

## Professionalism

Throughout our working lives, most of us will have many different jobs, each requiring a different level or set of skills. No matter the industry - from customer service to an office job to construction and the trades - all of these jobs have one thing in common: in order to succeed and move ahead, you need to demonstrate professionalism. Professionalism does not mean wearing a suit or carrying a briefcase; rather, it means conducting oneself with responsibility, integrity, accountability, and excellence. It means communicating effectively and appropriately and always finding a way to be productive.

As today's labor market becomes more and more competitive, jobseekers will need to continually find ways to stand out from the crowd. There are few things an employer values more than employees who carry out their duties in a professional manner. Professionalism isn't one thing; it's a combination of qualities. A professional employee arrives on time for work and manages time effectively. Professional workers take responsibility for their own

behavior and work effectively with others. High quality work standards, honesty, and integrity are also part of the package. Professional employees look clean and neat and dress appropriately for the job. Communicating effectively and appropriately for the workplace is also an essential part of professionalism.

Regardless of the job or industry, professionalism is easy to spot. On a construction site or in a trade, a professional worker will work hard and manage time effectively, including arriving and returning on time from breaks. A professional worker in a customer service setting will speak clearly and politely to customers and colleagues and have neat and clean appearance. In an office setting, an employee with professionalism will work productively with others and strive for a high standard and constant improvement. Professionalism may look slightly different in various settings, but the core elements are always the same - and give young employees an edge as they begin their careers.

The activities in this section focus on each of the five individual soft skills presented in this publication (communication, enthusiasm/attitude, teamwork, networking, and problem solving/critical thinking), but in a broader framework. This is because professionalism, in and of itself, is not one skill but the blending and integration of a variety of skills. When professionalism is demonstrated, it tends to be thought of as the entire package.

Employers want new workers to be responsible, ethical, and team oriented, and to possess strong communication, interpersonal, and problem solving skills. Wrap these skills up all together and you've got professionalism.

*A note to facilitators: Professionalism is not an easy skill to develop, since it is the make-up of many different skills all “mushed” together and tends to take years of experience to perfect. More than any of the other soft skills covered in this publication, professionalism is the one that employers (and others) say they “know it when they see it.” Recognizing that there is a population of young people who may struggle with one or more of the individual skills that make up professionalism, it is important to provide a safe environment for all youth who are determined to practice and reinforce these skills. Young people need an environment where they feel safe enough to make mistakes, learn from their mistakes, and have opportunities (and the encouragement) to try again. It is by offering a safe environment along with encouragement that all youth can succeed and develop their own personal style of professionalism.*

## 26. Professionalism in Today's Workforce

**JUST THE FACTS:** The face of the workplace is constantly evolving as one generation begins to retire and another moves up to take its place. In 2010, an office may have a mix of baby boomers (and older), Gen X-ers, and Gen Y-ers (Millennials) all working together. In addition to generational differences, differences in education, upbringing, social norms, and values may create cultural gaps that may lead to misunderstandings or conflicts at times. In reality, a variety of perspectives in the workplace can actually benefit and strengthen an organization. The purpose of this activity is to have participants discuss how to bridge generational, cultural, and other diversity gaps in order to build a new standard for professionalism in the workplace.



### Time

30 minutes



### Materials

- Optional: Flip chart/markers
- Activity 26 (The Cultural Divide)



### Directions

Today's workforce is made up of people from many different generations. In fact, some workplaces include people ranging in age from 16 to 70 (or older) all working together. How can these different generations of workers all get along when so often their values, ideas, and experiences are so different?

#### Begin a discussion around something like:

- What do you think the older generation thinks of the younger generation? [Examples may include: lazy, lack of loyalty and respect, need for constant feedback, unrealistic (expect to get to the top right away)]
- What does your generation think of the older generations? [Examples may include: inflexible, slow, set in their ways, technologically incompetent]
- Do you think these ideas are always true? Sometimes true? Never true? Why do you think each group may have these ideas about the other group?

