

New grads: make the most of your first job

By Sheryl Silver - Career Source
If you graduated this spring with a degree in computer science (CS), electrical engineering (EE), or information systems (IS), you probably didn't have much time to think about your first job. In fact, you probably had more than one offer from which to choose. New graduates with technical degrees were in high demand this year.

But let's face it: you're going to have to get hired down the road, says Andrea Dolph, manager of career initiatives for Lockheed-Martin and co-author of the book *How to Hit the Ground Running in Your New Job*. Having the technical credentials and skills to get hired doesn't insure on the job success. Dolph, who has a master's in computer science and has worked as a software developer and technical manager, says in the course of her career, she observed a number of

performance problems that led people to be terminated in spite of their technical competence. Dolph says she and co-author Lynda Clements wrote their book to alert people to these potential pitfalls.

"The most critical issue," says Dolph, "is to recognize that there is an adjustment coming out of college and entering the workplace. There really is an 'expectation gap.' For one thing, says Dolph, "Even though students are on their own to some extent in college, they're still accustomed to having all their assignments very defined. As a result, many of them expect a lot of direction from their manager and managers simply can't do that anymore. There's been a lot of delaying and an increase in the span of control of most managers, so they simply don't have the time to give a lot of individual

attention to employees." There's also a trend toward "virtual organizations," says Dolph. "Managers may not even be in the same location as their staff," she notes.

These realities don't mean new employees should walk around guessing at what their managers expect of them. To the contrary, says Dolph, "you can sabotage yourself by not asking for direction. For example, if you've been told to complete a project 'sometime' or 'next week,' tomorrow, or next month? If you're not getting the details about a task you've been asked to perform, take the initiative to ask for clarification. I've never seen a manager who wasn't happy to fill in the details when asked."

To insure you meet your manager's expectations in completing a project, Dolph also recommends asking, "If I do this job, what are your expectations for fully satisfactory performance, and what would be required to exceed your expectations?" As you're progressing on the project, she suggests, "Ask periodically if you're meeting those expectations."

Dolph also urges first time job holders to seek out performance feedback if they're not getting it. Particularly, important, she says, is feedback about developmental needs. "It's always easier to hear the positive feedback," she says, "but ask for the areas where your manager sees you needing some improvement as well. That can help avoid unpleasant surprises when it comes time for your performance appraisal. It can also help you improve your skills and enhance your future marketability. The longer you're in the workforce, the higher the perfor-

environment," says Dolph, "that involves certain rules that cannot be violated."

Besides the "written" rules, Dolph says knowing the unwritten rules of an organization are crucial. That's where mentors can help. Make effort to develop some trusted advisors and mentors, advises Dolph. Mentors don't have to be managers, just someone more experienced," she notes.

And remember, despite your best efforts, "There will be times, when you're going to make mistakes," says Dolph. "That's to be expected. Just be sure to learn from your mistakes."

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