

Success at Work: Inside Canada

Preparing for your first day

Congratulations: you've landed that job! You have convinced the hiring manager of your professionalism and the benefit you'll bring to the organization, and the day now approaches when you will begin to deliver on all those promises. So, how are you going to pull it off? And, just as important, how can you ensure that you will benefit fully from this work association? Some careful thought and planning prior to your first day on the job will take you a long way toward realizing both of these goals.

If this is your first work experience, it is a time of major transition. Having a job gives you a chance to put into use what you have learned and to earn income, but it also brings many challenges and lifestyle changes. These changes can be overwhelming, particularly if you haven't prepared for them. No matter your experience, any new job can be tiring at the start. Everything is new and there is much to learn. You will also be meeting many new people. Plan for this transition by permitting yourself adequate leisure time and by taking care of your health.

Aside from the obvious, such as confirming the location and start date and time of the job, there are measures you can take prior to arriving. Have a plan. Without one, it's less likely you'll end up where you'd like to be. Determine what you want from this work experience; then establish objectives and the steps (with contingency plans) you'll need to take to get you there. Put them in writing. In co-op, this plan may be framed as "learning objectives." Obviously, the information you need to complete this task will be more readily available to you once you begin employment, but you can start to develop a rudimentary plan before then.

What image do you wish to portray? You want to be yourself as much as possible, but each workplace has its own culture and professional standards. If you wish to be successful in that setting, you will need to adapt to those standards. Hopefully, you learned about some of these through your company research, networking, and interview questions at least enough so that you have some idea of the image you should begin to convey from your very first day on the job. Try to determine what you need to do, wear, and say to make the impression you desire.

Your first day: making a positive first impression

Never underestimate the power of first impressions. If you do not create a positive first impression, it is extremely difficult to change others' opinions later. In your first days on the job, your supervisor and co-workers will make assumptions about you based on your words, behaviour, and appearance. These can all have a major impact on your future success with the organization. The effect of a negative impression, even if the impression is erroneous, will be magnified if this is your first real work experience, because you will have no track record to indicate your positive characteristics.

Having recognized the importance of these first impressions, how can you maximize the success of the one you make? Here are some tips to help you:

1. Arrive early: give yourself plenty of extra time to get ready and to travel. It is just as unforgivable to be late your first day on the job as it is to be late for a job interview
2. Make it easy on others by introducing yourself. Unless otherwise instructed, address superiors using their title and last name: if they want you to use their first names, they'll tell you. Learn co-workers' names quickly (use memory tricks if necessary). If you do forget a name, apologize and ask for it
3. Demonstrate enthusiasm for learning. Listen carefully and have a pen and paper handy so you can make notes for future reference. No one expects you to know all of the answers, so don't be afraid to ask questions when you are uncertain. Provided they aren't excessive, such questions will help to demonstrate your genuine interest in the job and organization, as well as your eagerness to learn
4. Be positive, quietly confident, friendly, courteous, and open
5. Attend all orientation sessions
6. Don't use profanity or slang, and be careful with humour and sarcasm. Individuality in behaviour and appearance is a good thing to a point. While being true to yourself, demonstrate to your supervisor and to the organization that you are mature and have well-developed judgment

Make the most of all situations. Don't worry if you don't make a perfect first impression: few of us do. If you relax, show enthusiasm, keep an open mind, get to know your co-workers, and do your work, you'll be well on your way to making a lasting positive impression.

The first 30 days: building on that positive impression

During your first few weeks or months, you will go through an orientation and probation period. Your attitude towards your job, coworkers, and the organization is critical to your success. Exude an upbeat, positive, and enthusiastic attitude, and offer to pitch in to help wherever you see reasonable opportunities. Be a sponge for company and job related information, and do the best you can on every assignment you are given, even the menial, routine tasks that you are likely to be assigned in the early days of your employment. Take these assignments in stride and view them as a challenge. Don't complain or convey an attitude that such duties are beneath you. Realize that it is not as important to "wow" them with knowledge and skills at this point as it is to demonstrate your willingness to learn and to put forth your best effort. As well, although it is only natural to want to prove yourself quickly, in many organizational cultures, it is more important to show your ability to work as part of the team than to demonstrate individual achievement. Once your supervisor has observed your strengths (and weaknesses) first-hand, you will be assigned more challenging tasks.

Organizational structure

Learn as much as possible about your new employer, even if you have to take materials home with you to read. If there is no manual, prepare a list of questions to ask your manager, and schedule a meeting to discuss these. Find out what the organizational structure is, the typical working hours, policies regarding time off (including breaks and lunches), computer and telephone procedures, who's who, and anything else you think will be helpful. And do resist any temptation to point out how policies and procedures could be improved, at least in the early months of your employment. If you are in co-op, hold such suggestions until at least half way through your work term. Your first priorities are to establish trust and to build rapport with your colleagues. By the time you have achieved these goals, you may also have acquired enough information to validate your suggestions for change or perhaps you will come to understand why things are as they are and that most policies and procedures do in fact make sense.