Discuss the word “stereotype.” Use the following for discussion or use a definition from another source: According to the online Urban Dictionary, a stereotype is used to categorize a group of people. When we stereotype groups of people, we depict all people within that group as having the same characteristics.

What causes these stereotypes? How can our society rid itself from grouping people by stereotypes?

Divide the larger group into groups of no more than four. Each group will be using Activity 26 to discuss some of the situations that might create a “cultural divide” in the workplace. Discuss the small group answers as a larger group.



### Conclusion

Draw out a list of some of the strategies one can use on the job to ensure that everybody works well together (not just different generations). Discuss some of the proactive steps one might take to ensure stereotyping does not occur on the job. Some examples might include:

- Look past stereotypes
- Find common ground
- Learn from each other
- Listen to each other
- Acknowledge and appreciate differences
- Promote intergenerational discussions



### Journaling Activity

Think about a time when someone made a biased judgment about you or acted unfairly toward you because of your age, skin color, clothes you were wearing, gender, the way you speak, where you live, how much money your family has, or some other reason. Why do you think those assumptions were made about you? How did that experience make you feel? How do you think you should have been treated in that situation?



### Extension Activity

Connect with an employer who can talk about diversity in the workplace - its importance, its relevance, and how most companies strive for workplaces that are free of stereotyping (of all kinds) and full of diversity.

You may also wish to delve further into a discussion about groups who tend to face stereotyping and stigma (such as people with disabilities, people of color, people with criminal backgrounds, teen parents, certain cultures, etc.) and what a world without stigma and prejudice might look and feel like. Participants can work together to come up with a slogan or educational campaign for promoting a workforce that truly celebrates diversity and inclusion.

## Activity 26. The Cultural Divide

Today's workforce is very diverse. People of different ages and backgrounds are working alongside one another more so today than ever before. The purpose of this activity is to consider how we perceive others and how others may perceive us, as well as whether or not these perceptions paint an accurate picture of who we are. Consider the following situations:

**Sandra is 19 years old and has her first job as an administrative assistant. She wears very low cut shirts, short skirts, heels, and lots of perfume.**

What might Sandra's attire lead others to believe about her? What might the reality be?

**Tony is 24 years old. He has tattoo sleeves on both of his arms, as well as a name tattooed on his neck. Tony would like to be a waiter at a very fancy restaurant. He has first interview today.**

What might a job interviewer think of Tony? What might the reality be?

**Terrence is 18 years old and just graduated high school (where he had a 4.0 average). Terrence has an interview today for a summer internship. Terrence is a wheelchair user.**

Do you think there is a chance that the interviewer might not ask Terrence the same interview questions he or she would ask of someone who isn't in a wheelchair? Why or why not?

**Marissa is in 10th grade. She comes from a family of mechanics. Her dad and three brothers are mechanics, and her grandfather owns a garage. Marissa has secretly wanted to work on cars but has been afraid to tell her family. She now wants to approach her grandfather for a summer job.** Why do you think Marissa has kept her career dream a secret? How might she ask her grandfather for a summer job?

**Ruthie is 62 years old and is looking for a job. She loves one of the local clothing stores and applied online for a job as a sales clerk. She has an interview today and is afraid the store manager will be much younger than her. Ruthie considers canceling the interview.**

Why do you think Ruthie is worried about her interview? What would you tell Ruthie?

**Sam is 20 years old, a sophomore in college and is looking for an engineering internship. Sam has Asperger syndrome (a form of autism), and while he has an A average in his engineering courses, he recognizes the fact that he has trouble interacting socially and is worried about his interviews.**

Why do you think Sam is worried about his interviews? What advice would you give Sam?

## 27. Professional Work Attitudes

**JUST THE FACTS:** As an employee, your attitude at work contributes to your work environment and how you get along with your co-workers and supervisors. A positive attitude can improve morale and increase productivity for all. The purpose of this activity is to generate a discussion about workplace attitudes (of both supervisors and co-workers) and how these attitudes impact those around us.



