



SURVIVING YOUR FIRST YEAR ON THE JOB

Congratulations, you landed a job!

Entering the “Real World” is a time of excitement, enthusiasm, and exploration. For many college students, it represents the crowning achievement of their educational experience. The courses, insights, and knowledge you have gained through your education will be tremendous assets as you make the transition to the world of work.

The new opportunities and experiences you’ll encounter will be both exhilarating and, at times, frustrating. As you will most certainly encounter situations for which higher education did not prepare you, the graduate who enters this world with open eyes, a willingness to learn, enthusiasm, and common sense invariably does better than the one who naively expects life to continue as before.

The purpose of this monograph is to present some of the realities and opportunities of the first career job to help the new graduate make the transition successfully. Although it may seem like there are as many don’ts as there are do’s throughout this monograph, realize that both are equally important to succeeding in your new environment.

Before You Arrive

You have the job offer and are excited about the opportunity, but don’t know where to start. Begin by thinking about the things that you’ll need to do before you move. Finding an apartment is a good start. There are some employers who will assist you with this process, so begin by asking if your new employer will make a referral. Web sites abound on the subject of real estate, allowing you to conduct on-line apartment searches. However, you will need to visit the area to secure an apartment, as tiny pictures and brief descriptions on the internet can often be deceiving.

A local real estate agent will be happy to show you property rentals. Consider location, commuting distance to work, property amenities, and population demographics. Take some time to closely evaluate your new salary and create a monthly budget so you know what price range you can afford when apartment hunting. One commonly used rule of thumb is to spend no more than 40% of your take-home pay on housing/apartment rent.

When creating a budget, be sure to work with your net income – after deducting things like taxes, insurance, benefits, savings/retirement investments. Usually, this computes to approximately 30% less than your gross salary. Begin by making a list of all of your essential expenses – things like rent, car, insurance, utilities, gas, groceries, clothes, student loans, and savings. After calculating the net income you have “left over,” consider those additional expenses like parking, newspaper, eating out, cellular phone, gym membership, doctor visits, birthday/holiday gifts, and credit card payments. The point being there will always be extra things you want to spend your money on, but prioritizing your expenses will allow you to get a better picture of your financial status.

A word of caution about credit cards. Credit cards are abundantly easy to obtain while you’re in college, so seize the opportunity and obtain one. However, carefully consider the fine print and analyze terms such as grace periods, billing dates, late fees, and teaser rates. Realize that it’s much easier to use this piece of plastic recklessly, so a credit card spending strategy should be considered. A simple strategy is to create a “credit card” folder. Immediately after you’ve exercised your “plasticity,” write a check to cover the expense, attach it to your receipt, and place it in your credit card folder. This will help you build your



credit rating, maintain your bank account, and stay out of credit card misery. Credit cards are conveniences that have become a necessity in the business world. Be sure to use them wisely so that you can tame “The Plastic Monster.”

An important, often overlooked item by new college graduates is saving and investing. To drive home the importance of understanding the “time value” of money, let’s consider this example. Sally and Frank are each 22 years old and plan to work until they are 65. Sally opens a qualified retirement plan at 12% and invests \$2,000 a year for six years, then **STOPS**. Frank **SPENDS** that extra \$2,000 a year on himself for the first six years, then opens a qualified retirement plan at 12% and invests \$2,000 a year for the next 37 years. Sally has invested only \$12,000, compared to Frank who has invested \$74,000. However, at 65 years of age, Sally has accumulated \$1,348,440, nearly **IDENTICAL** to Frank’s accumulation of \$1,363,780!

Understanding your benefits is crucial to getting a good start with your new employer. Hearing terms such as indemnity, PPO, HMO, POS, PCP, COBRA, FSA, 401K, and 403B being thrown around at employee orientation as if they are second nature can be an intimidating experience. Don’t worry, a list of these terms and their basic meanings are provided at the end of this document. Realize that if something remains unclear to you regarding your benefits package, you can schedule a time to meet with your friendly human resources representative. Remember, more often than not, employers aren’t going to spoon-feed you this information. Be proactive – research the terms to understand meaning, carefully read through your employee handbook, and develop a list of questions prior to new employee orientation.

