

First Job?

**Coping with starting work,
your first month survival guide**

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Congratulations on starting your first job.

You'll probably experience a honeymoon period for your first few days where everybody will be nice and friendly as they show you around, introduce you to people and welcome you on board.

Even so it's going to feel a bit odd. After all you've just left a place, whether it's school, college or university where not only did you know your way around since you'd been there for a number of years, but where (leaving aside the teaching staff) you'd been in a relatively senior position, and surrounded by people that you've grown to know over a prolonged period. Whereas now you're starting somewhere completely new, with its own rules and networks that you're going to need to get used to, as probably the most junior member of staff, knowing precisely no one.

Do you remember your first day at big school? Well in many ways you're back there again.

By the end of week two, with piles of work landing on you apparently at random, from people who seem demanding and to expect you to just know what to do with it all, and the phone going all the time, you might feel yourself drowning as you wonder how you are ever going to handle all this.

Well the first thing to say is that you're not alone in going through this.

Schools or colleges are often great at getting you the qualifications you need to land a job and guiding you in how to apply and land it. But given the many different career paths for students, it can be difficult for them to fully prepare you for the range of practical issues you will run into at work and how to make a success of it once you've started.

And that's a pity, because it's an important formative experience. Your first 'proper' job is potentially the foundation for what you are going to be doing for the next 40 or 50 years, and how far you are going to get, so if you want to have a great career it's important to make a great start, and it's never too early to begin either.

They say you never get a second chance to make a first impression (actually if you think about it that's complete rubbish, you just have to make it on someone else, somewhere else), so this short guide is focused on making those crucial first impressions in those critical first few weeks at work.

Think of it as a crash course on a few essentials intended to ensure you get off on the right foot in your first month or so.

It's therefore a bit of a catch-all of some basic information and survival tips, a mix of Dos and Don'ts to get you started.

Key behaviours – the Dos

There are a limited number of things you probably need to concentrate on in your first month or so as summarised below.

- **Be there and be there on time** – one of the simplest steps you can take, but one which is entirely within your control and which is very visible and gets noticed, is to be punctual. Downstream in your career you may need to deal with the cultural problems of presenteeism but don't worry about this now.

At this stage of your career you want to be building social capital and this is one of the quickest first steps to doing so.

So, you should always arrive early (*on time is late*, some say) and crucially stay on for as long as there seems to be work to do (never be the first to leave).

You will probably come across people at some point in your

career who always spend the last quarter of an hour before the end of the official working day packing up so they can get away on the dot every time. Clock-watcher is the term and it's not a description you want to pick up.

One tip I've seen is if asked why you are there you can say; *I just want to be available to help out with anything that needs doing and learn as much as I can.*

- **Get your game face on, give a good impression from the moment you walk in** – if you've seen the film *Pulp Fiction*, think about how Vincent and Jules go about getting into character outside the door of the flat they are about to hit. They are heading into their own particular work environment so they deliberately adopt their work personas before starting.

One of my colleagues on a turnaround had a checklist he kept in his car and went through every morning before he walked into the office; reminding himself he was there as a director, staff would be looking to him for leadership, and he had to conduct himself confidently, smile and be upbeat.

So, develop something similar for yourself. Don't just walk in to your work in the morning. Before you get there deliberately make a little time every morning to think about how to give the best impression from the moment you arrive, and if nothing else, before you walk in the door, smile!

- **Dress appropriately** – this could reasonably fit as part of giving a good impression but it's important that you and your appearance fit in with the organisation's culture and values. A professional firm will have certain standards of professional dress code which can either be quite prescriptive (one financial organisation I'm told issued a formal dress code notice stating in effect 'no cleavage') or simply enforced through the cultural

norms. So, look around at what everyone else is wearing and check that your dress is appropriate.