Corporate culture

Each organization has a corporate culture: the unspoken beliefs and attitudes of the organization that come primarily from the top officers and managers and that reflect their views on management, customer service, the value of their employees, and company budgets and finances. Culture varies from organization to organization and may also differ from department to department within an organization. While some policies and procedures exist in writing, others will not be formalized in writing (just as some, although written, will not be strictly adhered to). For example, what are the real working hours? Is it expected that you will take work home with you? And do lunches really last a full hour, as stated in the policy? Learn these unofficial rules of conduct by observing and by asking co-workers. In the long run your comfort level will depend on how well your values and beliefs match those of the organization, but if you do not adhere to these rules, you run the risk of being viewed as lacking commitment to your job and to the organization.

Full days

Work full days: be on time or early, stay a little late, and be prepared to work some overtime. Repeatedly coming in late or leaving early creates a very negative impression. Also establish a good attendance record. Although company policies vary widely regarding taking time off, keep time off to a minimum for the first several months, even if you see others taking full advantage of this company benefit. Remember: you're new. If you must be absent or late for some reason and know ahead of time, inform your manager as soon as possible. If you are late, apologize and don't make excuses. And avoid Monday absences: missing a Monday is often interpreted as a "weekend hangover."

Be aware of the impact of lifestyle upon your performance. Getting adequate sleep will help to minimize absences due to illness and ensure that you are on time and ready to work. Sleeping on the job is always unacceptable and has been the reason for termination of employment in more than one instance!

Team player

It is important to be a strong team player in today's workplace. By being a team player, you build your reputation and increase your value to the organization. Volunteer to help others. Show an interest in what they do, and find out how you can help. Pay attention to what is important to your co-workers. Share successes with your team, and don't blame team members when failures occur.

Another way to be seen as a team player is to attend company social events: these are wonderful opportunities to get to know your co-workers and can help to advance your career, if handled appropriately. Mingle, introduce yourself, and be on your best behaviour. Unlike the parties you may have attended at school, these events do not call for you to be the life of the party. Limit your alcohol intake, don't overstay, and don't bring uninvited guests.

Learning your job

Your manager realizes that in the first few weeks, you need training and guidance, so your primary goal is to absorb and learn, not try to "wow" them with your knowledge and expertise. Instead, prove that you are a quick and eager learner. The learning process at work will likely be different from what you experienced in school. Much of your learning will depend on your ability to listen well, ask questions, take notes, and observe others.

Find out exactly what is expected of you: don't assume anything. Obtain a copy of your job description as soon as possible, and if one is not available, discuss typical responsibilities and expectations with your supervisor (even the most basic requirements such as how to answer your phone). Clarify instructions and ask questions. Your goal is to ensure you have a common vision of your job, its parameters, and objectives. What are your job priorities? How is your performance evaluated? How frequently and in what manner does your supervisor wish to be updated on your activities? You may also want to request earlier

feedback on your performance than is standard procedure (e.g., at the end of the first month or two instead of, or in addition to, at the end of your probationary period). This feedback doesn't have to be formal; just schedule a time to sit down and discuss how you're doing. Early constructive feedback can be very helpful in keeping you on a successful path.

Your supervisor

Work to build rapport and a solid working relationship with your supervisor. Prove that you are a self-starter by taking the initiative to ask for more work as you finish assignments. (Don't just sit and wait for assignments!) As soon as possible, try to determine your supervisor's personal style and ways of doing things and adjust yours accordingly. If your supervisor provides little supervision and feedback, set some personal goals and work toward them so you will have something you can be proud of. Also, reward yourself for doing a good job.

Recognize the importance a supervisor plays in your success. No matter what, always treat them with respect, and never criticize them or a superior in front of others.

Your coworkers

Also of importance is a strong relationship with coworkers. Much of what you need to learn is not found in manuals but comes from other members of your team. So get to know these people: make a point of going to lunch or coffee with them and listen to what's important to them. Be co-operative and supportive, show appreciation when they help you, and be sure to share credit when appropriate. By demonstrating an interest in your coworkers, their jobs, and their lives, you will have allies who will help you to succeed in your job and your career.

Realistic expectations

Be careful about what you promise to do. Although it is always wise to go above and beyond what is asked of you, it is also prudent to be somewhat conservative in your estimation of what you can accomplish and the timeline you require to achieve it. Then, if you are able to deliver greater results than promised and in less time, you will truly shine.

