

Tips for College Grads at First Jobs

By ERIN WHITE

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Stephen Felkins, a 23-year-old engineer who graduated from Duke University last year, wore a jacket and tie to his first day of work at a Philadelphia architectural firm. But he quickly noticed most people were dressed informally. The second day, he ditched the tie, and he has rarely worn one since.

As newly minted college graduates start their first real jobs, the first weeks are filled with potential missteps. Grads need to figure out new tasks, the office culture, the boss's expectations, how to interact with colleagues, how to dress, and even when to arrive and leave.

"The first couple of weeks are very important," says Mike Hendel, associate director of the career center at Carleton College in Minnesota. "A good showing the first couple of weeks will set the tone."

For many, it's a challenge. The work world is more ambiguous than school, where students get explicit instructions and regular feedback. On the job, some bosses explain assignments and culture, but many don't. Often, the onus is on the new hire to figure out how to behave.

Career advisers recommend that new grads observe carefully during their first few weeks on the job. It's better to watch and learn at first, they say, than unknowingly blurt out something that causes offense -- such as criticizing a project that turns out to be the boss's pet. Watch co-workers to learn how people dress, the hours they keep, how long they take for lunch and how they interact with each other and their supervisors. Even something as simple as how loudly co-workers talk can be important.

Mr. Hendel suggests that new hires take advantage of any mentoring system. If the employer doesn't have such a program, new graduates should seek out slightly older co-workers to learn more about the culture. To learn the workweek flow, he suggests asking colleagues to lunch. What times are busier than others? Do people get together certain nights to watch sports at a bar?

Andrea Dolph, an author and corporate-training consultant, says many new hires are afraid to ask questions in their first few weeks. Don't just sit silently and nod when given an assignment, hoping to figure it out later, she says. Instead, ask specific questions to understand what a boss expects. If he asks for research, does he want the findings orally or in writing? If she asks for something in writing, does she mean a draft or a final product?

In addition, the new hire should ask who else can help if he has other questions and what other resources -- such as company databases or Web sites -- can provide information.

Besides observing the dress style, Mr. Felkins sought out co-workers he could rely on for advice when he had questions. Those relationships came in handy when he got his first assignment, which involved the heating and cooling needs of a laboratory.

To complete the task, he had to use a software program that he had just learned. When he found himself stumped, he asked for help from his co-workers. Partly as a result of their aid, Mr. Felkins adds, he finished the task in several hours over a couple of days -- more quickly than his boss had expected.

When tapping co-workers who were significantly older and more senior than he was, Mr. Felkins says he made sure to be polite and grateful, partly to make sure those people wouldn't hesitate to help again.

Still, Mr. Felkins wishes he had found some less-senior peers sooner. "You would feel less guilty bothering another 23-year-old," he says.