9. Your New Job: The First 90 Days

So you’ve set up house, stepped into the real world, and found that new job, but you still need to tackle the activity that will take up most of your time: working itself. You may be in graduate school, at an office, teaching, conducting research, pursuing independent projects of your own—but all of you will encounter new challenges in the so-called “real world” post-college. This chapter will help you begin to navigate that world.

Leaving Yale’s system of structured grades, dean’s excuses, and spring breaks for an unknown work environment that features infrequent or unstructured feedback, high expectations, and an absence of excuses can be a shock to the system. As the new person, you are under a microscope; how you interact with others, contribute to the team, and express your attitude toward work will define how your colleagues view you. The first days, weeks, and months on the job are a time to prove yourself, earn responsibility and credibility, and demonstrate professional maturity. Sound like a tall order? You’re prepared for it—just make sure you follow the tips below.

Office Culture

Before you saunter into a board meeting the way you would a discussion section, it’s important to learn the rules and culture of your new work environment. The first thing to remember is that offices have both written and unwritten codes of conduct, and every office is different. You may have had an internship where the CEO wanted your input on day one; but at your new job, you might be expected to spend some time on the job before you discuss ideas with your immediate supervisor. The company handbook won’t tell you how your office works, so you will have to take the time to learn it for yourself.
Figuring out an office system may seem daunting, but you have spent four years learning how to learn. At the office, learn by observing. Pay attention to the protocol for speaking up at meetings—do you let the boss speak first? Are you expected to report on your projects? Can a new employee comment on other people’s suggestions? The office is not a seminar in which you should speak up as often and as loudly as possible. You can make your voice heard, but you need to know the right ways to go about it.

Your New Supervisor

Luckily for you, someone at the office is getting paid to help you understand your new role: your supervisor. During your first week on the job, it’s important to set up a regular schedule of supervisory meetings with your new boss. These meetings will give you the chance to ask questions about your role in the organization and projects you’re working on, get clarification on topics that come up in meetings that you may not be familiar with, and establish the specific expectations of your job. Use these meetings to get any help you may need right at the start.

Meetings with your supervisor are also a chance for you to receive feedback on your performance in those critical early weeks and months on the job. Feedback, both praise and constructive criticism, can help you gauge what you need to do in order to be professionally successful. These meetings might not always be pleasant, but they’re important; now that you’re not getting grades, talking with your supervisor is the best way to figure out where you stand. And just as you would follow a professor’s advice on an essay, it’s essential that you work to improve your areas of weakness in response to constructive criticism.

But your supervisor is not just a taskmaster. He or she should be on your side; after all, your strong performance reflects well on everyone you work with. For that reason, your supervisor can be a great resource to help you get a feel for office culture. After sitting in on staff and/or team meetings, you can debrief with your supervisor to help you figure out when it’s appropriate to speak up, when to keep quiet, and what kind of boundaries are in place. If you are polite, respectful, and attentive, understanding office culture with your supervisor’s help can be as easy as asking your dean about a deadline.
Starting Out

You’ve got your first assignment in hand—and it doesn’t involve a trip to Sterling, a lab report, or a problem set. There is a different set of requirements for success at your job, but one thing stays the same: your ability to communicate. They may seem obvious, but the quick tips below can help you acclimate.

Quick Tip 1: Ask Questions

When you begin a new job, you’re not expected to know everything. But people won’t know what you’re unsure of until you tell them. Whether you are looking for the supply closet or don’t know how to proceed with projects you’ve been assigned, ask! It doesn’t mean you are unqualified for the position; actually, asking questions shows that you are trying to make yourself as useful as possible by learning how the office works. And it’s always better to ask early than to find out later that you misunderstood what you needed to do.

Quick Tip 2: Speak Up

You may have spent the past four years at Yale asking your professors questions; or you may have avoided office hours like they were a dreaded sixth credit. Either way, you need to strike a balance at your job.

On the one hand, an intense level of questions and suggestions may be misinterpreted at the workplace, especially if you challenge decisions made by leadership. Decisions may not always be logical to you, as someone who doesn’t know the history or underlying politics of the office, but you can’t put people on the spot in an office the way you might try to trump an argument in class.

On the other hand, you are allowed and expected to contribute to the organization—that’s why you were hired! Your goal is to make your boss and your team look good by being an enthusiastic contributing member from the beginning. The office is not a lecture where you sit quietly and passively take notes; you can and should share ideas and progress in a thoughtful, respectful way.

Job v. College: The Times, They Are A’Changin…

At Yale, you may have rolled out of bed two minutes before class and run to lecture buttoning your pajamas with one hand and eating a bagel with the
other. But when you enter the workplace, you’ll need to change the lifestyle you’ve gotten used to over the past four years. You should focus on looking and acting like a professional--after all, you are one!

Procrastination

At Yale, it may be fine to wait until the last minute to work on projects, but in the workplace your supervisor may want weekly status updates. That’s not an invitation to slack off until those meetings, so if you’re the type of person who runs to the drop box sixty seconds before your paper is due, you need to change the way you budget your time. All-nighters in the workplace are a sign of someone who is not prepared or mature enough to act professionally.

This isn’t just an admonition; it’s an opportunity. A job gives you a boundary between work and home that did not exist at Yale. So take advantage of that separation, do your work while you’re actually at work, and use your home time for you.

