

PROFESSIONALISM IN THE WORKPLACE
A Guide for New Employees

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“Every job is a self-portrait of the person who did it. Autograph your work with excellence.” – Anonymous

“Hold yourself to a higher standard than anybody else expects of you” – Henry Ward Beecher

“Your future depends on many things, but mostly on you.” – Frank Tyger

Depending on where you work, whether you are a new employee or have been around for a number of years, professionalism at work may have different meanings to many different people. You can usually expect a bit of a honeymoon period when you start your first job; no one is going to fire you for inadvertently hanging up on your boss' partner. However, you still want to make a good impression. There are some underlying principles that will help you through your first days on the job and will keep you from embarrassing yourself in front of your co-workers, or more importantly, your boss.

Orientation Programs

Orientation programs depend on where you work and the culture of that organization. Some will take you through a rigorous training program, where they will have your first week laid out well in advance and have you involved in a number of planned activities or meetings. Others will simply show you where your desk is and leave you to figure out the rest. Hopefully, your orientation program is somewhere between these two extremes.

No matter what orientation program your organization offers/doesn't offer you, it is your responsibility to ensure that you have the information needed to get up to speed quickly and make a contribution early on in your employment. Take notes. You won't be able to remember everything you were told on those first few days.

Again, although no one expects you to remember every detail, having to explain the same information over and over again becomes very old, very fast. Take advantage of the fact that you are a new employee and ask for help when you need it. You won't necessarily be able to get away with some of these questions very long. For a list of some of the main things to do or find out during the first few weeks on the job, see the list on page 9 in this handout.

Make a Positive First (and Lasting) Impression

Making a positive first impression is probably the most important thing that you can do to help you in this new environment. In categorizing people, we all take shortcuts, and first impressions about people often turn into long-term perceptions and reputations. This is good for people who make positive first impressions, but bad for people who make negative ones.

Clarify Your Work Culture

Protocols. They're everywhere. No matter if you are dining in a restaurant, driving a car or voting in a Federal election, we all have to live with protocols of some kind. Working is no exception. The only difference between the protocols of business and many other protocols that we are used to (and accept) is that many at work are not formalized. They are often learned by error or happenstance. The only true way to ensure that you are not going to be blindsided by all of the "what if's" that can occur in your workplace, is to ensure that you are fully aware of the company culture and clarify areas that may either not make sense to you, or that you truly just don't understand. If you did your research prior to being hired, you should be able to have a relatively accurate sense of the general tone of the

office. Although you won't know everything, you should be able to make some general assumptions.

Know Your Character

Why you react the way you do in situations may seem like a mystery...something beyond your control. The more you know about who you are and what makes you tick as a person and an employee, will only increase your ability to handle difficult, stressful or even pleasant situations on the job. Reflecting on your experiences and determining strategies for coping will benefit you when working on the job, especially if you are working with others. No one individual will think or react in the exact way you do, but having insight into why your body or mind are reacting in a specific way will only increase your confidence going into new situations and better prepare yourself for the ups and downs of a new job.

Ask yourself some of the following questions:

- How do you react in stressful situations?
- What are your physical signs of stress or anger?
- When you are tired, what are the jobs that you just can't give your full attention?
- How do you handle criticism?
- How do you continue to be productive and work with someone that you just don't like?

Harness Conflict

If you've never had conflict on the job – you haven't worked anywhere long enough. No matter if you are working in an office, factory or retail establishment, positive and negative conflict come with the territory. Not everyone is going to agree on everything or get along with everyone, everywhere, every time. It's up to you to determine how you are going to manage the conflict in your work life. Conflict doesn't always have to be bad. It can produce creative solutions to difficult problems and can move the company and your skills forward. You have the ability to change the course of conflict. You can either mire in it and let it eat at you, or you can be proactive and let it drive you.

Conflict also takes into account office politics and gossip. It is inevitable and somewhat human nature to be involved at some point with office politics/gossip. However, it is extremely important to stay away for at least the first few months. As well, try and limit your contact with the "office gossip" as much as possible. You don't want your reputation being soiled by their already established reputation.

As well, not that you have to keep silent, however, realize that you are new to this environment and may not have the complete history of the organization, nor the trust of your coworkers within the first few days or weeks to be offering unsolicited opinions or advice. Offer opinions when asked, however, avoid comparing your old employer and position to this new organization. It is imperative that you observe the reactions of others. Body language is a great indicator as to whether you have gone too far. If you feel as though you may have offended someone – apologize.

Adopt a Team Mentality

There are a number of ways that you can adopt a team mentality. Take the initiative to introduce yourself to those around you, instead of waiting for them to come to you. Getting to know your co-workers and what they do, especially those that you will be working with, is a way of ensuring that you work together and not separately. Find out how you can help them help you. Know how your job, your team and your department work into the overall strategic plan of the organization.