Not being too slack (you have flip flops on while everyone else around you in your law office is in a suit and tie) is the obvious failing, but sometimes being overdressed (everyone else in your software firm is in beachwear while you have a three-piece suit and gleamingly polished shoes) can be a problem in achieving a cultural fit with your colleagues.

Of course, dress can also vary depending on the role people have to fulfil, so while the coders at that software firm might work in very casual clothes, the sales staff who are out selling services into big corporates will have to dress formally to give the right professional image to the clients, ie fit in with that culture.

- **Listen and take notes** – quite simply **write** everything down.

Your work is going to be overwhelming to start with and people will be telling you lots of different things, which you'll be expected to remember.

If you don't write it down, you won't remember. There'll just be too much to absorb too quickly.

So, write it down!

Get yourself a notebook and carry it with you everywhere you go at work. Use it to note down everything: work to do, names (and contact details), deadlines, ideas, everything. It's important to realise how much you are in learning mode in these early days and how much you are therefore going to need to take notes to be able to refer back.

Immediately this will help you keep yourself organised and avoid forgetting things that need doing, people you need to deal with and so on (at one UK business I've heard about, being seen

without a notebook is regarded as a disciplinary offence!).

Longer term it will help you as well. People are usually very willing to help someone new and show them the ropes, but there are few things more irritating than finding they have to be told again and again. No one wants to have to go through telling you the same stuff twice or three times and this will quickly infuriate them, not least because it shows a lack of respect for their time and the effort they've already made for you.

Whereas if you can acquire the reputation that you only have to be told once (because you write it down and learn it) then you will be earning credibility and a good reputation.

- **Plan** – a properly organised and prioritised To Do list is your best friend. It's the way you order and organise your world and turn the stream of work heading your way into something manageable (a subject covered in more detail in Chapter 4).

The truth is, if you don't plan, others will plan for you and you will simply end up reacting to and running around after their priorities, not yours.

To begin with you simply need to start daily planning for yourself. For the moment, at the end of each day sit back for a moment and take the time to put together an outline plan of what's expected of you tomorrow. In your notebook, you'll be keeping a schedule of all the dates when projects are due or expected so you can keep track of them and pull them into your To Do list for the next day. If having a structured format for writing down notes, planning your day and prioritising your projects would help then use a copy of *My Time And Project Manager* (see the section on further reading and resources).

As part of this process go through today's list to make sure you've

done what you were supposed to do and to carry over anything that didn't get finished today into tomorrow's list.

- **Work to make everyone else around you look good** – forget about yourself for the moment and instead work on the basis that your job is simply to make your boss (and your team of co-workers) look good (much more on this in Chapter 5).

So, try to think about what their goals are and how you can support them. Ask yourself:

- What does your boss want and why?
- And so, what you can do to help them so you become their, and your team's, go to person for getting things done.

Be proactive and always look for chances to help and be useful. This will make you stand out and in due course you'll start to be seen as indispensable.

If you focus on serving others what you are actually doing is investing in your social capital, while at the same time helping yourself to learn and develop. Do this throughout your career and it will pay back handsomely, believe me.

- **Always be ready to learn** – start off by being honest and embracing the fact you are new. No one expects you to have all the answers so don't pretend you do because it's not going to fool anyone.

Instead treat your job as a chance to learn, but don't simply expect to sit back and be taught.

You need to be proactive and self-starting. So, if you find a problem, don't just go running for help immediately or ask someone to show you what to do. Instead think about the issue to see if you can come up with answers or options yourself, and

then if you need to, go and check you have got the right answer.

Don't be afraid to ask for help. Yes, as we've covered above you don't want to be bothering people for the same instruction time after time, but if you have a problem you can't solve or aren't sure you have the right answer for, then ask.

I'll let you into a secret, people generally like to be asked for help. It makes them feel good about themselves (*I'm seen and respected as an expert*) and what they're doing (*I'm being nice and helpful, how great am I?*) and if they're passionate about what they do they will positively want to share their knowledge with you. Some of them will even write a book about it...

