At Farnam Street we understand there are certain aspects of living and important transitional moments that occur throughout our lifetimes that universally challenge all of us. That is why we created the “FS Guide” series—to capture advice, wisdom, and tactics from those who have already figured these things out (or failed and learned from it!)

The FS Guide to Your First Job (and a Fulfilling Career)

Most guides to starting your first job will present you with the same few basic tips. Show up 15 minutes early. Wear a smart, well-ironed outfit. Introduce yourself to people and try to remember their names. Don’t be the first to leave the office. Ask questions if you’re confused. Say thank you to everyone.

All of these tips are reasonable. But they’re table stakes. They are the basics that should be the norm. If you’re taking the initiative to read this guide and put thought into preparing, you’re probably not the type to roll into the office at 10 a.m. with pasta sauce on your shirt on the first day. Most people are going to get the basics right. We want to help you focus on more impactful, durable principles.

Our goal is to help you get an edge right off the bat at your first job but also to help you think, collaborate, and act in a way that will make you a valuable part of your team and put you on the right track towards a great career.

Being nervous or apprehensive about starting a job is normal, especially early in your career. Very few people feel otherwise. After spending the majority of your life in formal education preparing for work, it can seem like everything is riding on this moment.

At the same time, your first job is unlikely to be your dream job. It’s more likely to be a stepping-stone, a starting point. That doesn’t mean you should treat it as a throwaway, but realistically, you will make mistakes. You will mess up in small ways and big ones. You will find yourself looking like an idiot at times. All of this is inevitable—not because there’s anything wrong with you, but because it happens to all of us. What matters is not that you are perfect right out the gate. What really matters is that you can let the world teach you lessons and be humble enough to learn from your mistakes. True learning is what you will collect through experience, not just through studying. There’s no one class that can prepare you for the workplace. As the saying goes, everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face. We all think we know what we’re doing until we come into contact with reality and have to rethink everything.
Sometimes our first job is the start of a great career. More often than not we have to switch jobs a few times as we develop and grow through our early working life. As we take on new jobs we learn more about ourselves, our needs as employees, and what we can offer to employers. We hope this guide will help you be deliberate in your early career so that you can change jobs with purpose and get the most out of each one in terms of growth and learning.

We know that not everything in this guide will apply to your specific role. But we’ve thought about these principles a lot over the years and believe they are widely applicable. Overly specific advice soon becomes outdated and might not be at all relevant for you. There is no simple formula or perfect advice for job success in any field. There are only time-tested ideas you can adapt to your own situation that won’t become outmoded as soon as someone invents a new app.

Work isn’t everything in life. It’s important to tie your identity to who you are, not just what you do, and you must keep that in mind from the start. As Maya Angelou put it, “I’ve learned that making a living is not the same thing as making a life.” Still, work is a huge component of our happiness and self-esteem. The way you approach your work can make the difference between feeling miserable and trapped or contented and free. Your work offers tremendous space to grow as a person and learn more about yourself. It gives you a way to benefit other people and have a positive influence.

With all of that said, let’s get started.

This guide covers eight principles. Each principle contains the following three parts:

1. Theory and explanation: where we provide advice, wisdom, and techniques
2. Actionable examples: where we offer concrete suggestions for actions you can take to implement our principles
3. Reflection Questions: where we ask you to pause and think (this is an extremely important part of a good learning process, and we encourage you to consider these prompts or better yet, write down your thoughts)

Finally, the guide ends with a list of resources. We leave you with a curated selection of articles, podcasts, and books you can use to further your learning on this subject.
Here are our FS principles for getting the most out of the early part of your career:

1. There are no shortcuts to knowledge.
2. It’s all material.
4. Be a generalizing specialist.
5. Do things that are first-order negative and second-order positive.
6. Opt for velocity over speed.
7. Avoid stupidity instead of seeking brilliance.
8. Try to take the most empathetic route.

Reflection questions:

1. What are your early career goals?
2. Are there any obstacles you anticipate might come up in your first three years in the workforce?
3. In what ways do you feel prepared to start your career? In what ways do you feel unprepared?
4. What unspoken assumptions do you think you might have about your first job?
1. There are no shortcuts to knowledge

“Happiness does not come from a job. It comes from knowing what you truly value and behaving in a way that’s consistent with those beliefs.” —Mike Rowe

The reality is that there is no way to circumvent the process of acquiring wisdom, and this can be one of the hardest lessons to learn in your early career. Knowing information about your job does not equate to understanding it in depth.

One of our core principles at FS is that opinions should take work. They shouldn’t be something you pull out of the air. If you’re going to have a serious opinion on something in your first job, you need to have taken the time to understand the nuances of the situation. Look at it from different angles and consider how you might argue against yourself. Seek out disconfirming evidence, not just what supports your belief. Of course, many people never learn to do this, and it’s a valuable practice no matter where you are in your career, so doing it from the start will make it a habit.

When you’re starting your first job, it’s a good idea to be cautious about expressing strong opinions, especially when it comes to things you think could be improved or need to be changed. The reality is, you have no idea why things are the way they are. There may be good reasons why a particular process is set up the way it is. Until you learn the background, you run the risk of suggesting solutions that have already been considered and tried. It can be smarter to note down your impressions, then revisit them once you’ve learned more. Avoid giving unsolicited opinions or advice.