As you may have a personal philosophy about how you live your life (within and outside of work) others will too. The key to working with others in a job is not that you have to agree with everyone and thereby diminish your own feelings, but rather treat everyone in the organization with the dignity and respect that they deserve and what you feel you deserve as well.

Part of respecting others is to take the time to learn the names of people that you meet. No one expects you to remember everyone's name after the first day, however, if you truly are bad at remembering people's names, then this is a good time to learn some memory aid tricks. If you have forgotten someone's name, simply apologize and ask them again.

Body Language, Dress, Personal Grooming and Accessories

Unconsciously, we are constantly evaluating people and being evaluated by others in an unspoken way. Body language includes eye contact, posture, hand shakes, facial expressions and voice intonations. Don't underestimate this very important part of making a positive first impression with your co-workers, clients and supervisors.

Handshake

A strong and firm handshake (not bone crushing) can reflect that you are serious about the job and sincere about meeting the person. When you shake a person's hand after a meeting, it is a "thank you" gesture.

NB: In the lab, for cleanliness and sterilization reasons, you may skip the handshake when you meet someone at the work bench. Always wash your hands before exiting the lab.

Eye Contact

Give your undivided attention to the person with whom you are speaking. If there is a group of individuals make sure to make eye contact with all of the people involved in the conversation.

Posture

Make sure to sit or stand up straight and be alert. Try not to lean on a table, wall or anything else. NB: Don't sit on lab work benches. Sit on your lab coat, even when using a chair in the lab.

Smiling and Voice Intonations

A smile will go a long way with your new coworkers. It will give the impression that you are interested in being there and more importantly, interested in talking with them. When you are talking to someone, make sure to be careful of sarcastic tones in your voice or tones that sound as though you are uninterested in what is going on.

What you wear and how you wear it are very important in making a positive first impression with your new co-workers, clients and boss. Initially, your dress is your representation of who you are to people that are meeting you for the first time. After a while people may realize that these things don't necessarily correspond, however, if your grooming and dress on those first very important days are not neat, tidy and 'professional' they may have already formed a very harmful impression.

In all work place settings:

- Tone down perfume or cologne as many people have sensitivities or outright allergies to these scents
- Try to keep makeup, nail polish and jewelry to a minimum
- Be cautious about wearing clothing that may show tattoos or body piercings. The image may not be workplace appropriate
- Trim your beard and keep your hair and body clean
- Make sure clothing is clean, tidy and ironed (if needed)
- Breath mints, chewing gum, coffee, cigarettes – do you need them or should you tone them down?
- Dress in relation to your coworkers. Match what they wear to the office on a daily basis

Laboratory specific:

- For safety reasons, don't wear contacts.
- Try to avoid short sleeves, shorts or skirts
- Do not wear open toed shoes and keep long hair tied back at all times
- Always wear your lab coat in the lab

Communication

Verbal

Learn industry and company lingo, but use proper English when speaking or writing (ie. memos, notes, reports and documents) Be assertive and try not to use too many "umms" and "likes" in a sentence. By properly addressing a person (Dr., Professor, Mr. Mrs. or Ms.) you show respect and professionalism. Never assume that someone will want you to use their first name, unless you are introduced as such, or told otherwise.

Written

With a university degree, you are expected to write with more advanced skills. Formal writing and documentation are important in all work settings. Keep your work/lab notebook organized and up-to-date

Email and Internet

For email security, don't use hotmail or yahoo for emailing work information. Use your company email account respectfully and only for business purposes. Email etiquette does exist. Minimize internet surfing during work hours and separate Facebook or MSN chat time from work time

Some tips for making a professional impression when using email:

- Clearly summarize the contents of your message in the subject line.
- Don't use the CC (Carbon Copy) function to copy your message to everyone.
- When responding to e-mail, do not respond to all recipients, unless you absolutely need to.
- Use BCCs (Blind Carbon Copies) when addressing a message that will go to a large group of people who don't necessarily know each other. Just as it is not polite to give out a person's telephone number without his or her knowledge, it is not polite to give out someone's e-mail address.
- Keep your messages short and focused
- Avoid using all capital letters. IT'S THE EQUIVALENT TO SHOUTING IN SPEECH
- Don't write anything you wouldn't say in public. If you don't want to potentially share something you write, consider using the telephone.
- Don't use emoticons in business emails.
- Avoid sending e-mails to large numbers of people unless you have a serious reason to do it. You could be accused of 'spamming'
- Nasty e-mails should always be avoided.
- As a courtesy to your recipient, include your name at the bottom of the message.
- Check your spelling and grammar
- Consider using a signature at the bottom of your email. This will provide the recipient with all your contact information
- Although adding quotes to your signature is not widely accepted, if you do use these, make them appropriate and brief

Phone

Limit personal use of company phone. Speak clearly in your "work" voice; politely, sincere and not loud. Answer the phone properly ("Nestle Canada. Good morning, Linda speaking.") and have an appropriate voice mail recording. Get the proper training for using special features on the phone. Take a message for someone who is unavailable and remember to thank the person who helped you take a phone message.