And while we're on the subject of learning, learn through errors. Cock-ups and errors happen to us all, it's part of life. So, when you make a mistake admit it, don't hide it. Take it to your boss (yes, you read that right) and show them what you've done and why. Work out together what needs to be done to fix it and how you can avoid it in future.

Trust me, it's a better way than them finding out for themselves down the line.

- **Think about what you are doing and why.** Your firm is employing your brain as well as your hands. Early on in my career I had to prepare what were known as Section 48 reports on companies, which I did the way everyone else did in my department. I found an old one to use as a template, and in those days actually cut and pasted the details of the current company onto it to be typed up.

Or I did until I got a new boss who called me into his office, threw my report at me and chewed me out asking me why my Section 48 report didn't meet the requirements of Section 48 of the

relevant law? To which the answer was, although I didn't say so at the time, because:

- I'd never read Section 48 of the relevant act, even though I knew it existed; because
- It had never even occurred to me that I ought to so as to check I knew what I was doing!

Instead I'd simply had my brain parked in a bucket by the side of my desk while I got on with pushing my papers.

And as your career develops make sure you continue to learn. Take responsibility for your own development. After the bollocking I got from my boss for that report I realised I needed technical training in the area I was working in, so I signed up for a professional training course which eventually gave me my next business qualification.

- **Seek feedback** – check in with your manager on a regular basis to get their view on how you are doing. Your job is to make them look good, so don't you want to know if they feel you have?

Share your To Do list with them at the start of each day, is it covering everything they need or is there anything else they want? This helps you ensure you get off on the right track and shows them you are being proactive in planning your work.

Check in with them before you go home to ensure everything's been covered off that's needed today.

Show them your notes on a regular basis (that in itself is likely to impress them). Ask them whether they feel things have gone right and whether there's anything you could have done better?

If there is, then look to make sure you do it next day.

Depending on how formal your workplace is, you might seek a

regular feedback session, say on a monthly basis (particularly while you are working towards the end of your probation period). If you can get this agreed pull together a short summary from your notes about what you've been doing, what you've learnt, and what you see the key tasks and areas for development are for the next month.

In essence this is some of the material a decent appraisal and development system should be requiring on a six-monthly or annual basis for all staff, you are just engaging in the same sort of process on an accelerated basis during your first few months when your need for development is likely to be most acute.

- **Participate** – your work is a social environment and to be successful you need to understand the culture and build relationships. There is something to learn from each of the people around you, so dive on in and become part of the team.

What's the coffee making rota? (Probably you as the newbie, but you never know.)

Where do people go for lunch? Go with them and talk to people. Same again after work if people socialise.

- **Work out the social rules, quickly** – every workplace will have its own little customs and practises which are the social norms everybody knows, works by and unconsciously expects everybody else to follow. So, if you don't, because nobody told you or showed you, then people will see you (probably unfairly but there you go) as acting anti-socially.

Just getting a cup of coffee can be a minefield. What's the fridge and milk etiquette? Do people make a round of hot drinks, or get their own? Do people have their own mugs or is it a free for all? If you've used the last of the water in the kettle are you expected to

fill it up again? What happens to dirty cups? Are you expected to wash up after yourself, put them in a dishwasher or leave them for a cleaner?

Get this wrong and you'll be seen as the one who took my mug (and my milk), didn't make a round of drinks for everyone, left the kettle empty for the next person and left your dirty cups in the sink as a mess for someone else to have to wash up and put away.

- **Don't burnout in month one** – the first point on this list was about being in early and staying on while there's work to do. But this needs to be tempered with looking after yourself, since taken to extremes there's always more work to do and you could then get sucked into working longer and longer hours.

Unfortunately, in the work environment there's always more work, and there'll always be some people who will be happy to let you put in all the hours (even though in the long run this will lead to stress and lower productivity), the only person you can really trust to look out for you, is you.