Another item on your checklist of “pre-arrival” things to do is to update your wardrobe. Although many companies are implementing more casual dress codes, it will likely be necessary to update the typical college student’s eclectic collection of clothing. Substance is very important and much will be expected of you in your new job. In the workplace, however, you must also recognize the importance of image.

In college, those who assign grades don’t care much about image (and grades are not assigned based upon image, but upon whatever other criteria the professor has set). You may dress radically, doze through classes, drink heavily many nights of the week, use profanity liberally, complain about the establishment, and so forth. College is meant to be a time for self-exploration, and many of these activities are tolerated as long as acceptable grades are maintained.

In the workplace, image becomes much more important than it was in college. This seems superficial to many graduates, particularly those with a penchant for rebelliousness, but there are reasons for the importance of image. Many of the first impressions you make will be based upon image and these impressions affect how you are viewed within your organization, by clients or other outside contacts. How many times have you formed an opinion of someone within the first minute of meeting him or her? Most of you will certainly agree that impressions are clearly influenced by dress as well as communication skills. These impressions project an image of your entire organization and your personal “image” should not be treated lightly.

A major part of image is how you dress and groom for the job. Clothing is important! Regardless of a formal business or casual dress code, your attire is one of the first things people will notice about you and you must pay attention to it. Most college students expect to “get by” for a while realizing that they might look shabbier than colleagues from time to time. **DON’T!** You need to be able to dress appropriately the first day, the first week, and the first month on the job. This means an up-front investment in clothing that will allow you to be appropriately attired on a daily basis.



Other tasks that you should complete prior to your arrival include filling out all necessary paperwork and knowing when, where, and to whom to report on your first day of work. Be sure to take some time to read, even study, the company literature and human resources handbook you have been provided. Any insights you can gain, whether procedural or cultural, will give you a head start and help you make a good impression during career start-up.

Finally, it is a good idea to get some time to unwind between graduation and beginning your job, because it will probably be your last vacation for a while. Many jobs offer two weeks vacation per year to new employees, and usually you cannot take a vacation day until at least six months have passed. Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's are just short holidays.

All the years you've been attending school you've become accustomed to long vacations after each term, a summer vacation of three months, and a liberal holiday schedule. Now you find that it's week after week of work with no big break at the end of a project. You may be asked to work weekends to meet a tough deadline – just a part of the job.

You may well look back enviously on all the free time you had during your college years. Remember them fondly, but don't resent the demands made by the job. You paid the college – your employer is paying you.

On The Job

The transition from the world of higher education to that of the first career job is a dramatic one. The adjustment to a new community coupled with the task of developing new professional and social networks can be very emotionally taxing. Things that had been simple in college, like going out with friends or on a date, will not happen as easily in your new environment. Fewer social opportunities along with a demanding work schedule can make you feel pretty lonely during the first few months of your new life. If your evenings and weekends are open, be proactive to find people you like to be with in your spare time. Making a connection within your new community can be made easier by becoming involved in local clubs, churches, volunteer organizations, or classes.

Your first few days and months on the job set the stage for long-term success within your company. When the big day finally arrives, make sure you have prepared by getting a good night's rest and arrive early! Throughout the workday, remain focused on learning, listening, and be sure to ask questions when you have them.

You may fondly recall the time and flexibility of those college days – sleeping in, skipping class, arriving late, and leaving early. Recognize that you are in a new environment, one with less freedom and more structure, more responsibility and accountability, less vacation time, fewer social opportunities, and REAL performance evaluations. Realizing that the real world is much less tolerant of mistakes, offers less time and flexibility for adjustment, and demands performance for the pay it offers is a critical part of your transition.

For example, some students avoid morning courses like the plague, stay up till 3:00 a.m. most nights, cut classes and get notes from their friends, and goof off for weeks at a time, then work at a frenzied pace to finish the term in decent shape. If you had a tendency to follow this sort of schedule in college, forget it.

First of all, you can't cut work. If your starting time is 8:30, you are advised to arrive early and alert. Excuses for tardiness or absences will not be appreciated and recurring behavior of this type will result first in a negative image, then in dismissal.