Saying you don’t know something or even that you need more information is often challenging. We often worry it makes us seem stupid or uninformed. However, the first thought that comes into your head is unlikely to be the correct one. Don’t be afraid to ask for help or more information to navigate your current situation. You can create problems for your future self by making decisions on incorrect or insufficient information now.

As Ben Horowitz writes in The Hard Thing About Hard Things: Building a Business When There Are No Easy Answers:

> Until you make the effort to get to know someone or something, you don’t know anything. There are no shortcuts to knowledge, especially knowledge gained from personal experience. Following conventional wisdom and relying on shortcuts can be worse than knowing nothing at all.
Thinking has a multiplicative effect. The more time you’re able to take to think about what you’re learning, reflect on your experience, and ponder new ideas, the better your outcomes are likely to be. Unfortunately, most bosses aren’t particularly keen on hearing that you’ll be blocking out the next half an hour to think, especially if you’re new and junior level. It’s up to you to figure out where to fit in space to reflect, with the understanding that it’s an investment in your long-term success. Time spent thinking is never wasted, even if it feels odd because you’re used to feeling the pressure to be constantly doing. Trying to learn without thinking is an unproductive shortcut. And you can’t get much thinking done if you only allow yourself brief snippets of time for it.

There are also no shortcuts to building the impression other people have of you at work. In biology, “signaling” refers to traits animals possess—such as physical features or behaviors—which convey information to other animals. Signals work by being impossible to fake; in order to possess the signaling trait, the information must be true. For instance, badgers have highly visible white stripes on their bodies which prevent them from being able to camouflage themselves against predators. The signal is that badgers are so good at defending themselves that they don’t need to hide, so a prospective attacker shouldn’t bother. Consequently, badgers have very few natural enemies.

In the workplace, signaling serves a similar purpose: it refers to methods of communicating a particular trait that are hard to fake because the communication can’t be done by someone who doesn’t have that trait. Think of the labels you affixed to yourself on your resume. They’re meaningless if they don’t translate into your behavior. There’s no point in saying you have good time-management skills, then manage your time badly. It’s useless to say you work effectively in a team if you struggle to communicate in groups. You can’t signal that you know something you don’t really know—you’ll get caught out. Be honest, and let your behavior speak for you.

The impression you create will come from your actions, not what you say about yourself. To build knowledge you need to put work into developing opinions, be willing to change your mind, and put the time into thinking things over.

Supporting idea: a company is a complex adaptive system

Any company is a complex adaptive system, meaning that understanding any individual part of it does not necessarily mean you can understand the whole thing. The parts of a company interact in complex and unexpected ways. The relationship between the behavior of the parts—that is, people—and the outcomes of the whole company are nonlinear, meaning they are not a straightforward 1+1 equation.
When you start a new job, you can be sure there is a lot you don’t see at first. Things may seem illogical or convoluted. You might have lots of ideas about how things could improve. **But you need to understand the whole system before you can understand how any changes might impact it or even how you fit into it.** In particular, it takes time to understand the relationships between people within a company, which are always more complicated than they seem on the surface.

Think of a network of tree roots tangled together under the ground in a forest. You can’t see them, but they hold the soil together. If someone randomly cut away at the soil, it will have unexpected follow-on effects on different trees. Any new tree growing in the forest needs to tussle with the existing ones and find its own foundation, working with the existing roots. It can’t just grow where it likes.

Seek to understand why things happen before trying to change them. Put some time into reading information about the company, such as organizational charts, reports, and instructive manuals that can help you see the whole system, even if they’re not directly relevant to you. Avoid taking statements coworkers make about other coworkers or the particulars of the organization at face value. Seek to confirm an opinion before you take it on yourself or communicate it to others.

Viewing a company as a system can also help you understand how your actions could impact other people. Nothing you do is likely to happen in pure isolation from everyone else. Your work is no longer about you. For instance, if you miss a deadline for an essay at school, you alone will pay the price for it. If you miss a deadline at work, it may have serious consequences for others. On the flip side, if you do well at school it only benefits you; if you do well at work it benefits other people too.

Learn to see your company as a system and you’ll be well positioned to build a rich understanding of how things really work. Fail to look beyond individual components and you may miss out on the important interconnections.

**Examples to consider:**

1. When examining our opinions, we tend to only consider confirming evidence. Try making an effort to look at disconfirming evidence for some of your strongest opinions to see how it makes you react.
2. The [Ideological Turing Test](#) involves arguing for an opinion you don’t hold so well that an observer wouldn’t be able to differentiate you from someone who truly holds that opinion. Could you try doing this for an opinion you hold?
3. Draw a map of the company you work for, showing the different parts and the interconnections between them. Keep adding to it as you discover new connections.