### Time

30 minutes



### Materials

- Flip chart/markers
- Activity 27



### Directions

Imagine it is your first day on a new job. Discuss what you would do to make a good impression on your co-workers and supervisors [make a list for all to see]. Why might it be important to make a good impression on your first day?

Divide the larger group into smaller groups. Each group will work together to offer advice on an issue related to Justin, a stock clerk at the grocery store (see Activity 27). As the facilitator, read the story aloud, one section at a time. Pause after each section and ask each group to confer and share their collective answer/solution to the question at hand. Each group should be given the opportunity offer their advice first, followed by any additional and new advice from any of the other groups. You may choose to continue the discussion around the room



### Conclusion

Ask the group to describe Justin's work attitude. What do you think would be the most difficult part of being Justin's supervisor? How can a supervisor or boss affect your job performance? How can co-worker attitudes affect your job performance?



### Journaling Activity

Imagine you are a supervisor on the job. What type of supervisor would you be? How would you deal with an employee who had a bad attitude? What are some of the skills you would like to develop so, one day, you can be a GREAT supervisor?



### Extension Activity

Using the situation in Activity 27, have participants work in small groups to create a series of short skits or role-plays about both co-worker and supervisor attitudes - and how those attitudes can affect the job performance of others.

## Activity 27. Examining Work Attitudes

1. Justin is a stock clerk at the local grocery store. Justin does only what he is told to do, no more and no less.

**Question:** *Does Justin have a good attitude toward work? Why or why not?*

2. One day, one of Justin's co-workers knocked over a product display. Boxes were scattered all over the floor. At the time, Justin was working close by. He ignored the scattered boxes and left his workstation to tell others what had happened.

**Question:** *If you were the co-worker who knocked over the display, what would you have said to Justin?*

3. Later the same day, Justin was stocking shelves. The item he was stocking belonged in another part of the store. A co-worker trying to help Justin told him he was making a mistake. Justin insisted he was right and started an argument.

**Question:** *Was it right for Justin to argue with his co-worker? What could Justin have done differently?*

4. Before Justin went home that night, he overheard a personal conversation between two co-workers and the supervisor. The next morning, Justin told everyone what he had heard. The entire grocery store was soon talking about what Justin told them.

**Question:** *Was Justin correct in discussing what he had overheard? Explain.*

5. When Justin's supervisor found out what had happened, she called Justin into her office for a conference.

**Question:** *What do you think was said to Justin?*

**Question:** *If you were one of Justin's co-workers, what advice would you give to him?*

**Question:** *If you were Justin's supervisor, what could you do to help him become a better employee?*



## 28. Teamwork – An Essential Element of Professionalism

**JUST THE FACTS:** Part of understanding professionalism is figuring out how each of our individual actions impacts the actions and work of others. This activity is designed to give participants a quick way to rate themselves and their own professional actions. It also gives them the opportunity to reflect on the positive behaviors they demonstrate, and to how these behaviors impact others.



### Time

20 minutes



### Materials

- Activity 28 (one for each participant)



### Directions

Using Activity 28, participants will rate themselves on workplace behaviors that are typically thought of as “professional” in the workplace. Participants should be encouraged to be honest, as this paper can be kept 100% confidential. The purpose of this activity is to generate discussion and thought related to the workplace soft skills often sought by employers.



### Conclusion

Ask the group to share the skill of which they feel the most proud. Without asking who wanted to improve, discuss some of the strategies people could use if they wanted to improve a few of these skills (select two or three). Ask the group if there are any additional skills missing from this list. What are they?



### Journaling Activity

Do you think that the strengths and weaknesses you recognize in yourself are the same as those that others recognize in you? Why or why not? How do you think your behavior impacts those around you?



