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THE JOB CENTER

ON YOUR OWN: SURVIVING THE WORK FORCE

BRAVING THE OFFICE ARENA

First-job jitters? Slay your fears and conquer the workplace with these tips

Nothing can ever really match the horror of the first day at a new job, especially if it's the first time you've strapped on a tie, packed your lunch in a brown bag and sat in the same place for eight (or more) hours straight.

Even though you know you knocked the bosses' socks off at the interview, you're suddenly faced with the very real fear that you'll have no idea how to do what they want you to do, and that they're going to catch on before you even get your first paycheck. Even more than that, you're

surrounded by a bunch of unfamiliar faces, and forced to ascertain which co-workers you want to befriend by decoding the tchotchkes arrayed on their desks. And those are tiny details compared to the real question of the day — are they all making fun of the way you're dressed?

Never fear — everyone faces a first job at some point, and almost everyone survives. But to make the whole thing a little easier, we've put together a guide to help you navigate the potential potholes along the way: difficult bosses, ethical issues and (gasp!) an empty cubicle.

— Becky Sher

PROTECTING YOUR HONOR: Ethical behavior is important

Settling into a new workplace can be a lot like fitting into a high school clique. Just like you and your high school pals wore the same clothes and listened to the same music, you and your colleagues need to abide by the same rules for office etiquette and ethics. But this time, it's about more than just fitting in.

Alan Axelrod, author of "My First Book of Business Etiquette" and "My First Book of Business Ethics," says if you don't follow the unwritten rules of your office, you could find yourself the butt of jokes, or even worse, on your way out the door.

Axelrod explains the biggest pitfalls young employees face, and offers tips on how to avoid them:

ETHICS

■ **Avoid rationalizing unethical behavior.** Don't think that the means justify the ends. Don't base your decisions on anger or other emotions, and don't do things just because your co-workers do them and get away with it.

■ **Think of the consequences of your decisions.** Can you live with them? Will the decision hurt you in the long run? Try to be fair, and base your decisions on what is best for all of the parties involved.

■ **Ethics is about being honest with others and yourself.** If you lie even a little, the whole transaction is

wrought with problems. "And if you start off unethical, it's very hard to regain the opportunity to build an ethical relationship," Axelrod says.

ETIQUETTE

■ **No matter your profession, you're really trying to become successful working with people.** Whether it's customers or coworkers, give them value by demonstrating your manners and competence.

■ **Constantly build a rapport with your coworkers.** It's as simple as giving a smile, a wave or a sincere handshake. Axelrod also encourages a little small talk with colleagues to build a rapport and increase your visibility in the office.

■ **Diversity is good for a company.** Squash stereotypes when you hear them. And if you can, avoid gender-specific words like "manmade" or "businessman."

■ **Office politics — you're involved whether you like it or not.** Avoid backstabbing and gossip, but stay involved in what's going on around the office. If you isolate yourself, you could cost yourself acceptance and eventual promotion.

■ **Perhaps most important is being on time.** There is no faster way to make a bad impression than showing up late.

— Joseph Gidjunis

NEUTRALIZING A TYRANT: Dealing with an 'idiot boss'

It's an honored tradition — working for an idiot boss. They don't take suggestions, don't think efficiently and don't make your job easier. If you've seen the movie "Office Space," you know the drill.

So, will you get along with your new boss?

Well, that depends on you. Self-proclaimed former "idiot boss," John Hoover, author of "How to Work for an Idiot," explains that you have two choices — get in your boss's way, or be the best employee you can be.

With communication, positioning and other strategies, Hoover says new employees can get on their boss's good side and create a positive relationship.

Before your next day of work, read Hoover's tips:

■ **Study your boss** and notice the signals he or she sends. Pick up on body language and spoken language.

Figure out your boss's agenda. Then you'll be able to read your boss better, understand what he or she is telling you and determine your best course of action. And don't be afraid to ask your co-workers for help.