Reflection questions:

1. How might you be able to incorporate time to think into your workday? How can you ensure you don’t neglect this important activity?
2. How do you plan to avoid snap judgments? How can you make a habit of thinking things over first?
3. What might help you with understanding the company as a whole system?
2. It’s all material; take everything as a lesson

“You must have a pride in your own work and in learning to do it well, and not be always saying, There’s this and there’s that—if I had this or that to do, I might make something of it.” —George Eliot, Middlemarch

Everything that happens in your early career, good or bad, is a lesson for future reference. We all have to deal with jobs we may not love at some point. There are two ways to approach doing something that isn’t what you want to be doing: you can resent it or you can look for opportunities to learn from it. At the very least, these jobs will focus your mind on what you actually want to be doing. People are really the same everywhere. Any job can teach us about what bosses want, what customers want, and what employees want.

Every job offers the chance to develop or improve skills, even if they’re unexpected ones like defusing conflict or persisting in a difficult situation. You can learn from the bad as well as the good. A negative work experience might give you a sharper sense of what you would like to do in the long run. A terrible boss might help you learn to act the opposite way when you find yourself in a leadership position. A coworker who starts drama all the time might instruct you in emotional resilience. You can get a lot of wisdom from the bad experiences, which will help you make better decisions in the future.

In a speech at Yale, bestselling author Robert Greene shared a motto he developed early on in his own career: “It’s all material.” Up until he published his first book in his late thirties, Greene spent much of his career working an assortment of different jobs, many of them unrelated to his dream of being a writer. At first, he was unnerved by the political maneuvering and power games that seemed unavoidable. But instead of getting caught up trying to participate or dismissing the dynamics he was witnessing, Greene decided to view everything as material. He observed the people he worked with like they were subjects in a scientific experiment. He paid attention to the games they played, aiming to learn as much as possible from them. He viewed everything as possible material for some future project. In the long run, Greene’s observations ended up forming the basis of his first book, The 48 Laws of Power. He explained to us on the Knowledge Project podcast:
When you’re working for someone else, and you’re flipping burgers at Burger King, it’s dead time. They own you. But if you’re working at Burger King, and you’ve just read Nietzsche’s Beyond Good and Evil, and you’re thinking about it, or you’re working at Burger King, and you go, “I have a plan, in a year I’m quitting this ridiculously awful job, and I’m saving my money, and I’m going to night school, and I’m going to kick ass in this field,” that dead time of Burger King is now alive time, because you’ve got a plan, and everything has a purpose. “My purpose here is, all right, I’m going to get a great job after this crap job. All right, I’d better learn while I’m doing this shift. Well, what can I study? I can study people. I can ask questions to some of the customers that come in at two in the morning. I can be alive to my circumstance, my situation. I can go home and read books, and I can prepare for that time when I quit.”

Some people have a defined sense of what they’re passionate about right from their first job. Most of us need to cultivate passion, building up competency through experimentation and research. When you’re starting in your career, you have considerable flexibility to try things out. Many of the decisions you make are not final and you can use the results as information for future reference.

**Actionable examples:**

1. Think of a person you admire for their work, then see what you can find out about their early career. See how direct or indirect their path to their current position was.
2. Make a list of skills you have started to develop and consider how many different areas they could apply to.
3. There are probably some, or even many, elements of your first job you dislike. Try thinking of how you could use those as material.

**Reflection questions:**

1. Describe what your worst and best jobs would look like. What is it about those scenarios that attracts you or repels you?
2. What would you like to better understand about your job or your organization? What person or situation could contribute knowledge?
3. How does learning usually happen for you?
3. Master double-loop learning

In your first job, you’ll probably need to learn fast, because there’s a lot you don’t know.

**Double-loop learning** is a means of adjusting beliefs, behavior, and attitudes in response to new evidence and experience. In short, it means learning from your experience by analyzing what happened, seeking out feedback, and assessing how well a given approach works.

It might sound obvious, but it’s not always easy, and it’s not what everyone does. Single-loop learning is the standard approach. It means trying something one way, then continuing to do the same way without modification. Getting stuck in single-loop learning makes it impossible to progress. Some people will tell you they have ten years' experience at a job, but they might as well only have done it for a year because they’re not learning anything new. They’re just repeating the same mistakes. Only using single-loop learning means you’re like a child who never bothers to learn to walk because crawling is sufficient to get around.

Business theorist Chris Argyris pioneered this concept. Argyris described single loop learning as being like a heating thermostat. It adjusts the temperature in line with changes in the room, like someone opening a window. While it does a good job at keeping things steady, it cannot get better at regulating temperatures over time. A thermostat capable of double-loop learning might get better over time, however: for instance, by learning to preempt when someone might open a window and act accordingly in advance.

The steps for double-loop learning are the following:

1. Decide to carry out an action.
2. Make a prediction for the outcome.
3. Observe the actual outcome.
4. Plan future adjustments based on feedback.

The hard part about double-loop learning is that it doesn’t work unless you’re willing to own up to your mistakes and areas of weakness. It requires acknowledging when you’re not altogether competent at something. It’s when we can admit we have made a mistake that we put ourselves in the mindset to discover what we can to avoid that mistake in the future.

Scrutinizing mistakes is often painful and one reason why Argyris found that being a top performer at something can actually make double-loop learning harder. People who are used to thinking of themselves as smart and successful get defensive when faced with mistakes. They don’t want to seem incompetent. So they ignore their own mistakes, often blaming other
people or external circumstances for their failures while taking personal responsibility for their successes.

