Managing the Transition to Work

For students and new hires — 12 steps to making a successful transition from college to the workplace.

by

Ed Holton

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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. Most managers and executives I have interviewed complain that new hires just don't understand what it takes to successfully enter a new organization.

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.

Does It Really Matter?

The way in which you enter a new organization and a new job will have a major impact on your success within that organization. Much of your early career opportunity and success will be charted by the impressions you make on the people you work with and the perceptions they develop of you in the early weeks and months on the job. Research suggests that how you approach your first year will have a major impact on your future salary, advancement, job satisfaction, and ability to move within the organization as well as on your own feelings of success and commitment to the job. And, it can impact your career for many years to come, not just the first few. That’s not to say that a 30-year career is made or broken in a few months, but the simple fact is that it can take years to recover from a poor start.
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. Figure 1 outlines some of the key differences that new graduates talk about.

**Figure 1**

**College Vs. The World of Work**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequent, quick, and concrete feedback (grades, and so forth)</th>
<th>Infrequent and less precise feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highly structured curriculum and programs with lots of direction</td>
<td>Highly unstructured environment and tasks with few directions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Few significant changes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flexible schedule</th>
<th>Frequent and unexpected changes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequent breaks and time off</strong></td>
<td>Structured schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal control over time, classes, interests</td>
<td><strong>Limited time off</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intellectual challenge</strong></td>
<td>Directions and interests dictated by others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose your performance level, e.g., A, B, C.</td>
<td><strong>Organizational and people challenges</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus on your development and growth</strong></td>
<td>A-level work required all the time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create and explore knowledge</td>
<td><strong>Focus on getting results for the organization</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual effort</strong></td>
<td>Get results with your knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Right” answers</td>
<td><strong>Team effort</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independence of ideas and thinking</strong></td>
<td>Few “right” answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors</td>
<td><strong>Do it the company’s way</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Less initiative required</strong></td>
<td>Bosses</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Lots of initiative required</strong></td>
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</table>
Let’s look at a few examples of how different these worlds are: In college you usually received a lot of direction about what to do and how to do it. Your curriculum tells you what courses to take, your professors tell you what is expected of you. At work, you’ll rarely get that type of direction. Your college education has taught you how to argue your position to convince a professor that you are right and that he or she is wrong. Try that with your boss in a meeting and see how far you get! You’ve become so accustomed to being frequently told “how you’re doing” that you might push your manager for feedback, leaving the impression that you are insecure. Other new graduates are so used to growing and developing through education that they get upset when their boss won’t send them for extensive training during the first year. Still others can’t understand why they aren’t getting assignments that stretch their minds, not realizing that work will never mimic college.

“Not me” you say? Believe me, you will make mistakes like these if you’re not careful; what comes naturally to you is what you’ve done for 17+ years—be a student. You’ll think you are changing, but nearly every student will automatically react to the workplace as if it were an educational institution. Eighty to 90 percent of new graduates’ complaints are caused by or greatly exacerbated by their failure to recognize and let go of their deeply ingrained college-type attitudes, expectations, and behaviors. And it is these college-like behaviors—things that you won’t even realize that you are doing—that will get you labeled as “naive” and “immature.” It takes lots of work and effort to let go of those old ways, but it’s the key to a successful first year.

What’s Really Important in the First Year?

If you’re like most new graduates, you’re probably thinking a lot about the tasks you’ve been hired to do. What wonderful challenges! You will finally get to put those long years of study to use. But, you may be a bit insecure and anxious about your abilities. “Do I have what it takes to be successful at these challenges?,” “Do I know enough to compete?,” and “Am I good enough to do the job?” are all questions you may ask yourself.

Your employer, on the other hand, isn’t worried about your ability to do the tasks; instead your employer is concerned about your ability to do the non-task components of the job, such as your willingness and ability to learn new things, fit in to the culture, learn the politics of the organization, and build effective working relationships. Your employer is concerned about how well you will be accepted as a member of the organization and how effective you will be in learning how to get things accomplished.