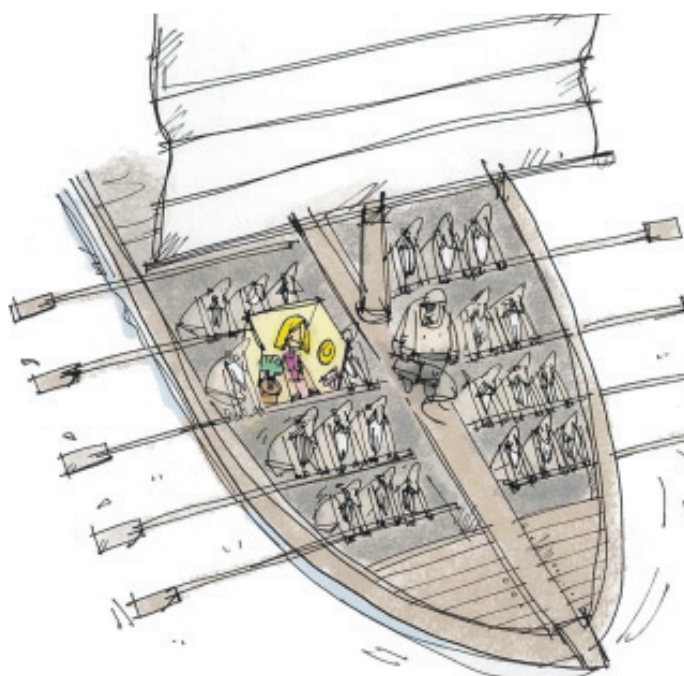
There are ways to deal with even the most demanding boss.



■ **No boss will get upset with you for making his employees more motivated or happy.** Get involved with staff events. Not happy with what's available? Start your own event.

Organizing something like an intramural bowling team increases your value to the organization.

— Joseph Gidjunis



FIGHTING THE CUBICLE BLAHS: Decorate your space

Sitting down at a brand-new cubicle is kind of like moving into a new apartment — it's a little bland, but it's got potential. The question is, how can you spruce up your tiny piece of the working world, organize what are bound to become mountains of paper and still show a little personality? It's easier than it seems, says Christine Plantan, president of

Russell+Hazel, a Minnesota-based company that makes funky office supplies. Here's a word you'll hear a lot in the workplace: multitasking. Plantan suggests using that as a strategy for organizing your desk, not just your workday. Go out and find unique supplies, or use unusual accessories to stow your stuff.

(Note: This is only an option if you're willing to spend a little of your own cash or dig through your kitchen cabinets.) A funky hatbox, vintage serving tray or garden basket can store your papers just as easily as a standard-issue paper tray. And a votive holder or vase,

like the one below, makes a perfect pencil holder. Voilà: You've gotten organized while also showing a little of your own flair.

Plantan's other tips for keeping an organized "home" at work:

■ **Cut down on clutter.** The first few weeks on the job, create a home for all of your things, and — most importantly — keep them there.

■ **Post-its stuck to your computer monitor** are a no-no. They give off the impression that you're unorganized. And even if that's the case, there's no sense in broadcasting it to your new colleagues. Plantan recommends keeping a small binder with a page for each day and sticking Post-its and other notes there.

■ **Talk to the office manager** on your first day about getting a stock of basic supplies: paper clips, a stapler, "bulldog" clips (silver clips that can grasp papers and hang from a tack in your cubicle) and Post-its that are actually big enough to write on.

■ **Use black ink.** It looks more professional than blue, and certainly more polished than purple, green or orange.

■ **Take a common-sense approach to organization.** Things on your desk should be things you use every day. Your top drawer is for short-term projects, and your bottom drawer is for items that you only use every once in a while.

■ **Keep an in-basket on your desk** to hold on to documents as they come in, until you have a chance to file them away.

■ **Use colors when you can** get away with it. That means don't turn in a report on pink paper, but use bright pink and green file folders to spruce up your desk. Color-coding isn't a bad idea either, but don't go overboard.

■ **Display a few personal items,** but keep them low-key. (Pictures of you and your friends at an out-of-control happy hour probably aren't a great idea.)

— Becky Sher

YOU HAVE THE POWER

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