

Careers

22 Tips for Your First Day at Work Starting a New Job



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Reliable statistics about the frequency with which Americans switch jobs are surprisingly hard to find. One of the broadest-based measures of economic mobility is the Bureau of Labor Statistics' National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79), which tracked the early and middle careers of thousands of people born between 1959 and 1964.

From age 18 through age 48, the average male study subject held 11.8 jobs, or one every roughly 2.5 years, [according to the BLS](#). The average woman held 11.5 jobs, or one every roughly 2.6 years.

Forward-looking analyses suggest that job-hopping will remain a fact of life for American workers. If anything, the frequency with which people switch jobs is likely to quicken. [Fast Company](#) advises workers to “plan on switching jobs every three years for the rest of [their lives].”

Be Ready for Your Next Job Change

Changing jobs frequently isn't inherently bad. [Forbes contributor and workforce expert Liz Ryan](#) makes a persuasive case that job-hopping is actually a measure of personal and professional success. Of course, whether you agree with Ryan's sentiment probably depends on how well you've weathered your own job changes.

If you're anticipating a job change in the near future, or you've already committed to take on a new role, use this guide to weight the dice in your favor.

These proven tips from HR professionals, business owners, and employment experts, *will* smooth your transition into a new workplace and increase your odds of success moving forward – even if you're onto the next opportunity before long.

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Before You Arrive: Tips to Prepare for Your First Day on the Job



Do these things in the days and weeks leading up to your first day on the job.

1. Take Some Time Off Between Jobs

Don't rush headlong into your new job. It's better to take it slow and use the extra time to prepare. You don't need months away from the office, and it's unlikely that your personal budget can bear that burden in either case. A week off is probably sufficient to get your head in the right place.

Unless you took the job with the expectation that you'd start right away, your new employer should be amenable to a later start date. Bring this up during the interview process, ideally once you've taken care of salary and benefits negotiations.

2. Learn More About Your New Employer and Coworkers

Use your time off to learn more about your new employer and coworkers.

If you haven't already done so, study the company website to learn more about your soon-to-be-colleagues. Find and follow the organization, its key employees, and members of the team you'll be working on (if you know this already) on social media to get a sense of their personalities, interests, and professional strengths. You want to have something to talk about – and to know who you're talking to – on your first day.

Pro Tip: Whenever you use social media in a professional setting, be careful to abide by [social media etiquette](#) conventions. There's no quicker path to a rescinded job offer than a major social media gaffe before your first day.



3. Review Onboarding Materials

Take a full day between jobs to review all the informational onboarding materials you've thus far received from your new employer. These might include:

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- Employee handbook outlining policies to which all employees (or employees with your particular classification) are held
- Employee benefit packets outlining the scope, cost, and enrollment procedures for health insurance, retirement plans, fringe benefits, vacation and paid time off, and similar
- Employment contract, if your position requires one and you haven't signed it already
- Information about your rights and obligations as an employee, such as protections provided by the [Fair Labor Standards Act](#)



Keep in mind that you may receive some of this material on or after your first day, in which case you'll need to set aside time one evening or weekend day to go over everything in an unhurried setting. While it won't make for riveting reading, it'll help set expectations for your new role, provide a comprehensive picture of what you need to do to be successful in the role, and set a road map for extricating yourself (or standing up for your coworkers) should things go south.

4. Know Who You Need to Meet and What They Need From You

Don't rely on your new boss or HR contact to set up all the meetings and introductions you'll need to wrap your head around your new job. They don't necessarily know everything you'll need to do to prepare for your new role and responsibilities. More importantly, they don't know – and might not care – what's best for *your career*.

Some of the most important connections you make are those you expect to advance your career or personal brand. In an uncertain economy where job-hopping is the new normal, you simply can't afford not to look out for *numero uno* (that's you).

Use these basic guidelines to help articulate the value you bring to the workplace:

- What you want people to know about you
- Past experiences and expertise relevant to your role
- The identities of the people you'll be working with
- Those your work will directly affect
- The allies you'll need to be effective in your role
- Your colleagues' concerns and expectations

Within the first few weeks of starting your job, make a point of meeting with everyone in your role's orbit to learn more about what they need and expect from you. This is important regardless of your seniority level.