Most employers are good enough at hiring new people to know that you have the raw talent and ability to perform the basic tasks of the job. Yet, many new graduates feel that is exactly what they have to prove. When managers of new employees are asked what makes the difference between an average new employee and one who is outstanding, task performance has little to do with it. Outstanding new employees, they say, are the ones that have good attitudes, get along well with people, and do other things we will talk about here. Great performance on the basic tasks of the job will only get you an average performance rating.

Most new graduates are focused on the wrong things because that is what college focuses on: the task-related knowledge and skills. The 12 steps presented here will help you focus on what your employer is worried about: the non-task elements of the job.

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.

In fact, your colleagues may be biased against respecting you because you are inexperienced. You will have to do things to convince them that you are professionally mature and deserve their respect. Then, you will be able to establish your expertise, your experiences, and your contributions as credible and worth considering.

The first nine steps of this 12-step program will help you accomplish these goals and set the essential foundation for becoming productive. The last three steps are the task-related ones that complete the process and enable you to produce. It is through the first nine steps that you demonstrate your professional maturity, gain acceptance and respect, and learn how to get things done. Then, and only then, can you achieve outstanding performance on the tasks of your job.

Surprised that the task-related steps are last? Outstanding task performance is a building process. Make no mistake: You must be proficient at the tasks you are asked to perform. But becoming an outstanding employee—which should be your goal—requires much more than technical skill or know-how. No matter how brilliant you are or how successful you have been in school, it’s nearly impossible for you to receive an outstanding performance rating at the end of your first year without first mastering the non-task aspects of the job. Why? Because getting results (and it’s results that count) in whatever task you are assigned will require you to work with other people and within an organizational system. No task is performed in isolation, and you can’t really understand the task until you understand the people and the organization.

12 Steps to First Year Success

1: Adopt the right attitudes
2: Adjust your expectations
3: Master breaking-in skills
4: Manage impressions you make
5: Build effective relationships
6: Become a good follower
7: Understand organization’s culture
8: Develop organizational savvy
9: Understand your new-hire role
10: Develop work savvy
11: Master the tasks in your jobs
12: Acquire knowledge, skills, abilities

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. Here are some key attitudes that managers in almost every organization say new graduates need to work on:

**Humility:** Your graduation from college can leave you with a false sense of importance and capability. Some who struggle the most with the transition from campus to company are those who have been campus leaders or very successful academically. You have a right to be proud of your accomplishments and to be confident, but recognize that college has only given you a foundation—it’s not the end of your learning experience.

**Readiness to learn:** It’s not how much you know that is most important to your employer, it’s your understanding of how much you have yet to learn and your willingness to learn it that
employers want to see. Take every opportunity you can to learn. Things a little slow around the office? Then study something. Take your training seriously. Ask questions—before you tell someone what you think the answer is. Don’t resist when your previous learning is challenged. Your employer knows you are smart; now show your ability and willingness to learn.

Readiness to change: Lots of new hires complain that it “isn’t what they told me it would be.” Organizational life is full of changes, and you need to be flexible. A flexible and adaptive attitude wins points.

Respect: Your organization is the way it is and does things the way it does for some reason. Few organizations are perfect, but you must respect them for what they are. Understand why the organization is the way it is before you criticize it. Want your boss and co-workers to respect you and your knowledge and contributions? Remember, you have to give respect first before you can expect to receive it.

Confidence: Employers want to see confidence—but the right kind. The confidence that earns respect is confidence about your potential combined with humility about your newness and lack of organizational savvy. Be proud of what you did, but realistic about what you can do now.

Have an open mind: The worst thing you can bring to the job are preconceived notions about what work ought to be like, how things ought to be done, and what you are supposed to do. Start with an open mind to accept the organization and its way of doing business as it is. Be open to new ways of thinking and doing things and to new experiences.

Long-term perspective: Your employer views your development as occurring over many years, not just a few months. You, however, have been conditioned to courses that last from 6 to 15 weeks. A successful professional’s attitude is one that says “I’m here for the long haul and what I’m doing today (or even this month) is not as important as where it is taking me down the road.” These people willingly accept assignments that aren’t fun but provide good training. They understand when they don’t get to do exciting work for a while, and they stay focused on goals down the road. Your first year is really just a time to lay foundations for the future.