The workplace will not care that you are "not a morning person." It will not be interested in your late night escapades, or the fact that your car would not start. Develop a reputation for being punctual. One of the easiest ways to make a good early impression at your new workplace is to demonstrate consistent punctuality.

Many professors' grades are based upon exam scores and maybe a term paper. They don't care if you never show up for class, as long as you learn the material. This might be fine on the campus and you might have enjoyed the leniency, but recognize the fact that it is not accepted in the real world. Even if you get more done in six hours than others do in ten, tardiness is not acceptable.

College life allows for all kinds of mid-day breaks. You could relax during a major part of many days and study on your own schedule. The job will probably call for you to be working continually through the day. There will be time for lunch and brief interludes during the day, but you won't have time to leave the office and go for a swim, take a nap, etc. This straight-through schedule can be a difficult adjustment.

Relationships with Your Supervisor

Relationships in the workplace are a major factor contributing to your career success. The knowledge of "how" to develop positive workplace relationships will contribute to your success in this regard. Your co-worker relationships will most likely be much different than the relationships you formed in college, and so will the ways in which you develop them.

To enhance your relationship building success in the workplace, be sure to listen to what others have to say and understand their position **before** articulating your position. Be willing to work with each individual, get to know them as a professional, and concentrate on their positive qualities and inner potential. Do not focus on their weaknesses, but rather compliment those weaknesses with your strengths. It is critically important not to focus your energy on validating others' weaknesses (in other words, don't talk badly about other people behind their backs). Finally, be sure to communicate effectively with others. Communicate your concerns (be tactful), your challenges (be honest), and last, but not least, your accomplishments (be modest, yet direct).

Most important among the many relationships you develop is the one with your supervisor. Your supervisor is not like your college professors and should not be viewed in a similar manner. The professor had all the answers, encouraged argument and debate, laid out guidelines to assignments (generally well ahead of a due date) and was expected to be fair and objective. Your supervisor, on the other hand, will often send you to get the answers, may discourage arguments, will be vague as to how to complete a task, and will often come up with last minute assignments, unclear priorities, and vague directions. The sooner you can accept this change from professor to supervisor, the greater your chance at success.

Your supervisor controls a great deal of what can happen to you during your first year. If you come into the organization with a willing attitude, demonstrate poise and maturity, and work well with others, you may begin to be chosen for the better assignments. If you fight the system, grunt work will become your specialty. The more you complain about it, the more the boss will pile it on. The more enthusiastically you complete the grunt assignments, the more quickly you'll be moved into the better ones.

If your supervisor is not your ally, you have big problems. You might sometimes view him as the enemy because he may be demanding more than you want to give, intruding on your free time, and causing you to lose sleep at night. Accepting this requires you to change your paradigm and accept a realistic perspective regarding the world of work and how it differs from college.



One of your biggest responsibilities in the new job is to make your supervisor look good. This means completing work on time and with excellent quality, acting like a professional at all times, and maintaining a positive attitude. If you regularly do what you can to make your supervisor look good you are already progressing in the right direction.

Your supervisor is expected to train and develop you, not to become your best friend. Don't expect to form a buddy relationship with this person, and it is not recommended to use him/her as the sounding board for your personal or financial problems. Too much awareness of these problems can affect her view of your maturity, professionalism, and competence. Not all of us handle our personal lives as well as our jobs, and they should be kept separate.

Let's discuss a hypothetical situation. It is Friday afternoon and you have plans at the lake for the whole weekend. Suddenly your supervisor calls you in and loads you down with files so that you can prepare a detailed report for an unexpected Monday morning meeting. She apologizes but the meeting was just scheduled and she also has to prepare for it.

You are now left with several possible choices. You can go through with the weekend plans and try to do your work in quiet moments here and there, and by pulling an all-nighter on Sunday. You might not do your best work but you feel it's unfair to expect you to change plans that have been made for weeks.

You can explain the situation to your supervisor and see if she'll reassign the work to someone else. She seems pretty reasonable and might not hold it against you.

You can cancel the weekend plans and do the best possible job on the report. You get a good night's sleep on Sunday so you go to work on Monday fresh, alert, and confident of your information. Your supervisor recognizes and appreciates your effort and knows that she can count on you, a point she makes clear to her superiors.