Punctuality

Your job is not a student meeting that starts fifteen minutes late; arrive on time, if not a few minutes early, and work through the end of the workday. No one appreciates a clock-watcher who strolls in later than everyone else and says good-bye at five o’clock on the dot. If that means sticking around a little longer than you’d like, remember that supervisors consider your presence (and absence) direct reflections of your investment and enthusiasm.

Meg Martinez ’10 says: “Waking up early is hard. Practice before your job starts and don’t get out of practice on the weekends.”

Attendance

Maybe no one noticed if you skipped out on a lecture, but you’re expected to be at work every day. Calling in sick when you’d rather stay in bed or spend time with friends will not earn points with your boss and colleagues. Many employers don’t allow you to use paid vacation or sick time for the first 60-90 days on the job, so don’t be surprised if an unwarranted sick day shrinks your paycheck.

Facebook, Cell Phones, and Texting, Oh My!

Technology and social media are your friends, just not at work. Cell phones should be turned off or at the very least put on vibrate at the office. You’re
expected not to take personal calls unless necessary. The same goes for texting. Just because you think no one can hear you doesn’t mean no one will notice; holding your phone under the desk while you pretend to work does not look natural. Remember that, as the new person in the office, your supervisor and colleagues will be watching your behavior.

Internet use should be limited to your work projects. Unless monitoring Facebook is part of your duties, you should not be checking your wall. Many companies have policies that prohibit surfing the web or checking personal email while at work. Some even track what sites employees are visiting, so don’t make the mistake of assuming that no one will know. Quickly minimizing the window when you hear someone approach is an obvious clue that you’re looking at something you shouldn’t. That quick visit to YouTube during office hours can get you in trouble.

Language

You should know by now that you speak more formally in an office than a dorm room, but make sure to watch your language even in friendly conversation. Swears, slang, or offensive terminology can reflect poorly on you, and you never know how your audience (or the colleague walking past your desk) will respond.

The Office Social Scene

Be A Friendly Face

A simple “hello” or “good morning” accompanied by a smile for everyone you pass as you arrive at work can do wonders for your image around the office. In some workplaces, it may be common for staff to spend a few minutes in common areas first thing in the morning to catch up over coffee. If this is part of the company culture, then don’t be the antisocial new hire who never participates. Conversely, if the majority of co-workers get right down to business upon arriving, then it may be best to do the same. Follow the lead of those around you, at least until you’ve settled into your job.

Politics: Gossip and Alliances

We’ve all been around people who love to gossip. If you encounter one of these people in the workplace, try to keep your distance and avoid getting caught up in their talk. You want to remain open and neutral toward your fellow employees.
During the first weeks on the job, co-workers may invite you to lunch or to go out after work. It’s important to be friendly and accept offers if you are able and comfortable, but be wary of becoming BFFs too quickly. There are alliances and personality clashes that you won’t recognize at first; you would hate to be unfairly labeled based on your friends at the office. That said, forming professional friendships can go a long way toward easing your transition into the workforce.

As You Continue…

Attitude

Depending on your position, the projects you’re given in the early days of your new job may not be the most intellectually stimulating of tasks. But it’s important to pursue every assignment, from writing a brief to buying a coffee, with promptness and enthusiasm. A positive attitude can go a long way toward maintaining your happiness.

Don’t be afraid to advocate for yourself. Ask too many questions instead of too few, especially where you, the new employee, are concerned. Of course you try to pay attention, be aware, and learn what you can independently, but stand up for yourself. Before signing on, ask for a contract; read it carefully; and follow up on any aspects you do not understand. Ask about health insurance and other benefits. Negotiate a fair salary. You are only as small or as “new” and innocent as you decide to be. Listen to your gut and if an opportunity seems right, go for it. If it doesn’t, pinpoint why and opt to keep looking if possible.

-Alumna ‘14

Initiative

If you’re done with your assignments early, don’t sit at your desk waiting for something to do to drop from the heavens. Politely ask your supervisor how else you might contribute, and volunteer to assist with other projects. You’ll receive the most interesting work if your supervisor knows the amount of quality work you can perform in a given time period, so show him/her!

Progress Checks

There are no exam grades in the office; in fact, it’s not uncommon to receive formal feedback only once per year on an employee evaluation. To get a feel for
your progress, seek periodic feedback from your supervisor. That way you’ll know which areas you could improve—and work to improve them—before the yearly evaluation.

Chain of Command

If you have a problem, don’t go straight to the CEO (unless the CEO is your only boss.) Generally, your first stop should be your direct supervisor. For personal issues with a co-worker, try to resolve your concerns directly with that person if possible. In many companies, human resources can also help you settle problems.

Upward Mobility

Some of you may have taken an entry-level position intending to move up. Completing your work efficiently and well is the best way to prepare for that move. Project your enthusiasm for additional responsibilities, but don’t let your desire for a higher position diminish your attitude toward the work you have right now.

After some time on the job, you can politely express your aspirations to your supervisor in the context of asking how to prepare yourself now. This will plant the seed that you are interested in moving up, without forcing the issue.

You will not know everything. Always express your thanks to those who go out of their way to welcome you and get you on your feet.

— Jennifer Shelby ’13

Some Perspective

In the end, your first job is just that: your first job. It does not define you, and it is not a measure of your worth—it is a stepping stone to the really cool stuff you’ll do down the road. You’ve spent four years preparing to go out in the world. So enjoy the process, be open to self-discovery, and listen to Henry David Thoreau (even though he attended an unmentionable school in Massachusetts…):

“Go confidently in the direction of your dreams! Live the life you’ve imagined.”