### Extension Activity

Using additional copies of the activity sheet, have participants ask three people they know and trust to complete the form (about the participant). The forms can be completed anonymously (so to speak). Participants should take some time to determine if how they view themselves is similar to or different from the way others view them. Discussion can then be generated as to why this may be. Participants should pay particular attention to the answers to the three questions asked at the bottom of the activity. How does this information impact the young person's original answers to these questions?

## Activity 28. Teamwork – An Essential Element of Professionalism

Here are some quick tips to being a good employee...and a good team player. Determine which of your skills are “on target” and which might need some improvement by choosing “Always,” “Sometimes,” or “Never.”

1. **I get to work on time. If I am going to be late, I call and let my boss know.**  
[Always • Sometimes • Never]
2. **I rarely miss work. If I am going to miss work, I let my boss know ahead of time (or call if I am sick).**  
[Always • Sometimes • Never]
3. **I work as hard as I can.**  
[Always • Sometimes • Never]
4. **I pay close attention to my work.**  
[Always • Sometimes • Never]
5. **I do my work as I am told. If I am unable to do something or have questions, I ask my supervisor or co-workers.**  
[Always • Sometimes • Never]
6. **I am friendly on the job.**  
[Always • Sometimes • Never]
7. **I try to solve problems that come up.**  
[Always • Sometimes • Never]
8. **I follow safety and company rules.**  
[Always • Sometimes • Never]
9. **I use materials and equipment properly.**  
[Always • Sometimes • Never]
10. **I behave professionally.**  
[Always • Sometimes • Never]

**NOW, ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:**

**Based on the descriptions above, I am most proud of my ability to:**

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**One area I'd like to improve is:**

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**Some strategies I might use as I work to improve this skill is?**

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## 29. Is it Considered “Professional” to Have Friends in the Workplace?

**JUST THE FACTS:** Working with friends can make work lots of fun. Sometimes, though, it may not always be the best situation. The purpose of this activity is to get participants to discuss the benefits and potential drawbacks to working on a job alongside friends.



### Time

15 minutes



### Materials

- Activity 29 - one for each person or each group.
- Optional: White board/flip chart and markers.



### Directions

Ask the group to discuss (or list) some of the pros and cons for working (on a job) with friends. Divide the larger group into groups of three. Hand each group the “Avoid the Clique” scenarios. Discuss/define “clique” if necessary (a small group of people, with shared interests or other features in common, who spend time together and do not readily allow others to join them).

Each group should read together and discuss Scenario #1. With the larger group, discuss what the lifeguards’ supervisor meant by “paying close attention to their jobs?” If you were the supervisor, what specific instructions would you give?

Next, the small groups should read together and discuss Scenario #2. Each group should come up with possible solutions for each of the four questions for consideration - and be prepared to discuss with the larger group.



### Conclusion

Come back together as a group to discuss the possible solutions. These may include, but need not be limited to:

1. Too much socializing at work may result in poor production.
2. Co-workers may feel alienated by the clique. They may be suspicious or jealous that they’re not included in the group.
3. The three can maintain their friendship outside of work hours.
4. It’s important to like people at work. It makes the job more enjoyable.

Use this opportunity to discuss “cliques” in general - and the problems that might arise (in different situations) because of them. Think about how cliques may be perceived by others. Ask if anyone has ever had the experience of being part of a clique or an outsider to a clique. If comfortable, ask each to share a story explaining what it felt like to be in either position.



### Journaling Activity

What would be the benefits of working at a job with your best friend? What would be the drawbacks? Would you want to work at a job with your best friend? Why or why not?



### Extension Activity

Participants can create a list of tips for:

1. How to manage friends in the workplace.
2. How to develop friendships on the job.
3. What to do when your workplace friend turns into a “frenemy.”

## Activity 29. Avoiding the Clique

### SCENARIO #1:

LaToya, Rosa, and Day were great friends. All three received their lifeguard certification together and were very excited to be working at the same community pool during the summer. The pool's supervisor knew the three girls were all close friends - and that this would be their first paid job. He wanted to be sure they recognized how fortunate they were to be able to work alongside their friends, but also needed to stress the importance of not letting their close friendship get in the way of doing their jobs.