So, you need to take responsibility for your own work-life balance right from the start.

You need to decide what your boundaries are. You need to ensure that you keep a life outside of work and you need to make sure you work hours you are comfortable with and take the holidays and breaks you need.

The Don'ts

If those are the Dos, then there are also clearly some Don'ts that you want to avoid.

Some of these are obviously the flip side of the Dos. If looking business-like and presentable is a Do, then turning up looking like a

slacker or a tramp (in either UK or US meanings) are obviously a no-no.

The other key Don'ts are probably also pretty obvious if you stop to think, the only problem being that sometimes people don't:

- **Getting drunk when socialising** – if there are social activities organised at or around work then you ought to be taking advantage of these to meet your colleagues outside the work environment. It can be a great shortcut towards getting to know them and building good relationships. But remember, this is now work and you're an employee and not a student anymore so don't let a free bar go to your head.

Enjoy yourself. Yes, you want to get on with people and make a good impression. Fun, good company and sensible is good, beneficial even, given that as you get on in your career socialising is likely to become an ever more important part of it at senior levels (see Chapter 8) and these skills are seen as an asset.

But whether there's actually a manager there or not, be careful in what you do and how you behave so don't overdo it, as stories about you will get around and get back to the office quicker than you can ever imagine. An outrageous drunken clown is not an asset, they're a business liability.

- **Gossip/over confide** – neither your manager, nor your co-worker are your best friend (certainly not yet anyway).

So, don't gossip about what you think about other people in the workplace, who you like and who you don't, or over confide about issues at home. All that's going to do is lead to trouble as it gets around the grapevine and you don't want to be seen to be a source of trouble, do you? Thought not.

- **Grandstanding your personal views** – following on from above,

you will probably share a range of views amongst your friends where there's a degree of consensus or acceptance of differing points of view on anything from politics to football teams. But that's amongst a self-selecting group of people (as anyone with, say, political views that were completely unacceptable to the rest of the group is, in practise, unlikely to stay a member of that group for long).

But the people you work with aren't brought together because they like each other's company and share each other's outlooks and opinions. They are all there simply because they were hired to do jobs which needed doing, so you need to appreciate:

- there is likely to be a wide range of deeply held views in your workplace, some of which you may fundamentally disagree with; and
- the last thing your employer wants is someone starting arguments with other employees, particularly over non-work related issues.

All of which is a long-winded way of saying remember you are there to work, not debate or campaign, so park your politics or whatever at the door and don't bring up contentious subjects at work, certainly not until you have a thorough understanding of the culture, and have established strong and respected relationships that can take the weight of your opinions.

Starting conflict in the workplace is not the way to give your boss what they want.

- **Never forget you are now representing your organisation** – your employer is hiring you and certain of your attributes to do a job. Your private life is your private life and while it's up to you how you live it, it's not unreasonable for your employer to expect that

what you make publicly available shouldn't bring the organisation into disrepute.

This is an area where I'd expect quite a lot of potential conflict to arise in employer/employee relationships, particularly as social norms change. (How many years back would it have been when there could have been concerns about employees coming out as gay, for example?)

However, without getting into a debate about the rights and wrongs of it, the advice simply needs to be, in these days of ubiquitous social media, think very carefully about what image you are conveying. These days what happens in Vegas stays on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Pinterest, Instagram...

- **Use social media/gaming at work** – your employer is likely to have the old-fashioned idea that they've actually hired you to work. So, unless that work is to create a viral social media buzz, then you are not there to chat to your mates, work on your high score, scroll your Facebook feed, download pirated movies, or curate your blog. That's all personal stuff so keep it for personal time (apart from pirating stuff aka the theft of copyright material that someone has slaved over creating – just don't do that at all).