Get and Stay Organized

If you are the kind of person that has trouble keeping track of everything, then spend a few dollars and invest in a daily planner (or Google Calendar). You don't want to be caught (especially in the first few weeks) missing a deadline or important meeting. Write notes for yourself to remind you of important events that are occurring in the organization, meetings, deadlines and anything else that needs to be remembered.

Work a Full Day and Establish a Good Attendance Record

There's nothing that can affect your reputation faster than routinely coming into work late or leaving work early. Especially in those first days/weeks on the job, be sure you get to work early and leave no earlier than when the majority of your co-workers leave.

Just as with working full days, it's important to show up to work every day and establish a good attendance record. Of course you might get sick, or there may be an emergency, however, try to make it to work every day during those first few weeks/months on the job.

Keep Your Boss Informed

Not that you have to go to your boss with every minor detail or problem that may have arisen since the last time you spoke, however, you should keep your boss informed of your progress, concerns or challenges within the first few weeks of being on the job. This will also help you build rapport with your new supervisor.

Show Appreciation

Nothing works like kindness and genuine appreciation. So, show your appreciation to everyone who helps you learn the ropes during your first days on the job -- from your co-workers and receptionists to the people in human resources.

Take Advantage of After-Hours Activities

Many organizations have formal or informal after-hour activities, such as sports leagues. Get involved -- even if only as a cheerleader -- because these types of activities are great ways to bond with your co-workers. Do be on your best behaviour during these outside-work activities, you still have to work with these people the next day. If you are going out for after hour drinks – stick to one.

Dating

Let's face it. You spend a lot of hours at work and at times may find yourself in a situation where you are attracted to someone. Make sure that you have read the policies the organization has laid out regarding this matter. Some organizations have very strict policies around the dating issue and have spent a lot of energy into developing guidelines that are meant to deter this kind of activity.

Finding Meaning in the Workplace

Finding meaning in your work is one way of ensuring that your actions have the best interest of the organization at heart. The more invested you are in the work you and your organization do, the more likely that you will do everything you can to keep it moving forward and thriving. Professional behaviour is a natural result of finding meaning in your work.

To help you find meaning, there are some things that you can do:

- **Be motivated and challenge yourself**

Ask for special assignments. Even if you are unsure of exactly what needs to be done. Challenging yourself to learn new skills and abilities will help you during those times when your job may become routine. This will also go a long way in ensuring that you come across as a productive member of the team. What you get out of the job is usually congruent with what you are willing to put into it.

- **Identify possible career opportunities**

Even if you have just begun your job, don't make the mistake of becoming stagnant. Conduct informational interviews with people in your field that are doing interesting work and learn from them. Attend conferences, read journals or magazines in your field and continue to expand your knowledge. Find a mentor – either within or outside of your organization. They can help you in determining future career paths and goals that you can set for yourself in the early stages of your career.

- **Learn from your mistakes**

Ask for feedback and learn how to improve. A mistake can offer you a great lesson – how not to do something in the future. Continuous learning is the key to success.

Being the newest member of the organization, is both challenging and exciting. You'll be faced with both difficulties and opportunities, and your goal should be to make the most of all situations. Don't forget that although you are just starting out in this organization, the impressions you make today, could possibly affect your entire career path. Remember, you may not only need these individuals to help you in your current position, you may actually need them for the next position in which you want to apply. Each position you hold will act as a building block for further career choices you make. If you don't have a solid foundation to begin with, your career may not grow as you had hoped and intended.

Read through the following guidelines for office etiquette. If you find that you are not following some of these guidelines, circle them and be conscious of how your actions may impact those around you.

