



AATCC NEWS

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July 8, 2014

Can the Gen Y Job Seeker Hack It in the Real World? 17 Things New Grads Need to Know About Getting—and Doing—a Great Job

Employers aren't exactly clamoring to hire today's new grads. If you are one—even one with an impressive degree—the deck is stacked against you.

Here, I offer 17 ways to prove you know what matters in the real world—both in the job search and in the early days after "you're hired."

By [Ben Carpenter](#), author of [The Bigs: The Secrets Nobody Tells Students and Young Professionals About How to Choose a Career, Find a Great Job, Do a Great Job, Be a Leader, Start a Business, Manage Your Money, Stay out of Trouble, and Live a Happy Life](#)

Graduation is almost here. You've worked hard for the past four (or six or eight) years and are rightfully proud of yourself. But as you head out into the brutal workplace armed with proof of your smarts and persistence, don't expect too much from those shiny new credentials. While a good education is never wasted, your diploma isn't stamped "admit one job seeker to the opportunity of a lifetime." In fact, it might as well read, "I'm a member of Gen Y and I may not have what it takes."

That's right. Too many hiring managers—[66 percent according to one survey](#)—think today's new graduates just aren't prepared to enter the workforce.

Many of them cite details like typos on résumés as reasons why they don't want to hire a new college graduate. But it's not the typo that really matters—it's what it says about you. Your communication skills. Your work ethic. Your attitude toward details. Your drive to do what it takes to get the job.

Of course, the typo is only one tiny example. There are lots of ways to inadvertently live up to the bad rap new grads get. My point is that too many people already assume you can't hack it in the real world. It's up to you to prove them wrong.

Here, I share 17 things college grads need to know right now in order to stack the odds for professional success:

Things you need to know while you're looking for a job

Don't think about what you want to do. Think about what you can do. You're probably trying to find a job that will fuel your passion and make you happy. If so, my first piece of advice might feel like a cold wake-up call: Spend less time figuring out what you want to do and more time thinking about what you can do. In other words, seek out a career doing something that you're good at.

Choosing a career you can do well, rather than one that seems fun and exciting, might sound unappealing—but it isn't. The satisfaction you get from doing your job well will far outweigh how entertaining it is. Plus, think about how unhappy you'd be if your heart's desire failed to pay the bills. From personal experience, as well as from observing family, friends, and coworkers, I can state that most professionals are happiest doing what they are good at, while pursuing other passions—that their careers give them the means to finance—on the side.

Always ask yourself, What's my edge? In other words, what makes you unique and different? Why should other people pay attention to you? What do you have to offer? What gives you an edge over the competition?

This is a great question to ask yourself in a multitude of professional scenarios, not just when you're interviewing. If you're starting a business, it can help you to define your product or service's niche. If you're going after a promotion, it can help differentiate you from your coworkers. In all situations, it will help you define how you can become your personal best.

Be creative and bold. Long gone are the days of being handed a job just because you have a diploma. There are millions of job seekers with the same qualifications as you, so if you want to receive one of a limited number of opportunities, you'll need to stand out. For instance:

- Instead of sending out a résumé that will probably get lost in HR Purgatory, stand outside Company XYZ's offices with a cardboard sign that reads, "Please let me tell you why I'm the person you want to fill the junior systems analyst position you posted on Monster.com."
- If you're interested in a graphic design position, create a mockup redesign of the company's website. Then send it to the prospective employer with the headline, "Get ready to be blown away by your new look!"

Or take a page from a friend of mine's book: After identifying her dream job, she walked right into the "big boss's" office, handed him her résumé, and told him she'd call him later that afternoon. The tougher the situation, the less you have to lose—so the more radical your actions should be. The worst that can happen is that you don't get the job.

Understand whose problem you're trying to solve. The key to being offered a job is showing the interviewer that his or her company needs you.

Most young people I interview think their goal is to convince me how smart, accomplished, or nice they are. And yes, those are all laudable qualities. But the fact is, I'm not looking for Miss or Mister Congeniality. I'm looking for the best person to help my company succeed! In other words, interviews aren't about solving your problem (finding a job); they're about solving the employer's problem. Every word that comes out of your mouth has to support that goal. Before sharing something about yourself, consider why the person sitting across from you should care.

