

Things I Wish Someone Had Told Me When I Was A Young Professional

By Jamie Cochran, AICP – Planning Service Group Leader, RS&H

Around this time of year as college graduation ceremonies are underway and students prepare for their first big jobs, as a university instructor, I always get questions from young people who want to know what to expect as they enter the working world. These questions always tend to make me reflect on my own experiences a hundred years ago as a young professional myself. I offer these few insights as a starting point in the hope they might help you, your kids, or your friends, or colleagues.

1. ***All any of us keep with us forever is our professional reputation, which includes our personal integrity.*** Think very hard before you do anything to jeopardize it.
2. ***Your career is a marathon, not a sprint.*** Watching your friends or colleagues pull ahead of you from time to time will undoubtedly happen – often more than once. Don't get discouraged – learn from others. Keep your focus on your own personal and professional development and compete with yourself to reach your own personal best.
3. ***Read – Read – Read*** – all types of publications, even those not pertaining to your field. Be as well-rounded a person as you can be. You never know where your next big idea will come from.
4. ***Make sure you have a circle of professional friends as your support system*** – people who root for you and cheer you on when things go well and help you bounce back when things don't go your way. Reciprocate when others need you, too.
5. ***Minimize time spent with negative people.*** Negativism squashes enthusiasm, creativity, and initiative.
6. ***Don't be overly concerned about making mistakes.*** Making mistakes when you're starting out is how we learn. Just don't make the same ones over and over again. Someone once said, "...anyone who hasn't made a mistake, hasn't learned anything."
7. ***It's good to explore opportunities that come out of the blue and aren't part of your "Five-Year Plan".*** You will have many more career opportunities to choose from than you think and some of them won't resemble anything you anticipated. Don't be tied to a strict plan.
8. ***Be known as a reliable person.*** Doing what you say you'll do is a critical part of personal and professional success.
9. ***Work on learning how to explain complex ideas to people outside your field.*** This is a very valuable trait to have in the workplace. It is said that you don't really understand something until you can explain it well to someone else.
10. ***Find at least one mentor who will help you learn the ropes.*** Having more than one is even better.
11. ***Sometimes you will have to choose whether to be respected or liked.*** Be prepared to choose.
12. ***Pay attention to how people perceive you.*** Be the authentic you, not a version you think other people want you to be. Most people are very good at recognizing fakes.

13. ***Make a list of people you admire and why you admire them.*** Revise and lengthen your list over time.
14. ***Bad bosses (and good ones) come and go.*** Learn as much as you can from both kinds. Nothing lasts forever.
15. ***Don't be in a hurry to move to a new job, unless it benefits you both in the short-term and long-term.*** Think through the pros and cons of each opportunity and how it will help advance you to your ultimate career objective, not just the benefits it brings now.
16. ***If your brain can't tell you which choice to make, trust your gut – it seldom is wrong.***
17. ***You can learn something from everyone if you pay attention.***
18. ***Treat people around you at all levels of your organization with the same respect you want to receive.*** You never know who your boss will be someday.
19. ***Smile when you meet someone.***
20. ***Find something in common with your colleagues and clients that is not work-related.*** It helps forge good, long-standing work relationships and gives you something besides work to talk about.
21. ***Try to see the humor in things at work – it relieves stress.*** Keep a few of your favorite cartoons nearby to give you a smile when you need one.
22. ***Make a list of what you want to accomplish as a professional.*** Revise your list and add to it over time. Check things off when you accomplish them.
23. ***Work on being the best communicator you can be – both in writing and verbally.*** In the electronic age, it's not as easy as you think. E-mail and texting will never be as effective as one-on-one talks or phone calls for certain types of communications. Know when to talk with someone in person, when to use the phone, and when to use e-mail or texting. Don't dismiss the importance of writing well – it will make you stand out as a professional.
24. ***Take a time management class, even if you have to pay for it yourself.*** It will reap benefits many times over during your career.
25. ***Help the people around you when you can.*** Random acts of kindness always come back to you – sometimes in wonderful, unexpected ways.

The most important thing I wish someone had told me early on was creating a balance between your work life, your family life, and your personal interests is really the biggest challenge we'll face as professionals. Don't shortchange any of these parts of your life!

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