Work ethic: Don’t skip this advice! I haven’t met a graduate yet who didn’t think he or she was a hard worker, but many employers don’t agree. Many graduates find that professional life is a lot more demanding than college. Employers often complain that graduates aren’t ready to work hard. To dispel that notion: Show up early, stay late, volunteer for projects, and work extra hard at your learning. Your transition from student to employee makes your first year a lot harder than later years, so extra effort is called for. You will win points by going the “extra mile” and doing whatever is asked of you, no matter how trivial it may seem.

Positive attitude: In college, complaining is pretty common. Whether it is about the professors, the lousy administration, or just the workload, everyone does it. Your employer wants to see a positive attitude. Complaining just doesn’t cut it when you are new, even though older employees may do it.

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. Expect to be surprised—the odds are that many things about your job will not be what you expected them to be.
It’s important to remember that the image the recruiter painted may be a bit too rosy and that you won’t receive the special attention from others in the company that you did while being recruited. Most employers are frustrated by new graduates’ naive expectations, so you’ll score points if you work to keep yours realistic. The reality is that your job probably won’t be nearly as glamorous, important, or as high a level as you thought. New graduates often comment on how different the challenges are from what they expected, how much more pressure they feel than they anticipated, and how surprised they are at how many hours they have to put in.

It’s in your expectations that the college experience has shaped—and hurt—you the most. If you find yourself repeating any of the following phrases (or any that are similar) you’re probably expecting work to be too much like college:

- I never really know how well I’m doing.
- Work is boring.
- This is just grunt work; it’s beneath me.
- They don’t want my new ideas.
- Things aren’t like they said they would be.
- They don’t tell me what I’m supposed to do.
- If they were really interested in me, they would help me more.
- Nobody knows what’s going on around here.
- Nobody will tell me how things work around here.
- They keep changing their minds.

Although each feeling could be symptomatic of a “real” problem at work, in your first year it is more likely that such feelings result from “student thinking,” which will keep you from being effective at Step 4—impression management. Start with a clean slate.

**Step 3: Master breaking-in skills**

We’ve already said that there are some different rules to play by during the first year. Here are some of the basics:

- You are an outsider until you prove otherwise. Just because you are an employee does not mean that the people in the organization have accepted you.
- You can’t change the system until you are part of it. When an insider criticizes the organization or tries to make changes, it is considered constructive. When an outsider (that’s you) criticizes or suggests changes, the odds are good that it will be seen as an attack. The presumption is that until you know the organization well and are part of it, you can’t possibly understand things well enough to make constructive criticisms. New graduates are particularly likely to want to implement some of the new ideas they learned in college, but you’ll often find resistance among your established co-workers. They want to see you learn the way things are before you offer ways to improve them.
- Avoid “big splash” strategies. Conventional wisdom says that you need to show your new organization how smart and talented you are by using the “big splash” approach. Your natural tendency is to charge ahead, trying to make big contributions and dream up great ideas for new initiatives or changes to impress your colleagues. The problem is, if you do that before you have earned acceptance and gained a good understanding of your organization, you will most likely stick your foot in your mouth and embarrass yourself. The quickest way to make a big splash is to have the maturity not to try. You may think you know how to make a good impression, but experience says that a few rough lessons and lots of mistakes later, you will learn differently.
- Admitting what you don’t know is more important than showing what you do—and makes a positive impression. This means eyes and ears open, mouth shut at first to learn as much as you can about the company and the people in it. You need to learn the ropes, to
understand the nuances of how things are done before you can have any hope of making intelligent suggestions for change or getting new ideas accepted.

- You have to earn your “pin stripes” before you can shed them. Getting accepted generally requires a great deal of conformance to the organization’s rules, norms, and ways of doing things. You don’t earn acceptance by challenging the system at first; you earn it by fitting in. In time you will have plenty of opportunity to develop your own style, assert some individuality, and make the job fit you better. But in the beginning such efforts are usually interpreted by the organization as a sign of immaturity.
- Build a track record. The old saying is true: Nothing sells like success. Look for opportunities to be successful. They won’t necessarily be home runs—just solid base hits. Be sure to make the right mistakes; that is, those that come naturally from learning, not those that come from immaturity and impatience. Become known for your dependability and willingness to work hard, for fitting in, and for professional maturity.

