



Confessions OF THE NEW GIRL

A new job brings anxiety – and opportunity. How do you make the most of it, asks Annabel Brog, Team ELLE's latest recruit



The call, when it came, made me very happy. A new job, covering the role of deputy editor on ELLE. But, once I had finished tweeting my news and responding to the congratulations, my excitement morphed into something suspiciously like... fear. Not just nerves. Proper fear.

I have been a journalist for more than 10 years, working almost entirely on glossy magazines. My career has spanned women's titles, men's, newspaper supplements... But ELLE, a fashion magazine, appeared to me a totally different proposition, due to my own bigoted preconceptions ("They won't eat. They will laugh at my clothes") and a more justified wariness: I had spent five years editing another magazine in the same building and was used to seeing ELLE girls in the lifts: silent, elegant creatures with perfect skin, directional haircuts and structurally improbable footwear.

First-day nerves are familiar to us all. Starting a new job is one of the most vulnerable times in our lives because, when you break it down, offices are not entirely unlike other institutions rich with the possibility of social rejection and failure: a new school, say, or the olde royal courts of Machiavelli or the Borgias. All are microcosms, hierarchical societies that operate in an enclosed space with influential authority figures, petty rivalries and established cliques. To adapt, there is a language that needs to be learned, of practises that need to be adopted. I have worked in big teams and small; with magnificent peers and, occasionally, ones who should come with a collar, name tag and muzzle. And I have come to love (almost) all of them. But each and every time, starting a new job comes complete with The Fear – will they like me? Will I like them? Can I do this job? ELLE just incited it in greater quantity. I anticipated a chilly, antiseptic



atmosphere. I imagined I would hear the words 'this season' more often than was strictly palatable. I thought they would all be unfriendly. The morning I was due to start, I actually reminded myself *out loud* that, fashion magazine or not, they were just normal people.

A few months in, I can say with authority that Team ELLE is many things – funny, intelligent, stimulating, unpredictable – but normal is most definitely not one of them.

In my experience, most offices are like football teams, albeit better dressed; there may be occasional disputes and tactical clashes between, say, the midfield and the defence, but you all pull together as a unit. On ELLE, there is a perpetual, low-level, inter-departmental war. Let me explain.

The art department do not like interference. Interference can come in many forms. A feature, for instance, with more words than they like to see on a page. A headline that necessitates specific, not always aesthetically pleasing, punctuation. Where other magazine art departments will frown and then go to work with the words and headlines they have been given by features and production editors who take pride in making copy perfect, in these instances the ELLE designers defiantly butcher them. The features team do not like to see their words cut. The production department just wants everyone, please, for the love of God, to meet their bloody deadlines. Team ELLE argue a lot; much more than I have been used to.

This worried me at first. Now I simply appreciate where it comes from. The criticism isn't personal, any more than the resistance to it is. When people care passionately about what they do, they want to defend their choices. I have learned that when colleagues are scary, they usually have good reason to be. If your colleagues

are wholly committed to their jobs, the best way to work with them is to show them how wholly committed you are, too. This doesn't make for a conflict-free environment, but it does breed professional respect.

It also, interestingly, breeds genuine friendships. Far from being unfriendly, as I feared, Team ELLE were very welcoming. They make me laugh all day, often without intending to. With genius comes madness and I swear I am surrounded by lunacy. My preconception – based on the willowy fashion assistants who scared the life out of me in the lifts all those months ago – that they would all be 1) skinny and 2) obsessed with being skinny was way off the mark. ELLE staffers certainly look amazing, but that is more to do with style

and confidence than a dependence on oat bran. They have better things to think about, or at least the women do. The team member most dedicated to a restrictive diet and punishing gym routine is one of the three men in the office. And if one of the other boys wore shorts any shorter I'd be able to see what he had for breakfast.

There is an amazing camaraderie in Team ELLE. Every birthday is celebrated with cake, crisps, a rousingly tuneless rendition of the song and a card designed by an award-winning art team. Most weeks conclude with 'Gin Friday', a glorious tradition of scrabbling through the filing cabinets to unearth secret bottles, which are duly emptied from 4pm onwards. I have watched three ELLE weddings be planned with the input and assistance of the ELLE fashion, beauty, travel and art teams, which is another glorious thing.

I have learnt that it's possible to be incredibly stubborn professionally, but that it needn't lead to personal rancour: two department heads at war in the meeting room will be best friends again once they're back at their desks. In a world where it's easy to tend to self-involvement, where every slight or cross word can be pored over and analysed endlessly, it's

a revelation to see colleagues banging heads, then brushing it off entirely.

So is Team ELLE easy to work with? No. Should they change? Hell, no. They fight for what they believe in. The magazine, as with all successful products, is not so much made, as sculpted out of the love, insight and brilliance of the people who work on it. What ELLE has taught me beyond any other job is not to shrink away from a scary opportunity or even the most problematic colleagues.

The easiest jobs are not the most satisfying; tension and debate in the workplace usually stem from the fact that people care. So next time you are starting a new role, relish the fear, the challenge and the conflict. You may even learn to enjoy them. I certainly have.

That's not to say my initial fears were entirely misplaced. The office is quiet, elegant and often intense, albeit warm and very funny. And do they laugh at my clothes? Well, no. Just before I started, I attended a meeting with ELLE editor in chief, Lorraine Candy. I think I handled myself well on a professional level. But once we'd concluded business, she looked me in the eye, waved an index finger at my person and said: 'You can't wear that cardigan when you work here full time.' 'But it's cashmere,' I protested weakly. Lorraine held my gaze: 'Put it this way,' she said bluntly. 'You can't wear that cardigan if you want the fashion team to take you seriously.' She was right. ELLE is quite unlike any other magazine I have worked on. Long may it stay that way.

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