# Navigating
# **Corporate America**

## *Your Words Matter* series

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*About the Author and the Document*
This document has been developed as part of a series of professional development resources for students at the College of Business Administration by a staff member who has almost 20 years of corporate experience. These materials are reviewed by corporate executives and others as we work to provide helpful information now, as students prepare for careers.

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## Navigating Corporate America

For college students who have not yet worked as full-time employees in a corporate environment, it's going to be important to realize that working in "Corporate America" will be quite different than your college experiences. This document will provide some key insights that generally hold true across the corporate world so you can be better prepared. In the next few pages, we set the landscape by explaining why a sense of urgency is pervasive in most workplaces, why a level of professionalism throughout a career is important, as well as some thoughts about work-life balance and corporate politics. The quicker you can adjust to the corporate environment, the easier it will be to get off to a good start in your career.

> *Corporate America is a significantly different environment than academia.*

## Competitive Pressures Create a Sense of Urgency

Today's corporate world is a hypercompetitive environment in which competitors can enter most markets and erode a company's market share and net income. Even if an organization participates in a market in which the barriers to entry are higher so it's more difficult for new competitors, there still are regulations, increasing raw materials prices, dependency on quality products at certain prices from vendors, disruptive technologies, newer and better information technologies and other technologies to assess, 24-hour product and news cycles, and many other pressures. For publicly traded companies, leaders are held legally liable for financial and other statements because investors make decisions based on such statements. In addition, company managers and leaders routinely make decisions and take actions in an ambiguous environment, one in which they cannot be certain their decisions are correct ones.

These challenges create a dynamic, fast-paced work environment in which those who are making decisions and helping run the company are under significant pressures to perform well, grow the business, create wealth for shareholders/private owners and keep employees' jobs, compensation, and other benefits intact. In addition, there is tension among primary stakeholders' interests, like those of owners, non-owner managers, and employees. It is rarely easy to optimize a business while meeting all stakeholders' goals.

Such circumstances add up to a level of pressure on managers and leaders that sometimes results in managers acting "short" or blunt with employees. It also means employees are expected to perform tasks well and efficiently and look for other work that can be addressed, or done more efficiently, as customers and the company are counting on all employees to perform well. It's called work, after all. While the fast-paced, stimulating corporate environment might require some adjustment on the part of new employees, this dynamism also rewards those who are well-prepared and eager to learn.

## Professionalism

Different people have different definitions of professionalism. For the most part, professionalism is about understanding you are in a public work place. It requires you to present yourself in a better and more formal way than you might at home or in school, and includes high expectations of your work quality and effort.

Starting out, it is always better to err on the side of being more formal than less. Your level of formality also depends on your reporting structure because as the people to whom you report change, you will encounter different or certain variations in preferences. As you learn what is expected of you and what the majority of other employees do, you can adjust your style. There is nothing wrong with having an individual style, but in a public workplace, it is always better to be more conservative rather than less.

### Doing Your Best Work

A large part of professionalism is working to ensure that whatever work you produce is your best. Even when you are new to an organization, the expectations are that the work you produce represents clear, critical thinking and grammatically correct, polished prose. While you might not know as much about the organization when you are new, you also have fewer preconceived notions, which allows you to think differently about issues. This mindset is valuable to every organization. As long as you have thought deeply about a topic, have addressed the issue thoroughly, and present it well, your insights will be valuable.

When you are given projects, they aren't adding up to a final grade. Your abilities are being judged with every assignment. Make sure you make at least several revisions to your work based on your review and others who are willing to read your work. Co-workers are valuable resources and often are happy to offer insights based on their experiences and knowledge.

Even though you'll be producing your best possible work, you will be critiqued – probably more than you ever have in your life. Corrections, edits, and critiques are not to be taken personally. They are meant to help you learn your job, business, and industry. You are

on your way to becoming a professional, and it takes many people to help you on your journey. Consider feedback as something positive and learn from it. No one's doing you any favors if they aren't correcting your work. Your obligation is to apply the edits that make your work better and to learn from the feedback.

## Dress

Acting and dressing professionally from the start will help you because others' first impressions are crucial and, fairly or unfairly, people draw instant conclusions about us based on dress and how we present ourselves. Certainly, others developed first impressions about you in school, but in the workplace these impressions often carry more weight. A level of professionalism indicates a level of competence and trust others feel like they can have in you.

## Credibility

*Credibility is, in part, doing what you say you'll do.*

Associated with professionalism and doing your best work is the idea of credibility, or, a person's ability to be believable, which in turn helps build trust in that person. It's critical to realize that it's much easier to lose credibility than to gain it, and when you are new to a company, you start with little credibility, and it is your job to earn it. You'll find that as you work more and meet more people, the professional world is actually small. People get to know one another relatively quickly. Your credibility is your passport to a successful career. The great new is that you have almost total control over this. You'll need to say what you'll do and do what you say, be an excellent team player/teammate, treat people the way you want to be treated, work hard, continue learning every day, and produce excellent work. This is how you build professional credibility.

