

Young at Work: The Value of the Menial

By Mary Abbajay & Karen Bedell

A major cause of frustration with new professionals is that they enter the workplace with unrealistic expectations. We often enter new situations with high hopes and even higher expectations. The road from entry level employee to CEO is a long one. Your first year or two at work may look very different than you had thought they would and that many aspects of the working life will be quite different than what you expected (or wanted).

Misaligned expectations

Young people want to succeed. They want to contribute in a substantial and meaningful way. In fact, they are literally chomping at the bit to put their talents and education to use. They enter the workplace with high expectations and hopes. Unfortunately, often the reality of the first job doesn't quite align with their expectations. And many young people are often unprepared for the reality of "entry-level" work.

Here are some common complaints we hear from young people today:

- Work is boring
- I don't know what is expected of me
- I don't have enough to do
- Nobody tells me how well I am doing
- Working in a cubicle is distracting
- My creativity and skills aren't being used
- I didn't go to college to make copies
- This is not what the recruiter promised
- Nobody tells me what to do (or how to do it)
- The managers don't care

- I have new ideas—but nobody will listen to me
- The managers keep changing their minds
- This is grunt work and it is *beneath* me

Most of us don't get to cure cancer in our first year on the job. Don't be surprised if you have to endure some boring and routine work in your first year—especially if you work for a large company.

Understand and embrace the value of "menial tasks"

Young professionals often complain that they are given too many menial tasks that are "beneath" them. It is important to understand how these tasks well are an important and valuable contribution to your success.

It's not beneath you. Grunt work is the blood and guts of organizational performance. Organizations conduct business through disseminating information. Making copies is a valuable function for passing information.

Specifically, performing menial tasks will help you:

- Earn trust. Nobody is going to trust you with a complex task until they see you perform well with

a simple task. Remember—organizations require results, so you have to prove you can deliver

- Learn the business. Menial tasks allow you to learn the business from the bottom up. As you perform these tasks, you will learn how the business is run and what people are producing.
- It's a test you need to pass. Doing the "grunt" work allows your colleagues to see what kind of worker you are. It provides an opportunity to prove your worthiness as a team member.
- Meet important people. Rubbing elbows with the CEO is swell, but the real work in most organizations is performed by folks much further down the ladder. Doing the "menial" tasks provides you with an opportunity to create relationships with front line workers—the very front line workers who one day may rise through the organizations as your peers or report to you as your staff. You are someday going to need these people so gaining their respect and trust early on is professional savvy.
- Inefficiencies often live at the bottom. Because management often loses sight of life at the bottom, you will have plenty of opportunity to recommend and implement improvements.
- You need to know this stuff. One day you'll be an important person and you'll find yourself working late one night on the biggest project of your career life and suddenly the copier jams. Luckily for you, you know this copier inside and out so fixing it in order to meet your deadline is no problem at all!
- Management requires knowledge *and* experience. In order to manage a business you have to know it inside and out.

Align expectations to workplace realities

Once you understand the value of "grunt work," make sure your expectations and attitudes are aligned to workplace realities. Learn to manage workplace annoyances and cultural norms. Perform mundane and boring tasks with enthusiasm and professionalism. Working hard--with a positive attitude--on even the most mundane task will get you noticed and promoted.



Attitude is everything

The number one complaint about young people in the workplace today: Attitudes! Here is what employers complain about:

- They act entitled
- They are impatient and unrealistic
- They are lazy
- They don't want to work hard to build a career
- They want constant feedback and instant gratification
- They don't show respect for other's experience

These employer complaints are often just perceptions based on attitudes displayed by young adults in the workplace. Attitudes are what people project in their manner, disposition, and approach to work. A young professional with a misaligned attitude--no matter how great their skill--will face an uphill battle earning trust and opportunity from organizational leaders. Successful workplace attitudes must accomplish the following:

- Overcome the stereotype of your generation
- Have a positive impact on others
- Be aligned with your intentions
- Demonstrate that you have what it takes to succeed
- Position you to succeed!

Attitudes that work!

Humility

You are not in charge (yet). Understand your position in the organization and adopt the appropriate attitude. The opposite of humility is arrogance. When was the last time you wanted to work with someone who was arrogant?

Readiness to learn (from the bottom up)

You have a great education and lots of skills. However, there is so much you don't know! Be open to learning new things—be receptive to the ideas of others. The opposite of readiness to learn is a close-minded know-it-all.

Respect

You have great ideas—probably new and maybe even better ideas. Your organization and colleagues have *both* ideas and experience. They do things a certain way because on some level it works. Learn what respect looks like in your organization and with your colleagues—and give it freely. Do not fall into the trap of expecting respect before giving it. If everybody adopted this ridiculous attitude—then nobody would give respect because we'd all be waiting to get it first. Remember the golden rule: You must give to receive!

Confidence (Not Arrogance)

Confidence is a winning attitude: arrogance is not. Learn the difference. Confident means positive, self-assured, upbeat, and brave—of yourself and others. Arrogance is when you are pompous, disdainful, and contemptuous of others. Arrogance is a position that assumes superiority over others. Confidence is not.

Strong Work Ethic

Whether you like it or not—your employer's work ethic is based on his/her experience of what it takes to be successful. To them, a strong work ethic probably looks like showing up early (or at least on time), staying late (or not racing out the door at 4:59), volunteering for projects, taking on any task handed out, and being willing to go (with a positive attitude) the

extra mile to get the job done. The work life is much more demanding than school life. No matter what you may see on TV or in the movies—true success comes only from hard work and lots of it!

Long-term Perspective

The corner office, company car and the Vice President title is not coming anytime soon. In school, you have been conditioned to expect results, outcomes and progression in a matter of weeks and months. Work is very different. School is a sprint. Work is a marathon. The sooner you understand that success, fame, and fortune is not going to happen overnight, the faster you will be able to create effective strategies to achieve your goals.

Service Orientation

One of the biggest challenges we see in young people is not understanding that work is basically a service attitude as opposed to a consumer/customer attitude. In school, you were the end user of academic services. You attended to school to receive things like information, education, knowledge and skills. At work you are there to provide and give things like knowledge, skills, information, and results. You are the provider which means you need to always seek to understand and meet your customers' needs.

Positive Attitude

Showing up at work everyday with a positive attitude is probably one of the greatest things you can do to further your career. All things considered people always prefer to work with someone who is upbeat, supportive, enthusiastic and ready to go. Resist the urge to go negative. Nothing will derail your career faster than getting labeled as a complainer who is negative, resistant, cynical, and unwilling.

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