

PREPARING FOR THE U.S. WORKPLACE

A Guide for MSU International Students

Whether you have been in the U.S. for one year or many, life as a student is different from that of a full-time employee (often referred to as “the real world”¹ by Americans). One of the most important skills to use in your first few months at work is observation. The workplace has its own culture, which can vary from company to company even in the same field. That said, here are some general guidelines to consider:

- Build a strong first impression: be punctual in your arrival to work, return from lunch break promptly, be on time for appointments, dress neatly and appropriately (find out if there is a dress code before your first day) don't make lengthy, numerous or unnecessary personal calls, and don't be the first to leave at the end of the day.
- Utilize company resources, such as the employee handbook, website or training workshops offered by the company (“in-house”). The human resources office can be a good source of information on company policy as well as the state and federal laws that impact your status as an employee. These resources will help you learn about the company's culture.
- Actively participate in staff meetings. Like the U.S. classroom, verbal input is often desired whether it is offering a new idea or reinforcing a suggestion made by another.
- Volunteer to serve on committees. This is a good way to learn about your colleagues in a different setting. Also, some companies encourage employees to participate in community work outside the office setting. Find out if your company has a favorite charity that it supports. Finally, the company may have sports teams it sponsors for recreation, such as softball. Being part of a team with colleagues in a casual pastime is another ideal way to interact.
- Be prepared for diverse workforces, for example, approximately 50% of U.S. workers are women. You will have colleagues from many racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. The U.S. workplace is very sensitive to sexual harassment and other inappropriate behavior. Although you may not intend a comment to be inappropriate, a colleague may interpret it as such. There can be serious repercussions to an employee's job and future with the company, depending on the particular situation. Definitions of unacceptable behavior may vary from company to company.
- Do not gossip about your own or others' personal lives. Office “grapevines”² tend to be faster than email. Something you may have told someone in confidence could become information shared by many. Be discreet as to how much personal information you reveal. For example, if you need to take a day off to help a sick parent, you may not wish to go into the details of their condition, depending on the situation.
- Schedule your time off well in advance. Though you may be ready for a vacation after your first week, it is likely you won't be eligible until several months - or a year later. Depending on the work environment and pace, it is advisable to request vacation days 2-4 weeks in advance, whenever possible.
- Use office property in a responsible manner. Make sure if you take materials home, they are used for office work at home - and returned to the office the next day.
- Likewise, use office technology in a responsible manner. Treat email as formal correspondence, with correct spelling, punctuation and grammar. Do not “surf the web” for pleasure while at work – nor should you store documents of a personal nature on an office computer. Finally, do not load computer games onto an office machine.
- Understand how Americans view their employer, for example, the days of working at one company lifelong have largely passed for the majority. On average, Americans change jobs 4-6 times in a lifetime.

- “Networking”³ is a valuable tool for your professional development. Volunteer work, professional association membership and conference participation may be ways to expand your connections within the company and the field.
- Use your MSU connection! As an alumnus, you are able to access the resources of the Office of Career Development – whether you are in an active job hunt or are interested in updating your resume. Also, remember to stay in touch with faculty and classmates, as they progress in their careers as well.
- Be aware of American body language. In general, Americans value a lot of eye contact during a conversation. It is routine to shake hands with someone upon introduction.
- Treat staff at all levels as important. In fact, you may find a secretary may greatly impact the quality of your work life. Also, when dealing with persons of high status, the secretary often serves as the “gatekeeper”⁴ to access that person. Finally, in keeping with American views on personal mobility, it is not unusual for someone in a support staff position to later be promoted to a professional job.
- It is important to learn colleagues’ names as soon as possible. On the first day, take a notebook to jot down such information. It is routine in most companies to call the boss and colleagues by their first name. Normally, companies evaluate a new employee within six months of arrival. This is a way to gauge your strengths and weaknesses. If your company doesn’t offer this formally, you may wish to ask your supervisor for this opportunity. Many Americans value “constructive criticism.”⁵
- Dating a colleague is not advisable. Some companies have explicit policies against this. Think very hard before you pursue a social relationship with a co-worker, since if it ends in an unpleasant manner, you will still be interacting with that person professionally.
- If you decide to change jobs, it is advisable to have a new one secured prior to resigning. Depending on the company, 2-4 weeks advance “notice”⁶ is expected before departing. You will need to consider your specific situation to determine whether or not to inform a current employer you are job hunting. If the company culture values loyalty or is highly competitive, you may wish to keep your search private for as long as possible.
- Be sure to maintain copies of all important correspondence and documents you both receive and produce. Start immediately to create a logical file system, so that you can easily access such items.
- When working on a document on the computer, which is important or will be used long-term, be sure to back the item up on disk, in addition to saving it on the hard drive.
- Music in the office environment can be a routine – or controversial – issue. If the workplace allows and/or encourages music, be sure to play any radio at a low volume, so you do not distract or offend your colleagues.
- If you have a conflict with someone at the office, it is usually best to try to resolve it directly with that person. If you are unable to do so, the next step would be to speak with your boss. If the situation still cannot be resolved at that level – or if it is an ongoing conflict with the boss – you may wish to use the assistance of the personnel office.

Source: Office for International Students & Scholars, New York University

¹ “The real world” – is often used to infer that the college environment is protective and it shields students from problems they will encounter upon graduation. More recently, it is also the name of a popular TV series on MTV.

² “grapevine” – is a term used to describe how information is transmitted from one person to another, often in the sense of rumors.

³ “networking” – is when people make alliances, often at the professional level, which can be ways to pass on information to each other, find out about recent developments, job openings, etc.

⁴ “gatekeeper” – is the person who controls the communication access for another person, often of higher status.

⁵ “constructive criticism” – is when feedback is given in a way that points out the problems, but also works with the individual to help them come up with ways to correct them.

⁶ “notice” – is when an individual informs a company that s/he is going to resign.