Every year, college graduates all over the country work hard at planning their careers, honing their interview skills, and preparing for job searches. As you enter your new career, it is important to recognize that the first year is a transition stage in which you’re not a college student anymore, but you’re not really a professional yet, either.

If you consider your first year on the job separately from the rest of the career ladder, the world of work begins to make a little more sense. Here are some tips to help you wade into your first job in professional forestry.

**First of All, Slow Down**

You may be tempted to show your new organization how smart and talented you are right away by using the “big splash” approach. Your natural tendency is to charge ahead, to make big contributions and dream up great ideas for new initiatives or changes to the organization. Understand what people expect of you, particularly the accepted work ethic and social norms. Pay attention to the political climate and how people communicate and work together. And remember, you can’t change the culture until you are accepted into it.

**Make a Good Impression**

You should place a premium on impression management in your first year. Everything you do early on will be magnified. As you progress in your career and build a professional reputation, your track record will give you a cushion against mistakes and interpersonal gaffes. But in the first year the impressions really count.

Because every organization is different, it is difficult to precisely define the “right” impression. But the first step in making a good impression in any setting is to read the environment. You want people to notice your professional maturity, not your college-student ways. They are looking for someone who has good judgment and can build good relationships with colleagues, is ready to change and learn, and has a healthy respect for the experience and expertise of other employees.

**Manage Your Expectations**

If you work at keeping your expectations realistic, you won’t become disillusioned. Odds are that many things about your job will surprise you.

The picture the recruiter painted of the organization was probably a bit rosy. Your first job probably won’t be as nearly as glamorous, as important, or as high-level as you thought it would be. The way decisions are made won’t be nearly as logical as you expected, and people skills and teamwork will be much more important than you ever imagined. New graduates often comment on how different the challenges are from what they had expected—how much more pressure they feel and how different their tasks are from what they had envisioned.

**Become a Savvy Subordinate**

The single most important person in your first year on the job is your new boss. Working for a boss may be unlike any other relationship you have had in the past. You must be sure that what you do supports your boss. Learn what he or she wants, needs, and expects—and then do it. Bring your boss solutions, not problems. And remember that having a bad boss is not a legitimate excuse for a poor performance.

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**Tips for a Successful First Year on the Job**

Every organization has its own personality and culture that, in turn, translates into unique sets of rules and norms—often unspoken and informal. Organizations want employees who “fit” the culture. If you don’t take the time to understand the culture and politics of the organization, you are almost certain to make mistakes that could cost you. For example, one new hire was quick to criticize a project, only to find out later that it was started by one of his senior managers who still believed in it.

Pay attention to “the way things are done around here.” Find out the basic mission and philosophy of the organization. Understand what people expect of you, particularly the accepted work ethic and social norms. Pay attention to the political climate and how people communicate and work together. And remember, you can’t change the culture until you are accepted into it.

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**What’s your story?**

This article may trigger some memories (recent or ancient) about your own experiences as a new employee. Or you may want to offer some additional tips from an employer’s perspective. Either way, send your recollections or suggestions (250 words or less) to Fran Pflieger, managing editor of the Journal, at pfliegef@safnet.org.