

Career Planning

How to Gain Credibility When You Have Little Experience

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October 06, 2017



Summary. To be successful, young workers need to be seen as credible before they have had the opportunity to build expertise from the ground up. It's an incredibly difficult obstacle for younger workers in their first job to overcome. But there are five activities that young professionals can do to jumpstart their career trajectories: leverage your research skills; identify your specific contribution; volunteer for unenviable assignments; manage your workload and communicate proactively; and build a network of close relationships. Your coworkers won't see you as a crucial part of the organization until you prove yourself to be one. But by using the tools, assets, and capabilities that you already have as a young worker, you can overcome the credibility paradox and jump start your career in the process. close

There's a meme on the internet, which speaks truth about a dilemma for young people entering the hypercompetitive workforce of 2017. The photo is of two seasoned, older interviewers glaring critically across the table at a young interview candidate with the following words: "We're looking for someone age 22-26... with 30 years of experience."

This credibility paradox is indeed a core dilemma many young people face as they enter the workforce. To be successful, young workers — or anyone starting a new job or career with little previous experience in a given field — need to be seen as credible before they have had the opportunity to build expertise from the ground up. It puts a new spin on the idea of "hitting the ground running." With the credibility paradox, there's no ground to run on; you need to have already covered the ground before even having started.

For the young and inexperienced, it's essential to overcome this challenge. Getting a fast start in your career will help you gain access to experiences and opportunities that will help you get noticed, be seen as a "high potential," and be given access to opportunities to learn and grow in your career. And it's not only young workers who will benefit from solving this dilemma. It's critical for companies who spend thousands of dollars and countless hours of time recruiting, interviewing, screening, and onboarding new employees.



How can the credibility paradox be solved? In a new initiative at Brandeis University's Perlmutter Institute for Global Business Leadership, we're studying this exact problem. Early findings suggest it may be less of a paradox than we think. Young people

have more resources than they think to overcome their experience deficit. And they can take direct actions to compensate for and build the expertise they lack.

Here are five common activities that you can do as a young professional to jump-start your career and catalyze your leadership trajectory.

1. Leverage your research skills. One of the best ways to stand out in a corporate setting, even as someone with less work experience, is to develop unique knowledge that makes you a go-to resource for your colleagues and clients. One of the most effective ways of doing this is to use your research skills to synthesize and master industry specific knowledge, trends, and information.

Chances are, if you've recently graduated from university, you have a set of freshly honed research skills that you can put to immediate use in a professional context, but if you don't, work on them now. Find out what specific types of knowledge people in your industry crave — and lack — and build your area of expertise around it. Read relevant industry magazines and books, or watch YouTube videos from industry thought leaders. If you can make yourself a unique and helpful resource for solving problems, you'll very quickly build credibility and be seen as a source of information by your colleagues.

2. Identify (and embrace) your specific contribution. Ask yourself some basic questions to identify your strengths and where you might be able to contribute value. In which areas do you feel you do your best work? What have you been praised for in the past? Think about your own best self and how you might describe that to someone. What would that be? Use your answers to generate strengths and resources that can become fodder for jump-starting your career and fast tracking your professional growth.

Also consider your personal background. For instance, you may not have worked in the industry or this specific position before, but chances are you possess useful insights simply because of your geographic or demographic background. Perhaps as a 20-something professional working on a marketing research project, you have ideas about the types of questions to ask people of your generation to yield the most valid and reliable data or about the most viable means of data collection. You don't want to become typecast or pigeonholed as someone with a narrow skill set or who only speaks from a particular perspective informed by their background, but using this as a starting point can be an effective way to build initial credibility and positive regard, especially as a newcomer to the field and the organization.

3. Volunteer willingly. Don't underestimate the power of grit, determination, and the willingness to take on unenviable assignments. If, at the end of a group meeting, your department

head requests more feedback from sales reps on a product line your team has been discussing, volunteer to track down the information. If your senior colleagues ask if anyone would be willing to scrape a big data set for trends that could support your team's case, take on the project — assuming of course you have the skill set to deliver. Opportunities abound to prove yourself. Take advantage of them to make a quick impression as a reliable and hard worker.

4. Manage your workload and communicate proactively.

Although knowledge and experience take time to cultivate, you can immediately establish a reputation for reliability with your colleagues and superiors. Manage your commitments and workload wisely. Know when you're taking on too much, and say no judiciously (though as a junior employee, err on "yes" unless you really feel overtaxed). Also, be proactive with your communication. If you anticipate any difficulty in meeting a deadline, discuss it with your superior as soon as possible, and ask for guidance when you need it. Don't be afraid to ask questions.

And don't forget the importance of follow-through. Bring every single assignment to its conclusion. Don't leave any details hanging or deadlines unmet. You may not be the most experienced person in the room, but you can become one of the most reliable.

5. Work to build a network of close relationships. Your goal over time will be to build a deep and varied network of trusted colleagues who will provide you with ongoing mentoring, advice, and feedback as you progress at your job and in your career. When you start out initially, your cupboard may be a bit bare in terms of trusted contacts and connections, but you will be surprised as how easily you can build up a network for yourself. Follow a similar approach you took in your schooling and post-graduation. You created a network of friends and academic colleagues in college and likely had to network when you looked for your job in the first place. Leverage these skills and apply them to your current situation. Invite coworkers to lunch. Identify superiors you admire and get a feel for how to connect with them within the culture of the organization. In some companies, you might be able to invite them directly to lunch or a coffee meeting. In others, you might want to wait until you've had more work experience with them before deepening the network tie.

The key, though, is to work hard at getting to know as many people as you can on a collegial or even more personal level. These contacts and connections can be critical mentors, sounding boards for your ideas, and potential advocates for you and your work throughout the organization. Demonstrate to them your motivation, commitment, and relevant expertise, and when possible, find ways you can be of service to them and help them with their work.

Expertise doesn't build on its own, and your coworkers won't see you as a crucial part of the organization until you prove yourself to be one. But by developing the confidence to leverage the tools, assets, and capabilities that you already have as a young worker, you can overcome the credibility paradox and jump-start your career in the process.

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