Managing the Transition to Work

Every year, thousands of college students work hard at planning their careers, honing their interview and resume-writing skills, and preparing for their job search. Many find good jobs and start work with high enthusiasm and energy—only to be disappointed in the results. Why? Because most of them overlook a critical step that makes much of the hard work that went into finding a job worthless: making the transition from campus to workplace.

The Unique First Year

Starting to work in an organization is a unique and critically important time that requires you to have a special perspective and use special strategies to be successful. You need to recognize that the first year on a new job is a separate and distinct career stage. It is a transition stage; you’re not a college student anymore but you’re not really a professional yet. It is only by considering the first year on the job separately from the rest of the career ladder that the world of work truly begins to make sense.

Savvy graduates know that many new graduates hang on to their college-student attitudes and behaviors too long. But, few realize that it also takes time to earn the rights, responsibilities, and credibility of a full-fledged professional. There is an intermediate stage that lasts from the time you accept your job until about the end of the first year that can make or break the early part of your career.

There is a different set of rules to follow during this breaking-in stage. Because you are the “new kid on the block,” people will respond to you differently, work with you differently, and judge you differently. You, in response, have to approach them differently.

Learning the new “rules” is essential to a fast career start, yet few new graduates take the time to learn them. If you’re smart, you’ll recognize this as a golden opportunity to distinguish yourself from other new hires and excel by showing your professional maturity.

Your challenge in the early months will be to use the strategies presented here to establish your reputation as a bright, capable, and valuable employee and to earn the respect of your colleagues.

College Is a Different World

At the heart of the problems most new graduates experience during their transition is the failure to recognize how much the educational culture has shaped their attitudes, expectations, behaviors, and overall view of the organization of which they are a part. Think about it. You have spent at least 17 years in education. How could you not be shaped by it?

Ready for surprise number two? The skills you learned to be successful in school and the behaviors for which you were rewarded are rarely the ones you’ll need to be successful at work! College and work are fundamentally different. The knowledge you acquired will be critical to your success but the process of
succeeding in school is very different from the process of succeeding at work. Worse yet, the culture of education is so different that if you continue to have the same expectations of your employer that you did of your college and professors, you’ll be greatly disappointed with your job and make costly career mistakes. By taking the time to learn the culture of work and what it means to be a professional, you’ll avoid making a fool of yourself by taking classroom behavior into the workplace.

First Year Goals

Your goals for the first year must include more than just productivity; they should include gaining acceptance, respect, and credibility. Organizations are groups of people. Just because you have been hired does not mean that you have been accepted by these people as “one of them.” Your colleagues will not automatically respect you, your expertise, or your contributions. Your success in college got you hired but means little on the job. Acceptance, respect, and credibility are earned. You have to prove yourself all over again.

5 Steps to First Year Success

Step 1: Adopt the right attitudes

Employers’ number-one complaint is the attitude new graduates bring to the workplace. Your challenge is to identify “success-related attitudes.” Look around and find those people in the organization who seem successful and respected by others. What are their attitudes toward other people, their jobs, the organization, and the future of the organization? Model your attitudes after theirs.

Step 2: Adjust your expectations

A major cause of the frustration many new graduates experience is their expectations. Frustration is nothing more than the difference between expectations and reality. If you work at keeping your expectations realistic, you won’t be disappointed.

Step 3: Manage the impressions you make

You must place a premium on impression management in your first year. Whenever you start any job, there are many people watching you and trying to assess your ability to succeed. Those people will include your peers, subordinates, and bosses. Those graduates who carry their college-student ways to the job are labeled early as “immature” and “needing time to grow up.” They don’t get the good early opportunities and may be relegated to lesser tasks. Those who make the best early impressions will get the first opportunities to succeed on projects that really matter to the organization and will have the highest visibility.

Step 4: Build effective relationships

Take the time to develop relationships with as many people—and that includes support staff—as possible. Here are some ways you can build effective working relationships:

- **Understand the nature of working relationships.** You don’t have to become good friends to be good colleagues. Until now, you may be accustomed to associating with people who are like you on a personal level. Forget that. You’ll now have to build good working relationships with people that, frankly, you may not even want to invite out to a movie.
- **Develop good communication and relationship skills.** Learn to communicate and work well with all types of people. Learn how to negotiate differences, avoid or manage conflict, and see others’ perspectives. Take a
course in interpersonal communication skills to understand your style and how to interact with other styles. Learn to respect and work with all types of people.

- **Learn to work in teams.** You can’t succeed by yourself. Just about everything you do will require you to team with others. No one person has all the expertise, information, and experience needed. College is largely a solitary pursuit; work is not. Being a team player means learning to share your success, involve others, become less competitive and possessive about your ideas, and be open to ideas.

- Find a mentor, coach, or sponsor. Every new employee needs the guidance of more senior colleagues. If a structured mentoring program is available, take advantage of it! If not, seek out older, more experienced employees who seem to have an interest in helping you. Listen carefully to their advice, even if you don’t like it.

**Step 5: Understand your organization’s culture**

Every company has a unique personality, which is its “culture,” also known as “around-here-isms.” You’ll hear them every day: “Around here we don’t do things like that,” “Around here we like to see people working hard,” “Around here, people show up early,” and so on. These rules and norms, many of which are unspoken and informal, will shape everything you do in an organization from how you work with people to what you wear to work. Culture defines “how” you do “what” you were hired to do. Whether you realized it or not, when you accepted the job, you bought into a way of life as well as a set of responsibilities and tasks. How well you come to understand this way of life will have a major impact on your first-year success.

**Take Responsibility for Your Success**

Putting these steps into practice takes work and time. Unfortunately, few jobs allow you to work through these steps one at a time. Instead, you’ll be involved in all of them at once, at least to some degree.

**Parting Thoughts**

Once you accept the unique nature of the transition from college to work, it can be lots of fun, very exciting, and a terrific start to a successful career. The advice given here is the conservative, safe approach to starting a career.

Most graduates tell me that as they got to know their new organization, they found areas where they didn’t have to be so conservative. But, each of them reports something a little different in every organization, and nobody has ever said they made mistakes with this approach. This approach will keep you out of trouble in the beginning and put you on the road to a professionally mature image right from the start. No employer will fault you for a conservative start.

If done correctly, this can be a wonderful time in your professional life. Have fun, work hard, enjoy your success and - good luck!

For students and new hires — *12 steps to making a successful transition from college to the workplace, by Ed Holton. (This article originally appeared in the Spring 1999 Journal of Career Planning & Employment, Volume 59, Number 3.)*