**Step 4: 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.

Everything you do early on will be magnified in its impact. As you progress in your career and build a good professional reputation, your track record will give you a safety net to cushion you against mistakes and interpersonal gaffes. But in the first year, you have no track record, so it’s the impressions and perceptions others have of you that count. Even the smallest mistakes are magnified in impact when you’re new.

It is hard to define precisely what the “right” impression is since every organization is different. That’s why the first challenge in making a good impression is having the professional maturity to take time to figure out what the organization wants. Steps 1 through 3 laid the groundwork for this because a good attitude, realistic expectations, and breaking-in savvy will immediately make a good impression. These really stand out in a new graduate. And they help you open up to determine exactly what people want to see.

Since colleagues won’t know you well yet, your second challenge is to pay attention to the little things that create strong, positive first impressions. Little things you don’t think are very important can create impressions that are the only things your co-workers have to judge you. Make the right impression and people will want to be associated with you, get to know you better, and help you out. Make the wrong impression, and you will be dismissed as “another immature college grad.”

The third thing to remember is that what is okay for more experienced people to do may not be okay for you to do. Avoid anything that reminds people of college-student-type behavior. One new hire started complaining about the way certain work was being done (and she was right) soon after being hired—until she realized that she was being viewed as a complainer. One guy loved to wear crazy ties and was pleased to see some others doing it too—until he realized that people remembered him for his ties, not his ideas.
Evaluate everything you do in terms of how it will look to people who know nothing about you but who are going to put a label on you. For the first year, be very conservative. Find opportunities to do things that you know people will like to see so you get “good” labels early. Avoid doing anything that could be misinterpreted. Remember, it’s a lot easier to get noticed for the wrong things than for the right things.

Step 5: Build effective relationships

Picture a typical new graduate, in his or her office, working long hours to complete a project, taking manuals and books home at night to learn more, skipping lunch to make sure the work is done just right. Sound smart? Only partially. Organizations are people. They aren’t just collections of tasks and duties; they are people working together for a common goal. It’s people that shape the organization, determine how things are done, decide your future, and guide the success of the organization. Every job, no matter how technical, will require you to be successful at working with, through, and around people.

The only way you will learn how to become successful in an organization is from people. Much of what you need to know about getting things done is not written down and can only be learned from others in the organization. Building good relationships is really the only way that you can be successful at the rest of the steps. Without strong relationships where people will like you and want to teach and help you, I can almost guarantee that you will not become an outstanding performer.

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.

- **Network, network, network!** It really is true: Who you know is just as important as what you know. Build a network of contacts, resources, and sources of advice and information. Take advantage of opportunities to attend social functions, meetings, and seminars where you can meet colleagues. And, don’t limit yourself to just those within your organization. Look for professional groups so you can meet outsiders. They can help with information, perspective, resources, and even a job change.

- **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. Be careful to choose those that seem to be respected in the organization. Don’t expect them to help you climb
the ladder (that's up to you) but just to help you learn. Find several mentors if one person doesn’t fit the bill.

**Step 6: Become a good follower**

There is no more important person than your boss on your first job. He or she will be largely responsible for getting you opportunities to showcase your talents, seeing that you get the training you need, setting the tone of your first year, shaping the organization’s opinion and evaluation of you, determining your advancement beyond the entry position, and socializing you to the organization’s culture. You must give top priority to learning how to build a positive and mutually productive relationship.

Working for a boss is unlike any other relationship you have had. The problem is, you really haven’t been taught how to be an effective subordinate. Just as there is a well-defined set of skills you can learn to be a manager, so too is there a well-defined set of subordinate skills. College focuses on developing future leaders, but you can’t be a good leader until you first learn to be a good follower. Employers don’t want to see your leadership skills in the beginning—they want to see your “followership” skills.

The success of your relationship with your boss is just as much your responsibility as it is your boss’s. Don’t slip into the “oughta-be” trap. Perhaps your boss “oughta-be” doing lots of things differently or better, but ultimately you and your career will be hurt if the relationship doesn’t work well. A bad boss is not a legitimate excuse for poor performance.