Some practicalities

It's also worth covering some practicalities that should be sorted out in your first few days on the job, and if not you might want to speak to your Human Resources (HR) or Personnel Department to ensure these are organised:

- **Employment contract and terms and conditions** – you will need to be issued with and sign a written contract of employment specifying the key terms of your employment such as your job title, who you report to, your rate of pay, hours, place of work,

and holiday entitlement.

It should also specify the details of any initial **probation period** so you are clear on the length and review date. You should also make sure you understand as far as possible what your probationary period will be judged on (and if there any formal targets, for example) so you can focus on what you need in order to ensure success at that stage.

- **Employee handbook** – the employment contract is usually quite a short agreement and it will often include a reference to an employee handbook which is a much larger set of documents, which may be annotated and updated over time. The handbook is where details of the organisation’s policies, rules, codes of conduct, and key employment processes such as appraisal systems, grievance procedures and disciplinary processes are set out.

While almost all organisations have one of these, they vary widely in how it is used and viewed. Broadly the larger and more formally organised the organisation, the more this will be used and referred to as a day to day management tool and so you need to be aware of it and its key provisions.

At the other end of the scale smaller and less formally managed organisations may have compiled one once (or had their solicitors write one when they last updated their employment contracts) but it’s sitting gathering dust in a cupboard somewhere as no one ever looks at it, much less updates it. In which case the advice is probably leave well alone.

- **Job specification** – as you’ve been hired to do a job, it’s useful if it’s spelled out what that job is as a first step in giving you a fighting chance of understanding it and doing it.

However, please never, ever, think that your job description is the be all and end all of what you are there to do. Think of it as the minimum core of what you must do, and then start looking at what else you can do on top of it.

Never even think, let alone say, That's not in my job description. No one likes a jobsworth.

- **Induction** – most organisations of any size should have some form of induction process as a way of bringing new staff on board. The degree of formality will vary enormously and can range from a simple tour and introductory checklists, through to formal training and issuing of copies of mission statements and charters of How we work with each other.

At the very least you should expect briefings on some basics such as Health and Safety policies and procedures and usually IT and security; as well as a process for issuing you with things like a security pass, any IT or PPE (personal protection equipment) you need and so on.

Some organisations have either formal or informal guides where someone is your key point of contact for an initial period with responsibility for showing you round and how things work.

- **Occupational health** – in some workplaces, particularly those where there are any identified health risks you may need to have health tests. One of my businesses operates metal presses so ear defenders are compulsory on the shop floor and all staff have to have their hearing tested when they join and then again on a regular cycle.
- **Skills training** – there may be specific skills you need in order to be able to work (when I joined an accountancy firm after university the first two weeks were straight onto a residential

course on double entry bookkeeping before I even saw the office), or there may be work specific processes and procedures that you need to learn (*Here's our Standard Operating Procedure for quality checking our widgets*).

In either case, you will need to establish what training you are expected to have and how this is being organised.

- **Any choices you need to make** – your organisation may offer employees a range of benefits as part of their remuneration packages. The range of benefits on offer usually increases as you get more senior, but you may still need to make choices about whether to join a pension scheme, for example, so you need to be clear about this as such benefits will normally be trade-offs against salary.
- **Organisation chart** – it's very useful to get a copy of an organisation chart (or organigram) if you can. This is a diagram showing how the organisation is structured and who reports to whom. It will help you see how the part you are working in fits into the whole.
- **Expenses policy and process** – if you are going into a job which involves travel (such as sales) inevitably you are going to incur expenses for which you will want to be reimbursed. Organisations' policies will vary, and this is an area which can be very strictly policed, so make sure you understand what is and is not claimable, keep receipts to back up any claims, and know how to fill in and get your claims properly authorised.

Employers have to rely heavily on the honesty and discretion of their employees in respect of expenses, since by definition this type of expenditure often cannot be pre-approved. Employers are therefore very sensitive to any suspicions that their expenses system is being abused. So, filing any claim for dodgy or padded

expenses is a very quick way to severely damage your reputation for honesty and get yourself into real trouble. Just don't do it.