However, your potential to learn is greatest at the moments when you feel the worst: when you’ve failed, messed up, or made yourself look silly. Those are not the times to shut down and hide from your mistakes. Those are the times when you need to scrutinize what happened, however painful that can be, and look for the lessons. A key point here is to avoid turning the blame elsewhere—on coworkers, the weather, the Wi-Fi, whatever. Other factors may be responsible, perhaps even to a large degree. But you can’t learn anything unless you consider your own contributions. As Andrea J. Sutcliffe writes in First-Job Survival Guide, “Mistakes always have a positive side: They usually teach us something, whether it’s learning to double-check our math or seeing the need for better sales skills. The proverb that says we learn more from our failures than we do from our successes states a basic fact of life, both business and personal.”

For example, at one point you are going to receive criticism from your boss. Nobody is perfect, and you just aren’t going to knock it out of the park all of the time. When that criticism comes, you have two options: get defensive and double down on your actions or accept that you made a mistake and learn from it. A single-loop learner goes for option one. They blame their boss for being awful. They blame their friends for keeping them up the night before. They run from the sting of failure and do the minimal changes to keep their boss happy (usually grumbling all the while and believing that they are right and a better boss would see that).

Double-loop learners move past the initial emotional hit and respond to criticism with curiosity. Does their boss have a point? What about the old action contributed to the situation? Are there better ways to approach a similar situation next time? What is the boss really looking for? What are some more options for getting there? How does my action fit into the needs of my team and the organization? The answers you generate will help you learn, improve, and be of more value as an employee.

The more you practice double-loop learning, the more it becomes a functional habit rather than a source of discomfort. Conversely, the more you practice single-loop learning, the harder it becomes to break out of it. If you get into the habit of learning from mistakes right from your first job, you’ll have an enviable advantage over those who shy away from them.

Sub-principle: the power of questions

“Ask a stupid question and you’re an idiot for five minutes; don’t ask a stupid question and you’re an idiot for a lifetime.” You might have heard this saying many times, but like many
clichés, it’s true. Asking questions in your first job is essential for learning. You can’t expect other people to read your mind and know when you don’t know something. This is even more pertinent when those advising or training you have a lot of experience at their work, meaning they may struggle to explain it to a beginner.

How can you ask better questions? Former Knowledge Project guest Warren Berger’s work offers a number of pointers. Make your questions focus on the other person and their expertise, not on yourself or your uncertainty. Keep questions simple and non-leading. Describe concrete situations, not abstract hypothetical ones. Preface difficult questions with praise.

If you want to understand someone’s decision better, try asking them, “Can you walk me through your thinking? I’d like to learn how you ended up at this conclusion,” or “I think that’s a great decision for our situation. Why did you choose A over B?”

If you are trying to get insight on someone else’s experience, try, “Have you been in a situation like this before? What did you learn?” or “What are the three most important things you need to know to do your job?”

Asking better questions will improve your understanding of everything in life. In your first job, don’t let the fear of seeming stupid prevent you from asking necessary questions.

Actionable examples:

1. The next time you make a mistake on the job, even if it’s not monumental, take some time to write down what you can learn from it.
2. Research what you can about the career of someone whose work you admire. Look for occasions where mistakes or failures led to growth for them.
3. Observe how your coworkers tend to respond to failures. Is there a difference in how the highest performers handle it?

Reflection questions:

1. How can you ensure you engage in double-loop learning starting now?
2. Do you find reflecting on mistakes uncomfortable? Why or why not? How can you make a habit of doing it regardless?
3. Can you think of a time where you were able to seriously learn from a painful mistake? What made that possible?
4. Be a generalizing specialist

“When we are captain of our own ship, life can be a wonderful continuous voyage of discovery. Yet we frequently pigeonhole our learning and discovery into limiting discrete blocks.” — Laurence Endersen, *Pebbles of Perception: How a Few Good Choices Make All the Difference*

A generalist has lots of diverse skills. A specialist has an extremely narrow range of skills and knowledge. One way to conceptualize the difference between these two modes is to look at the animal world. Specialist animals thrive if they are in the precise right circumstances, with the habitat, climate, and food supplies that they need. Generalist animals can survive almost anywhere, adapting themselves to whatever is available. Generalist species have flexibility, while specialist species can out-compete any other species as long as the environment stays stable.

As we move through our educations, we’re expected to keep narrowing our focus and specializing. We start off studying lots of subjects, then tend to shift towards focusing on one. The further you go in higher education, the more you’re expected to specialize. Once you start your first job, that process is likely to continue.

Being dependent on a single specialty is a high risk. It reduces your options and makes you vulnerable to change. Sudden shifts in industries have become commonplace as technology replaces what was once skilled labor. For instance, being a taxi driver in a big city used to require an enormous body of in-depth knowledge. Drivers needed to know how to get to anywhere from anywhere, plus how to handle changes like road construction or traffic. As a result, they were often able to command a healthy income. Now, anyone with a car and a smartphone can drive a taxi because GPS systems replace the need to know anything about a given area. Memorizing routes seems pointless.

