to have a cavalier attitude to a career move."

If you're in the right job and you now need to survive the probationary period, Hammond's tip is to work hard, fit in to the culture of the place and have regular contact with your line manager.

"Figure out what everyone else does. If people are getting in to the office at 8am and have had their breakfast first, you fit in with everybody else."

"The big mistake is you go in and achieve everything you set out to do in a short period of time. Tread softly, this isn't silly. Don't try to change the world, it takes time to understand how a business works from the inside. Get people's expectations clear, from your line manager, colleagues, your staff and from other peers in the business."

University of Queensland's new director of human resources, Shard Lorenzo, is two months into her six-month probation period after moving to Brisbane from the University of South Australia in March.



CAREER step . . . HR boss Shard Lorenzo suggests treading softly and getting to know how a business works before trying to implement changes is one way to help survive the probationary period for new employees.

Lorenzo has worked as a teacher, principal and South Australian state manager of the Disadvantaged Schools Program, and has

always passed successfully through her probationary period, but she knows many people who haven't.

"It's a pretty common occurrence," she says.

Now in charge of academic and general staff at the University of Queensland, Lorenzo organises some of the longest probationary periods of any industry in Australia.

"For academics, the probation period varies from 3-5 years. In America it's even longer," she says.

"There is much to deliver when you are an academic. A proportion of your job is in relation to your research and the application of grants, publications, supervision of higher degree students. This takes years. Then you are confirmed into a continuing position."

Academic staff can still apply for promotion during their probation and the Vice-Chancellor can shorten the period on a case by case basis.

Academic staff are reviewed halfway through their probation, say year three, and are given annual performance reviews where issues can be raised and support given as needed.

"It is disappointing for all parties if the probation doesn't work out, but there are strict guidelines that have to be set. However, it is underpinned by the principals of natural justice."

Lorenzo says a recent trend in the current competitive recruitment process is the poaching of good academics by institutions waiving the probationary period.

Technically, an employee's resume should include details of failed probationary periods. However, Kylie Hammond says there are situations where it may be necessary to present information differently.

"You may have joined a company and been sexually harassed by the boss and you've decided you want to leave. You get a new job, but do you want to be explaining that (previous) decision into the future every time you show someone your CV?"

Debra Bela
The Courier Mail, Brisbane

The steps you can take:

- Ask questions in the job interview. Is the company profitable? Where are they getting the funds for that future project they're talking about? What is the staff turnover like? Have staff left and why have they left?
- Do background checks on the company you are thinking of working for. If it's a publicly listed company, look at annual reports and company websites. Check with colleagues who have worked with the company, people currently working with the company. Google the company.
- If it's a small private company, use credit reporting company Dun and Bradstreet (www.dnb.com.au) to check out the financials of the company.
- Adapt to the culture of the new workplace. If people are getting in to the office at 8am and have had their breakfast first, you fit in with everybody else. You shouldn't be expected to work unusually different hours to what you will be doing in the future but find out what the cultural norms are in the letter of offer, because you want to fit in.
- Employ an executive coach. The pressure to perform beyond expectations and to 'hit the ground running' during probation is high and often leads to clashes with staff and the boss. Whether working a trade or a professional position, find someone to lean on. Google 'Executive Coaches Brisbane' on the internet for a comprehensive list. Expect to pay \$300-\$400 an hour and have weekly contact.

Source: ARGroup Executive Search & Coaching