Career-wise, the choice is clear. You sacrifice personal plans, at times, to do the best job possible if you want your career to advance. This may happen a number of times during your "freshman" year and if you are not responsive your supervisor will probably write you off.

Is it fair? Probably not, in the college frame of mind. However, in your career where you and others are competing for advancement, it certainly is fair. Willingness, flexibility, and cooperation count for a lot in your boss' eyes, and in the view of others with whom you work.

Suppose you're working for a good organization but got stuck with a "lousy" supervisor. He is demanding, unreasonable, poor at training, and everyone agrees that he's going nowhere. It's a very difficult situation to handle, but one that may be improved by changing your paradigm.

Your paradigm, or frame of reference, of your supervisor is that he's difficult, unreasonable, unmanageable, or maybe even crazed! In life, our attitudes and behaviors are controlled by and evolve from our paradigms. If the paradigm you hold of your supervisor is negative, adjusting your attitude and behavior is most likely difficult, impossible, or at best, only temporary.

However, let's take a look at what happens if you adopt a new paradigm of your so-called "lousy" supervisor. A paradigm that focuses on his positive qualities – that he is deeply committed to the company, works very hard and long hours, and is a perfectionist. By seeing your supervisor in a different light, it will be much easier to change your attitude and behavior to one that will support him, support the company, and will provide you with opportunities for advancement.



The idea is to perform and learn as best you can so that you can make significant contributions to the company and become an indispensable resource, perhaps putting yourself in line for a promotion. There are intolerable supervisors, to be sure, but many college graduates either quit prematurely or dig themselves into an irreparable hole through negative attitude and weak performance under circumstances to which they overreact. Your initial supervisor is not forever, and if you can survive a year with a particularly tough supervisor, that alone can be viewed as a feather in your cap. Before you lose your temper or take any rash steps that could jeopardize your career with the organization, take time to think how you might adjust your paradigm so that you can be more supportive to your employer.

Identify a Mentor

An invaluable tool in both learning the job and developing good relationships with your co-workers is identifying a mentor. New employees should take the time to develop relationships with people in the organization who have good reputations. Choosing a mentor who has been employed with the organization for a longer period of time is usually the best choice. This person is able to provide valuable and unique insights into the organizational culture while helping the new employee learn the ropes, and understand the political landscape.

Mentor selection is an important factor in the college student's ability to successfully transition to the workplace and is worth further discussion. An effective way to choose a mentor at work is to focus on what you want to be and do, identify a highly influential individual in your life, and think about how this individual has contributed to your life. This person may be a parent, work associate, friend, family member, or neighbor. Answer the following questions, keeping in mind your professional and personal goals relating to what you want to be and do. Who has been one of the most influential people in my life? Which qualities do I most admire in that person? What qualities have I gained (or desire to gain) from that person? After you have made a list of these qualities, seek someone at work who appears to have the qualities that you admire and seek to develop in yourself.

The mentor you select can be an invaluable resource as you navigate your first year on the job. Schedule regular times when you can listen and learn about the various aspects of your new company, new job, new trends, new technologies, corporate culture, etc. A weekly lunch where you can hold a focused discussion on your progress – what you've learned, what you'd like to learn, your career goals, your mistakes, and your successes. Be sure to take the opportunity to listen carefully to your mentor's feedback, as they may likely be someone who can assist you in realizing your career goals.

Relationships with Co-Workers

Getting along with your co-workers is particularly important. It is worth noting the relationships you develop with your co-workers will, in many cases, be very different from the relationships you developed in college. Even though competition for grades in college can be fierce in some cases, it does not usually get in the way of friendships, trust, and personal openness. Few faculty members pit students one against another, and students generally help one another by studying together, sharing class notes, and tutoring.

In the job setting, you are faced with a different situation, somewhat paradoxical in nature. You and your peers are working for the same organization with the objective of helping the organization fulfill its mission. That is why they are paying you. In order to function effectively you must be able to work well with others. You will be continually called upon to engage in teamwork





to complete a task or project. At the same time, you are competing with these peers for recognition and advancement.

