

# Waiting for a guide

This is a time of upheaval in the pharmaceutical industry – and whether it's NHS reform, redundancies or a merger, transition brings challenges. Helen Croft and Agnes Bamford look at the impact of transition in the workplace and how to manage it.

**T**he pharmaceutical industry is undergoing a period of significant change as the NHS reforms bed in and their impact is felt throughout the sector, from R&D to sales. The increasing number of stakeholders working within healthcare has required many pharmaceutical companies to restructure in order to take account of changes such as the greater autonomy of local commissioners. Combined with austerity, the restructuring has often resulted in a reduction in the sales force, bringing fears of redundancy.

Few people respond positively to change, so this is a worrying time for many within the industry. In an uncertain climate, experiences such as dealing with the reforms, merging with another company or facing redundancy become even more stressful and difficult to handle. Much of the focus is on elements outside your control, which may increase anxiety.

However, there are ways of managing transition anxiety and making it a more positive experience. Be realistic about the situation: accept that moving between roles, working practices or companies will usually involve some uncertainty. It is important to acknowledge that anxiety about change is normal – and also that it is emotional, and so cannot be rationalised.

## **The phases of transition**

Transition generally has several phases whose timescale and intensity varies according to the individual.

Firstly, it is normal to experience initial excitement coupled with anxiety about the new situation. NHS reforms have necessitated a change in the industry's sales model and customer base, which can be perceived as an exciting opportunity to generate new and better work practices. However, it can also involve anxiety around their implementation, combined with the loss of routines and practices that have worked well.

In our experience of working with the pharmaceutical sector, individuals have often found it helpful to step back from their circumstances and reflect on the bigger picture. For example, the changes in the NHS have been driven by a reform with the primary objective of opening up the health service to the free market. Understanding the root of the change can help to provide a sense of clarity and determination to make the best of an opportunity.

In the case of a merger between pharmaceutical companies, the excitement of generating a new work culture is combined with anxiety about changing roles and fitting in. Similarly, when professionals are faced

with redundancy, it is common to experience enthusiasm about looking for new job opportunities together with concerns about finding a new position and maintaining financial health.

This ambiguous mood may be followed by a honeymoon period of discovery and exploration – for example, starting a new job and being assisted as a newcomer by colleagues. In this context, it is helpful to consider some of the positive effects of change. For example, recent pressures on the pharma industry have led to an 'opening up' of the sector: an increase in collaboration, transparency and data availability – all of which are leading to a better experience for professionals.

The first emotional dip that occurs is a reaction to the new environment and an inability to function consistently within it. This includes reacting to logistical systems and procedures that you haven't yet learned to manage. This bad patch is normally followed by adaptation to the new practices.

As you become more involved in the new situation, you may experience a second dip: an internal reaction because your former behaviours are not sufficiently effective or do not generate the expected reaction any more. This can be resolved by adopting a flexible mindset and recognising the need to adapt

to the behaviours and norms of the new culture. Focus on the opportunities of the new situation, recognising that you may not feel or see them as such.

### Working through it

The good news is that there are practical strategies you can use to help you manage the anxiety of transition.

Firstly, think about how you normally tackle hardship and how you can prepare for such experiences. Difficult situations are often easier to tackle – and may even act as a powerful motivator – as long as you are prepared for them. While most of your attention should be focused on success, it will also help if you are prepared for negative experiences. It is possible to change your mindset and learn how to like being uncomfortable, teaching yourself to enjoy the possibilities offered by tough challenges.

Remember, during transition periods within organisations, you are not alone. Most businesses recognise these changes can create stress and uncertainty, and provide support mechanisms. In the case of one major pharma firm we spoke with, there were numerous avenues of support. Internally, line managers and HR offered an open door policy for talking through change. Externally, the provision of coaches

and mentors enabled discussions with impartial third parties. In addition, subject matter experts were made available and information and resources were published on the staff intranet. In many cases, your HR department will be able to talk to you about what support to access within your own organisation.

### Learning from the past

We all learn from professional and personal experience: looking back at past transitions can help you understand how you react to change. Think about your past responses to major life events such as changing jobs or companies, having children, getting divorced or moving house. What were the emotional highs and what enabled them? What triggered the emotional lows, and how did stress manifest itself during them? What helped you to manage those transitions?

Now consider the implications for your current situation. What did you learn about yourself that you could apply this time? It may also be useful to look at how others, including colleagues and clients, have dealt with transitional changes in their lives, environment and circumstances.

Reflect on what normally causes you stress, identifying the situations, types of people, responsibilities or areas (work and

personal) that are your specific stressors. Think about how stress affects you: what you tend to think, feel and do as a result. Then consider what you can do that will help you to feel balanced and manage stress more effectively.

Those who work in the life science industries need to accept that change is inevitable – and that a certain level of anxiety is likely to accompany any transition. However, with reflection, preparation and support, its impact can be managed, minimised – and even transformed into something positive.

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## 10 tips for managing transition stress

1. Knowing what helps us manage transition stress is the first step to a successful transition. Acknowledge your past successes while focusing on going forward.
2. Get into a positive mindset. Reflect on and list the top 10 successes in your working life so far. Consider:
  - Where have you added value to the organisation or people in it? When have you received praise or recognition?
  - What has brought you the most enjoyment? When have you felt positive and satisfied?
3. Considering the above, identify the five main skills or qualities that have enabled your success.
4. Look objectively at your new role:
  - What are the five best things about this opportunity?
  - Which of your skills will be useful?
- What would be the best outcome for you 12 months from now? What two things can you do straight away to move towards achieving this outcome?
- Imagine a colleague you admire stepping into this role. What would they do in the first month/three months?
5. Look for the positive people in your life, including family and friends. Share your thoughts and concerns with people you trust who will listen and enable you to talk things through without judgment.
6. Try to make sense of your new environment. Look for logical reasons why people behave as they do and why things work differently now. Look for the 'big picture'.
7. Pay attention to the values, behaviour patterns and communication styles of your new colleagues and respect the differences. How do your own beliefs, values and assumptions colour the way you perceive them?
8. Be prepared to step outside your comfort zone. Great learning can occur when you do. Take advantage of your new environment and take reasonable risks. Get involved in the new community: volunteer, explore and interact.
9. Pay attention to your physical wellbeing: stay healthy with a well-balanced diet, appropriate exercise and sufficient rest. Feeling physically well will have a significant impact on your ability to deal with new situations.
10. Approach a colleague you trust who can introduce you to parts of the new culture or working practices, and help you make sense of the differences. New colleagues can show you the culture from the inside, as well as helping you interpret reactions around you and develop effective interactions. They can offer feedback and act as a safe sounding board.