Generalizing has its risks too. In a world where remote work is increasingly common and more basic tasks are being automated, the rewards accrue to those with rare skills and knowledge. Generalizing can mean not being good enough at any particular thing to stand out.

At FS, we believe in finding a middle ground. Specializing is a good route to developing valuable skills that tend to lead to a higher income and more professional respect or influence. But too narrow a specialty is a precarious position to be in. Generalizing too far is also a risk, as it can prevent you from mastering a unique skill. The middle ground is becoming a generalizing specialist. As much as that might seem like an oxymoron, it’s what many successful people do. It means having a core specialty that you’re good at and putting most but not all of your time and energy into working on it. But it also means putting a bit of effort into developing and...
maintaining other skills or understanding other parts of your world. You can choose between going for skills related to another specialty (e.g., learning about typography or game theory) or more general skills with wide applicability (e.g., public speaking or decision-making.)

Every day, you have a choice between improving existing skills or learning new ones. It’s up to you to decide how to divide it up. Think about where you’d like to be in, say, a year and work backwards from there. How much time do you need to put into each area?

The advantages of being a generalizing specialist are numerous. When you’re adaptable, change is an opportunity, not a threat. You’re better positioned to take advantage of it. Plus, wider skills can complement your main specialty. They can offer additional lenses for viewing problems. A multidisciplinary approach can help avoid “man with a hammer syndrome,” where every problem seems to have the same solution.

**Actionable examples:**

1. Think of one skill you could develop that would complement your specialty. Consider how you could adopt it in the future.
2. Take a look at the skills and knowledge your job requires. Try researching predictions for how they might change in form and importance over time.
3. The concept of generalists and specialists comes from biology. Do some reading about the two types of species to help you see your workplace in a new light.

**Reflection questions:**

1. What is your core specialty?
2. What other generalist skills do you have?
3. What other generalist skills can you develop to complement your main skill(s)?
4. How can you prepare for probable major future changes in your industry?
5. Do things that are first-order negative and second-order positive

“Every day is a new day. It is better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready.” —Ernest Hemingway, The Old Man and the Sea

Everything you do has first-order consequences (what happens right away) and second-order consequences (what happens later as a result of your initial action). Second-order consequences also, in themselves, have consequences and so our decisions can have effects that continue to ripple through our lives.

As the investor Howard Marks once explained, thinking of first-order consequences is easy and simple. It’s what most people do. Thinking of second-order consequences is much harder work and, as a result, rarer. Few people are willing to take the time to consider them at any depth. To be exceptional at any job, you need to see what others can’t or won’t.

According to research by Dr. Edward C. Banfield of Harvard, one of the biggest predictors of upward mobility in families from lower socioeconomic classes is the ability to think long term. Among the families Dr. Banfield studied, those who tended to improve their economic status over time thought on a scale of years or even decades. They were obsessively focused on the future, enabling them to plan ahead and make decisions with a delayed pay off.

Throughout formal education, you generally have a sense of your future trajectory. You know what you’re working towards and how long it should take. Once you enter the workplace, it can be easy to forget this and fall into the trap of short-term thinking. For instance, you might feel tempted to sacrifice your health in your first job by working flat out and neglecting to look after yourself. The first-order consequences of this might be positive. Going without sleep or exercise, eating badly and not taking any time to recharge might make you more productive. If your managers are also thinking short-term, they might encourage this, aiming to squeeze as much out of you as possible, and quickly. But the second-order consequences will be negative. You’ll get burnt out, your performance will drop, and ultimately this pace of living will negate any early benefits you accrued.

Learning to think long term and do things that are first-order negative, second-order positive is a valuable skill. There are some things that cause pain now, like going to the gym, but make you feel good down the road. When you’re just getting started in your career, thinking ahead is more important than ever. Now is the time to make decisions that will positively compound and benefit your future self. Second-order thinking can help you create opportunities down the road. Because often, what looks like luck is really long-term thinking. Be willing to do things that are difficult now with a future pay-off, like choosing a lower-paying job with more room for

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learning over a better-compensated one with a greater likelihood of locking you into stasis. Learn to ask yourself what might happen next when you make decisions.

The beauty of long-term thinking is that it doesn’t require you to have a grand plan for your career. No one can predict the future. Try asking someone a few decades into their career how they ended up in their current position. Chances are, it wasn't planned from the start and may even be altogether different from their initial idea. They ended up there through random events and chance encounters, off-the-cuff decisions and pure luck.

The answers of successful people, though, will be different. Everyone needs a little luck, but anticipating second-order consequences means you will be able to capitalize on that luck when it happens. What if your dream job comes along, but you can’t afford to take the short-term salary hit because you’ve financially overextended yourself? What if an amazing project is up for grabs, but you haven’t been developing a diverse skill set in favor of playing games on your phone every evening? Even if you’re experimenting now or just trying to get by, you can still benefit from thinking of second-order consequences. You can still view decisions from the perspective of your future self, and consider if you are setting up future you for success or frustration. You can practice the art of delaying gratification, which can benefit every area of your life, by opting to forego immediate pleasure in favor of later reward.

