

Your First Year as a Professional

Life after MU Series

Congratulations on earning your degree and accepting your first professional full-time job upon graduation! You are now entering into the next phase of your life, and there are a number of things you need to know in order to make a smooth transition from the academic world into the world of work:

Don't Underestimate the Importance of Professional Appearance

Based on appearance, a positive or negative first impression can be made. Appropriate dress can lend credibility to you and your position because wardrobe projects self-esteem, level of confidence, and professionalism. In addition, appropriate business attire works to your advantage when it comes time for promotions, raises, and job evaluations. More than 70% of American companies allow some form of casual attire on occasions. To ensure that you dress appropriately, research dress code in your field and specifically, your place of employment. If in doubt, always err on the conservative side and remember the following rule of thumb: Dress like the successful people in your organization.

Here are the **Don'ts** of professional attire (for a more detailed list please see our *Dress for Success* handout): *Avoid excessive or flashy jewelry and make up, shorts, miniskirts, stretch, or capri pants, sleeveless or bare back shirts and dresses, low-cut blouses and shirts, form-fitting spandex attire, ties with large prints or cartoon characters, sandals, shoes with elaborate bows and buckles, bare legs.* It is a good idea to keep an extra shirt or blouse, pressed and boxed, in your car. You may also consider having an extra tie or an extra pair of nylons available at the ready. Keep a toothbrush and breath mints in your desk for bad breath emergencies.

Cultivate Solid Time Management Skills

Good time management skills begin with goal setting. Plan your day in advance by rehearsing what you need to accomplish that day during your morning commute. Ten to fifteen minutes of planning in the morning will equal an extra hour or more of productivity during the day. There are a number of tools available to help you plan your daily activities (e.g., a Day-Timer, Franklin Covey Planner, or other pocket planners). It is a good practice to carry a notepad with you to write down your thoughts or daily reminders as they occur to you. If you drive, get a windshield-attached notepad.

Develop a routine that increases your personal productivity. If you can take public transportation to work it will give you time to read (and may also save you money). If you drive, get in the habit of listening to books on tape. It is amazing how much reading you can accomplish over the course of a year.

Don't forget to schedule times to relax and take a break throughout the day. Park at the far end of the lot in the morning, go for a brisk walk each day, or stretch your legs during lunch. It will clear your mind and make you more productive for the remainder of the day. Join a health club: Exercise will increase your level of energy; you will look better and feel better.

Develop Strong Interpersonal Skills

Talk 20% and listen 80% because you learn by listening and not by talking. Get in the habit of remembering the names of those you are introduced to. In your first few days on the job it might be a good idea to jot down names until you remember them and don't be afraid to ask the person to help you with his or her name in case you forgot it. Project a positive attitude by smiling (even if you feel like frowning) because everyone loves a cheerful person. Be the first person to say "hello" to others in the morning.

If someone is confrontational with you, avoid the confrontation. Take time to cool off before you respond and focus on solutions and not problems. Don't be a complainer and ignore those who attempt to practice their art upon you. Finally, always take the opportunity to praise others who are worthy of praise. If someone has done well, take the time to compliment him or her. When someone compliments you for your work, don't say "it was nothing" or try to talk them out of it. Just say "Thank you" with a smile and move on.

Focus on Career Development, Education, and Training

Ask your boss to point out areas for continuous improvement. Know and understand the company training program and take advantage of it. Continue your education; even if you do not pursue a formal degree, make learning a lifelong vocation. What you learn will affect what you earn. Computer skills are one of the skills you should focus on developing as you need to be proficient in the use of technology in your work.

Be aware of the work that is going on around you because these could be your areas of potential future growth. Make sure that you understand your role in contributing to the bottom line of the company and keep your eyes focused on the big picture rather than your own cube. Invest time in networking with professionals within the organization. Take others out to lunch to learn about their jobs and departments. Know who your boss' boss is as this is the person who may recommend or authorize your promotion in the future.

If you love what you do, success will follow. If you think that you do more than what you are paid to do, you will eventually be paid more for what you do. And finally, don't ask for a raise because you *need* more money; ask for a raise because you are *worth* more money.

Learn About Ethics and Politics in the Workplace

Develop a reputation for honesty and integrity. Integrity means doing what is right, even if it is unpopular, unfashionable, or unprofitable. Don't lie, cheat, or steal, even when the temptation is great. Stand for honesty and integrity in all you do, and you will be amazed how far it will set you above your peers. If you have failed in these areas in the past, your new job is an opportunity to start fresh. You must earn your reputation over time and live up to it at all times, at work and everywhere else.

Don't use profanity, never tell dirty jokes, racist jokes, or sexist jokes and ignore those who attempt to share them with you. When dining out with co-workers or clients limit yourself to one glass of wine or beer and wait for someone else to order liquor first—don't be the only one.

Watch and emulate those who are successful in your company; allow them to be your mentors from afar. Make sure to show respect for your boss in everything you do. Don't join in when others are boss bashing--it can be contagious. Always seek the good in others, and they will be more likely to find it in you.

Manage Your Money Wisely

Eat lunch in to save both time and money. Even just \$5 per lunch eating out adds up to \$2500 per year. Besides, it is healthier to bring your own lunch, not to mention that you will often be viewed as a hard worker for consistently staying in when others are going out.

Take time to understand your company's benefits plan instead of waiting until you need to use one of the benefits to understand it. Sign up for your 401(k) plan as soon as possible so that you can be taken care of later in life. If your employer provides the option, have your paycheck set up for direct deposit to save the time and hassle of depositing each paycheck and giving you quicker access to your money.

Always pay your bills on time, especially credit cards and student loans. An unblemished credit record is an asset that should be protected. Don't run a monthly balance on your credit card--if you can't pay it off, don't buy it. Remember, wealth and happiness are not the same thing. There is more to life than the endless accumulation of wealth. There will never be enough money. You must find your wealth elsewhere in your life.

And Lastly...

Always give back to those who are less fortunate than you. No matter how hard you have worked to get where you are now, there is always someone who has not had the same opportunities that you have had in life. Do your best to give something back. ***We wish you all the best in your new life after college!***