Entry-level positions vary greatly in personal contact. You may have very little contact with your peers in the organization or you may work side-by-side with a whole group of them. It is important that you cooperate, get along well, and develop relationships of mutual support with them. One of the most challenging issues in the workplace is to get along with co-workers that you don't like. Make every effort to develop positive working relationships with all of your co-workers. Those who stay with the organization will be advancing with you as you assume management roles, and your ability to work with them will magnify in importance.

Inevitably, however, you will come across some people who insist on playing games. They may think they are masters of manipulation, and they will deceive others, take credit for ideas not their own, attempt to use personal relations in place of job performance, misrepresent their real influence or power, etc. Obviously such co-workers cannot be trusted, but you must also be careful around them for they can be vicious enemies. Such deceptive tactics will sooner or later cause their downfall, so don't let such people discourage you or bring you down with them.

When you begin meeting your peers, be friendly but don't immediately join a clique. Spend some time observing how people act, who performs well, and who takes a positive view toward the job and the organization. There is a good chance that one or more perpetual grippers will try to befriend you and add you to their group, spending lunch hours talking about how bad things are. Keep your distance. Look for those who are doing well on the job, and whose personalities you can relate to. The grippers are going nowhere.

Finally, don't use co-workers as confidants. A peer may someday be your boss, or you may be his. Laying out all your feelings, fears, anger, emotions, dreams, etc. to a colleague can come back to bite you when you least expect it. Your innermost feelings should be saved for those who are outside the organization.

Hopefully, some of your co-workers will become good friends. The above paragraphs are not meant to discourage your willingness to establish on-the-job friendships, but you need to be cautious. Unlike college where you can add and drop acquaintances at the drop of a hat, job-related relationships must go on even where two people may have little in common personally.

The Society for Human Resource Management survey results clearly illustrate the significant role of relationships in the workplace. The study focused on identifying the causes of performance problems in the workplace and found that, in more than 65% of cases, problem employees (many of whom wound up getting fired) didn't lack technical skills or motivation, but rather suffered from strained relationships with co-workers. Another study, by the Bureau of Vocational Guidance at Harvard, shows that, for every person who loses a job because of poor quality work, two more are fired because they simply cannot deal successfully with other people. So, it's not only who you know or what you know, but how well you get along with others that is increasingly becoming a key factor in one's career success story.

Do Subordinates Correct Your Spelling?

Many new hires have the misperception that they will arrive on the new job with company car, laptop, expense account, and an army of subordinates on-hand to perform all sorts of undesirable tasks. Unfortunately (for a new hire), this is rarely the case. In fact, it is often the entry-level college graduate who is asked to photocopy reports, deliver memos, proofread documents, tally



columns of numbers, and even run errands. The better your attitude in handling these chores, the sooner you advance from them. They are all a part of "learning the ropes."

You may well work in an environment with "hourly" employees. (You will be most likely be "salaried," meaning management or professional and expected to work as many hours as are needed to get a job done.) Hourly employees are generally paid less than salaried, have lower status jobs with less advancement potential, receive extra pay for overtime work, and are the lifeblood of many organizations.

Too frequently the new college graduate arrives on the scene and treats the hourly secretaries, sales clerks, production workers, technical aides, etc. as personal subordinates. If you fall into this pattern you will probably jeopardize your potential to succeed. Hourly employees are very well attuned to the arrogance of many new college graduates, and if they sense this arrogance in you they can respond in ways to make your life miserable. Never act in a condescending or superior manner to those with less education or lower positions. Besides being an inappropriate thing to do, it will surely have negative ramifications on your career advancement within the company.

Let's look at an example of how this can happen. A management trainee at a large retail store is put in charge of the small appliance department. He arrives on the job and immediately lectures the lead salesperson about how he is going to straighten up the department (based upon college coursework and a summer job at another store). The lead salesperson has been in that department over twelve years, listens to his lecture, and decides not to support him because of his arrogance. That poor management trainee is in for a tough time because of his lack of sensitivity, but the veteran salesperson will not suffer at all.

Treat all people well! Develop a reputation for being good to work with. Before you try to order a secretary to bring you your coffee, or drop a stack of papers on someone's desk and insist that it be copied in five minutes, think about how you would like to be treated if the situation were reversed.

