New Job Checklist for Programmers

By Itamar Turner-Trauring @ Code Without Rules

Here's my personal checklist when I start a new job as a software engineer:

1. Understand the big picture direction of the organization, team, and product I'm working on: management, marketing, sales, and engineering.

   - Talk to relevant managers about where we're going, and what they'd consider success or failure. Also a chance to meet managers I didn't talk to during interview process.
   - See if anyone's done a pre-mortem, or if not try to informally or formally do one: "it's one year in the future and the project has failed. What did we do wrong?" Usually by this point I've started mentally creating a list of big picture risks, but many of those are probably irrelevant, and I'm probably missing quite a few.
   - Learn meeting schedule, start forming opinions about existing ones (useful/needs improvement/useless) and what meetings might be missing.

2. Get to know co-workers: names, roles, who knows what.

   - Wander around introducing myself, and asking people what they are working on.
   - Figure out lunch and snack culture.
   - Join social chat rooms / email lists.

3. Set up work environment.

   - Standing desk, with keyboard and monitor correct height.
   - Kinesis Advantage keyboard.
   - Mat for standing desk.
   - Install Linux on laptop.
   - Editor configuration (using my dotfiles repo).
   - Setup email, chat, other communication methods.

4. Start learning the development process, code base, tool chain, and relevant technologies.

   - Get code checked out, figure out how to build and run it.
   - Figure out how to file tickets.
   - Get smallest possible commit merged (fixing a typo, say).
   - Improve or write documentation for the above three, for the benefit of future developers.
   - Next smallest code change: improve code quality by adding a linter, or setup EditorConfig.
   - Start work on a small, real feature or bug fix.
   - Order (and expense!) books covering topics I don't know enough about.

5. Logistics.

   - Health and dental insurance.

- Retirement account.
- Bring relevant legal documentation first day (passport / birth certificate).
- Figure out best time to leave for work.
- Figure out bike parking.

Jonathan Lange suggested the following additions:

- Be careful when bringing up pre-mortems; some people will interpret talking about potential failure as defeatism.
- Map the value pipeline from customer/user to whatever it is you are doing.
- Try to define the terminating conditions of the small, real feature before starting on it. (Good advice for any feature you're working on!)

This checklist was originally published on my Software Clown newsletter. Every week I share stories and lessons from 20+ years working as a programmer and employee: if you'd like more, sign up today.

-Itamar Turner-Trauring