

Steps Into 'The Big Unknown'

Advice for New Grads

Entering Workplace;

Buying Dress Clothes

By ERIN WHITE, *Wall Street Journal*

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John Sadofsky wanted to be ready when he started his first postcollege job at a big accounting firm in Chicago last fall. The 23-year-old read financial books, sought a mentor's advice, attended a company networking event and bought some dress shirts. "When you graduate, you're going off into the big unknown," he says.

As a new crop of college graduates prepares to follow Mr. Sadofsky into the workplace, not all will prepare themselves so thoroughly. And no matter how much they do to get ready, many students will feel a bit overwhelmed. But career counselors say there are steps everyone can take to get a head start.

Brad Karsh, president of JobBound, a Chicago career-counseling firm, says it is OK for new workers to feel at sea when starting out -- and to realize that is part of adjusting to the work world. "I don't care how bright you were or how much you studied," he says. "There are some things that colleges have prepared you for and others that they haven't."

Mr. Karsh recommends that students read as much as possible about their soon-to-be employer, its competitors and its industry. That includes visiting Web sites and reading trade publications.

He also encourages students to contact any recent hires they know at the company, however casually, and to solicit advice. "What was helpful for you when you first started?" Mr. Karsh suggests asking. "There's nothing like someone who's just been through it to give you the real scoop."

Pamela Gingold, president of CareerStart, a career-coaching firm for students and recent graduates, says it is important for new hires to bone up on current events, not just the specifics of their jobs. College students sometimes have a reputation for having "their heads in the sand," and new hires who expose glaring gaps in their knowledge of world events demonstrate immaturity and can make a bad impression. Reading newspapers and magazines will help impart "a broader knowledge of what's going on in the world," she says.

Mr. Sadofsky did many of those things before starting his job. He read business newspapers and magazines. He bought a guidebook about finance to learn more about stock options. He sought career advice from a mentor he had met at a college networking event who works for the same accounting firm.

He also took advantage of a firm networking event at a White Sox baseball game a few weeks before he started, where his employer invited both new hires and current employees. He thought it would be a good chance to meet future co-workers in a less-formal setting so there would be some familiar faces when he started work.

He thinks his efforts helped him feel more comfortable when he started in September. "It's kind of hard to say you're ever prepared for something," he says. "You always have your doubts, but I think it prepared me well enough to move forward and get into my career."

Matthew Schopfer is taking a similar approach. The 22-year-old just graduated from the University of Michigan and plans to start an investment-banking job in New York in July. He interned at the firm last summer so he already knows some employees. He has been emailing them to catch up on recent developments -- who has left, who has arrived and which groups are getting lots of new deals.

He is reading the newspaper and watching business news on television to "stay current with the financial markets," he says. He also is buying some new dress clothes.

Otherwise, he is savoring what is likely to be his last chance to enjoy leisure time for quite awhile. While staying at his parents' place in Chicago for the next few weeks, he plans to catch up with friends. "I know what my life is going to be like soon enough: working 90-to-100-hour weeks," he says. "For now, the main thing I'm trying to do is pretty much just relax."

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