Another challenge you will face is how to effectively ask questions. Asking questions is necessary and indicates someone who wants to learn. Corporate managers look for new employees to ask questions as a sign of an engaged employee. As someone starting out in a career, you'll naturally have questions about why your company does certain things. However, because you are new, you won't know if you are questioning projects or aspects of a business about which someone is passionate. When you are questioning at this point, never frame a project or process as "good" or "bad." Rather, offer up some questions you might have and start with framing the question as something you are trying to learn, such as, "I'm trying to understand how this process fits in with the overall goals of x at our company." Observe what those who are skilled at asking questions do, how they frame the conversation, and try and copy it. You'll see many examples of what to do and what not to do; be sure you keep the effective practices and ignore the ineffective/poor ones.

## Work as a Public Place

Institutions and organizations play powerful roles in peoples' lives today. It is where we spend most of our time and build strong friendships. However, even though organizations have a strong social aspect to them for individuals, it is crucial to keep your work and private life reasonably separated.

As an employee, you have certain obligations to your co-workers and employers, and you have an obligation to yourself. This includes keeping work frustrations as well as personal activities (such as a pub crawl) restricted to private conversations. Make certain your public Facebook pages are free from potentially embarrassing information or pictures. If you send an email venting personal frustrations or post Instagram pictures of your late night out for everyone to see, don't be surprised who will see them and the resulting repercussions. To avoid this, keep such materials to a minimum.

## Final Thoughts on Professionalism

Remember: the basics go a long way. Speak grammatically correctly, clearly, and don't forget that a simple "please" and "thank you" are important words and sentiments to say. Also, the sooner you get rid of using "I," and replace it with "we" in your speaking, writing, and presentations, the better.

## Work-Life Balance

The term "work-life balance" is used in many forums and by many different people. Work-life balance means that a person doesn't have to spend many additional hours at work to continue to be employed; the workload is appropriate for an 8-hour workday so a person can get home to their family. Human Resources professionals talk about work-life balance to encourage potential employees to work at that company. However, to be successful in a career requires effort and, at times, sacrifice of some personal enjoyment. For example, if you are responsible for a report that is due Monday morning, you might not be able to go out Friday night because you need to work late. People who have very successful careers, like CEOs and other executive-level employees, typically have sacrificed a significant amount so they could devote more time to work. The time they spent working allowed them to learn more about their organization, industry, and about business in general.

Work-life balance is an individual choice that needs to be made as situations arise, based on a person's personal needs and the needs of loved ones, and professional aspirations.

## Politics

In any place or situation that has humans gathered, there will be personal politics. This is a fact of human nature. The key is for employees and organizations to reject detrimental, "political" behaviors such as gossip and intimidation or rewarding employees based on politics. Corporate America inherently has a significant amount of politics because of the monetary rewards associated with promotions.

Every job has a certain amount of politics, and individuals have to make choices about how much they want to engage. While office politics might benefit a person at a certain time, they almost always go against the same person when managers and leaders change. Another detrimental aspect of office politics is that it takes considerable time out of the day. If employees are spending time spreading gossip, it's time away from jobs that need to get done. However, this doesn't mean that you shouldn't interact with fellow employees on non-work-related matters. It's a good idea to engage in some activities – like a golf league, lunch, or some other social event – when invited by your manager. When you engage with others in settings outside of work, you get to know people on a more personal level, which is a human tendency that often is good for an office. But for the most part, you'll want to stay out of much of the politics. The sooner in your career that you develop an attitude that "gossip" is not something you are intersested in, the better.

### Take-Aways

While it's important to always do your best work and act appropriately while at school and in public, it is particularly crucial when you begin your career. Corporate America today is an exciting place to work, as companies come under more pressure to maintain the quality of products and work environments and benefits for employees. Companies and other organizations need to have employees who understand the importance of being professional, working hard and avoiding detrimental office politics and behaviors.

## Additional Resources

- ○ [Colorado State University's Writing Studio](#)
- ○ [The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)](#)
- ○ [YourWordsMatterAkron.org](#)

The University of Akron's Communication Resources Springboard site, including:

- ○ How to Create Effective Explanations
- ○ How to Provide Feedback (Peer Edits)
- ○ How to Avoid Plagiarism
- ○ Write Emails the Right Way It's All Greek to Me
- ○ Ingredients for Great Presentations
- ○ Presentation Design Basics
- ○ Common Presentation Mistakes to Avoid
- ○ Presenting Numbers
- ○ Presentation Introductions and Conclusions

If you do not have access to the Springboard Communication Resources site, send your student identification number, your full name, and your email address to Betsy DuWaldt, Business Practitioner – Communications, [businesswriter@uakron.edu](mailto:businesswriter@uakron.edu). ●