

10 Steps to Dominate Your First Job

Statistics indicate that one in two new college graduates are unemployed or underemployed. If you are one of the lucky ones who got a job soon after graduation, congratulations. While many of you will have had part-time jobs, this new position can be an incredible learning experience and a stepping stone for your long-term career.

It's also a struggle. Getting the job doesn't automatically mean that you will be excellent at it- or that you will even want to be good at it. Almost certainly, there will be hurdles to overcome as you initially transition into this new season of life.

What if there was more you could do than just try and merely survive this entry-level nightmare? More than just putting your head down and counting the minutes until you could leave and go back to your "real life"? What if you could do more than just dream of the day when you will be excited to come to a job you are engaged in and excited about? **What if you could DOMINATE your first job out of the gate?**

What follows are ten tips for DOMINATING your first job after college.

1. Never eat (lunch) alone.

One of the best things about any new experience is the incredible learning opportunity it provides. Every single person you'll work with in your new position — from the receptionist to the CEO — can teach you something valuable, and each of them help you in your career. Many of the happiest and most successful people I know constantly ask questions and seek guidance from everyone around them. Your workplace is full of intelligent, thoughtful, and experienced people. Get to know them. Treat them with respect. Ask them questions. Learn from them.

A common view of Millennials is that they are entitled and narcissistic. And a typical mistake young people make is to focus on competitively climbing their career ladders rather than humbly seeking to serve their colleagues and customers. If you want to earn the respect of those around you and defy your generation's stereotypes, the best thing you can do is bring an attitude of service to your job. Jim Collins has written about how the greatest leaders often combine humility and fierce resolve. And humbly serving — staying focused on others — can be a great way to develop leadership and earn the support of your coworkers. Proactively seek out ways to help your colleagues. Think ahead for new ways to please clients.

Action point: Particularly in the first few months, take the time to go to a colleague's office and talk to them in person, rather than by phone or e-mail. People tend to communicate better in person- there is less chance of confusion or misunderstanding.

2. Work hard and show up on time.

It's been well-documented that hard work can be at least as important as talent to professional success. And nothing signals seriousness to your employer like promptness, perseverance, and dedication. Over the long run, diligence will earn you the respect of your



colleagues, and hard work will give you the mastery and self-discipline to succeed in the future. The basics are simple, but easy to forget: Understand your company and know your role. For those of us who just discovered our independence in college, it may be tempting to dive into a new job wanting to shake things up and expecting to lead the company in new directions right away. But if you want to become a leader, your colleagues have to respect you first.

One of the biggest complaints about new college grads is that they often expect too much too soon and come across as thinking they know more than seasoned employees. Watch your attitude. Know that you will need to earn your stripes, as well as the trust of colleagues and supervisors, before being given more responsibility. Especially watch your attitude with support staff so as not to come across as arrogant or condescending.

Action Point: Be on time, and don't expect any rewards for doing it. Then do it again.

3. Look the part

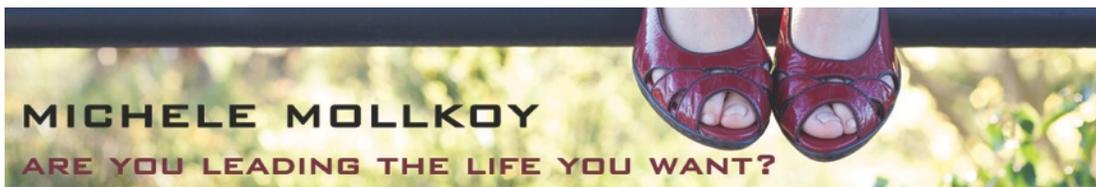
It may have been acceptable to walk into your morning classes at college dressed in a sweatshirt or pajama pants, but those fashion choices will no longer be an option the first day on a new job. What you're expected to wear may differ greatly depending on the environment of your new place of employment. Some places will allow you to wear a nice pair of jeans, but most will have the "business casual" rule in place. This means no denim, T-shirts with slogans you thought were humorous in college, or sneakers. A good rule of thumb is to model your work wardrobe after what you saw during your interview for the position. What was everyone else wearing? That should give you a good basis on what you should pull out of your closet — or look into acquiring — to dress appropriately at your new job.

Embrace your superficial side. First impressions are absolutely critical (perhaps more so than they should be). You should always pay attention to your appearance at work. You want to look professional and within dress code standards when you're new and trying to create a name for yourself, even if your more-seasoned colleagues roll in dressed more casually.

Action point: Watch how people dress at work. Watch how people dress for work on TV shows. Then go to the store and buy affordable versions of what you see, depending on the area of the country you live in, the weather, etc. The old saying is true: "Dress for the job you want, not (just) the job you have."

4. Add value. A company hires you to make them money, save them money, solve problems, prevent problems, design a new system/service/product or manufacture or sell something. Determine the best ways you can contribute value for your department and for the company. Equally important, always be looking for opportunities to communicate your value. In other words, go beyond your job description and quietly let people know what you've done.

If you're in an office where you'll have deadlines to meet and projects to complete in an "as soon as possible" fashion, it may be a good idea to get yourself organized and manage your time efficiently right off the bat, and work out a plan for the first few weeks or months that will help you prioritize tasks. If you find yourself drowning, it's best to let your boss know as



soon as possible rather than blow a deadline because you were afraid of asking for an extension.

"College sets up expectations you didn't realize you had," says Elwood Holton, author of *How to Succeed in Your First Job: Tips for College Graduates*. Think about it: On your first day of class, you're handed a syllabus, told exactly how you will be graded, and given most of your assignments for the semester. The workplace just doesn't work like that.