First, you need to learn good subordinate skills that allow you to be productive and effective in working with your manager (see Figure 2). Second, you need skills that make you an easy employee to manage (see Figure 3).

**KEYS TO BEING A GOOD SUBORDINATE**

Figure 2

*These skills help ensure that you give your manager what he or she needs.*

- Never surprise or embarrass your boss.
- Keep your boss informed.
- Offer solutions, not problems.
- Do what is asked and do it well.
- Be consistent.
- Know your boss’s agenda—wants, needs, and expectations.
- Makes your boss look good.
- Work with, not against, your boss.
- Support your boss.
- Don’t cause trouble.
- Work hard.
- Help your boss manage time.
- Don’t waste resources.
- Make your boss more efficient and productive.
- Be available.
- Make yourself indispensable.
KEYS
TO BEING AN EASY EMPLOYEE TO MANAGE
Figure 3
These skills help give you what you need to develop as a subordinate.

Respect your manager’s authority.
Accept criticism and feedback well.
Be flexible; expect the unexpected.
Take ownership of the job.
Eliminate your need for supervision.
Play it straight.
Keep disagreements behind closed doors.
Ask for help (but not too much).
Motivate yourself instead of waiting to be motivated.
Do more than you’re asked to do.
Accept assignments willingly.

Step 7: 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 every thing 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.

There are two basic rules you have to remember about culture. First, organizations want employees who “fit” their culture and enthusiastically embrace it. That’s not to say that every worker should be a clone, but each organization limits the amount of individuality it allows an employee. Second, you aren’t allowed to deviate from the culture until you are accepted as part of the “team” and have a track record of proven performance. That won’t happen in your first year, so focus on “fitting in.” If you don’t take time to understand the culture, you are almost assured of making many dumb and embarrassing mistakes that will hurt your career.

For example, consider one new hire who was quick to criticize a project only to find out that it was originally started by one of his senior managers who still believed in it. Another new employee didn’t attend safety meetings and continued to violate safety rules, not realizing that safety in the workplace was a very important value to the company. Another didn’t understand company protocol that said never discuss an issue with the boss’s boss without first informing the boss.

Here are some critical elements of culture to pay attention to:

- Mission of the organization.
- Guiding philosophies.
- Basic values and norms.
- Behavioral expectations.
- Work ethic.
- What gets rewarded.
You learn the company’s culture by observing it. It’s rarely written down, and most people can’t explain it to you directly, but every employee lives it every day. Pay attention to “the way things are done around here.” Watch your colleagues; pay attention to the things they spend their time on. Learn the norms and values of the organization by watching others’ behavior. Pay attention to the political climate and how people communicate and work together. Take time to learn your company’s culture before getting too adventurous, and remember, you can’t change the culture until you are part of it.

**Step 8: Develop organizational savvy**

Organizational savvy simply means learning how an organization really functions. First, politics is not a dirty word: You might as well get used to the fact that everything that happens in an organization includes politics. Politics is just the way things get done when people work together. It can be nasty and vicious, but usually it’s not. It is the process of sharing resources and power and influencing others.

The first rule for new graduates is not to get involved in politics. You lack the experience, clout, and skill. The second rule though is to get rid of your political naiveté and consider the political aspects of everything you do. How will it affect others? Who else cares about what you are doing? Who do you need on your side? Who is against what you are working on? The third rule is to use the first year to learn good organizational political skills (see Figure 4).

**Good Organizational Political Skills**

Figure 4

- Learn to compromise with others.
- Involve others in decisions—before they are made.
- Understand the “players” in every activity.
- Learn good negotiation skills.
- Understand which battles are worth fighting and which ones are futile.
- Learn to build coalitions of people who agree with you on an issue.
- Don’t go out on a limb by yourself.
- Learn what the difficult political issues are.
- Understand who has the power and who wants it.

