What your employer will expect

By Gloria Stevenson

WASHINGTON — Every year, millions of young people leave the familiar world of classes and textbooks for the unfamiliar realm of full-time work. This is a major life change, one in which young workers are apt to encounter responsibilities, rewards and opportunities far different from those they knew in school.

It often takes time for new workers to "learn the ropes," but young people may speed up the transition from student to worker by learning in advance what employers are likely to expect from them and what they, in turn, can expect from their employers.

This article offers a general preview of many of those expectations. Inasmuch as the work world is so varied, of course, the conditions and situations described here may not apply in every job.

Nevertheless, the following information generally holds true throughout the world of work.

The Job Contract. A person who accepts a job makes a contract with an employer; he or she agrees to perform certain duties in return for a specified number of dollars and other benefits.

In line with this agreement, the worker's foremost responsibility is to do the tasks he or she was hired to do, in the way and at the time that the employer wants them to be done.

To illustrate, suppose that Jane is a secretary whose boss directs her to type several letters and have them ready for signature "by close of business." Jane's responsibility is then to type the letters in the manner prescribed by her office before quitting time.

Should Jane fail to finish this assignment correctly or on time, she may be "chewed out" by her boss. Employers differ in their willingness to tolerate work they judge to be below par, but most have competency standards their employees must meet.

Employees whose work frequently or consistently falls below these standards may risk being fired for failing to keep up their end of the employment bargain.

In addition, employers often expect workers to take full responsibility for the work they do, to show interest in their duties, to perform to the best of their ability, and to ask questions if they don't understand exactly what they are supposed to do.

Employers generally do not welcome employees who do slipshod work, show obvious lack of interest in or distaste for their jobs, try to wiggle out of assignments, act resentful or angry when they are given work to do, or try to pass the buck for their mistakes.

All About Time. Besides being expected to do competently the work for which they are paid, workers are generally also responsible for being at work regularly, unless they are sick or have some other legitimate reason for being absent.

Workers who don't show up because they simply didn't feel like working or had difficulty in getting out of bed do not have legitimate reasons for absence.

Employers often expect workers who must be absent to notify their supervisors or co-workers as soon as possible. A new worker may be instructed to telephone the work place at—or even before—starting time on a day when he or she will be absent to explain the situation.

Workers who know in advance that they will miss work on a particular day often are expected to let their supervisors know as far in advance as possible. A worker who becomes sick one afternoon, for example, might notify the boss that he or she is likely to be absent the next day.

Workers sometimes need to take time off for doctors' appointments, to conduct banking or legal business they cannot take care of outside of work hours, or for some other acceptable reason. When such needs arise, workers often must notify their supervisors or get their employer's permission in advance.

Employers want workers to be on the job regularly in order to avoid work delays or interruptions. Important tasks may not get done if a worker assigned to them is not there, or else other workers may be pressed into taking on more than their share of work so that a job will be completed.

Moreover, in factories and other places where work is done by a coordinated team of employees, work activity may slow down or stop completely if too many people are absent.

Most employers are sticklers for punctuality for many of the same reasons that they expect regular attendance. Workplaces which are open for business between specified hours usually need to have workers there at those times to answer telephones, deal with customers, and carry on other work activities.

An employer's work output, profits and public image may all suffer if employees are not on hand to take care of business at the beginning of the workday.

Employers therefore usually expect workers to be ready to work at starting time, to stay until quitting time and to take no more than the alloted time for lunch periods, coffeebreaks or other work interruptions.

Workers who are unavoidably late for work are often expected to telephone their workplaces at or before starting time to let their coworkers know when they will arrive.

Some employers view irregular work attendance, habitual lateness and frequent abuse of policies on lunch or coffeebreak time as grounds for dismissal, and some workers are not paid for time they miss when they are absent or tardy.

Some organizations, however, do have paid leave plans which allow employees to be absent from work because of sickness, the need to conduct personal business or other specified reasons for a limited number of days or hours each year and still receive pay for the time they miss.

Vacation policies differ from employer to employer; many offer workers paid vacations, others do not; and the amount of time authorized for vacations,

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