5. Visualize Success, Then Grab It

I'm skeptical of self-motivational pabulum, but some otherwise level-headed employment experts swear that simply *visualizing* a successful first day goes a long way toward its actualization. Spend one of your pre-start off days, or the early morning on the day itself, mentally preparing yourself to succeed. See yourself winning. *Will* it. And then go into work and make it happen.

6. Prepare and Perfect Your Personal Pitch

Spend your last few days of freedom preparing and perfecting your personal elevator pitch. Since you'll need to repeat it to colleagues in a variety of different roles and seniority levels, it helps to have a few different versions handy. Brainstorm (true) stories and scenarios that encapsulate the value you bring to the table and endear you to the people with whom you'll be working in your new role.

Be particularly careful about the the version you use for corporate higher-ups, like the executive in charge of your division or perhaps the president or CEO of the entire organization itself. There's a fine line between making a great first impression and coming on too strong.



7. Expect the First Day to Be Atypical

There's no such thing as a "normal" first day on the job. At most organizations, the first day is a blur of meetings: with members of your team, about benefits and other human resources issues, for training on internal systems and protocols. It might be days or even weeks before you can devote your undivided attention to the projects you were brought on to handle. Use the interim to get acquainted with the layout of your office and learn the rhythms of your coworkers.

8. Plan to Bring the Essentials

Spend the day before your first day on the job making a list of the items you'll likely need at the office or job site. Pack them the night before, just as you'd pack your back the evening before leaving on a vacation.

"Bring a pen and a notepad to take notes, your smartphone in case you need to look something up, and a briefcase or tote to carry documents," says Laura Handrick, staff writer at Fit Small Business. "And if you wear glasses, don't forget to bring them because you may be reviewing an employee handbook and signing some paperwork."

If you work in the trades or service industry, bring any tools you expect to use on your first day. Many contracting companies expect their workers to operate semi-independently, so showing up without all the equipment you expect to need (within reason) might reflect poorly on you.

“There’s no guarantee that the company will have exactly the tools you need, so it’s best to plan ahead and bring the tools you’d typically use with you,” says Handrick. “You can keep them in your vehicle, so you don’t have to run home to get them if you need them on the job your first day.”

To minimize the risk of miscommunication, or worse, you can confirm with your supervisor or dispatcher ahead of time whether field workers are expected to provide their own supplies. That said, an abundance of caution never hurt anyone.

9. Collect Required Identification Documents and Onboarding Paperwork

These qualify as essentials as well, says Handrick, as it’s customary to verify that you’re legally permitted to work in the United States before you can officially begin. The key form is the I-9, which establishes your work status.

“Bring your Social Security card and driver’s license, or your passport, and whatever else you’ll need to complete the I-9 form,” says Handrick. “No doubt HR will have requested it, and it just looks bad if you show up without that paperwork.”

Additionally, since employers can’t legally employ people who can’t prove they’re cleared to work in the U.S., “you may find yourself out of job pretty quick if you don’t bring it,” she says. If you’re not a U.S. citizen, you’ll need to bring your legal permanent resident card or work authorization permit if you’re in the country on a shorter-term visa.

Finally, while you probably won’t be required to complete and turn in benefits election forms on your very first day, you should spend some time thinking about your insurance and retirement planning needs before you show up at the office. These matters can easily overwhelm laypeople, so it’s a good idea to level-set before you get too deep into your job.

Pro Tip: Need a refresher on the different types of employee benefits out there? We have a ton of helpful content on health insurance, retirement plans, fringe benefits, and more.

Check out our article on the [differences between 401\(k\) and 403\(b\) plans](#) to learn more about the distinction between two common types of retirement plans, our primer on [deducting health insurance premiums and expenses on your taxes](#) to save some dough this tax season, and our post on [health savings accounts](#) for more detail on a little-known employer-sponsored health benefit.

At the Office: Tips to Ace Your First Day on the Job

You only get one chance to make a good first impression. Here’s how to hit the ground running on your first days and weeks with your new employer.