But you can create some structure on your own. Rather than thinking about all the different things you could be doing, try to focus on one or two projects each day.

Action point: Make "to do" lists and set due dates for tasks that don't come with deadlines.

5. Fully participate in the experience

Even if you only took the job to get out of your childhood bedroom, you may be pleasantly surprised at how much you learn at your new place of employment, despite your role in an entry-level position. Keep the lines of communication open and talk to your boss on a regular basis. Find out about the perks associated with the new job, from tuition assistance to discounts on computers or tickets to sporting events. Take advantage of organized functions after work hours, because you never know who you'll meet or who could help you down the line at a networking event.

Drink deeply from the experience, no matter how short-lived you think it'll be initially. You may find yourself liking the job more than you thought, and will be thankful then that you put the effort in to establish a good relationship with your co-workers and superiors. And if you do end up leaving after a short while, you'll have decent references to vouch for you. Don't hold back until you "find someplace you'll stay for a while." Interacting with some of your colleagues outside of the workplace can give you a chance to show them a different side of yourself and to get to know them on a more human level. Establishing those outside relationships then strengthens the rapport you have with them when you're on the job.

Action point: Jump in with both feet. If your co-workers ask you to join them for lunch or happy hour, go!

6. Stay positive

If you find that the job you've signed on for isn't what you expected, it's important to maintain a positive outlook about the situation you're in. It could just be that it'll take you a while to get used to a more rigid schedule than you were used to in college. Even if the job isn't your dream job (few first jobs are), it will help fill your resume so you can get to where you want to be down the line, and cover bills you may not have had much experience with as a college student.

Even after more than three years since graduation, it can seem like your career is not yet established. But you will probably be well on your way to building a professional network of contacts who can help define your career. Each year, take time to really think about the next steps. Working on new projects and taking on new roles will help prevent a career rut and



help you to stay open to new opportunities. "You have lessons to learn and mistakes to make, and this is the perfect time to do it," career coach Abby Kohut says.

Action point: Keep a list of things you're thankful for and review it daily. Perspective is critical.

7. Build skills (meaning: become an Excel wizard, not an online gaming one).

Understand the new work paradigm is that you, not the organization, are in charge of your career. Gone are the days when the organization takes responsibility for moving you along from first job to retirement. Your task is to make a contribution to the company and develop skills you can take with you when it's time to leave.

What are some good ways to build skills? Volunteer for interesting projects, and keep your eyes open for any professional-development opportunities both within and outside the organization. Ask people what needs to be done and then teach yourself how to do it.

Action point: Keep a skills portfolio folder, and as you learn, develop or demonstrate a skill, write it down and stick it in that file with an example.

8. Ask for regular progress reports.

You're bound to have doubts and insecurities in your first job, but if you never address them, they will start interfering with your work. Unlike in college, where you automatically know how you did on a project based on a grade, in the workplace, you generally have to ask for that feedback. Bosses may not be used to employees who ask for specific responses to their work, so give them time to get used to what may seem to be high-maintenance behavior.

Request regular meetings with your direct supervisor as a way to track your progress on projects, tasks and other learning opportunities. Come to those meetings with an agenda, typed and printed out, with one copy for you and one for her. List everything you are working on and be prepared to explain the status of each item.

Action Point: As a way to track your progress, Emily Bennington, author of *Effective Immediately: How to Fit In, Stand Out, and Move Up at Your First Real Job*, highly recommends sending a quick, bulleted "Friday memo" each week to your boss, listing your accomplishments for the week, the areas where you're awaiting input, and your goals for the week ahead. If you make this memo part of your weekly routine, it will become a part of your boss's routine, too.

9. Prioritize contacts over career

It has never been truer that who you know matters much more than what you know. Odds are you will get your next job as a direct result of who you meet now. Think of your potential network as those people you know and those people you don't yet know. Your colleagues and contacts in the profession, along with mentors and supervisors, will be valuable folks to have in your professional network.

It helps to have an enlightened counselor, or two or three, to act as both cheerleader and eagle-eyed supervisor/hold you accountable. Also possibly certain family members, someone who has been a mentor to you, old friend or two.



Ask the people who know you best what they think your greatest strengths and weaknesses are. Ask them what they admire about you and what areas you may need help in. Before long, you'll find that the information you're getting from your own review and the input you receive from others will lead you to some very concrete conclusions about what your mission or direction should be.

Action point: Complete the actions described above. Look into getting a career coach. Get to know "leaders and experts" in your field by attending professional meetings, seminars and conferences.

10. Give it time.

Your. First. Job. Is. Not. Your. Destiny. Talk to any mid-career worker, and you will be shocked where her career began. Your first job in no way predicts where you will ultimately end up. Your main task on your first job is to test your wings, learn how organizations work, how business gets done, and what makes people and organizations successful.

You may be surprised to find how exhausted you are after an eight-hour workday, let alone an entire workweek. You might have spent several eight-hour stretches in the library during college, but eight-hour workdays, every day, take some getting used to. Think of it like you're building a new muscle.

Action point: Pick a date on your calendar that is three months away. Then pick one that is 6 months away, and another that is a year from now. Make those your days to check in with yourself and evaluate how you think things are going in your professional role. On the days in between those days, don't let yourself overanalyze things that happen or don't go as you would like. When you look back over a longer chunk of time, you will see the path of your maturity and professional development, and possibly be surprised at what opportunities have come your way as a result of your patience and hard work.

Above all, **press on**. Your first job probably won't be your last job or even your best job, but we can learn something from every job. Good luck.