

# The Right Way to Start a New Job

CAREER  
ZONE

By Barbara Kofman & Kaitlin Eckler

This is article number VIII and the conclusion to our Career Zone job search series and follows "Winning Negotiations" from our April issue.

Starting a new job is both exciting and anxiety provoking. Exciting because we get to do something new and challenging, meet new people, while earning money at the same time. Anxiety provoking because it raises questions of self-doubt. Will I be able to do the job? Will they like me? What will happen if I am not good at what I do?



Starting out on the right foot at an organization is so much more than just starting a job. You need to develop a thorough understanding of the entire organization beyond your department and position. You need to learn about the company, including its people, power structure, business, standards for approval and success. In this column we will look at both the concrete and intangible factors that will help you start your new job the right way. As Michael Watkins states in his influential book, *The First 90 Days*<sup>1</sup>, "The actions you take during your first three months in a new job will largely determine whether you will succeed or fail in the long term."

Practice the old adage "You never get a second chance to make a good first impression." Although the content of the majority of work you will be doing will be technical, demanding intelligence and cognitive skills, the workplace itself is social, requiring interpersonal skills. All organizations have a corporate culture - an omnipresent force setting the stage for how people act and interact, how they are evaluated and the standards by which they judge, reward and promote. When starting a new job listen, observe, and begin each day with an open mind and an abundance of patience both for yourself and others. Observe how people dress and how they behave. Do they demonstrate a sense of freedom or restraint? What is their preferred method of communication? Listen for how people talk to each other and how

decisions are made. To create a positive image, fit in and be viewed as a team player emulate the habits of respected employees and adhere to their code of standards and conduct. If you are eager to express a different approach be certain the culture condones individuality. At this stage it is better to err on the side of caution, until you have a clear, in-depth understanding of the company and its workings.

You were obviously hired to do a job and it's a given that you will perform the task to the highest standards of your ability. If you do not yet have the skills necessary to carry out each function make a concerted effort to learn them. Keep notes of instructions on anything you do not understand and review explanations to avoid the need to ask the same things repeatedly. Always try to deliver beyond what is expected of you and pitch in whenever possible. Expect to work late to complete your projects - this will demonstrate commitment and motivation. With time and familiarity you will become more efficient and get the work done on schedule - again, be patient with yourself. For the first few weeks focus only on the job; get adequate rest, keep your social life to weekends. Your sincere effort and great attitude will be noticed.

Most companies consider the first 90 days at a new job a period of learning, transition, and adjustment. That's why it provides you with the best opportunity to position yourself positively, as a high-per-

forming, well-respected colleague. It's the best time to be asking a wide variety of questions about how the organization works, to evaluate the key players, to listen closely and to observe. During this phase it's important to apply the principals of risk management - capitalize on the fact you are a new employee and do not burn bridges or make irreversible decisions. Learn as much as you can about the company's history, business, competition, strategy, and challenges. Think about where you fit in and where you can best make a contribution. Do not expect the impossible from yourself or the organization. Decide on the kind of image you want people to have of you, and act accordingly. Remember consequence-focused behaviour. Try not to recommend changes until you grasp the whole picture - it's easy to take things out of context when you do not yet have an understanding of the company history and its business. Identify some role models and mentors and impress them with your commitment, work ethic, and skills. Seek out their advice when needed.

<sup>1</sup>"The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels," Michael Watkins, 2003.

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At the end of this time period you will be expected to be at the break-even point—versant in the nuances of your job and how to succeed within the organization, have proven your worth, and in a position to encourage dialogue about some of those great ideas you’ve been developing.

**STRATEGIES TO HELP YOU START YOUR NEW JOB THE RIGHT WAY**

- Conclude your work search properly. Inform everyone you have networked with about your new job and plan to keep in touch.
- Start on time. Don’t miss work unless you really have a justifiable reason.
- Dress appropriately - mirror the style of individuals you emulate within the organization. Don’t dress in a manner that makes you stand out for the wrong reasons.
- If there isn’t an onboarding program then solicit the support of your boss to create your own. Arrange to meet all the key people you will work with within your first few weeks. This will position you well to positively build your working relationships.
- Take the time to ask questions and to really learn what is expected of you in your job.
- Dedicate yourself to your work. Continuing the lifestyle you led during your student years will lead to fatigue and will prevent you from performing at your best. Once you have established yourself you will be able to lead a more balanced life.
- Be a team player. Understand the circle of people who work around you including your boss and your clients. Your ability to get along with these people is going to determine your success.
- Make being knowledgeable about your new boss your first project. Learn to appreciate how he or she functions. Set up regular meetings and solicit his/her feedback on how you are doing. Make them see your success as their success by ensuring you focus on making them look good.
- Avoid any form of negativity or criticism - don’t get caught up in “water-cooler” discussions or in aligning yourself with the wrong people. Their poor reputations will quickly affect yours.
- Continue learning. Read corporate newsletters, annual reports, magazines, and newspapers to keep up to date. Take advantage of courses offered both internally and externally.
- Exhibit dedication, energy, and interest at all times. Be prepared to do some mundane tasks. Your flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of the organization will lead to more challenging responsibilities.
- Plan for your future. Keep a record of your achievements; ensure your résumé remains current. While you must be alert to the needs of your employer you also want to make sure what you are doing remains aligned with your long-term goals. jp

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**jp WORD PLAY**

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