

Ten Ways School Prepares You for the Work World

The first day you pack a briefcase and head off to a professional job interview may seem far away, but the time to build strong skills and valuable habits is now. School is full of opportunities to develop the qualities most important to employers.

Writing Skills

If you dread essays and other writing assignments, consider this: in a recent survey of employers, communication topped the list of skills they look for most. By doing your best on every research paper and lab report you write, you're preparing yourself for a career.

Health professionals keep patient charts, researchers and artists depend on the money they collect by writing grant applications, software engineers write technical specifications, and nearly everyone writes email to people inside and outside their organization. And before you even get the chance to interview, you'll need to represent yourself in cover letters and resumes.

Speaking Skills

Next time you're assigned a class presentation, think twice before dismissing it as an unimportant part of your education. Employers look for speaking skills in job hopefuls and it's never too soon to practice good eye contact and other public speaking techniques.

Teamwork Skills

How many times a week does your class count off and break into small groups to tackle a challenge? You practice voicing your opinions, listening and responding to others, and reaching compromises. By the time you leave high school, you can be an expert in teamwork, an increasingly important skill in today's workplace.

Problem Solving Skills

Problem solving goes far beyond your algebra textbook. Every school assignment is an opportunity to weigh all possible solutions carefully and select the one you think best. As a working professional, you'll keep solving problems, whether computer programming bugs or budget shortfalls.

Initiative

Every time you raise your hand in class, every time you choose your own research topic, every time you interpret a piece of literature, you take initiative. And employers value can-do professionals who come up with new ideas and chart their own course through projects.

Cool under Pressure

Who hasn't made the argument that testing isn't a real-life situation? It's not like your future boss is going to ask you to translate a Spanish passage without a dictionary in under twenty minutes. But try thinking of the pressure of testing as practice for the work world's own explosive situations. You could someday find yourself meeting tight deadlines, speaking with irate customers, holding a scalpel, or handling dangerous chemicals.

Attention to Detail

When you double-check your calculations for a math problem, make sure you're using the correct homonym in an essay, or cite sources carefully in a research paper, you're paying close attention to detail. That habit will come in handy in any workplace, whether you maintain a database, keep a log of the hours you spend with clients, or simply write emails.

Time Management

How many classes do you attend each day? How many homework assignments do you tackle each night? And what about sports practice, play rehearsal, and other extracurriculars?

You have the chance to be a real pro when it comes to juggling the many demands on your time -- and that's a good thing since most jobs require multitasking. Examples of on-the-job juggling feats include taking care of current clients while attracting new ones, responding to emails while working on a major presentation, and ordering tomorrow's produce while planning next week's menu.

Honesty

Employers need to know that they can trust you with everything from credit cards to trade secrets. But how can you work at honesty? Every day that you do your own homework and resist the temptation to cheat on exams, you exercise your integrity muscle.

Love of Learning

Last but not least, a love of learning will see you through the initial weeks of a new job. It will also serve you well as you advance in your working life, taking on new projects, building expertise, and branching into new areas of interest. While your grandparents may have worked for the same company their entire lives, today's workforce is mobile, with most people changing careers, not just jobs, throughout their lifetime.