**Actionable examples:**

1. Consider enrolling in a company-sponsored personal development program; it might take some of your free time in the short term, but it will qualify you for higher positions in the long term.
2. Staying late to impress your boss might work once in a while, but being tired, short-tempered, and stressed will backfire if you let it become the norm. Take care of yourself so you can perform your job well.
3. Look for extra projects you can volunteer for. While they might add to your workload, you will likely meet different coworkers, learn about different aspects of the company, and gain valuable experience.

**Reflection questions:**

1. Do you think you tend towards short- or long-term thinking? Why?
2. Can you think of any particular things you can do in your first job that are first-order negative, second-order positive?
3. Can you think of any things you tend to do or might be tempted to do that are first-order positive, second-order negative?

4. Do you have any long-term goals you can start acting on now?
6. Opt for velocity over speed

“There are no shortcuts to any place worth going.” —Beverly Sills

Speed is how fast you’re going. **Velocity**, however, is the speed you’re going in a given direction. Moving fast might look and feel impressive. But it’s not much use if you’re not pointed in the right direction. Speed is saying yes to everything anyone asks you to do and being busy all the time. **Velocity** is only saying yes to things that further your career and won’t detract from more important matters. **Speed is about what’s urgent; velocity is about what’s important.**

As much as you might wish to be perfect, it’s unlikely anyone will expect you to be perfect from the first day of your first job. Some workplaces do throw new employees in the deep end at the start. In a more reasonable environment, you can expect people to give you time to learn and to figure out how things work. Instead of trying to hit the ground running and risking mistakes, show that you’re headed in the right direction by learning consistently and taking feedback into account. You don’t need to be perfect; you just need to be visibly improving. The first few months of any new job is very much a distinct transition stage in itself.

There are many ways you can learn to prioritize velocity over speed. An important one is learning the art of **tactfully saying no** if something seems like it could be an impediment to achieving your goals. Maybe you have a coworker who keeps asking if you can help them out with a project that has tangential relevance to your job but isn’t one of your main duties. You want to be on good terms with the coworker, but you know that assisting them will detract from everything that is actually in your job description. Saying no might feel difficult. So you could take a different approach, like asking what they think you should deprioritize to work on it.

The smartest people succeed by knowing to apply their energy in the right direction. They work smarter, not harder. They don’t funnel needless energy into things they know won’t progress their career. It helps to learn to differentiate between what’s important and what’s urgent. Many successful people like to divide tasks and opportunities into **four categories**: urgent and important, urgent, important, and not urgent and not important. Anything that is both urgent and important should be a priority because this is what moves you the furthest forward. Anything that is neither important nor urgent should be avoided wherever possible.

Your main priority in your early career is to develop the skills and knowledge you need to get you to the place you want to be five, ten, or even fifty years down the road. You need to focus on the opportunities for learning and growth and avoid everything else. Sometimes you will have to course-correct. As new experiences lead to new knowledge, you will likely make
adjustments as inspiration hits and your needs change. But always make choices in your career with an eye to the direction you want to go in.

Sub-principles: Golden handcuffs

“Golden handcuffs” are incentives that tie you to a job, making it difficult to leave or have much flexibility. Often, they take the form of financial incentives, such as stock options that only pay out after a set number of years and are completely lost if an employee leaves before then. Other times they may be more subtle, involving simple perks and luxuries you accrue over time but later limit you, like increasing vacation days, a flexible work schedule, or support for continuing education.

Another form golden handcuffs can take is lifestyle inflation. You start off with a low-paying job and spend accordingly: you live with roommates, take the bus, pack a lunch, and spend the holidays at home. Then you get a slightly better-paying job and start spending more on luxuries, going out more often, upgrading your habits to more expensive ones. It’s hard to resist the urge to treat yourself after a promotion or to keep up with coworkers. It escalates so you’re always spending as much or even more than you earn. The result is that no matter how much you make, you’re trapped in your current job by your lifestyle.

Golden handcuffs might seem like a good problem to have. Indeed, there are certainly worse things to face. In your first job, even small perks can feel amazing, giving a sense of progressing in your career. If you have your long-term trajectory in mind though, it’s essential to be aware of anything that might be golden handcuffs for you, holding you back from better future opportunities.

There is no such thing as a free lunch (quite literally: many employers offer free on-site lunches because they reduce the amount of time employees spend away from their desks or not interacting with each other). The price you pay can be reduced flexibility down the line. Always pay attention to the strings attached to your benefits.

The concept of golden handcuffs is important because it matters that you’re aware of things that might prevent you from heading in your desired direction. If you can recognize what might lure you towards speed rather than velocity, you’ll be more able to avoid it.
Actionable examples:

1. Make a list of all the things you could be applying your time and energy towards in your job. Establish the handful of most important ones and consider how you can avoid being distracted by the rest.
2. When something new lands on your plate, try categorizing it as important or urgent, so that you first work on the items that will have the highest impact.

Reflection questions:

1. How can you remind yourself to differentiate between what’s important and what’s urgent in your job? Can you come up with criteria for each?
2. What direction do you see yourself heading in?
3. What might distract from your desired direction?
7. Avoid stupidity instead of seeking brilliance

“A man is worked upon by what he works on. He may carve out his circumstances, but his circumstances will carve him out as well.” —Frederick Douglass

When you’re still an amateur, your focus shouldn’t be on winning. It should be on not losing so you can stay in the game long enough to learn more. Early on in your career, your focus should be on not messing up too badly, not building any major tensions with coworkers, and not causing your future self too many problems.