- **IT equipment, access, training and support** – if you are taking a job which involves use of IT equipment then make sure you know who's responsible for sourcing this and setting you up, that you have all the passwords you need, training is arranged in any new or specialist software you are going to need to use, and crucially, who do you call for support when it stops working. Write that number down now somewhere you can find it easily.
- **IT policies** – on a related note ensure you are familiar with your organisation's policies on use of IT at work, both the organisation's and your personal devices. This isn't just about whether you can use your computer to surf the web at lunchtime but it will be about IT security. Being responsible for introducing a virus into your organisation's IT system because you've not complied with rules governing security, and plugged in that old memory stick of yours, or clicked on a dodgy website, could be a severely limiting career move.

These threats are real. Whilst finishing this book one of my businesses suffered a ransom ware attack, which encrypted all our files, meaning we lost a whole week's transactions and had to do a full restore from our back-up.

- **Time recording** – many organisations will want you to record your time as this forms part of their process of assessing costs on projects or billing services to clients. So, if you don't want accounts breathing down your, and worse at this stage, your boss's neck, about missing timesheets, ensure you understand what you need to do when about recording and reporting your time.

Why have they employed you?

But before we get into more detail in the following chapters about how to manage your working life, it's not uncommon to develop some nagging doubts during those early weeks and months about whether you can cope, so here's a couple of things to think about by way of a bit of reassurance.

Remember, they hired you – that's important

You have been hired. The organisation which has employed you spent time, effort, and cold hard cash, often quite a lot of all three, in looking to find, interview, select and engage someone; and out of all the people who went into the find part of the process (and believe me, there's likely to have been a lot), they chose you.

So always remember:

- they've not hired you for the fun of it, they've done so because they have work that needs doing (probably lots of it as you are possibly finding out)
- they have picked you to do it; and
- they (particularly the individuals involved in the recruiting process) are invested in you and you making a go of it.

After all, having spent all that time, effort and money, don't you think the people who were involved in hiring you are going to want the process to be seen to be successful? If it goes well they've got bragging rights about what a good choice they made in you haven't they? But if you don't do well, or even leave, then that's a pain for them; not only might they look bad in front of their colleagues for having got it wrong, but the likelihood is they are going to have to go through the process all over again.

The bottom line? Once you have been hired, whatever it feels like,

people will be wanting to make the job work for you so they will be motivated to help and be supportive. All you have to do is manage this the right way.

But what if I don't know how to do the job?

If this is troubling you as a question it's worth asking yourself what they hired you for (and spoiler alert), it's not usually your skills or experience.

There are broadly three things that employers can be looking for in a potential employee and these are:

- **Skills** – your technical ability at the task.
- **Aptitude** – your natural ability for the task.
- **Attitude** – your behaviour towards the task.

A well-used recruitment mantra is *Hire for attitude, train for skills*.

This reflects a view that your attitude towards the work will be driven by your personality, which is something that will be really hard to change (for more on this see Chapter 3); whereas particular skills can be taught (and for some entry level positions there may be no assumptions about you having any previously acquired technical skills at all).

In some rare cases employers who want to train people in their own particular approach can deliberately look for people with little or no technical skills or prior experience in an area so that they can start with a clean sheet.

Whilst *Hire for attitude, train for skills* seems a sensible approach, it is however a little simplistic as training someone with aptitude is easier than training someone without.

