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Hello, Rookie Professionals!

By Janet White

You did it! You made it through unending years of school, spent hours doing homework, projects and papers, and sat through mindless classes while you fantasized about being free to do what you want. And now you are. Well, what's next?

Get ready, because if you're like the majority of new graduates, you are about to have the shock of your life. Lots of people may have told you about real world, and you may have put your toe in it by working part time, but you can't fully comprehend what's in store for you until you actually experience it for yourself.

This article will give you insight and advice about the adult world of working for a living you may not like to hear, but is based upon first-hand experience, common sense and sound business judgment. Heed it well.

The real world of work is populated by people older, wiser, better trained and more experienced in just about everything than you are. As such, they automatically deserve your respect; in time, you may know a fraction of what they do.

The person who hires you, signs your paycheck, tells you what to do, expects you to show up on time, do your work and know your place is your boss, who we will call "Mr. Bigg."

Mr. Bigg is not your friend, peer, parent, counselor or mentor, and has no interest in you or your career. The only things Mr. Bigg cares about are 1) himself and his life, 2) his company and career and 3) the work he is paying you to do.

If you are doing your work correctly, do not expect to hear anything from Mr. Bigg; if you don't do your work or do it poorly, expect to hear from Mr. Bigg quite soon. You will not like what he has to say.

You will be expected to learn, know and follow the unwritten and unspoken rules and procedures of the company that hires you along, of course, with whatever written ones there are (few companies have employee manuals.)

These unspoken rules and procedures include how to conduct yourself on the job, how to act toward your colleagues, how to approach your superiors, what you should and shouldn't do, and what is expected of you beyond your written job description. You will learn what they are by observing your colleagues and especially your superiors.

Never assume you're on the same level as everyone else there, especially the people who reside in the corner offices. You're not, at least not yet.

Conduct yourself as if you know what you're doing, even if you're still learning. It's okay to make mistakes, but you don't want everyone to think you're just some dumb kid right out of school, do you?

Even if your work is boring, mindless and beneath your intelligence, do it correctly and enthusiastically and then cheerfully ask for more. Offer to do the grunt work, volunteer for tasks no one else wants and do everything asked of you to the best of your ability. You'll learn new things, have unique experiences and make professional connections in this way that may prove invaluable.

You'll also be noticed by higher-ups and appreciated for your willingness to pitch in and, in time, be given opportunities worthy of your talents. Remember, every professional worth their salt starts at the bottom, and now it's your turn.

Dress like your colleagues; you may hate wearing a suit, but doing so won't kill you. You can be as expressive as you like – within the bounds of decorum and proper business attire. Look at how the corner office people dress and follow their example; regardless of whether they're in business suits or business casual, they're dressed for work. You should be too.

Check the major department stores and high-end specialty stores for basic pieces that will last you for years; you'll begin to appreciate how great it is to wear good quality clothes that actually fit. Consider your clothes an investment in your future: when you look like a professional, you'll really feel like one.

Always use proper English in all your written communications. After years of text messaging, you may instinctively use lingo instead of correct spelling. Big mistake. Using lingo automatically marks you as a rank amateur, a kid still in school and someone who simply doesn't get it.

If you send an email to Mr. Bigg that says, "Wuz my 1st asymmnt?" you'll find your first assignment is to pick up your first – and last – paycheck.

Learn how to address superiors correctly. Mr. Bigg and your colleagues are not "Dude;" they have names. As part of the unwritten and unspoken rules of the company, you'll find out very quickly who can be addressed by their first name, who should be referred to as Mr. or Ms., and who should be called "Sir" or "Ma'am."

If you've had any kind of military experience, this should be easy because you've been trained in the importance of chain of command, how to show respect for superiors and the significance of rank. The only difference is that in the civilian world you don't salute anyone.

Your job is important but you are not. Sorry, but you were not hired to be groomed for bigger and better things, because someone saw something special in you or because you have unique gifts to share with the world.

You were hired simply to do a job and you will be expected to show up and do it. When your work day is over, you can go home and be important.

Don't dip your pen in the company ink – ever. For your own piece of mind, don't date, have sex or mess around with anyone you work with or for, regardless of what you feel or how hot they are. Talking to, becoming friends and socializing with your colleagues is fine, but don't be "friends with benefits." The only "benefit" you'll end up with is a lot of grief.

Don't overstep the limits of your authority. If you don't know what to do in a given situation, ask Mr. Bigg or another supervisor for instructions and then do what they tell you to the letter.

That way, if something goes wrong, the heat will be off of you and on the person who gave you the instructions. In the military, this is called "following orders;" in business, it's known as CYA or "covering your ass."

Ground your helicopter parents. If your parents interceded on your behalf with your college professors and/or counselors, they may assume they can do the same with Mr. Bigg. WRONG. Mr. Bigg won't hesitate to tell your parents what he thinks of them and you – before he fires you.

To make sure this doesn't happen, teach your overly-involved parents to respect your boundaries by saying "no" to them. Don't worry; they'll survive the shock that you have your own life, make your own decisions and think for yourself. After all, that's what an adult is supposed to do.

Park your ego at home. You may think you're a star pitcher and deserve to take the mound from your first day in the league, but if you let that attitude show, the veterans will either keep you on the sidelines or boot you off the team.

If you want to be a player, lay low, watch how the pros make it all seem so easy, and keep your mouth shut and your ears and eyes open. Your turn will come.

Your degree is the beginning – not the end – of your education. All your degree means is that you had an interest in a particular field, took some classes and have absorbed some basic concepts. Now the rest is up to you.