New grads: How to interact with co-workers at meetings or gatherings

By Debra Auerbach, CareerBuilder Writer

Recent college graduates have a lot to bring to a post-college job. Their enthusiasm, their knowledge of new and emerging trends and their passion for a particular subject area make them well-prepared for an entry-level position. Yet when it comes to certain soft skills, particularly communication, some grads may need a crash course in proper etiquette.

"Making the transition from the informal environment of college to the professional world of work can be challenging for many people, particularly when it comes to communication," says Tracy McCarthy, senior vice president of human resources at SilkRoad Technology, a provider of human-resources software. "Let's face it, when you are communicating in your classroom or work-study groups, everyone is a peer and in the same position. Most people tend to be comfortable and more willing to take a difficult stance and be wrong without the fear of rejection or embarrassment. In business, there are much greater differences in people's age and experience levels. The safe college environment disappears; thus many new entrants into the professional world may be reluctant to assert themselves and take risks."

McCarthy also points out that the forms of communication often change from college to the professional world. "Gone are the short text messages wrought with acronyms and emoticons. The transition to more formal email and conference-call communication can be daunting for the first-time professional."

To help those grads who are ill-prepared for the more formal communication practices of the working world, here are some tips on interacting with co-workers.

**Listen**

While a new worker may want to show her enthusiasm by speaking up at meetings, it may be more helpful to listen and pick up on the way others communicate. "The first two weeks at your position should be all about listening," says JT Sweeney, a recent graduate and marketing assistant at information technology consulting firm York Solutions. "New grads should definitely learn how the company works and what the hierarchy looks like before talking too much. Conference calls can always be difficult to adjust to, because they're so foreign to students who haven't spent extensive time in the corporate world."
Sweeny also suggests that new grads take notes during every conference call or meeting. "Later on, when reviewing your notes, see if there is any jargon that you aren't familiar with, and ask about its meaning. Most co-workers are happy to be sources of knowledge for you."

**Be confident and concise**

Big meetings or brainstorms can be intimidating, so when you are ready to talk, your nerves might take over. This may lead to long-winded answers or getting your thoughts lost in the shuffle. "The ability to be more direct than you've been used to in the college environment is key," McCarthy says. "In college, you have more time to think about the subject and bounce around ideas. In business, things move at a faster pace, so rather than fall into the 'deer in the headlights' situation, practice being more assertive, and speak up a little louder. For first-time professionals, there isn't always the confidence that their opinions or thoughts matter as much as others, and in reality, they need to get past that quickly to be successful. Being concise in communication is important."

**Respect authority**

"Learn quickly the lines of authority and chain of command," says Roy Cohen, career coach and author of *The Wall Street Professional’s Survival Guide.* "Never interrupt or disagree with your boss in group meetings and in the presence of more senior management. It is unappreciated and it will backfire. You will be viewed as a loose cannon. Although your intentions may be sincere, a confrontational style in public may label you as difficult to manage or motivated by political ambition. Neither are labels to be burdened with so early in your career."

**Stay professional even outside of work**

A new job can be nerve-wracking, so when you're invited to your first office happy hour, you may be counting down the minutes before you let loose. Yet, remember that you're still with co-workers, so it's necessary to maintain a level of professionalism. "These types of situations are a great opportunity to be a bit less formal, yet professional, in getting to know your co-workers and building personal relationships," McCarthy says. "Take the initiative to introduce yourself and start conversations. Provide some personal information, but don't get too personal too soon."

**Be friendly, but not friends, with your boss**

While befriending your manager may seem like a quick way to get on his good side, blurring the lines between boss and "bestie" may make him uncomfortable. It may also make it more difficult for him to give you constructive feedback, something that's essential for career growth. "Your boss is not your buddy," Cohen says. "Refrain from informal conversation and from oversharing personal business. It is far more challenging to correct a bad impression than to establish one that is brand-new and untarnished."

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