Transitioning from Young

Making the transition from “young kid” to “young professional” is a process with definite do’s and don’ts and is also key to building your professional reputation.

You have been in the environmental arena for a few years, you have worked closely with your supervisor and other knowledgeable professionals, learned a lot along the way, interacted with clients, but you are still seen as the “young kid” in the office. You expected you would have to “pay your dues” for a while, but are beginning to wonder when you will be accepted and acknowledged as a professional and not just the newbie in a cubicle. Instead of letting the disappointment dictate your behavior and hinder professional growth, after all, that would be childish and would only support their view of you as the young kid, you decide to make an effort to graduate from young kid to young professional.

So, how do you make that leap? Fortunately, the process can be fairly easy and most of it involves things you already know. Sometimes, there are things we simply have to be reminded of and when someone points out how everything is connected, it is easier to see the big picture and understand how everything together helps us grow professionally.

Pay Your Dues
You have heard about it and believe you have paid your dues, but have you done enough? If you are
Kid to Young Professional

straight out of college and have been on the job a few weeks, months, or possibly even years, chances are you have not yet paid your dues. The sense of entitlement in the workplace is gone, and from day one, you should be willing to work for all good things to come your way. Schedule flexibility, the nice office, pay raises, bonus checks, are all earned and will find you as you pay your dues and prove that you have earned these benefits. What is possibly more important than paying your dues? Earning the respect of others and the acknowledgement of your growth as a professional without having the attitude of when will enough be enough? Instead, work with a team effort attitude.

Manage Your Time
Chatting with colleagues, texting, or being attached to your cell phone throughout the day, despite a pressing deadline, does not exactly represent the idea of professionalism. Manage your time to get the task done on schedule, so as not to negatively impact your project team members. Late nights at the office because a project team member (you) failed to manage their time throughout the day, will do you more harm than good.

Be Organized
The days of a cluttered dorm room, and mom picking up after you are over; it is time to get organized. A supervisor asking you for information they gave you last week, and it taking half the day to find it on your cluttered desk, does not work to your advantage. Do not forget to carry over your organizational skills to electronic files also. Knowing that a client or colleague e-mailed you information two weeks ago, but being unable to locate the e-mail is of no benefit, and can be an embarrassment to have to request the same information again. An organized professional is a great resource to clients and project managers. Being organized will also help with better time management and improved efficiency, both traits of a professional.
Maintain Appropriate Office Discussion
While co-workers and even supervisors may join discussions of your “extracurricular” activities, it does not mean these discussions are helping your quest to be considered a professional. Discussions of extracurricular activities should remain office appropriate. The best test as to whether a discussion is appropriate for the office: If you are uncomfortable with everyone in the office, including your company CEO, knowing of your extracurricular activities, it is probably inappropriate discussion. People talk; do not depend on others to keep your conversation in the original (honest) context.

Recognize Boundaries
Just as there are office appropriate discussions, there should be office boundaries. A colleague’s individual boundaries should be considered, recognized, and respected. Understand that different colleagues may have different boundaries; some may keep personal and work very separate and never mix the two; while others may share very limited parts of their personal life, but have a well-defined line of what is off limits for office colleagues. Respect everyone’s boundaries and establish some of your own. Your personal life does not need to be an open book for everyone at the office, things you share with friends are not necessarily things you should share in the office. Establish boundaries for social media, what to wear, what to share, and office appropriate behavior and etiquette.

Be Prepared
If there is a staff or client meeting on your schedule, do not show up empty handed. Attend meetings prepared, be on time (or even better, early), have pen and paper in hand, and be prepared to participate. If it is a client meeting, be sure to educate yourself about the project and the purpose of the meeting. Be attentive and avoid asking questions that were either just asked or discussed. Attend individual meetings with colleagues the same way. Always be prepared with pen and paper to take notes.

Take One for the Team
Everyone knows deadlines and changes happen. There will be crunch times that call for late nights at the office. Take one for the team and volunteer to stay late and be a dependable resource. If others are obviously in a time crunch trying to get a project completed, an offer to help is always appreciated and remembered.

Communicate
Do not forget to keep all lines of communication open. Keep project managers and supervisors aware of challenges and statuses of project work. If you have to be out of the office, be sure someone knows that you are out and when you can be expected back. If you are going to be out for an extended period of time, provide colleagues updates on all project work before your absence. Colleagues, supervisors, and managers should not have to chase you down for updates. Instead, be proactive in communicating important information with others, especially information that affects them.

Take Initiative
Most in the environmental arena can agree there are busy times of the year, and then there are lighter times of the year. Perhaps the holidays are
coming and while many are out on vacation, your workload is light. Take the initiative to prepare for upcoming work, review regulations or proposed changes, identify potential new work, or work a project with another colleague, even if it is outside of your comfort zone. Staying productive even when you are not busy can benefit you and others around you.

**It is a Career, Not a Job**
Decide if this is your job or career. What is the difference? Anyone can work a job; dedicated professionals have careers they are always seeking to advance. Those that have a job work the 8:00–5:00 shift, watching the clock until 5:00, and when it’s 5:00, work is done until the next workday. Consider it a career and you are more likely to put in the extra effort and go above and beyond.

**Seek Self-Improvement**
Ever wonder exactly how those supervisors, managers, and professionals made their break from being the young kid? Chances are they did the same thing you are working on now. Step outside your comfort zone and learn something new, find professional development courses, challenge yourself, work on a new project. Identify a peer that has achieved what you are hoping to achieve; work with them, ask them to be a mentor, learn from them, and discuss your career path with them. Set your goals and discuss them with your supervisor. Follow through and develop a plan that will help goals become a reality.

**Do Your Homework**
It is easy to run to peers and supervisors for answers on how to perform a task or to find an answer, but before you head down the hall, do some research of your own and make the effort to find a solution on your own. It is okay to seek a supervisor’s feedback, but only after you have put forth some time to determine the solution and understand the reasoning behind your decision. Do not rely on others to do your work.

If it seems like a lot of information to take in, recognize that most of it comes down to attitude. Having the right attitude will carry you far; it will even transition you from “young kid” to “young professional”. Know that every professional has had the same struggles and has been in your shoes. A slip up one day, does not define your future; brush it off as a lesson learned and move forward noting that a mistake was made and work toward self-improvement. The process is also a process of building your reputation; build one to be proud of and one to be respected. 

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**In the Next Issue...**

**Air Quality Sensors, Part 1**

Findings from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s 2013 Air Sensors Workshop are summarized in two issues (January and August) to help define the current state of the science in the research and development of air pollution sensors for measuring air quality. Part 1 (January). Emerging sensor technologies, data challenges and solutions, performance characteristics, and sensor calibration options. Part 2 (August). Citizen-based science, sensor performance, shared data opportunities, regulatory considerations, and a European example of multi-city sensor deployment for air quality research.

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