You also need to accept the organizational realities you will face. Not only are organizations political, but they also are often illogical and unfair. They don’t always welcome change, they aren’t always fun, and sometimes they don’t even like newcomers. Not all people in them are nice, helpful, or motivated. Simply put, organizations aren’t perfect. What might have looked like
an ideal place during the interview will probably reveal its warts and blemishes quickly. You have to accept and adjust to these realities because they are true in every organization. You can be happy and successful, even with these faults. Mature professionals are realistic and accept the imperfections.

You also need to know how to get results. Organizations establish elaborate formal structures, systems, and procedures but the people in them develop their own informal structures and methods that are the way things really get done. These are the “back door” ways of getting information, the shortcuts to get around the cumbersome accounting system, the informal agreements among departments to make work flow more quickly. There are also thousands of procedures and ways of doing things that are never documented and simply evolved over time. It is these informal, unwritten ways of doing things that make organizations productive. If you want to get results in your job, you will have to master them. Don’t get lost in the “official” procedures. Learn how things “really get done around here.” The only way to do that is to watch people, ask questions, and depend on others to teach you.

Step 9: Understand your new-hire role

Nobody really likes being new in an organization. It can be uncomfortable and frustrating. Everyone has been there and has had to adjust to being the “new kid on the block,” so they expect you to do the same. Want to know the best way to score points? Perform the “new kid” roles and tasks with a smile on your face and to the best of your ability.

Master the art of being new: It is just as important to learn how to be new as it is to be experienced. The more you understand and accept being new, and the better you become at acting like and being a new employee, the quicker you can leave it behind. That’s totally contrary to traditional thinking, which says you need to stop acting like a new employee as quickly as you possibly can. Effective new employees understand the importance of the transition period. They accept their newcomer role, understand the special “rules” for newcomers, and attack the tasks of learning the organization and getting accepted with vigor rather than running from them.

Pay your new employee dues: Every organization has its tasks that new employees get stuck with. They are called “paying your dues.” In many organizations, new employees get stuck doing copying, filing, or running errands. Sometimes you get all the grunt work on a project. Often you get the worst desk and office around.

Don’t take it personally: Sometimes these things are done just because someone has to do the grunt work and everyone had to do it when they were new, so now it’s your turn. If this happens to you, relax. Your opportunities will come. Remember the three-stage process. This is a transition period, not your career. I guarantee you that you will win more respect for fitting into your role, whatever it is or however trivial it may seem, and doing it to the best of your ability and as cheerfully as possible.

Understand the bigger picture: Many new graduates fail to recognize the big picture in their organization. They get “tunnel vision,” focusing only on their needs, interests, and jobs. When asked to do the copying for the big project due next week, they see it as grunt work instead of helping the department get an important project done. When the boss doesn’t have time to talk much for a few weeks, they feel neglected instead of realizing there are many other very important things to attend to. When their training program is delayed or converted to on-the-job training, they are angry they didn’t get what was promised instead of looking at the drop in profitability that forced the vice president to cut the budget.
Your first job is the most important thing in the world to you and consumes most of your energy and time. However, the organization has many other priorities that may be equally or more important. Be professionally mature enough to recognize this and take responsibility for yourself.

**Find your niche:** It’s frustrating when you are new and don’t have a well-defined role. We all like to have our part to play. Look carefully at what role the organization wants you to play. Does the organization see you as a loyal assistant who does not get significant responsibility for a while? Do your superiors need you to step in and take over for someone who is out for major surgery, even though you may not feel ready? Does the company want you to spend six months going to school and reading manuals?

Whatever it is, your job is to pace yourself to match the company’s schedule and plan, not to fit your own. Many new graduates create problems for themselves and for others by trying to force the organization to march to their plan. There will come a time when you can push the system (probably about half way through the first year) but only after you are accepted and respected (there are those goals again). Until then, forget what you think your role should be, look around and figure out what the organization wants your role to be, and then do it willingly and to the best of your ability, no matter how distant from your own preferences. Trust me. It happens so rarely that you will be admired and respected very quickly. Then you can pursue your agenda.

**Step 10: Develop work savvy**

At this point in the process, you will have acquired the related-related skills you need. Now you are ready to become an outstanding performer. To do so, you need to apply your knowledge and develop your professional skills. Most new graduates find that they have to learn how to apply their knowledge in a job setting. Book knowledge is fine, but what can you do with it? How does it fit the tasks you have to do? How can you use it to get results?