- ✓ Always assume that everyone is as busy (and as stressed) as you are
- ✓ Give everyone that calls you or comes to your office, your undivided attention
- ✓ Be punctual for meetings. If you must be late, apologize – but don't give long winded excuses
- ✓ Celebrate with others. Special events that are not considered part of your "job description" may seem taxing or boring, however, ensure that you show up (even briefly) for these informal get-togethers.
- ✓ Share your expertise without making others feel inadequate
- ✓ Be sensitive to others need for privacy. If you are in someone's office and they must take a personal call, offer to excuse yourself.
- ✓ Don't interrupt others when you are on a break and they are continuing to work
- ✓ Do your best to return calls or respond to email within 24 hours.
- ✓ Whenever you leave a voicemail message ensure that you leave important details, including your name, telephone number and reason for your call
- ✓ Keep voicemail messages clear and concise
- ✓ Put the cell phone away at work
- ✓ Don't read faxes or company memos that are not addressed to you. Be alert to the fact that others may not follow this principle.
- ✓ Be careful with humour. Not everyone will appreciate your sarcasm or offensive jokes
- ✓ Never make changes to anyone's computer – even if you are trying to help
- ✓ Dress in accordance to your company's dress code
- ✓ Steer clear of conversations that may spark antagonism and create misunderstandings (ie. ethnicity, sex, religion, politics)
- ✓ Call people by their name
- ✓ Attend to personal matters on your own time (breaks, lunch etc.)
- ✓ Try to leave personal problems at home
- ✓ If you are truly sick. Stay home. No one wants to catch whatever it is you have.
- ✓ Don't complain about the little things. Pick your battles and realize you can't always get what you want
- ✓ Be a good neighbour. If you borrow something – bring it back to the person as soon as you are finished with it
- ✓ When in doubt ask yourself the following question "What if everyone here acted that way?"

If you don't have a comprehensive orientation program, the following is a list (not an exhaustive list) of things that you should do or at least find out during the first day, week and month of being at your new job.

<p>Make Sure to Find Out Before You Start Your First Day on the Job</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When should you report to work? • Where to go and report that you have arrived • What are the security procedures for the company (if any) • Who should you meet with? • What are the normal working hours? Is there paid overtime, lieu time etc. • Where do you park? Do you require a parking pass? • Do you need a key to the office? • What documentation (if any) do I need to bring with me? • Should you meet with HR before you start to do any paperwork? • Is there an orientation session? • What kind of dress is appropriate?
<p>Make Sure to Do/Find Out the First Day You Start Your Job</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan to arrive a few minutes early • Where's the bathroom? • Where's the lunchroom? Is there a lunchroom? • Do you need identification to enter/exit the building? • Are there designated breaks, or do you take them when you need to? • How do I work the telephone? • Computer passwords • Use of office equipment (passwords etc) and policy around personal use • Bring a lunch • Where can you buy drinks (coffee, pop etc.)? OR Can you buy drinks on site? • Who does what in the office? How do they relate to your role?
<p>Make Sure to Do/Find Out the First Week on the Job</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to introduce yourself to others in the office and determine what they do and how they relate to your role • Start to learn company lingo – if you are unsure – ask • Determine all projects that were already started before your arrival and what needs to be completed • When is payday? • Knowledge of the company, it's mission, customers, competitors, etc. • What if your sick or going to be late – who do you call? • Where are the supplies and what is the procedure for getting them
<p>Make Sure To Do/Find Out During the First Month on the Job</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vacation scheduling • More in-depth knowledge about the company, products, underlying culture etc.

Practice professionalism with these scenarios.

1. You are overloaded with duties to complete at work. Everyone thinks that you have a lot of time and they keep putting things to do on your desk. In order to finish, you put in a lot of over-time hours. How do you handle the situation?
2. **Everyone in the office/lab dislikes one person and always talks behind their back. Gossips starts, they rant during break-times and lunch. Do you join them?**
3. You keep making mistakes. What should you do?
4. **Your work is not recognized and your efforts are taken for granted. What do you do?**
5. There is a co-worker that seems to be always picking on you. How do you deal with the situation?
6. **You assist a new staff and help them get the hang of things, but they are taking too much of your time. How can you manage them and your work at the same time?**
7. You break something at work by accident. How do you report it?
8. **You are not properly supported by your supervisor at work or dealing with stress. How can you get help?**
9. You want new challenges and a project of your own. How do you bring it up to your supervisor?
10. **You are in the office alone and have no set task to complete. How do you spend the day?**
11. A co-worker's personal habits really bother you. How do you approach them and resolve the problem?
12. **There has been an argument or upsetting event in the office/lab and now there is constant tension in the air. How do you deal with it?**
13. The staff has not been cooperating and now there is back stabbing among the office/lab. What do you do?
14. **You've lost something and suspect that it was lost in the office/lab. Was it stolen or misplaced? How do you announce it?**
15. You are challenged about your opinions or moral values. How do you handle the situation?
16. **Coffee buying is common to treat people at work. How does the owing game work? Do you join in on the lotto pool?**
17. You have been challenged and tested on the spot about your knowledge on technical things. What do you do?
18. **You've forgotten about a presentation, how do you deal with the situation?**
19. You are the youngest staff in the office and you constantly feel out of place and intimidated. How would you cope with the situation?
20. **You claimed to know the technique and you really don't! How do you resolve the misunderstanding?**
21. You got sick the first week of work and could not to go in the office. What is your plan of action?

Some material in this workshop was developed utilizing the following sources:

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