It might be tempting to aim to be brilliant from day one in your first job. But it can be a better approach to instead use the concept of inversion: the practice of looking at a problem backward. Thinking forward about your first job would mean considering the ways you could be brilliant and impress everyone. Thinking backward—using inversion—would mean contemplating all the ways you could be stupid and give everyone a negative opinion of you, then working backward to avoid those things.

Imagine wanting to share your opinion at a meeting. Trying for brilliance will have you focused on thinking of the most stunning thing to say (and likely not paying much attention to the conversation). Using inversion will have you thinking with care before saying anything at all in meetings, lest you say something poorly thought out. It’s a dramatic distinction. Likewise, when picking a job, instead of thinking about what you want from an ideal job, you could consider what the attributes of an unpleasant and unsatisfying job would be. Then avoid any role that seems to possess those.

Stupidity is more often a matter of doing the wrong things than failing to do the right things. We have a tendency to always want to intervene and do something, even if doing nothing would be more beneficial. When you start your career, you might assume it’s best to show your skills and enthusiasm by constantly taking action, suggesting improvements, and looking for ways to leave a mark. Often though, it’s more useful to spend your early career learning as much as you can and not screwing anything up for your future self.

One of the best ways to avoid stupidity is to ensure you know your circle of competence: the area of the world in which you have built up knowledge and understanding. Perhaps you’ve acquired this knowledge in school, through your own initiative, or from general life experience. Some of those areas will be highly specialized, while others are more general.
In your first job, your circle of competence is likely to be tiny. This means it’s all the more important that you keep its parameters in mind, so your ego doesn’t lead you to stray outside of it. Once you’re outside of your circle of competence—especially if you don’t know you’re outside of it or think you know more than you do—things can easily go wrong. You can commit major blunders and make foolish decisions. Worse, not realizing you’re outside of your circle of competence can make you resistant to learning because you don’t know you’re in a blind spot.

Once you know the limits of your circle of competence, you can work to extend them by practicing what you think you know and always learning from your failures. Circles of competence grow through experience and reflection. If you are committed to learning, you will get better and you will be able to contribute more. However, no one’s circle of competence extends to every area of knowledge in the whole world. Knowing what you don’t know can be the most useful knowledge of all. As you grow, you can always come back to asking yourself, “How can I not screw this up?” Avoiding the worst is sometimes all you can do. At the very least, it’s a great starting point. It’s often only once you avoid the worst that you can have the opportunity to achieve the best.

**Actionable examples:**

1. Think of a problem you have faced and use inversion to work backwards to figure out how to possibly avoid it.
2. Look at the lifestyle and career of a person you admire. See if you notice any conspicuous areas which they avoid investing time in.
3. Try mapping out your current circle of competence. Then map out your ideal circle of competence.

**Reflection questions:**

1. What do you think is inside of your circle of competence? What can you be confident you know well?
2. What do you think is outside of your circle of competence? What don’t you know about or know how to do?
3. Which areas currently outside of your circle of competence would you like to make part of it? How might you achieve this?
4. How can you avoid the urge to stray outside of your circle of competence?
5. What would you like to achieve in your job? Can you use inversion to consider how to attain this by making a list of what you would like to avoid in your job?
8. Try to take the most empathetic route

There is tremendous power in trying to always be as empathetic as possible with the people you encounter in your first job. Hanlon’s Razor is a mental model that states that you should never attribute malice where incompetence would suffice as an explanation and demonstrates the rationale of giving people the benefit of the doubt.

The people you work with and for (and customers) are all human. At any point in time, they also have things going on in their lives: a sick child, an argument with a partner, a lost cat, a bad toothache, a worrying car maintenance bill, an impending performance review. Always try to be empathetic in your interactions, even when someone seems rude or they make a mistake. Everyone’s lives are complicated. Compartmentalizing and leaving worries at home can be difficult. Seek to understand people before you make judgments about them.

Take the case of decision-making. Chances are, you have some misconceptions about how people make decisions in the workplace. Things are not always strictly rational in ways that follow certain patterns. It’s a good idea to make an effort to learn about and observe the ways people actually make decisions. That doesn’t mean you should always emulate them; it just means you’ll be at an advantage if you can understand them. You might see people making decisions that aren’t what you believe they should go for. But understanding why those are made—and why bad decision-making can be good politics in certain environments and scenarios—can be as important as understanding more effective ways to make decisions.

Defensive decision-making is common in organizations of all types. This is when people make decisions that might not be the best possible option in a given situation but are the most defensible. If something goes wrong, they’re the least likely to face too much blame. Often, this means going for the default choice and avoiding questioning norms. The downsides are limited, as are the prospective upsides. In the long run, only making defensive decisions limits how good you can be. But knowing that it happens is a useful tool.

Many decisions are also reactive. The person making them may have little time to think through the options first. They are usually getting both a lot of information thrown at them, and pressure to make a decision quickly. There is a fire burning, and so they feel they must react immediately. Chances are they solve the immediate problem, but fail to address the causes.