10. Don’t Dress Down

Dress for success. You’ve heard it before, but it’s never more important than on your first day in a new position. A “casual” dress code doesn’t necessarily mean flip-flops, after all. On your first day, stick to smart casual – you can always dress down the next day if it’s clear you’re overdressed.



11. Think Twice About Bringing Your Own Lunch

We've already touched on what you *should* bring to your first day on the job. Now, let's flip that around: Is there anything you should consider leaving at home?

Yes. One item you might not want to carry to your new workplace is a premade lunch. While packing your own lunch is usually an effective strategy for [saving money at work](#), it's not always a practical choice for your first day on the job.

"I don't advise bringing a lunch box your first day, especially if you don't have an office – you'll just end up carrying it around," says Handrick, of Fit Small Business.

Handrick advises bringing cash or a credit card to pay for lunch at a local restaurant (or, in a pinch, the office vending machine). "You may or may not be invited to lunch your first day and you don't want to be the one without cash if your peers invite you to come along," she explains. "Otherwise, you'll want to make sure you can grab something to eat."

Use your first day to get a sense of how your coworkers typically consume their lunches, she adds. At their desks? In the break room? In a cafeteria? Or out and about at nearby restaurants or [food trucks](#)? Moving forward, you'll want to do as the Romans do.

Pro Tip: Looking for other ways to slim down your food budget and [reduce the cost of dining out at restaurants](#)? Consider applying for a [cash back credit card](#) that earns points on restaurant purchases, such as [Barclaycard CashForward™ World Mastercard®](#).

12. Stay Cool and Be Mindful

It's totally natural to be freaked out at the prospect of starting a new job. Honestly, it would be weird if you *weren't* nervous about your new role.

Practicing mindfulness can help control your jitters and prevent them from spiraling into productivity-sapping panic. Take a few minutes before your first day of work (or every day, if you find that this helps) to sit in silence and reflect on what's to come. Focus on clearing your mind, listening to your body, and taking deep, intentional breaths. Use the time to clear your mind, listen to your body, and take deep, intentional breaths.

Remember how this feels. Then, when you encounter an unfamiliar situation that might normally rile you up, take a mental vacation back to that cool, calm place and face the challenge with a clear head.



13. Remember That Your Employer Needs You Too

If mindfulness isn't your thing, take a rational approach instead. Remind yourself that your new employer hired you for a reason. They expect you to perform at a high level, but they also *really need you in the role* – or they wouldn't have posted it in the first place.

Just avoid coasting on this assumption. The easiest way to fall out of favor with your team is to take an “I don't need you as much as you need me” approach to your work.

14. Check In and Don't Wander

Confirm your initial point of contact *before* you arrive at the office or job site. Once you arrive, check in at the receptionist – or, in a smaller office, directly with that person – to announce your presence. Don't explore the office on your own initiative. Your first liaison will probably be in the HR department, but be safe and hang out in the reception area until you're called.

You'll have time to get the lay of the land later. Even if security is lax, an unfamiliar face poking around is a red flag in many workplaces, and it might be awkward when your now-coworkers recognize you later as the early-morning wanderer.



15. Be a Sponge and Avoid Bias

Shed any preconceived notions about your new employer at the door, and resist transparent attempts by colleagues to replace them with new biases. Try not to absorb too much input from lateral colleagues, who often have intense (and competitive) interests in describing the workplace from their perspective.

You'll have plenty of time to form your own opinions about anything and everything relevant to your job: your colleagues, your boss' management style, your organization's strategic vision and priorities. Just not on your first day. Today, your job is to learn as much as you can in transparent, unbiased fashion.

16. Ask Lots of Questions

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Don't be afraid to ask honest, direct questions. Better to come off as clueless and naive now than six months down the line. And be sure to retain the answers to your questions by taking notes on a notepad, smartphone, or tablet. You'll have an anything-goes grace period working in your favor, but it'll quickly become awkward to ask the same questions – and receive the same answers – again and again.



