Guidelines for new grads: Understanding the unspoken rules of the workplace

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Graduation later this year will officially bring to an end your time at university. But, many of you, particularly teachers will find jobs before you march. If you are a new graduand, how have you found the transition from the classroom to the work force, from knowing what is expected of you to learning it all over again? The following four guidelines are my take on the unspoken rules of the workplace. Following them will make you an even more valuable employee and save you from having to learn through trialand error.

1. Ask questions in your interview
Think about what you want from a job and ensure you cover these dealbreakers in the interview. An employer will always give you an opportunity to ask questions in an interview. Make the most of this. I've always asked questions about my potential boss because working relationships are important to me. What qualities do you bring to the working relationship? What's important to you in an employee? You get a sense of their values.

2. Be reliable
I've known casual employees who just didn't turn up for work if they got a better offer. Their lack of engagement surprised me. But employers, especially Baby Boomers and gen Xers, want you to be engaged even with basic or mundane tasks such as data entry (see point three below). So, my advice: show enthusiasm and make yourself useful or, even better, indispensable. If you can fix the photocopier when no one else can, you're highly employable.

3. Say yes to the basic tasks
If you learn to do all the basic tasks well, then you'll be given more responsibility for other tasks. Good leaders understand how their organisations work because, at one stage, they mastered the basics, too. You can't just take a leap off the bottom to the top. You have to step up, gradually.

4. Earn your stripes
This may sound blunt, but you don't get to take over anybody else's job until you know yours really well. Thinking, "I've got this. I'm ready for the next stage," is healthy: employers want to see drive. How will you know you're ready, though? Adopt an attitude of "I'm willing to learn" rather than one of "I already know it." You probably do know something about your job your employer doesn't but you don't know everything.

A Millennial who thought he'd done his job well—and he had—wanted to apply for his boss's job. He put his name forward even though others said to him, "This is not a job for you." They recognised he had yet to learn the necessary skills. I had mixed feelings: admiration for his boldness but frustration with his lack of self-awareness.

Having said all this, there are many things employers can learn from you. Here are two:

1. There are better ways to communicate than by email. You bring expertise in other forms of communication—chat, instant message, social media. Show your employer the benefits of these mediums.

2. You don't have to be at work to get the job done. Negotiate workplace flexibility with your employer—if they value you as an employee, they should at least consider your proposal. If successful, repay trust by demonstrating any productivity gain. Perhaps COVID has helped employers become less rigid in their thinking. TEACH

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Author information
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