How to Make Your
First Year on the Job a Success

Advice from
Recent Photonics Grads

**Photonics Alumni
Council for Technicians**

OP-TEC
National Center for Optics and Photonics Education

NSF

So, you've completed your education and training and you're ready to start in your first job as a photonics technician. We all remember the excitement, anticipation, and anxiety that you're probably experiencing. You're probably wondering whether you will like the job. Will you be good at it? How will you advance in your career? This first year is really important, and we want to help you do well. Here are some things we learned that you might find useful. Maybe you won't have to learn them the hard way like we did.

First, you need to know that you were selected by your employer as the best tech available for this position. *That's a real compliment to you, and you should be proud of this. But the other reality is that you're at the bottom of the pecking order*—the newest, greenest, most inexperienced tech in your group. Although you obviously have a great education and desirable personal skills, you're going to have to prove to your employer and your coworkers—and to yourself—that you deserve to be there. In this critical, first year on the job, you have to transform the knowledge and skills you have learned into high-quality, productive work. And you're there to help your employer, supervisor, and coworkers get their jobs done as well.

But you're also there to continue your personal and professional growth. The knowledge and experience you gain this first year should be as important as your formal education.

That's enough philosophy and preaching. Here is some specific advice that we think will help you successfully navigate the first year in your job:

1. **You haven't learned everything when you graduate.**

    Your education should have provided you basic knowledge in optics and lasers, plus some good hands-on skills. But even more important, it gave you the ability to learn more—and there's a lot more to learn, such as new equipment, new techniques, and related technologies. Here are some ways to learn on the job.

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a. Mentoring (learning/advice) from an experienced tech or engineer is really important. Don't be afraid to ask questions if you don't know something. Find out the *whys* of what you are doing, not just how to do the job.

b. Study the manuals for the equipment you are using. If you can't find them, go online or ask the manufacturer to provide you another copy. Make sure there is a file of equipment manuals available.

c. Take advantage of other new learning opportunities such as local or online courses and webinars, company-sponsored learning events, and vendor courses and demos.

d. Consider pursuing another degree in technology, business, or education. There will never be an easier time than now for you to pursue further education—and it may be the best investment you could make.

e. If you don't know something, *don't fake it.* Just admit it and ask for help. Only you can give yourself integrity and only you can take it away.

2. **Your mother doesn't work here, so learn how to survive on your own.**

a. Things may not always seem fair. Make the best of it. Complaining doesn't help. Keep a positive attitude under difficult circumstances. Don't lose your temper. Just be cool.

b. Compliance with company policies and schedules is important. Don't fudge on time sheets or travel reimbursements. It's not worth it.

c. Develop the attitude that you want to give 120% of the effort that's required of you.

d. Be willing to take on new assignments, even if they aren't your preferences. Be proactive in seeking assignments or projects. Don't "sit back and wait" for someone to tell you what to do.

e. When there is down time, don't sit idle, play computer games, or get in a bull session. Ask your supervisor if there are any other ways you can help. This attitude is noticed and really appreciated by management.

f. Never speak negatively about your employer or coworkers in public.

3. **You're personally responsible for the quality and timeliness of your work.**

a. Check your work to see if you have made an error. If you're taking readings or making calculations, review them to see if they are reasonable. If they aren't, something's probably wrong and should be corrected.

b. Don't *fudge* the data; report it as it is. If the data looks incorrect, there may have been an equipment malfunction, you may have made an error, or maybe the results are supposed to be different than expected. If you have made an error, just explain it and repeat the test if necessary. Your integrity is more important to your employer than making an occasional mistake.

c. Keep up with your work. If you have a deadline, work as long or hard as you need to meet it. Other people and other work may be depending on your completion of assigned tasks in a timely manner. If you see that your assignments will require longer than scheduled, tell your supervisor early enough that adjustments can be made.

How to Make Your First Year on the Job a Success

4. **Your value as an employee will depend on your soft skills as much as your technical expertise.**

    a. *Working with others; being a team player. Most projects are accomplished by teams of people*. Your part will likely be a vital link in the process. Don't let your other team members down. And remember that everyone's contribution is important. Prima donnas don't make good coworkers.

