

Why Didn't They Teach Me This In School?

For many young professionals, the transition from school to workplace can be abrupt. After having a student identity for most of your life, you are suddenly asked to shed this skin and take on a whole new set of unfamiliar situations, problems, and opportunities. Even for workers whose majors and courses of study correspond exactly to the work they will be undertaking, there will be all kinds of questions to confront in a new environment—how do I request time off, and how much is appropriate? Where do I find help and resources? How much should I rely on my student worldview when I look at a problem? It can feel like all the hard work you did in school turned out to be utterly irrelevant in a workplace. The good news is—you have more abstract skills than you think. You may not have been asked to memorize any of these tips and regurgitate them for a final exam, but they will serve you well in your career.

Problem Solving

Remember that class you took where you were totally in over your head? How did you get through it? Maybe you emailed your TA and asked to meet to go over a difficult problem set, or you reached out to a friend in the class to talk over a tricky argument in the reading, or you took to the library and battled it out for awhile. Figuring out your options and then selecting one or more to implement is a hugely helpful strategy in workplace problem solving. Coworkers are a huge wealth of knowledge, as are company resources. Knowing how to leverage these assets to your advantage can be the difference between getting stuck and breaking through.

Work-Life Balance

Even the most ambitious student can only fill their plate with so many classes, clubs, and extracurricular activities. No matter how much you took on, in school you learned more about your personal capacity for time and energy, which helped you make more informed choices about your schedule. Knowing where you cross the line from productive and busy to overworked and burned out is a great tool in the workplace. Saying yes to something which will denigrate the quality of your ongoing work does not help anyone in the long run, and managers will appreciate that you are honest about what you can realistically do—as long as you do it well!

Empathy

Being in school means being in constant contact with people, and with constant contact comes occasional conflict. Roommates are too loud, teammates disagree on strategy, teachers give out upsetting grades. It can be so easy to react instinctively—I'm right, they're wrong. The more difficult, and ultimately more rewarding path, lies in reaching for empathy. Maybe your roommate talks all night because she's on the phone with her faraway family. Maybe your teammate on the frisbee team disagrees with your strategy because he sees a hole in the opposing teammate's defense that you don't. A great first step in approaching conflict is asking questions to understand the other person's perspective, and considering that they are approaching an issue with the tools they have at hand, which will inevitably be different from yours. Making decisions at work can be difficult, especially when there are multiple people

involved in the process, but starting with a respect for others' perspectives yields more productive discussion and better outcomes for all.

Extra Credit

Did you ever have a teacher who offered a few more points in a class if you attended an extracurricular event or did a project? For busy students these opportunities can feel like a blessing and a curse—you can help salvage a grade, but you have to give up more of your time and energy. If you did opt to work for extra credit, maybe you learned something new while you boosted your points, even if it didn't feel like it at the time. In the workplace there are often all kinds of ways to seek out and benefit from "extra credit." There will be extra training sessions for your particular job, opportunities to jump on big, visible projects, maybe the chance to train a new employee. If you have the capacity, investing in work outside your given job description will give you a leg up on promotions and career development.

Group Projects

You know how this goes. You're chugging along on reading and essays, and your teacher suddenly assigns a group project. For many students this can be an instant source of frustration and anxiety. Inevitably there will be concerns about how the work is divided, and speculation about who is pulling their weight and who is not. Success in these group settings means figuring out productive ways to collaborate without getting bogged down in petty details. If you were able to pull this off as a student, then congrats! You're equipped to be a helpful and productive member of a team at work. And if you struggled, don't worry—you're on a path of learning and growth. Experience is the best teacher.

School may start to feel like a distant dream once you throw yourself into a job, but your experience as a student will continue to pay dividends for you as you tackle new problems and situations. Treating your job the way a student treats school—with an open mind and a sense of devoted focus—gives you the chance to learn and grow exponentially in your work. You may not remember the parts of the cell, but the soft skills you gained in your time as a student will prove invaluable in your career.

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