17. Get the Lay of the Land

Don't wait too long to familiarize yourself with your new workplace. If you don't get a guided walk-through on your first day, your second day might present a better opportunity to take a self-guided tour of the premises. At that point, you should have your employee badge and be able to walk with enough confidence to blend right in. Locate the bathrooms, kitchen, coffee station, meeting rooms, and other important areas.

18. Don't Come on Too Strong

You wouldn't jump headlong into a steaming hot tub, would you?

Remember our advice about leaving preconceived notions at the door and asking honest, direct questions. You want to ease into your new role, not come in with guns blazing. Save your alpha routine for later, when you're more comfortable in the job and better known to your colleagues.

Whatever you think of them, your coworkers are more valuable to you as allies than adversaries. Likewise, you're more valuable to your employer as a team player, at least at first, than a rogue agent. If you excel in your new role and find yourself promoted into a position of greater responsibility, your calculus may change. Until then, play it straight and retain your humility.

19. Be Punctual and Efficient

This should go without saying, but you'd be shocked at just how many new hires roll into work late on the first day, dawdle through lunch, or duck out early.

Once you've eased into your new role, you may earn the right to arrive late, leave early, or take long lunch breaks. Or you might quickly discover that your employer has a "leave when the work is done" policy that, at least in theory, allows team members more scheduling flexibility.

The first day is *not* the day to test those presumptions. Do whatever it takes to get there on time – for instance, rehearsing the route to the office on one of your off days before your start date. Once there, hustle through lunch and leave with the last of your colleagues.



20. Have a Plan for Your Downtime

“Downtime” and “first day at a new job” aren’t often mentioned in the same paragraph, let alone the same sentence. Still, it’s possible that you’ll have some unstructured time to kill between meetings or orientations. When that happens, look for a colleague to shadow or ask advice of.

If you haven’t yet had the opportunity, you can also use your downtime to bone up on workplace policies or employer-sponsored benefits. That way, you can actually decompress when you get home, rather than jump right into another work-related assignment.

21. Don’t Isolate Yourself

You don’t have to be your office’s party captain to get in your coworkers’ good graces. Simply making an outward effort to connect with them on a personal level is usually enough. Join them for lunch, grab drinks after work, make small talk at the water cooler – whatever it takes to break the ice. Don’t worry about being pushy – it’s better to introduce yourself early on and make a good impression than rush to catch up once you’ve settled in.

At some workplaces, keeping to yourself is perfectly acceptable, even welcomed. And, if you’re not adept or comfortable in social situations, you don’t have to continue forcing the issue. Merely enduring a single round of introductions and small talk goes a long way.

22. Don’t Be Afraid to Say, “I Was Wrong”

History is littered with situations that prove the old adage: It’s the cover-up, not the crime.

In other words, an honest mistake can be fixed, or at least forgiven. Trying to obscure or shift blame for mistakes is a more serious offense. For some bosses, it’s more than enough to earn guilty employees the boot.

Don’t be afraid to seek constructive criticism and feedback from your peers and superiors, too. As soon as you’re in a position to do so, make it clear that you welcome feedback, rather than waiting for it to be offered.

Hopefully you won’t make an egregious mistake on your first day with your new employer. You probably won’t have the opportunity to do so, absent a serious faux pas during meetings or

introductions. But once you're in the fire, you'll have plenty of opportunities to screw up – and to prove that you're an honest broker by taking responsibility for your error and making it right.



Final Word

You've probably heard the expression, "This is the first day of the rest of your life."

It's meant to concentrate the minds of high school and college graduates, not new hires. In an increasingly [gig-driven economy](#) where four or five years with a single employer is more than enough to earn veteran status, "the first day of the rest of your life" isn't really a helpful metaphor for your first day on the job.

But there's something to be said for approaching your first day with a new employer as the opening scene of a long, richly textured drama in which you play a critical role. (Maybe you'll turn out to be the star, but don't get ahead of yourself.) By throwing yourself into the preparation phase and making a killer first impression on your start date, you'll smooth out your on-the-job learning curve and set yourself up for a successful tenure – no matter how long the relationship lasts.

Do you have any first-day preparation tips? Any war stories you want to get off your chest?