



## Chapter 13

# Realistic Expectations

You've heard of sticker shock and culture shock, but here's a new condition you should know about: Reality shock. Reality shock is the state many recent graduates find themselves in a week or so into their first job, when their expectations for the job collide head-on with the reality of the organization's expectations of them. So if your eyes ache from the flash of the copier machine and the blur of entering data, know this: Everyone starts somewhere.

Open up a copy of *Forbes* or *Fortune* and scan the pages. All those high-powered executives? You can bet that almost every one of them put in their time filing, copying, faxing, and doing all the tasks considered, well, boring. The vast majority of professionals paid their dues in the early years of their career. However, articles and stories that celebrate successful people often gloss over the boring stuff and head straight for the critical plays, breakthroughs, and stellar accomplishments. We want to hear about someone collating and three-hole punching about as much as we want to hear Uncle Dave's "when I was a kid I walked three miles each way to school" stories. And when most of what we know about the working world is based on television, magazine profiles, or even textbooks, it's not surprising that most of us suffer from at least a little reality shock.

We hope this chapter will help you set realistic expectations for yourself, understand the most common causes of reality shock, and see what you're doing now as one step in a successful career.

## **The importance of having realistic expectations**

Did you ever get so excited for a gathering or a big trip that when the actual event came it was anticlimactic? Not that it was bad, but it just wasn't what you imagined somehow. That gap between anticipated excitement and reality can be a bummer. And even if you are generally an optimistic and motivated person, it's not uncommon to get so excited by the job search and hiring process that when you start the daily work it seems, well, just like work. Contributing to this feeling is the great sense of accomplishment you get when you graduate: Here I am world! Qualified! Degreed! Skilled! Energetic! Master of my field! And then someone asks you to change the toner.

If you feel this reality shock you are by no means alone. In fact, the most common complaint of new hires after two weeks on the job is that it isn't what they expected. The good news is it's no longer a complaint after two months on the job. The message here is clear: Give it time. In the meantime, learn about the most frequent causes of new job dissatisfaction.

## **Employer needs/new employee needs**

It's natural to come out of school ready to "hit the ground running" and prove yourself. You are smart and motivated and eager to become an integral part of the team. Your employer probably hired you for all of these reasons and will ultimately be happy to let you work to your fullest potential. However, it's possible that your needs and your employer's needs in these early days are not the same. It's not necessarily that they are at odds with each other, but more that they're operating at different speeds. You want to run with your talents and take an active role in the organization; your supervisor

needs to train you and evaluate your skills and level of commitment. The organization is investing time, energy, and money in you and needs to see evidence that you're invested, too.

You can expect, then, that the early days will involve training and sometimes repetitive tasks. Employers generally like to ease new employees into the scene and provide them with background information as well as a chance to get used to the office norms. Some organizations' training programs are very comprehensive, designed to teach every aspect of the organization to every employee. (A restaurant analogy is helpful here: The chef should know how to wash dishes even if her job description focuses on food preparation.)

Whatever the reason for your new-hire job duties, remember they hired you because they're really busy and need help. Right now you might be stapling and changing the occasional ink cartridge, but once they see you care about the job you'll be on your way to doing other things that are more in line with your goals. Here are some things to keep in mind on these early days on the job:

- **Everyone starts somewhere.** Even the CEO has spent time copying, collating, and entering data.
- **Demonstrate initiative.** Volunteer for projects and tasks. Your main goal at this point, after all, is to get to know the ins and outs of your new organization.
- **Be positive.** Your positive outlook and willingness to contribute *will* be noticed.
- **Do a good job.** This one might be intuitive, but it bears repeating. Whatever your assigned task, do it carefully and do it well. Every action should convey your attention to details and ability to produce quality work.
- **Be patient with yourself.** It can be frustrating to learn the ropes at a new job. It's typical to make mistakes in these early days. On top of that, you may feel slow and inefficient. Don't worry. You will get the hang of it. Focus on one task at a time.