If you were the supervisor, what specific instructions would you give to the girls?

### SCENARIO #2:

Trent, Ben, and Antonio all started working at a local home improvement store at the same time. They were in the same orientation group and liked each other immediately. Trent and Ben work in the customer service department and Antonio works in accounting. The three usually go out after work on Friday night, text each other during the day, and try to eat lunch together several times a week (when they can). Sometimes they even hang out on the weekends. While Trent, Ben, and Antonio are lucky to have found such good friends at work, some of their co-workers are not as pleased about their close friendship.

### Questions for Consideration

1. What is the danger of becoming too friendly with co-workers or socializing with them too much?
2. What objections might other co-workers have to this three-person clique? Why might some of these co-workers not be pleased?
3. How can the three maintain their friendship without damaging their relationships with their co-workers?
4. Why is it important to have friends at work?

## 30. Self-Reflection: Professional Problem Solving at it's Best

**JUST THE FACTS:** Problem solving is an important skill in work and life. Though there are many ways to solve problems, learning the skill of self-reflection as part of career decision-making can be extremely helpful. The purpose of this activity is to have participants see themselves in the future - and then reflect on how the decisions they made got them to where they are.



### Time

30-40 minutes



### Materials

- Paper and writing instruments of choice for each participant (pen, pencil, colored pencils, markers, etc.) - legal sized paper or chart paper may work best



### Directions

Ask the group what the term “self-reflection” means to them (solicit responses). Discuss that self-reflection is a process of giving serious thought to our lives and our decisions by examining our character, our actions and our motives and/or motivations. Sometimes we make decisions and then reflect on our choices, other times we reflect before making choices.

Say something to the effect of: This exercise will get you thinking about your future. You will be asked to think about what you want to do with your future and define some life goals by working backwards in time.

Ensure each participant has a piece of paper and the writing instruments of choice.

I’m going to ask you a series of questions. You will need to think about these questions very carefully and then either draw or write your reactions on your paper. Your responses do not need to be in any particular order, but will ultimately help you to tell or retell your own personal history.

#### Ok, here goes:

Imagine you are in your final years of life. You are sitting in a rocking chair reflecting on the life you have lived. You are contemplating the answers to the following questions:

- Did you choose a career (or careers) that you enjoyed?
  - If so, how did that happen?
  - If not, why not?



- What accomplishments did you achieve?
- What accomplishments did you want to achieve but did not?
  - What held you back?
- Which activities did you do that you wanted to?
  - What encouraged you to do them?
- Which activities didn't you do that you would have liked to?
  - What held you back?
- If you had your life to do over again what would you do differently?
- What would you have kept the same?
- What things did you choose to do in your life that made you happy?
- Could you have done more of them?
  - Why didn't you?

Thinking through your answers while in this rocking chair will have some tremendous power. To look ahead at what you think your life will be like has the possibility to help you take more control of your life right now.



### Conclusion

Ask for volunteers to talk about their rocking chair life story. It may be helpful for you to have completed a picture or a word collage earlier and share your personal rocking chair life story with the group first.

Discuss with the group how self-reflection activities have the power to help us make the personal decisions necessary to plan for our futures.



### Journaling Activity

Think about a time you needed to solve a personal problem and you acted first and then reflected later. Now think about a time when you needed to solve a problem and you reflected first and then acted. Which way turned out the best for you? Why do you think this is so?



## Extension Activity

Take self-reflection one-step further and think about your future career from today's point of view. Read each of the following 10 questions (see Activity 30) and take some time to think about your answers. What you answer today may not be the same as what you might answer tomorrow or next year - but the important thing is to keep asking yourself questions like these, and answering them.