When you see someone making what seems like a suboptimal decision, don’t assume they don’t know what they’re doing. Try to empathize with how that decision might make sense from their perspective.
Of course, the reality is that there are people in organizations who are malicious and out to play power games or sabotage you. They might only be a miniscule minority, but (especially in a larger company) you can expect that not everyone will want the best for you. Some people will view you, rightly or wrongly, as competition. Some people will see success as a zero-sum game. It’s important to look out for those people. Just don’t become one of them or assume everyone is like that. Outside of the most toxic work environments, most people will want to help you. So look out for malice, but assume incompetence as a rule. Empathy doesn’t mean letting people walk all over you. Yet on balance, kindness is likely to get you further than the alternative.

**Actionable examples:**

1. The first time a coworker does something that seems like it could be malicious, try listing all the possible charitable explanations. Maybe they misunderstood, maybe they’re unwell or tired—who knows? Think of some instances where you’ve had extenuating circumstances cause you to make a mistake that others may have seen as intentional.
2. Observe how an important decision gets made in your company. See if you think it was the best possible option or the most defensible one.
3. If you know a coworker is going through a difficult time, offer to help them in whatever ways you can. They may return the favor later on.

**Reflection questions:**

1. Do you find it easy to use Hanlon’s Razor, or do you jump to more negative interpretations of people’s actions?
2. How can you practice being more empathetic in your interactions? What deliberate steps could you take to humanize your coworkers?
3. How can you differentiate between defensive and ideal decisions? Can you think of a criteria?
Further reading

Our amazing guests on the Knowledge Project have shared extensive wisdom that can help you in your first job. Check out these episodes:

- **#1 with author and financial strategist Michael Mauboussin**
  - “People are only really going to be prepared to help each other if they will feel that they in turn will be helped when they need it.” — **#30 with speaker, executive, and author Margaret Heffernan**
  - “I think it’s important to spend at least some part of your day letting your brain just go random. And that’s why I think going for a walk is excellent, especially if you’re just kind of letting your brain go while you’re doing it.” — **#31 with author and teacher Barbara Oakley**
  - “Taking ownership of your time means I only have this much time to live, I’d better make the most of it, I’d better make it alive time, I’d better be urgent, have a bit of an edge, be aware of each moment as it’s passing and not in a fog.” — **#35 with author and speaker Robert Greene**
  - “I’m ruthless about prioritization. I just try to do no more than a couple of things at a time. I may do something different in a couple of months so it can make it seem like I’m doing a million things at once, but I’m not actually. I’m only doing one thing at a time.” — **#42 with surgeon, writer, and researcher Atul Gawande**
  - “The reason why a lot of people are working those longer hours, is not because there’s twelve hours of work to do—it’s because they can’t find time within those twelve hours to actually get a few contiguous hours of time to actually do the work they need to do.” — **#54 with Basecamp CEO and co-founder Jason Fried**
  - “A large part of status in contemporary organizations is that there’s something special about your judgement.” — **#61 with professor and author Philip Tetlock**
  - “What we found is that the most durable results happen as a series of good decisions that accumulate one upon another over a very long period of time, that create a massive compounding effect.” — **#67 with business author Jim Collins**

If you want to dive deeper into any of the topics from this guide, here’s a full list of blog posts we mentioned in the text:

- **Get Smart: Three Ways of Thinking to Make Better Decisions and Achieve Results**
- **Second-Order Thinking: What Smart People Use to Outperform**
- **The Hard Thing About Hard Things**
- **The Work Required to Have An Opinion**
● **Your First Thought Is Rarely Your Best Thought: Lessons on Thinking**
● **Multitasking: Giving the World an Advantage It Shouldn’t Have**
● **Double-Loop Learning: Download New Skills and Information into Your Brain**
● **Understanding Speed and Velocity: Saying “NO” to the Non-Essential**
● **Eight Ways to Say No with Grace and Style**
● **The Difference Between Amateurs and Professionals**
● **Avoiding Stupidity Is Easier than Seeking Brilliance**
● **Intervention Bias: When to Step in and When to Leave Things Alone**
● **Understanding Your Circle of Competence: How Warren Buffett Avoids Problems**
● **Defensive Decision-Making: What IS Best vs. What LOOKS Best**
● **The Generalized Specialist: How Shakespeare, Da Vinci, and Keplerexcelled**
● **Thinking About Thinking**

And for even more guidance, we’ve reviewed a lot of books about succeeding at work over the years, including these helpful ones:

● **Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level** (Joel A. Garfinkle)
● **To Sell Is Human: The Surprising Truth About Moving Others** (Daniel H. Pink)
● **Three Marriages: Reimagining Work, Self, and Relationship** (David Whyte)
● **Managing Oneself** (Peter F. Drucker)
● **Great at Work: How Top Performers Do Less, Work Better, and Achieve More** (Morten T. Hansen)
● **Ultralearning: Accelerate Your Career, Master Hard Skills, and Outsmart the Competition** (Scott H. Young)
● **Range: How Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World** (David Epstein)
● **Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World** (Cal Newport)
● **The Hard Thing About Hard Things: Building a Business When There Are No Easy Answers** (Ben Horowitz)