As a new hire, subordinates are not at your beck and call. Many of them will have been in their jobs for years, are highly valued employees, and do not exist to cover the deficiencies in your background. They will not correct all your spelling errors, or all the other first-time errors you might make – unless they like you.

Career Path – Keys to Success

Communication – voice mail, email, cell phones, wireless internet access, and handheld devices. Technology tools to enhance communication in the office continue to grow at a furious pace. Many experts think that this proliferation of technology will require workers to communicate more effectively and articulately, making so-called soft skills invaluable to an employee's success.

An OfficeTeam research study called "Office of the Future: 2005" pinpointed six key "people" skills that employers expect to need in the future: problem-solving, ethics, open-mindedness, persuasiveness, leadership, and educational interests (as in, willingness to pursue training in new skills and acquire knowledge in unfamiliar areas).

People usually build these skills over time through observation, experience, and instinct. However, there are additional ways to further develop these skills. Finding a mentor, signing up for formal training classes, or involving yourself as a volunteer in a professional or civic



organization committee are great ways to hone these skill sets while making solid connections within your community.

Keep in mind that you control your career path by knowing yourself and your goals better than anyone else! You are ultimately responsible for both your career failures and your career successes. Much of what happens throughout your career is neither wholly great nor wholly bad.

Be proactive in the way you approach your career. The key variable is the recognition of the differences between school and work and a willingness to adjust rapidly to these changes. Don't be unwilling to take on the simple gofer-like work or the overwhelmingly complex tasks, and don't be afraid of failure. Nothing beats a positive outlook and strong work ethic. Learn to stretch yourself beyond what you feel is imaginable. Thomas Edison once said, "Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed up in overalls and looks like work." Don't let opportunity pass you by.



Benefit Terms You Should Know

Health Plans

Indemnity or Comprehensive Plan: health plan in which you meet a deductible, then the plan pays a percentage of covered charges. **You** are responsible for the rest. Your choice of physicians or facilities is not limited to a specific network.

Preferred Provider Organization (PPO): health plan in which you go to providers within a network who have agreed to provide services for a predetermined amount of money. Your costs are higher if you use a provider from outside the network.

Point of Service (POS) or Managed Care: Health plan in which your care must be coordinated with a primary care physician. Authorized care within the managed network is covered (often in full, after a nominal co-payment). You can go outside the network, but your costs will be higher.

Health Maintenance Organization (HMO): Health plan in which your care must be coordinated with a primary care physician; within the network services are generally covered in full or after a small co-payment. You can go outside the network for care, but in most cases will receive little or no financial assistance from the insurer.

Primary Care Physician: Your “family doctor,” who practices in any of the following medical fields: internal medicine, family practice, pediatrics or general practice.

COBRA (Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985): Legislation whose health care coverage provisions include the opportunity to continue your health coverage after leaving an employer’s plan. Typically you must pay the full cost of coverage, and may continue coverage for up to 18 months.

Cafeteria Plan or Flexible Benefits: A benefit program that offers employees a choice between a variety of benefits, such as medical, dental, vision, life insurance and disability coverage. In many cases, employers provide a core amount of money that you can apply to the cost of available benefits as you wish.

Flexible Spending Accounts: An account that permits you to pay for IRS-approved health care expenses or dependent care costs on a pre-tax basis. You authorize pre-tax contributions from your pay into these accounts and then file claims for eligible expenses to be reimbursed from your account(s).

Retirement Plans

Defined Benefit Plan: A retirement plan in which your employer makes contributions on your behalf, investing the money so that at the time you are eligible to withdraw the money, it will equal a predetermined benefit. Payment may equal a flat monthly payment or a lump sum amount.

Defined Contribution Plan: A retirement plan in which you or your employer make contributions to your account. The amount that is contributed is defined; the value at the time you withdraw your money is not guaranteed but is a result of how your money was invested. You are responsible for investing your account, typically within a range of options provided by the employer.

401(k) or 403(b): Retirement plans that allow you to contribute money toward your retirement on a before-tax basis. You pay taxes on your contributions – and their earnings – when you withdraw the money, typically at the time of retirement. Many plans offer an incentive for employees to save, matching employee contributions up to a certain level.

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