I personally have the hand-eye coordination of a sack of cement with the athletic physique to match. However much I might want to, be

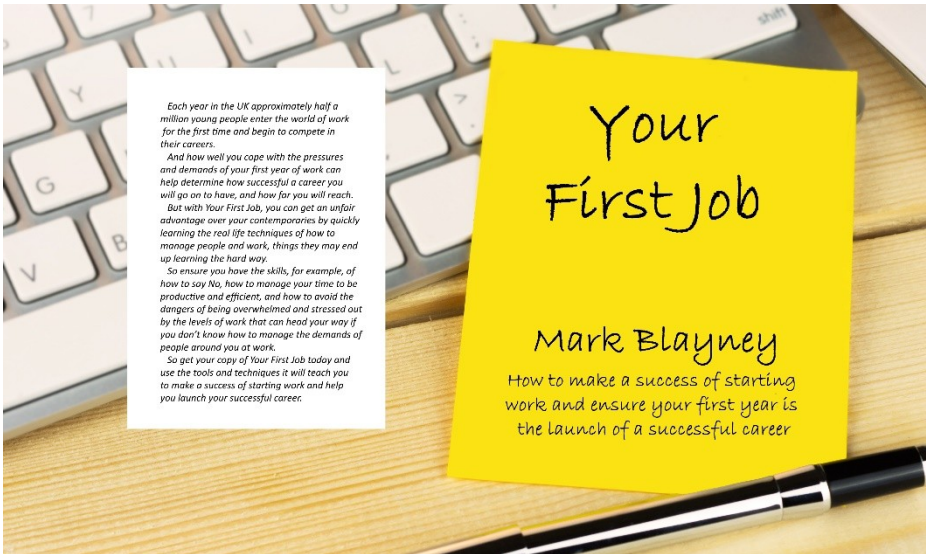
keen to learn and be prepared to put the effort in, my aptitude for developing the skills required to become a world class ping pong player is therefore abysmal. So, if an organisation wanted to hire someone to train for this role, whatever my attitude, I should quite rightly come last on the list of possible candidates.

So, in taking you on your employer will have taken a view on your skills, or even lack of them, and will have decided to hire you taking these into account, usually because they felt your attitude and your aptitude were actually what they were looking for.

And if they are happy about your attitude and aptitude, given that they know what they were looking for in respect of your job, then really, who are you to argue?

Your First Job

This guide is an extract from *Your First Job: How to make a success of starting work and make your first year the launch of a successful career* by Mark Blayney.



Each year in the UK approximately half a million young people enter the world of work for the first time and begin to compete in their careers.

And how well you cope with the pressures and demands of your first year of work can help determine how successful a career you will go on to have, and how far you will reach.

But with **Your First Job**, you can get an unfair advantage over your contemporaries by quickly learning the real life techniques of how to manage people and work, things they may end up learning the hard way.

So ensure you are equipped for example with the skills to say No, and manage your time to be productive and efficient, and avoid the

dangers of being overwhelmed and stressed out by the levels of work that can head your way if you don't know how to manage the demands of people around you at work.

So get your copy of **Your First Job** and use the tools and techniques it will teach you to make a success of starting work and help you launch your successful career.

In **Your First Job** Mark shows you how to deal with the wide range of issues you will face in your first year at work, providing you with key skills and techniques for:

- Managing yourself
- Managing your time and work
- Managing your co-workers and your boss, and working in a team
- Managing to say no
- Managing communication
- Managing your career
- Managing people and emotions
- Managing stress

Your First Job (ISBN 978-0-9956170-1-8) will be published by The Work Press on 20 February 2017 and be available at all good bookshops and online.

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Mark Blayney is a partner and co-founder of GPS Capital Limited a private equity business and is involved in a portfolio of trading businesses as investor, director or both.

He sought a career in business rescue and turnaround from the outset, obtaining an MBA, and then an accountancy qualification and insolvency license while working for PwC's business recovery service in both the UK and Tanzania, where he ran a match making business and set up a corporate recovery practice.

Having been seconded into one of the UK clearing banks and been involved in starting up a turnaround practice within PwC, he left to go into industry, before setting up in business as an independent executive and finance professional in 2000.

He is the author of a number of practical guide books for business owners on strategy, management, finance, and creating and realising business value, and has been actively involved in business training and education having spoken at a number of leading UK business schools.

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