| <b>New Employee Needs</b>   | <b>Organization Needs</b><br><small>(supervisor and coworkers)</small>                                |
|---|---|
| <b>Challenging Tasks</b>  | <b>To know that the new employee is competent</b>   |
| <b>Autonomy</b>   | <b>Evidence that new employee is trustworthy and understands his/her function in the organization</b> |
| <b>To feel he/she belongs and is liked others' time and space</b> | <b>Evidence new employee is making an effort to fit in and respects</b>                               |

If you need to ask about the tasks you've been assigned, try to begin the question with an "I understand" statement. For example, say, "I understand the value of this training process, but I'm curious about when I can expect to transition to other tasks." This will show your supervisor that you're ready to move on without making it seem like you're resistant to instruction.

So far we've assumed you might be dealing with the reality shock that comes from not being given what you think is meaningful, challenging work. There are other types of shock, though. Sometimes you'll land in an organization that is so slammed with work that you get all sorts of interesting, high-stakes projects—and no training. A situation like this can make even the most competent person feel completely overwhelmed.

### You want cream and sugar with that?

Collin S., now a journalist for a national publication, was shocked when his supervisor asked him to go on a coffee run on his second day on the job. "Here I was, fresh out of college, having won all these awards and accolades in school and my boss wanted me to be the coffee boy! I was furious. Also kind of embarrassed because the errand was like a red flag: 'New guy. Low man on campus.' But I did it anyway, of course. What I realized after working there for a few weeks was that everyone took turns getting coffee or running out for sandwiches. Sure, they asked me that day because I was the new guy, but it didn't have nearly the significance I thought it did."

To make the most of it, ask questions of available coworkers, and try to learn by example. It's a challenge to face such a steep learning curve, but it can be incredibly rewarding in the end. In this case, your employer's need—to get someone who will learn and produce fast—might be a great jump start to your career with the organization. And chances are, you'll end up feeling like an integral player in the organization's success.

## Other common causes of reality shock

In addition to the gap between the employer's needs and your own, there may be some other unexpected realities of work. Following are some of the most common surprises:

- **Bosses.** Bosses are more demanding than college professors, and in the workplace success is often judged simply on results. This is in contrast to college, where success is often evaluated according to product and process. In other words, a professor might care if you've invested a lot of time and energy into a paper or project, but a boss is just going to look at the final product.
- **Salary.** Many graduates overestimate their initial salary potential as well as the frequency and rate of promotions. Raises, too, are on average much lower than television or corporate lore would have us believe. Your workplace's human resources department is a good place to start asking what standard promotion and salary practices are for that organization. You can also look online for regional norms if you want to get an outside perspective.
- **Workspace.** Another sometimes jarring reality is the workspace you'll have when you first start. A cubicle, a corner of the staff room, a shared table. If you're disappointed with your placement, just keep in mind that your status is a function of how you see yourself, not where you sit or what computer you've been assigned.

- **Work hours.** Other common surprises include time demands. You might be hired for what seems like a forty-hour a week job, but end up putting in many more hours learning the ropes and doing what it takes to complete the tasks you've been given. You will get more efficient as time goes on, but it's also possible that the organization survives on lots of people working lots of hours. Or even just a few people working lots and lots of hours. If that's the case, you'll either get acclimated to the time spent on the job or decide to shift gears.
- **Fitting in.** If one of the other feelings you experience is a lack of a sense of belonging, rest assured that this is typical at first. Your new coworkers are busy and won't necessarily go out of their way to meet the new person. But take heart. With time you'll get to know each other and the relationships will develop naturally. Do what you can to connect with them: Ask them questions about their interests, invite them to join you for lunch, and accept invitations they extend to you.

Whatever your experiences in the first weeks and months of your new job, try to keep your ultimate goals in mind. At some point in the not-so-distant future, you'll be doing the work you want to be doing.