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Great Careers Don't Happen by Accident: Dos and Don'ts for Self-Promotion on the Job

[By Elizabeth Freedman]

Inside the office, most of us assume that the employees who work the hardest, are the smartest, or produce the best results are the same ones who wind up with the best projects, the most interesting opportunities—even the bigger raises and better promotions. After all, this kind of work-reward pattern makes sense; in school, the students who studied the most and worked the hardest usually got the "A"s, right?

Right...sometimes. And sometimes the "A" students were the ones who didn't spend too much time hitting the books but seemed to have a knack for acing the tests. Perhaps you remember "A" students who weren't the smartest ones at all; instead, they participated frequently in class or asked the most questions to earn their high marks. Even more annoyingly, you may have known one or two "A" students who could barely add but were loved and adored by all—especially the teachers.

For all you valedictorians reading, rest assured that most students with good grades earned them and deserved them, fair and square. But we also know that justice doesn't always prevail in quite the same way on the job. This isn't to suggest that hard work, producing results, and intelligence aren't key factors for success at work; in fact, it's hard to imagine any real progress on the job without these qualities. Still, consider the fact that the best folks on the job aren't necessarily the ones with the best titles or salaries, just as the best actors don't always win the Oscars at the Academy Awards each year.

How should you manage yourself—and your career—in this environment? Read on for some dos and don'ts:

DO imitate. The fact is that in any office, competition exists. I don't mean this in a

cutthroat kind of way, but recognize that plenty of talent is already out there. If you want what some of your more successful coworkers have, do what they do. Better yet, ask people who have what you want out for coffee or lunch. Prepare plenty of questions, listen, and find out what works for them when it comes to success on the job. (By the way, if someone is gracious enough to give you his time, don't argue or contradict his advice. Take it for what it's worth, and leave out stuff like "That would never work for me because..." After all, if someone is more successful than you, he's got something to say.)

DO commit to your job. Dedicate yourself to knowing more about your industry and profession, and gain expertise in your particular area. Join your profession's national association and local chapter, and go to their meetings and conferences. Attend seminars and lectures, and be willing to take vacation days and pay for this kind of stuff if your company won't ante up, because the type of learning you'll get and, more importantly, the people you'll meet will be worth their weight in gold.

DO try to see work through your boss's eyes. Don't forget that your job is to make her look good, so the more you understand about her world, the better. What are her time pressures, points of pain, and areas in which she feels most confident? When can you ask

questions, and when do you need to give her time and space? When you understand your boss's priorities, you can better position yourself for success because you'll schedule your work, tasks, and timing around what works best for her.

DO make an effort to get along with people of all ages and at all levels. When people are new to the workforce, they're often surprised that they're the youngest employees in the office. For some, this isn't a big deal—after all, once you start working together, you'll focus more on what you have in common and less on your differences. On the other hand, many of us tend to spend time around people our own age and aren't used to being around people who are our parents' or grandparents' ages (unless they actually are our parents or grandparents) on a regular basis, so we're not quite as comfortable conversing, making chit-chat, and generally building relationships with people of different ages. Just remember that your coworkers aren't your parents, no matter what their age, so act as professionally with them as you would with anyone else.

DON'T forget where you sit on the totem pole. Every office has a pecking order and hierarchy, so pay homage to yours. There's a fine line between taking initiative and sidestepping protocol, and success at work means recognizing the chain of command, even if it seems inefficient and antiquated to

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you. If it drives you nuts to get 10 different people to approve every memo you write, talk to your boss and see if you can cut out a layer or two in the bureaucracy. Still, don't hold your breath on this one. The reality is that most people have more time and knowledge about how things work than you, so your goal, at least in the beginning, is to work as best you can within the system—not to change or ignore the system.

DON'T assume that opportunity isn't always knocking. In other words, use any chance you get to demonstrate your talents. Don't put the minimal effort into something because "nobody will read it anyway" or show up looking sloppy because you sit in your cubicle all day. Trust me, the one piece of work you decide to blow off will be the one assignment your boss decides to take a close look at. As far as you're concerned, every day is game day, so keep your guard up and be ready for opportunities to shine.

DON'T get too hung up on how things "should be" at work. Sure, work is filled with annoyances like bureaucracy, office politics, hypocrisy, and plenty more, but keep your

attitude in check. True, this is easier said than done, but everybody gets driven nuts by work sometimes; when you voice your complaints, concerns, or other issues about this kind of stuff on a regular basis, you'll be seen as a complainer and immature or someone who doesn't have the history or experience on the job to understand why things are the way they are. At the very least, you'll look like someone who has expectations that are out of whack, so even if you are as right as rain, keep your thoughts to yourself and let it go. You've got better things to worry about, anyway.

DON'T stay hidden in your cubicle all day. Don't keep your nose so close to the grindstone that your coworkers have no idea who you are and what you do. Make the effort to get out. Eat lunch with other people, get involved by helping with a project or serving on a committee outside of your job description—do anything to connect with others. Get invited to meetings or go to programs and events that are related to your profession. At the very least, use email and other tools to communicate with others often. For example, at the end of a project,

send out a group email to thank everyone or acknowledge your part on the team: "Wanted to thank you all for letting me play a part in our work for Client X. Looks like we've landed another six-month contract as a result—great job, everyone!"

About the Author

Elizabeth Freedman, MBA, is an award-winning speaker and business columnist and is the author of *Work 101: Learning the Ropes of the Workplace Without Hanging Yourself* and *The MBA Student's Job-Seeking Bible*. She was a 2005 finalist for College Speaker of the Year, an honor awarded by the Association for the Promotion of Campus Activities, and runs a Boston-based communications and career development firm that helps new professionals look sharp, sound smart, and succeed on the job. Clients include The Gillette Company, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and The Thomson Corporation. For more information about the author, please visit www.elizabethfreedman.com.

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