Don't be afraid to ask for assistance when you need it. Try to overcome fear of failure. You won't learn what you can do until you try. Expect to make mistakes, and readily own up to them. Don't make excuses or blame others; just apologize, suggest how you might rectify the situation (if it is possible), and state what you will do differently in future. This will help to convince others that you have learned from the situation and that it won't happen again. And don't make the same mistake twice!

In your early days on the job (and beyond), don't fall into the trap of comparing yourself to others, particularly those who have been in the job much longer. Although it is human nature to use others as a gauge of our own competence, doing so can be discouraging and may actually hinder your performance and weaken your self-confidence.

In the early days and weeks after your arrival, offer your opinion only when asked, and never refer to how things were done in other work places. When in doubt, be quiet and observe.

Get and stay organized: set goals; and keep track of meetings, appointments, assignments, and projects. However, being organized doesn't mean being inflexible. Being adaptable and flexible are two of the most important qualities workers can possess in today's workplace. So, be ready for anything!

Ethical behaviour

Ethical behaviour simply means “doing the right thing” and it is governed by principles or standards that exist in all organizations. Examples of unethical behaviour include:

1. Lying, misleading, or taking shortcuts
2. Breaching confidentiality
3. Violating copyright laws
4. Coming to work under the influence of alcohol or non-prescription drugs
5. Habitual lateness or absence
6. Theft or breach of security
7. Copying company software for personal use
8. Taking office supplies for personal or home use
9. Making long distance calls on the organization’s account
10. Taking longer lunches/breaks or coming in late/leaving early while being paid for this time
11. Conducting personal business (e.g., checking email/MSN, visiting non-work related websites, making personal local phone calls) on company time

The above transgressions are cause for dismissal. Don’t let this happen to you!

Office etiquette

1. Beware of office gossip. Don’t believe everything you hear. Give yourself time to observe and learn how things really are
2. Avoid getting involved in office politics, but be informed and aware of them
3. Conduct personal business (e.g., checking email, making personal phone calls, etc.) on your lunch or breaks
4. Show kindness and genuine appreciation for help
5. Keep all promises and commitments
6. Don’t lie, mislead, or take shortcuts
7. Learn how others prefer to communicate (i.e., email/phone/in person)
8. Try to return phone calls and emails within twenty-four hours
9. Be careful with email: you don’t know whom it might be forwarded to or how it might be construed

It may be helpful to review the [Ensuring Clear Communication Across Cultures \(.doc\)](#) document.

Note

The way in which files open on your machine will depend on the web browser you are using, and the type(s) of software (e.g., Microsoft Word) installed on your device. For example, files may open up in a new window, download to your machine, etc.

Friends at work

Many relationships begin at work. However, choose carefully: it is often difficult to determine early on whom you would be wise to associate with. Form relationships with and take your cues from those whom you respect and who seem to be respected by others. Avoid individuals who are negative and/or whose business practices may be questionable.

With regard to office romance, be aware that, even if there are no official policies in place regarding taboo relationships (e.g., supervisor and subordinate), some co-workers will not approve of such relationships, and you could lose your credibility. If you do allow such a relationship to develop, ensure it doesn’t create an unbusiness-like atmosphere. Don’t arrive or leave with the other person, or sit next to him or her at meetings. In short, there should be no open display of your affection.

Longer term success

Showing initiative

Initiative is going above and beyond your job description. It is a personal attribute that is highly prized by employers and can be demonstrated by:

1. finding ways to increase efficiency
2. coming up with ideas and solutions
3. looking for opportunities to develop new skills that will be helpful to the organization
4. soliciting feedback on your performance or ideas from your supervisor, co-workers, and/or mentor
5. being generally proactive and enthusiastic in the workplace

In order to be truly successful in your career and work experiences, be sure to demonstrate this trait!

Longer term success

Once you have been on the job long enough to have achieved competency in your responsibilities, how can you continue to be successful?

Volunteer to do extra tasks, projects, or committee work. However, volunteer wisely: don't say yes to everything or you will likely end up being undervalued, overworked, and taken advantage of. Before raising your hand to offer your assistance, ask yourself how this particular project or task will be helpful to the organization and to you and your career goals.

As you gain knowledge and expertise, look for ways to save time and money for your employer: such savings will be appreciated and often rewarded. When you have an idea for an initiative, build support for it with those on whom it will have the most impact. New ways of doing things have a tendency to stir up ownership issues, and even though your idea might be implemented, you might also poison some valuable working relationships.

As your knowledge of the job increases, the learning objectives you developed prior to commencing employment can become more specific. Once you set specific objectives, monitor your progress. Be prepared to explain why these objectives were achieved or need to be modified. When you have completed a particular assignment or project, review it.