Things you need to know after you get a job

Think of your boss and your company before yourself. When you're a rookie in the big leagues, you have to prove that you're going to be an asset to the team, not a drain on its resources or a liability for the coach. Often, that means putting your boss's wants and needs ahead of your own.

For instance, it's a good idea to: show up before your boss and leave after she does...schedule personal appointments after business hours...work six months before you take vacation days...respond to phone calls and emails ASAP, even at night, on the weekends, during vacations.

I get that many of these things don't sound like your idea of fun. You might even think some of them are "unfair." But remember—it's your job to make your boss's life easier, not the other way around. Everyone has to start at the bottom and work their way up. And when you show that you're willing to sacrifice your own interests for the good of the team, you'll have gotten a huge head start on being named Rookie of the Year.

Don't agree to anything you don't fully understand. Once you have your foot in the door, you'll likely want to impress your colleagues and higher-ups at every turn. And in an attempt to avoid looking like you don't know what you're doing, you may be tempted to feign understanding and nod your head, even though you really have no clue what's going on. Don't.

Early in my career, a client bullied me into saying "yes" to a request I didn't understand—and it cost my employer \$25,000. While covering up your own ignorance might not come with such a steep price tag, it's still something you should avoid at all costs. Your integrity, credibility, and reputation—and possibly your job!—are all at stake. It's always better to swallow your pride and say, "I'm sorry, but I don't understand. I

need you to explain.” Oh—and that’s just as applicable in your personal dealings as it is in your career.

When you’re upset, choose to look forward, not back. You can’t always control what happens to you, but you can control how you react and move forward.

Maybe you’ve been handed an undesirable task at work, been blamed for your boss’s mistake, or been interrupted by an overzealous colleague during a client meeting for the thousandth time. Sure, you can choose to focus on your anger and irritation for hours, or even days. But that doesn’t do you a bit of good. Instead, resolve to channel your thoughts and efforts toward playing the hand you’ve been dealt in a way that will benefit you the most.

Learn to appreciate diverse work styles. In life and in work, we all tend to gravitate toward others who think like us and who see the world through a similar lens. If you don’t push yourself past the familiar, though, you’ll be severely limiting yourself.

Yes, it can be difficult, uncomfortable, and downright frustrating to work with people who take a different approach from you. For example, maybe you’re a Type A personality who is totally frustrated by your coworker’s seat-of-her-pants approach to projects. Remember, though, by shutting her out you’ll also deprive yourself of her creative solutions and outside-the-box insights.

No matter what the situation is, always try to seek out and utilize your team’s talents. You can never be sure you have the best answer until you’ve heard all viewpoints.

Own your mistakes. No matter how much you know or how hard you try, you are going to make mistakes as you pursue your career. The question is, how will you handle them? I caution you not to follow in the footsteps of a former coworker I refer to as “Never,” who never took responsibility for any mistakes and never apologized for anything.

Never was actually very good at what she did, but her insistence on passing the blame and refusing to admit her errors cost her all of the respect, support, and goodwill she could have earned. Here’s the lesson: Refusing to own your mistakes doesn’t make you seem more competent; it reveals cowardice, callousness, and untrustworthiness.

I promise, if you’re a hardworking, valued employee, when you do own up to your mistakes, your confession will be viewed as a sign of strength, not weakness, by your coworkers. Plus, you’ll be in a position to learn and improve.

Be a good steward of the “little” things. For example, always proofread your emails for errors before pressing “send.” Don’t leave voicemails unanswered at the end of the day. Keep your desk and computer files organized. Call your clients to share progress, even when a report isn’t required.

Most people don’t think much of letting the so-called “little things” slide. They think it’s okay to cut “unimportant” corners. So when you pay attention to small, often-overlooked details, you’ll distinguish yourself from the pack. Trust me, putting in just a little more work than most people are willing to do is a great way to propel yourself toward success.

If you want to be a leader, act like one. If your goal is to be at the forefront of your field’s innovation and growth, you may feel discouraged when your first job is composed of tasks a trained monkey could do. But don’t succumb to the I’ll never get there from here or the What I do in this position doesn’t matter line of thinking. Instead, get a head start developing the leadership qualities you’ll need in the future.

