



Transitioning Out of College: What Should I Expect?

By Julie Hamel

There are many programs available on college campuses to help students deal with the transition *into* college, but often there is not as much emphasis on the emotional issues surrounding the transition *out* of college. Just as you had many adjustments to make when you arrived on campus your freshman year, you will have adjustments to make when you leave the campus to take your first full-time job. Understanding the nature of the transition and being emotionally prepared can help you to make this process smoother.

Researchers have noticed that, after only two years of employment, 50% of college educated workers change jobs. There may be many explanations for this, including a desire to advance one's career, but studies seem to indicate that a major factor may be difficulties in adjustment.

What are some of the workplace challenges facing a newly graduated employee?

Wendlandt and Rochlen (2008) identify three areas that may be problematic as students make the transition between college and work: a change in environment, or culture; a change in skills required; and inaccurate expectations about work life.

The *culture* of a college campus and the *culture* of a workplace may be very different. Although you may be tired of hearing older adults warn you about the "real world," it can be helpful to recognize that life on a college campus is often quite different from life in the workplace. College has clearly defined expectations, schedules for completion of tasks, and a system of regular feedback about how one is doing. In contrast, in a workplace, tasks often come up unexpectedly and employers may give their employees only limited guidance on how they are supposed to handle a situation. Workplace evaluations are often given only annually or semiannually, compared to frequent grading and feedback given at college. On a university campus, social interaction is frequent, and primarily with your own age group. In the workplace, your fellow employees may come from diverse age groups and your social experiences may be more limited. Adopting a friendly and open attitude with all of your co-workers sends the message that you are interested in them and in what they do, and will hopefully result in some new, positive working relationships.

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A second problem area relates to preparation for the workplace. Although you may have studied hard, passed all of your classes, and done as much as you can to prepare for your career, you may still enter the workforce not having all of the skills your employer is looking for. It is usually impossible to enter a job completely prepared for the tasks you will be asked to do! This is normal, and understanding that can take the pressure off as you begin your job.

One learning theory suggests that we often operate in a stage of “**unconscious incompetence**,” where *we don’t know what we don’t know!* Many times, as we begin a new job, this is replaced with “**conscious incompetence**.” At this point, we realize what we *don’t* know and this can often be uncomfortable, unnerving, and downright terrifying! Approaching your supervisor about your concerns, asking for help from co-workers, calling up a former college professor, or just visiting with friends going through the same thing, can reassure us that we are going through a normal phase in the adjustment process. As we learn what is expected of us on the job, and become more comfortable in our role, this can be replaced with a new sense of competence, and satisfaction that we are bringing something unique and valuable to our workplace.

A third area of adjustment comes when we have unrealistic expectations about our new career and what it will bring us. As college graduates, there may be an expectation of a certain standard of living that will not be a reality for a few years down the road. Entry

level jobs often do not pay as well as we would like, but they can provide us with valuable experience, the opportunity to meet others with our same interests, and these jobs can teach us what we do and don’t like about the field we have chosen. Having a realistic view of what salary we can expect, and what our standard of living will need to be can help us to be prepared. An entry level job may also involve performing more routine tasks, as opposed to the broader, more creative projects expected of us in college. Remember that this is just the beginning of your lifelong career, and your employer may be watching to see if you can handle the more mundane parts of your job before putting you in a position requiring more creativity and responsibility!

Entering the world of full-time work can be challenging and anxiety-producing. However, it is the primary purpose of our college experience, and it can usher in a new phase of life that is also exciting and satisfying. As you complete your studies, you can take some steps to make this process easier. Take opportunities to visit with alumni and recent graduates in your field. Seek out internship or volunteer experiences that will expose you to the workplace, and utilize campus career counseling resources to discuss any of your concerns. Understanding the differences between the university culture and the workplace, accepting that you may not be totally prepared for your job, and keeping realistic expectations about “life after college” will help you to make a smooth and successful transition.

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