

Young at Work: Combating The First Job Blues

By Mary Abbajay

Your first job. How exciting! How nerve wracking. How disappointing. Your first job out of college or grad school can be all of those. Many people head into new jobs only to find that they aren't too thrilled with the reality of their career. They often run into what I call the first job blues, and it's very common. Luckily, the blues can be cured with a little insight, a little attitude adjustment and some very concrete tips.

What are first job blues?

First job blues usually pop up two to three months after first-time job holders start working. First job blues can have many symptoms, including feelings of dissatisfaction or frustration; feeling tired, having low energy or feeling a low level depression. Work may feel unfulfilling or pointless and you may start to question your choices and your future. Many start to wonder, "Is this what I went to college for?"

First job blues are similar to new job blues, where people may feel similarly dissatisfied after starting a new job. New job blues are when a new job initially doesn't seem to be a good fit. You've been in the working world a while, but those feelings of dissatisfaction creep in after you've switched jobs. New job blues are often temporary, as you just need time to adjust to your new workplace culture and position.

Workplace blues aren't new. People have always felt dissatisfied with their working life. What *is* different now is that we have far greater expectations that work should be meaningful and fulfilling. This is a relatively new career standard. A generation ago, people worked to provide food, shelter, security, etc. Being fulfilled by work wasn't part of the equation. That, however, has changed, as people (especially young people just entering the workforce) expect

their jobs to be meaningful and fulfilling. Young people today are surrounded by cultural images of exciting and rewarding careers. Expectations are very high.

Additionally, young people today have extraordinary pressures on them to compete, get great test scores, have all the right accomplishments, get into good schools, graduate with good grades, and get a "good job." Then they get the job and BAM! They are unprepared for real work, the often banal "humdrum-mercy" of day-to-day office life.

The cause of the blues

There are four major causes of first job blues: transition, poor job/career fit, poor company fit and misaligned expectations and attitudes. The transition from college to working life is a doozy, and presents the first hurdle. Even when the change is a positive and exciting one, like getting a great job, the transition can be tough. But the transition from college life, where you basically called the shots and were your own boss, to working life, when you are working for someone for pay, presents an enormous challenge.

First of all, the environment is radically different and may appear stagnant, cumbersome and downright annoying. There are also very real physical and psy-

chological adjustments. For example, you are no longer in charge of your own schedule. You have to be at a certain place at a certain time, and many recent grads struggle with not having control over their schedules. Many feel physically exhausted from a 9 to 5 day. Just sitting behind a desk all day is a huge adjustment for many young people.

The second cause of the blues, poor job or career fit, is equally difficult. Your job or career field may have sounded good on paper, but the reality may turn out to be quite different. This happened to me in my first job. I always wanted to be a PR person. I thought PR sounded fun and sexy and my very first job was in that field. Turns out, PR is all about selling and I hated sales. It was not a good fit.

The third cause, poor company fit, crops up when the field or job may be right for you, but the company ethos fits poorly. Organizations, like people, have distinct personalities and cultures. You may love your job or profession but you may not like the organizational environment or personality of your company. It may not be a good fit.

The fourth cause of the blues is one of the most common -- misaligned expectations and attitudes. Entry-level drudgery can be a real downer. It isn't just that the transition to real work is difficult, it's that you may have had expectations of writing ad copy or editing manuscripts, when in fact you are making copies and getting coffee. Young people today are used to fast results, instant gratification and lots of attention. They are not so used to the entry-level tasks that everyone must perform before they move ahead.

This is a real problem for many young people, and is one of the biggest hurdles to overcome. Many people expect too much too soon and don't realize the incredible importance of entry-level work. They think their degree is their golden ticket, when in reality the golden ticket is hard work, starting right at the bottom.

How to beat the blues

You can beat the blues easily and I am going to tell you how. But first I will tell you what NOT to do:

- Do not disconnect from potential mentors or advisors
- Do not assume the problem is the job and not you, or vice versa; in fact, do not assume anything
- Do not quit and run off to grad school
- Do not be afraid to ask for help from inside or outside your organization



That said, here is what you can do to beat the blues. The first step is to determine the cause. You have to be very honest with yourself and ask tough questions. Try to isolate factors. Is it the transition? Are you just tired and out of sorts from working set hours? Is it the job? The company? Were your expectations too high? Do you like what you do? Look up the company ladder and around the office. Do you like what you see? Do you like what the company does? Would you like to do what other people in your organization are doing?

Once you have asked and answered the tough questions, find a mentor in your profession or company. Ask them if they went through this. You may be experiencing very normal transitional hiccups. Really understand what the transition process is all about, that you are going to feel shock-waves for some time about a new schedule. It's no small feat to become accustomed to entry-level "humdrumery." Try to establish relationships at the workplace. Get to know the job better and the company better. Rule things out so you can get to the heart of the blues. And take a good look at your expectations and work ethic.

Now, if you determine that you like the industry or profession, but don't like the entry-level drudgery or dues paying, you have to suck it up. You will not get ahead until you have worked in that field. You've got to lose the green and gain experience. Similarly, if you like the profession or industry but do not like the company, you also have to suck it up until you have enough experience and have paid enough dues so that you can add that entry-level job to your resume. The more experience you have, even just a few months to a year, the more marketable you will be. It doesn't look good on a resume to quit after four weeks.

Conversely, if you determine that you like the company but not the job then start networking within that organization. If they liked you well enough to hire you, there is a good chance they will help you find a more appropriate home in the organization.

Meet people. Explore other opportunities. Get informational interviews with people in other areas. Volunteer to work on other projects in areas you think would make you happier. Network, network, network.

Last, if you hate the job, the profession and the company, then you will have to do some real soul searching to determine what you want to do. Hiring a career coach can be very helpful. A career coach can help you determine and define your interests, skills and talents. They will help you create a game plan for pursuing and accomplishing your goals and they will support you through this process by giving you honest feedback and advice. If you are really at a loss, a career coach can help. You can find a coach through your college career office, on the Internet or by contacting me.

What companies can do to keep the blues at bay

Organizations have to realize that their new recruits are going to go through some tough times, no matter the cause. And there is a lot they can do to soften the blow. First, they should try to provide young recruits with meaningful work. Traditional entry-level tasks like copying have to be balanced out with more meaningful work, or new employees will be demoralized. Companies can provide opportunities for young people to work on projects with older employees. Even if their duties will be small, at least they will feel a sense of connectedness and worth. They'll be a part of the bigger picture.

Organizations can help their young employees find the right fit by letting them do departmental rotations. This allows young folks to spend several months in different departments until they find the right place.

Last, organizations should check in with their new hires after a month or so. They should make it a point to offer mentors and to introduce young recruits to other workers who are a few years older who can help them see the "light at the end of the tunnel."

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