

First Three Months on the Job NYT 100518 print

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How to win your first three months on the job

You probably had internships or summer office jobs, but this is different. It's the start of your career. Start by making a good first impression, and don't be afraid to ask questions. Pretty soon, you'll be sitting in the boss's chair, right?

While you wait: Do some research

Before you walk in the door on your first day, be prepared. It sounds obvious, but it's not just about picking the perfect first-day outfit or rereading your job description.

Alexander Lowry, a professor of finance at Gordon College in Massachusetts, suggests asking your new boss for reading material on the ins and outs of your company. That could mean recent staff newsletters or transcripts of companywide meetings — basically anything you can't easily Google. It'll help you understand how the company works in ways your orientation won't, and it'll show initiative.

Day 1: Pay attention to communication styles

As the office noob, one of the first things you should do is learn how your colleagues interact with one another. It's a skill that'll travel with you throughout your career, something that in the long run could help you better navigate your career than how well you do on specific projects.

"One question you should ask very early on is how your manager likes to communicate: drop by the office, send an email, instant-message, call," Mr. Lowry said.

Take it a step further and learn to decode your boss's and co-workers' nonverbal communication. Pay attention to habits and behaviors and try to look for patterns. For example, if your boss sends an email with a blank subject line, that could mean she's superstressed and is sending that email in a hurry. Figure out whether that means you should reply, and ask her if there's anything you can do to make her life easier, if you did something she didn't like that you should learn for the next time or if you need to get out of the path of fury.

I used to have a boss who would shut his door anytime he felt overwhelmed or needed to focus. It was his way of saying, "Leave me alone for the next 20 minutes." I quickly learned to stay out of his way.

Day 2: Make friends — or at least acquaintances

You'll probably find yourself with downtime during your first couple of days. Walk around the office and introduce yourself to colleagues.

“Ask them about their background, experience, time with the company — and then ask them one more thing,” said Laura Handrick, a career [analyst at FitSmallBusiness.com](#). “Ask them what advice they have for you in your new job.”

During my first job, as a technical writer for an engineering firm, I met a disgruntled co-worker who vented about the disorganization of the company's spec sheets — the documents that summarized the specifications of the gas sampling tools we sold (exciting stuff, I know). He said the lack of order made it hard to retrieve them quickly for customers. I made a mental note to try to fix the spec sheet system for the sales staff. Your co-worker's complaints may not just be disgruntled ramblings; they could be intel to help you do your job better.

Day 3: Ask if anyone needs help

Once you get to know your fellow employees, ask if there are any small tasks they need taken off their plates before your workload builds.

“You'll show initiative, you'll build rapport with your boss and co-workers, and you'll learn about expectations, procedures and how things are done,” Mr. Lowry said.

Just don't annoy people the way I did. At my first job, I was so eager to please my colleagues that I constantly asked them how I could help. Then I overheard an otherwise kind co-worker whisper to my boss, “Please give her something to do. She's driving me crazy.”

Week 2: Make a list of your responsibilities

“The best employees don't need to be told to do something,” said Heather Myers, chief [psychology officer](#) for Traitify, which creates personality assessments for employee recruitment. “When they see a problem, they solve it, and when they have downtime they find ways to fill it.”

In her interviews with managers, Dr. Myers said, they always valued employees who were self-starters.

You want to be that employee. Make a list of specific responsibilities, tasks and goals you want to tackle in your new job, and — here's the important part — go beyond the basic job description you signed up for. If you were hired to write manuals for your company's products, but your sales team desperately needs help with organizing spec sheets, add that as a goal on your list.

Once you settle into your new job, present this list to your boss. Of course, your boss may have a very different vision for what you should do, so be flexible. The

main point is that listing out what you should do and want to be doing can help make those responsibilities feel real. And unfortunately, not every boss will articulate very well everything you're expected to do.

Week 3: Figure out how your team measures success

Many offices don't openly talk about how their company measures success, but when you know how your team values it, you'll know where to focus your efforts. You might have a certain sales quota that you're supposed to meet, for example, but your manager might be happier when projects are finished ahead of schedule.

Pay attention to praise and criticism that your boss and co-workers give one another, and learn to understand what they care about.

Week 4: Find your 'go-to' person

A workplace mentor can push you in the right direction. This is someone with whom you work well, can learn from and, most important, trust.

"This person won't necessarily be in your department, or even the same office," Mr. Lowry said, "but you can work together in some capacity, and through a mutually beneficial partnership, endeavor to help each other get stuff done."

Remember, networking works both ways. If you're going to ask someone for advice, be willing to offer something in return, even if it's as simple as helping with a menial task, like making copies or running an errand. (And if you ask that person out for coffee, pay for the coffee.)

Week 8: Leave your comfort zone

After six to eight weeks on the job, you should (hopefully) feel as if you know what you're doing. It's the perfect time to challenge yourself.

Those presentations you wanted to put together? Ask your boss if you can have a go at it. You don't have to break your back by putting in 80 hours a week; you just want to push yourself beyond your current tasks and duties. This will show your bosses that you're someone they should invest in.

"Taking on problems beyond your pay grade shows that you are able to work at a higher level and thrive with greater responsibilities," Dr. Myers said.

"Being able to continuously develop new skills is a green flag for being given harder, but often more interesting, things to do," Dr. Myers added. "Ultimately, it also lines you up for a raise, or maybe even promotion."

Week 12: Ask for feedback

After 90 days on the job, it's time to review your job description, considering what you've learned so far. "If your boss hasn't scheduled a formal, sit-down review, ask for one," Ms. Handrick said. "Consider saying something like: 'Can we schedule an hour next week so that I can get some feedback from you?' or 'Would it be O.K. if we had a sit-down meeting so I could check in with you on my progress?'"

Make a list of what you need from your boss to be successful, too. That might be more training, specific software or access to experts in other departments. "Never, ever complain about what you don't have," she added. "Just present your requests as solutions to solve issues you've identified."

By this point, you've gone out of your way to help others. You've probably earned the right to ask for some help in return. After all, the better you're able to do your job, the *better off your* company will be, too.

— Kristin Wong