There are numerous professional skills you will need to develop to perform your job. These include managing your time; setting priorities; juggling multiple projects; writing memos, letters, and reports; making oral presentations; managing your work flow; managing and participating in meetings; selling your ideas; setting and meeting deadlines; producing the right level of quality; and motivating yourself. Focus on developing these essential professional work skills.

**Step 11: Master the tasks in your job**

While the emphasis here has been on the non-task elements of your job, you must master the basic tasks of the job. Your employer will most likely provide you some training to get you started. Don’t take it lightly. It is odd how many new graduates complain about their “basic training” when they really don’t have any idea what it is they need to learn. Assume the training is conducted the way it is for a reason, and make the most of it.

**Step 12: Acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities you need**

If you’re like most new graduates, you will find that there are certain skills and abilities that you need but lack. Employers expect you to need development: Take advantage of it and don’t be embarrassed to ask for training or help. As a professional, you have to take responsibility for your own development; nobody will force you to develop as they did when you were in college. At this point, you should have a pretty good idea of what you need. Sit down with your manager and other colleagues and get their input. Listen to your performance reviews. Then develop a plan to guide your development. If you have spare time, which often happens in the beginning, use it to learn something new.
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. Use the steps to set priorities, since they build on each other. Ideally, Steps 1 through 3 should be your first priority and can be accomplished before you start work (for the most part). Making the right impressions and building relationships (Steps 4 through 6) should be your next priority. Learning the culture, developing organizational savvy, and finding your role (Steps 7 through 9) will follow naturally. Finally, your task performance will be the next priority. As you move along in your first year, the “honeymoon” ends, and people begin to look for a higher level of performance. Although you will be doing at least basic tasks from the beginning, most organizations will start you slower and give you time to work on the other steps.

Of course, each organization is a little different, so the order in which you work through the steps may vary, but it is important that you complete each of the 12 steps. Do not skip any step in any organization.

Remember that it is your responsibility to make your transition to work a success, not your employer’s. The good ones will help you, but it’s your career.

Issues and Challenges

Many new graduates find the transition from campus to workplace to be a challenge. Here are some common issues that arise:

“They don’t understand what it’s like to be new.”
Probably not. It takes only a year or two in the workplace to forget what it’s like to be new. And, few managers receive training in how to bring new employees into the organization. Don’t expect them to automatically know what you need.

“I’m not as happy as I thought I would be.”
It’s common for new graduates to feel a little disappointed, usually because their expectations are not met. Often, there is a burst of happiness and enthusiasm in the beginning, followed by a letdown, and then (here’s the good news) a return of enjoyment and satisfaction once the adjustment is past.

“I’m bored.”
The first six months may not be the challenge you were expecting. It will likely take time for you to grow into the level of responsibility and challenge you expected. While it is difficult to find the constant high level of intellectual challenge you experienced in college, work offers different types of challenges that can be just as rewarding.

“I can’t handle it all.”
It can happen that you get too much to do too fast and are confused. Try to relax. Even the most experienced employees feel overwhelmed in a new job. It takes time to settle in, and it does get better. Don’t be afraid to ask for help, and don’t expect more of yourself than everyone else does.

“I have a bad assignment.”
Sometimes it happens. Bad bosses, bad jobs, bad assignments are all unfortunate realities. Usually, the fastest way out of a bad situation is to do the best job possible under the circumstances. Usually a “grin and bear it” attitude will get you farther than loud complaining. If it is an intolerable situation, make sure your complaining is professional.
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. These 12 steps will help you make sense of a very critical career stage, avoid costly mistakes, build a solid foundation for advancement, and get a fast start. Most important, they will keep you from spoiling years of hard work and missing the rewards you have earned by making dumb mistakes. Is it easy? No. But most new graduates conclude by the end of the first year that it was worth it.

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!

(See also Building Better Assimilation Programs: Five Keys to Success. Author Donald Asher addresses employers on the issue of college-to-work transition and offers best practices employers can model to aid their new hires and increase their first-year retention rate.)