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New job: First impressions count

Though many people are still unemployed across the nation, thousands have also started new jobs — in many cases, their first. Whether you've held jobs before, or this is your initial venture into the workplace, it is important you recognize the significance of putting your best foot forward — beginning with day one.

Your performance during the first several weeks of your new job can set the tone and impact of your managers' and coworkers' opinions about you and your potential for job success. Fair or unfair, first impressions count and often translate into long-term perceptions. What you do and what you say can make a difference.

For this column, I've selected the following 10 guidelines I believe can provide insight and direction:

1. Build a good attendance record. Be reliable. It's important to show up to work every day and on time. In fact, arriving 10-15 minutes prior to your start time is a good habit to establish. Of course, there will be emergencies. So, if you're ill, stuck in traffic or have some other valid reason, be sure to call your manager in a timely manner.

2. Dress professionally. Always consider the importance of dressing professionally and appropriately on your new job. Learn the company's dress code — formal or informal. Of course, being well groomed from head to toe with clothes clean and pressed coupled with the appropriate hygiene are valued and will always speak well for you. Keep in mind,

“you never get a second chance to make a good first impression.”

3. Learn your organization. Read company literature, the employee handbook and reports that are available to you. Know the company's mission, values, goals and strategic plan. Study the organizational chart. Discover how your job fits into the grand scheme of things, the big picture. Gaining this knowledge can benefit you in the long run as well as serve as a motivational factor.

4. Find a mentor. Ask if your organization offers a formal mentorship program. If not, during your first few weeks on the job, develop business relationships with professionals at the company who seem to take a personal interest in your career success. An effective mentor is one who can serve as a sounding board and provide coaching in addition to drawing out your interests and talents to guide you in finding ways to apply them to advance your career.

5. Listen and learn. You can gather so much information by simply listening to others in your work environment. Most people have a preferred way to communicate — through emails, phone calls or face-to-face conversations. Knowing these preferences, and clarifying them as appropriate, can go a long way in helping you to build a positive reputation.

6. Be resourceful. Ask questions, research challenges and seek assistance when needed. These endeavors show confidence and your desire to meet/exceed expectations. Take the

initiative to make yourself an invaluable resource to your manager.

7. Demonstrate team spirit. Have a positive attitude and be cooperative. Remember, you are now a part of a work team committed to getting the job done. Learn everyone's name and their role on the team. You need to also understand your role so you will be able to contribute effectively.

8. Learn the office culture. Observe your company's dynamics. Learn the office procedures and practices. Look for unstated assumptions in the workplace. Is there an open door policy? Is the management style one of micro-management or laissez faire? What is the company's policy on workplace attire? By observing these workplace dynamics and adapting as appropriate, your transition on the new job can progress smoothly.

9. Avoid gossip and office politics. As a new employee, or even one who has been on the job a while, this is a definite “no-no.”

10. Maintain a “brag” book. Begin the first week tracking your accomplishments and any recognition/compliments from your manager, coworkers, customers and any others with whom you interact. This information will help in preparing for performance appraisals, salary reviews and in updating your résumé.

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