    Remember that although you and your colleagues may have the same goals, each of you may have different tactics on how to reach those goals. Everyone's contribution is important.

    b. *Problem-solving ability*. If the work were routine and predictable, your employer probably wouldn't need someone as well-trained as you. Many times problems arise in your work for which there are no *canned solutions*. You will have to THINK and solve the problem. If you need help or advice, ask someone. Don't give your problem back to your supervisor till you have solved it. "I dunno" is not a satisfactory answer.

    c. *Effective communication, verbal and written*. Most of the time, your accomplishments are only effective if you can communicate them to other people. These communications may be in the form of logs, lab manuals, reports, presentations, e-mails, or conversations. If you are weak in this area, look for ways to improve. Your future depends on it. The ability to *listen and follow orders* is also an important part of effective communication.

5. **When possible, volunteer to represent your employer in community or charitable events.**

    Sometimes you need to do some things that you aren't paid to do. It's called giving back. Employers want to be good community

partners, and often their contributions to the community are the services their employees volunteer to do. Find ways to contribute your time and talents in areas that you enjoy. Most of the rewards for this are just personal satisfaction—but these acts are frequently noticed and recognized by your employer.

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About the Photonics Alumni Council for Technicians (PACT)

In 2008, OP-TEC created the Photonics Alumni Council for Technicians (PACT). The PACT is an organization of distinguished graduates who have received education and training in lasers, electro-optics, optics, and/or photonics applications from two-year technical colleges. Graduates are nominated by current and former faculty members who recognize their technical achievements and leadership abilities.

The purpose of the PACT and its members is to:

- Recognize excellence and success in photonics technicians.

- Provide role models and mentors for photonics technician students and for high school students considering careers in photonics.

- Demonstrate diversity opportunities in photonics technician employment.

- Provide examples of successful photonics technician career and education pathways.

- Advise photonics technician students on how to be successful in school, why they should complete degrees or certificates, how to get jobs after graduation, and how to be successful at work.

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PACT members also:

- Provide unique and valuable insights on the changing roles of today's photonics technicians in the workplace.

- Advise OP-TEC and other educators on photonics technician curricula, teaching materials, skill standards, and instructional strategies.

- Advise OP-TEC on emerging applications in photonics, particularly in the areas of expertise of the PACT members.

OP-TEC has conducted a series of interviews with PACT members to learn why they chose to pursue education and careers in photonics and how their education and career choices have impacted their lives. We also asked members to provide advice to others considering education and careers in photonics. We have compiled this information into short biographies of the PACT members. Some PACT members have also been featured in the OP-TEC Photonics Technician Career Video series. For more, visit http://www.op-tec.org/careervideos.php.

PACT Members

Robert Aguilar, Jr.
AlconLabs, Inc.
Texas State Technical College

Bruce W. Allen
Newport Corporation
Indian Hills Community College

Michael Bass
Bright View Technologies
Central Carolina Community College

David M. Batsche
CREE, Inc.
Central Carolina Community College

Bruce Brinson, PhD
Rice University
Texas State Technical College

Darrell M. Hull, PhD
University of North Texas
Texas State Technical College

Reese A. Jernigan
Fibertek
Central Carolina Community College

Colt Jesse
Infrared Associates, Inc.
Indian River State College

Jeremy Johnson
Sony Ericsson Mobile Communications
Central Carolina Community College

Lee L'Esperance
Alcatel-Lucent, Bell Laboratories Division
Camden County College

Woodrow D. Morrison, III
Spectra-Physics
Indian Hills Community College

Christopher Pluemer
Epilog Laser Company
Indian Hills Community College

Michelle I. Redish
Northrop Grumman Corporation
Central Carolina Community College

Ryan Renfrew
L-3 Communications
Indian Hills Community College

Michael L. Smith, Jr.
Sandia National Laboratories
Central New Mexico Community College

Terry Smith
Pentair Water
Central Carolina Community College

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