

'Just Graduated, and Fumbling Through a First Job'

1. What is your opinion of this article, and why? Was any of the information presented an 'eye-opener', or was it not surprising? Was the article helpful in any way? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever held a part-time or full-time job? If so, what were your successes and what were your obstacles? What did you learn from the experience?
3. Why is the phrase stated in the article, "Show that you're interested in the business" important? How can you possibly demonstrate this:
 - in your cover letter and job application?
 - during your job interview?
 - as an employee working in a job?
4. What do you think of the suggestions given by the professionals in the article? If you could ask them for any other information and/or advice, what would you ask them?

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YOUR MONEY

Just Graduated, and Fumbling Through a First Job

Shortcuts

By ALINA TUGEND APRIL 4, 2014

TARA GOODFELLOW shudders when she remembers how she acted at her first job out of college. She once chased a 50-year-old colleague up the stairs to get to their boss first to explain her side of a story. She impulsively quit her job over the phone.

Now 38 and a career coach in Charlotte, N.C., here's what she wishes her 21-year-old self had known: "How to manage my expectations, learn about office politics and realize that perhaps I didn't know it all at 21."

Ah, yes — our first jobs. Or two or three. Few people can look back at them without cringing — or at least smiling wryly — at the many missteps.

Nowadays, with the raging debate between employers and colleges over graduates' lack of preparation for the work force, it's easy to forget that since the first cave man taught his son to hunt, every generation has no doubt complained about the next generation's work ethic.

Nonetheless, some things are different now. Most companies operate with fewer employees and tighter budgets than ever before, so there's not as much willingness — or time — to let novices come up to speed gradually. Rapid technological changes mean that some employees are much more computer-savvy but also that ideas of etiquette — what's the problem with engaging in a conversation and rapidly texting at the same time? — may differ widely.

“There’s a paradigm shift and friction in the workplace, with three different generations interacting,” Ms. Goodfellow said.

One of the big problems for new employees is that they don’t know what they don’t know, especially when it comes to soft skills — like working with people and being self-motivated — as opposed to hard skills, like knowing how to code.

An online study, the Student Skill Index, of about 2,000 college students from 18 to 24 years old and 1,000 hiring managers found large gaps between students’ perception of their level of preparation and employers’ perception.

For example, a far greater number of students saw themselves as very capable in the areas of prioritizing work, organizational skills and leading a group than did hiring managers.

Chegg, which started as a textbook rental company and now offers academic services like helping students find colleges, scholarships and internships, commissioned the study, which was released last year.

In the past, those fresh out of college may have had similar challenges adjusting to the workplace, said Oliver Raskin, a spokesman for Chegg.

But “what we’re seeing is an exaggeration of this,” he said. Automation of many departments means jobs that once were the bottom rung now just don’t exist “and there’s a higher bar for new hires to demonstrate their value. Now when you show up, you’re expected to hit the ground running.”

But experts say they believe that newbies need to think in terms even more basic than soft or hard skills, such as old-fashioned manners, grooming and communication.

Garry Polmateer, 35, a co-founder of Red Argyle, a company that designs custom applications, said that in his first job, he wished he had understood the importance of dressing professionally, or at least ironing out the wrinkles.

“I worked in the I.T. department for a labor union and was generally in a cave, but sometimes I’d be asked to work on a board member’s computer. I used to wear

cargo pants and rumpled golf shirts,” he said. “Sure, I was a broke, postcollege student and thought spending money on clothes was ridiculous, but looking back, buying nice clothes is an investment to help get you ahead in the workplace.” Vicky Oliver, a job interview consultant and author of numerous career development books, agreed that dress codes were “hugely important. They’re a sign of respect for the place. If you’re violating them, you’re saying, ‘I don’t respect the culture.’ ”

Sometimes bosses will be upfront: “I wore a skort to work and my boss asked, ‘Where is the other half of your pants?’ ” Ms. Oliver said.

Others are less straightforward. “My boss hinted around as my tenure wore on, and I finally broke out the iron,” Mr. Polmateer said.

One of the most common mistakes workers make at their first job, Ms. Oliver said, is to appear entitled, especially if they think they’re overqualified for the position.

New recruits shouldn’t act like “this isn’t what I signed up for,” Ms. Oliver said. “If you have a chip on your shoulder, you’ll make the job worse and leave with a bad recommendation.”

Say you end up as an assistant manager at a shoe store in the mall — not the career you planned for when you graduated with a bachelor’s in marketing. Nonetheless, “learn about this company’s marketing and advertising. During the downtime, ask about floor design, customer satisfaction metrics or employee retention. Show your supervisor that you’re interested in the business,” Ms. Oliver suggested.

Timothy R. Yee was that guy who thought he was hot stuff. He graduated with honors from the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1990. He landed a prestigious job before graduation at a major bank’s management training program in Hong Kong.

“Someone told me to spend six months getting the lay of the land,” he said. “I didn’t. The way they were doing work was obviously wrong and I was going to tell them.”

A year later, he was back home. Without a job.

“I was insulting, arrogant and shallow,” he said. “And yes, I deserved to be fired.”

Mr. Yee may have gone overboard, but as a new employee, it is often hard to figure out the line between being too passive and too aggressive.

“I was lucky to get a prestigious position right out of college in an investment training program,” said Heidi Waterfield, 48, who now works as a communications director at a design company. “I had always done well in school, but had no real corporate experience until then. So I assumed a job was like school. I sat in my office and waited for assignments. When they came, I fulfilled them to the utmost. I was bored out of my mind.”

Her boss finally called her in and told her she needed to take more initiative.

Megan Hall, 28, had the opposite experience at her first job — being too willing to take on projects.

“I was too eager to show my capabilities, and that was easily taken advantage of by my employer. I often would work 50 to 60 hours a week for a \$20,000 position,” she said. “I wish I would have known how to better pace myself professionally, to slowly figure out what I was capable of doing while maintaining a good work-life balance.”

Learning to read the people around you to see if you should initially hang back and watch or jump right in is a crucial skill to develop, Ms. Oliver said. And if you’re not receiving any positive feedback, “I always think it’s a good idea to check in with a supervisor during a calm moment and solicit feedback,” rather than waiting for a year-end review, when small deficiencies may have grown into serious trouble.

But even those who fail egregiously at their first jobs learn life’s most valuable lesson — you can bounce back. Mr. Yee, after being fired, spent three months trying to find employment.

After working as a vice president at Bank of America and other jobs, in 2006 he helped found Green Retirement Plans, a retirement planning company. And he speaks to students at his alma mater, the Haas School of Business.

His topic? Real-world experiences.

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