The best way to move up in the ranks is to lead in whatever position you’re in now. Even if you’re the lowest man or woman on the totem pole, you can still display leadership qualities like having integrity and a good attitude, providing others with helpful feedback, and treating them with respect. The fact is, very few employees consistently show leadership skills. If you’re the exception from day one, the Powers That Be will notice.

Do what you say you’re going to do, when you say you’re going to do it. One basic requirement for doing

an outstanding job is to handle all your work-related tasks, large or small, in a timely manner. If your job is to get a report done by Friday, get it done by Friday. If HR asks you to fill out a form today, do it promptly.

Yes, meeting deadlines sounds like a no-brainer. But you'd be surprised by how many professionals don't live by this rule. I can't tell you how many times I've been handed excuses and requests for extensions instead of the finished product. But I can tell you that that type of behavior is not going to do you any favors in the workplace.

Don't let anyone have anything negative to say about you. Over the course of your career, you'll encounter individuals whose opinions you think don't matter, and whose actions you think won't impact you. You may also believe that your own position gives you license to dispense with politeness and consideration in certain situations. Beware: Those assumptions could get you into big trouble. In many companies, for example, the most hated people are the assistants who treat people in a high-handed way because they work for the boss.

It is important that everyone you come in contact with has a positive experience with you. Even if someone is a pest, rude, or stupid, always treat him respectfully. One day you may be working with, or for, that person. Also, bear in mind how your boss views you will be heavily influenced by what people in the company tell her.

Don't complain about your job to your coworkers. There will be plenty of things you don't like about your first (and second, and fifth) job. But complaining about them around the water cooler—even if you have a very sympathetic audience—is never a good idea.

If your comments get back to your boss, she will think your behavior is unprofessional. Moreover, she'll wonder why you didn't talk to her directly. Anytime you're unhappy with something at work, whether it's your workload, the tasks you're being given, or how you're being treated by a coworker, bring them directly to your supervisor. If you feel that isn't possible, continue to do the best job you can while looking for a more suitable position.

Don't badmouth your coworkers. This is my personal golden rule for business: Never say anything negative about anybody in your office. That's right. Don't vent about your boss in the break room. Don't gripe about your coworker with the rest of the team. Don't even make fun of John's crazy tie, unless he's right there laughing with you.

These comments have a way of getting back to the people they're about. One of the things I'm most ashamed of in my career is badmouthing a colleague for no good reason. The things I said had a negative effect on our working relationship for years, until I finally reached out with a heartfelt apology. And guess what? Even if the other person never becomes aware of what you said, your colleagues will still make judgments about your character based on your willingness to bash someone else behind his or her back.

Live within your means. Maybe you think that your personal finances (whether they're good or bad) won't impact your life in the workplace. That's wishful thinking, especially if you're struggling to stay solvent. It can be difficult to check personal stressors at the office door, meaning that if you're worried about money, your anxiety might impact your focus, your performance, and even the values you apply to your work.

The easiest path to achieving financial security, or at least reducing financial stress, is to discipline your spending habits. Specifically, if there's any way you can help it, don't spend more than you earn. If you don't yet make a lot of money, don't acquire a taste for expensive things. I promise you will be happier in a small apartment, driving an older car, drinking cheap wine than you will be in a big apartment, driving a fancy car, drinking expensive wine, and having to worry about how to pay for it all.

Don't forget to have fun. If you want to succeed, you'll need to put your nose to the grindstone. Just don't forget to remove it every once in awhile.

I mean it! While work should certainly be a priority, it's also important to have fun and disengage every once in awhile. The fuller and more satisfying your life is in general, the more effective you'll be at work. Plus,

part of living a happy life is having friends and family to share it with.

Getting and doing a good job has never been a cakewalk, and in today's competitive market, the challenge is even greater. But the fact that you're a recent grad doesn't mean that you have no choice but to slog through several years of underemployment before finally getting your chance to go to bat in the big leagues. When your actions, words, and attitudes are shaped by values, integrity, dedication, and a true team spirit, you will set yourself apart from the rest of the rookies in a way that gets you hired, recognized, and promoted.