Track accomplishments and keep detailed records of your successes. Also retain positive feedback from others, be they superiors, co-workers, or clients and customers. These records can be very helpful at performance review time!

Realize that conflict is inevitable. At some point, you will have a difference of opinion with, or receive negative feedback from, a co-worker or supervisor. Always try to see the situation from the other person's perspective and give that person's ideas and views the respect they deserve. Separate fact from emotion and focus on the solution, not what went wrong. Being open and receptive will make the other person less hostile and defensive. It is extremely important to control your anger in the workplace, so if you feel yourself heating up, give yourself a timeout to cool down and ask if you can meet later to discuss the issue. Never use profanity or make statements that will cause others to question your professionalism: this can have a serious impact on your career success. Lastly, don't try to resolve any disagreement via email or over the phone: since body language and facial expressions are so critical to effective communication, in person is best.

Keep your personal problems to yourself. Share an issue with your manager only if you think it may affect your work, but provide as little detail as possible. Even if you don't mind others knowing, a personal

problem may have an affect on how others view or treat you (for instance, being passed over for a fantastic project because of the perceived stress it might cause you). Try to check any negative emotions at the door and focus on your job.

Maintain a work-life balance. Work is an important part of life, but it's not necessarily the most important part. Employees who are happy and successful in their jobs and who are less prone to stress and burnout are usually those who are physically active and have fulfilling personal lives.

Other tips for success

1. Find a mentor. Studies show that the majority of those who get promoted have a mentoring relationship with someone higher in the organization. Mentors can:
 - a) offer encouragement and answer questions when your supervisor is unavailable
 - b) give you feedback on your ideas or provide additional assignments when your supervisor does not have other work for you
 - c) be great sources of information and career advice
2. Network within and outside the organization. The more people who know you, your strengths and abilities, your value to the organization, and at least some of your ambitions, the more likely a promotion will be forthcoming
3. Carve out a niche for yourself. Try to find a useful area no else has spotted and become an expert in it
4. Be visible. Look for high profile projects to take on
5. Familiarize yourself with the network of other companies around your employer
6. Look for formal and informal learning opportunities:
 - a) Increase your knowledge through courses and reading
 - b) Enroll in training seminars offered by the company
 - c) Job shadow a staff member, supplier, or customer

What if it isn't going as well as hoped?

Sometimes, even an apparent dream job doesn't work out for one reason or another. If you find yourself questioning whether this is the right job for you after all, don't quit prematurely. Give yourself and the organization time to get to know each other, because first impressions, while formed quickly, aren't always accurate. Be realistic in your work expectations, because the odds are that many things about your job and the organization will not be what you expected them to be. You may well have to adjust your expectations to fit reality.

Depending on the situation, you might want to meet with your manager to discuss your concerns. If your concerns have to do with the duties of the job itself, there may be room to alter them to improve the fit. If, on the other hand, your disenchantment stems from incompatibility between you and the organizational culture, you may need to move on. Generally, a year is the minimum time you should remain with an employer who has invested much time, money, and effort to recruit, hire, and train you. Be as diplomatic and positive as possible when communicating your decision to leave so that you depart on the best possible terms.

If you are in co-op, unless your concern stems from harassment, make the best of the situation: you are there for only four months. Learn from this situation and know what to look for or to avoid in the future. And be encouraged: some co-op students who have at first been disappointed with their work term situation, but who decided to make it work, successfully completed their term feeling it had been a very educational and rewarding experience after all.

The employer may decide to end the relationship. Some common reasons for such a decision include false statements on your résumé, unsatisfactory performance, and any item noted previously in the Ethical behaviour section above.

Most of the above reasons can easily be avoided. Always be honest and demonstrate integrity and a strong work ethic. If there is a concern regarding your performance, seeking frequent and timely feedback will often help you to get back on track. If, however, you are in over your head, you will have learned what you are capable of and can use this information in seeking a position that is better suited to your current level of knowledge and skills.

In the end, it is your responsibility not your employer's to make your transition to work a success. Although a good supervisor can help, it is your career. So, take the initiative and responsibility that will put you on the road to job and career success.

Harassment and your rights

The Conflict Management and Human Rights Office acts as a resource to all members of the university community (faculty, staff and students) regarding matters of harassment, discrimination, and other general forms of conflict.

Workplace harassment and your rights

Visit Waterloo's Conflict Management & Human Rights page on [Sexual Harassment](#) for a definition of what it is, a list of people you can talk to — both on campus and during your co-op terms — if you find it happening to you, and some strategies for [documenting your complaint\(s\) of harassment](#) or [writing a letter to your harasser](#).

Additional resources:

- [Harassment and discrimination](#)
- [If it happens to me, what can I do?](#)
- [Social media abuse help page](#)
- [Human rights](#)