### 10 Self-Reflection Questions to move you Toward the Career of Your Dreams

1. How do you want your life to be?
2. What are the 10 most important work values to you?
3. What would you do if time, money, and experience were not a concern?
4. What would you do or learn if you knew you couldn't fail?
5. What are you passionate and energized by?
6. What are your current skills, abilities, and talents?
7. What is stopping you from moving forwards and achieving your goals, including any self-limiting beliefs about yourself?
8. What beliefs do you need now to achieve the life of your dreams?
9. What are all of your choices?
10. What will you commit to now to move forwards?

## (Extension) Activity 30. Self-Reflection Questions to Ask and Answer to Move You Toward the Career of Your Dreams

(Source: [http://EzineArticles.com/?expert=Louise\\_A\\_Newson](http://EzineArticles.com/?expert=Louise_A_Newson))

**QUESTION: HOW DO YOU WANT YOUR LIFE TO BE?**

**CONSIDERATIONS:** Think about what you would like to experience on a day-to-day basis. If you were totally 100% happy with your life what would that look like? What do you want to be doing a year from now or five years from now?

**ANSWER:**

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**QUESTION: WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MOST IMPORTANT WORK VALUES TO YOU?**

**CONSIDERATIONS:** Some examples are: independence, helping others, challenge, advancement, risk taking, change and variety, prestige, stability, making a difference, social status, leadership, making decisions, security, artistic creativity, self expression, adventure/excitement, public contact, mental stimulation, travel, working alone, etc.

**ANSWER:**

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**QUESTION: WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF TIME, MONEY, AND EXPERIENCE WERE NOT A CONCERN?**

**CONSIDERATIONS:** After you've travelled, bought you and your family a house and car, etc., what would you do next if there were no limits?

**ANSWER:**

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**QUESTION: WHAT WOULD YOU DO OR LEARN IF YOU KNEW YOU COULDN'T FAIL?**

**CONSIDERATIONS:** Put fear to one side and allow your imagination to work without restrictions. Would you start a brand new career or start your own business?

**ANSWER:**

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**QUESTION: WHAT ARE YOU PASSIONATE AND ENERGIZED BY?**

**CONSIDERATIONS:** What do you love doing? What could you talk about for hours? What would other people you know say if I asked them?

**ANSWER:**

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**QUESTION: WHAT ARE YOUR CURRENT SKILLS, ABILITIES, AND TALENTS?**

**CONSIDERATIONS:** If you struggle to answer this, as many people do, ask three significant people in your life what they think are your skills and talents. You may be surprised!

**ANSWER:**

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**QUESTION: WHAT IS STOPPING YOU FROM MOVING FORWARDS AND ACHIEVING YOUR GOALS, INCLUDING ANY SELF-LIMITING BELIEFS ABOUT YOURSELF?**

**CONSIDERATIONS:** You need to identify anything that is holding you back. It may be a physical issue (e.g. you don't have the necessary qualifications), or it may be mental (e.g. you don't believe you can succeed). Whatever it is, identify it and deal with it (e.g. take a course to earn a qualification or credential, read a book about self-esteem, or ask a teacher or a counselor to help you).

**ANSWER:**

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**QUESTION: WHAT BELIEFS DO YOU NEED NOW TO ACHIEVE THE LIFE OF YOUR DREAMS?**

**CONSIDERATIONS:** In order for you to have your perfect career, what would you have to believe about yourself to make that a reality (e.g. "I have achieved many great things in my life, and I deserve to have the career of my dreams.")

**ANSWER:**

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**QUESTION: WHAT ARE ALL OF YOUR CHOICES?**

**CONSIDERATIONS:** Brainstorm all your possible choices. Don't start to evaluate them at this stage, just get them all onto paper.

**ANSWER:**

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**QUESTION: WHAT WILL YOU COMMIT TO NOW TO MOVE FORWARDS?**

**CONSIDERATIONS:** Now evaluate all of your options and decide on a path to take. Create an action plan of all the steps you'll need to go through to achieve your goal, and if necessary get support from an adult you trust.

**ANSWER:**

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