

# How to take initiative at work (and how not to)

Life is a series of choices, and sometimes those choices take place at work. Since no amount of training can prepare you for all the different situations you'll face, learning when to do things on your own is an important part of your professional development. Taking initiative means completing both the work your employer expects and the work they don't. The better you perform at your job, the more likely you are to keep it. Who knows? You may even end up with a promotion. It's a mindset that takes time to adopt, and it requires some thought.

Taking initiative isn't always easy. Choosing to act on your own takes some self-confidence. You'll have to face your fear of failure and step outside your comfort zone, as going the extra mile can be a little risky in some cases. In this blog, we're talking about knowing how and when to act on your own at work, and how to avoid making mistakes when doing it.

## Less is more

While it's good to be a self-starter and do things on your own, it's not always necessary or even advisable. Some tasks are best left to others, especially specialized tasks where training and experience are required. Finding extra work further down your queue is good, but taking work from someone else's queue may not be.

Ask first. Offer help where your teammates need it before jumping onto their projects. You'll show initiative as a team player, and they'll have an easier time putting your efforts to good use.

If possible, try not to make permanent changes. For example, if your coworker needs help editing a document, make a copy for yourself where you can make changes (use your initials in the file name so there's no confusion). Some word processors also allow you to make changes in "suggestion mode" where edits are not permanent.

When there's no one around to ask, making separate copies avoids disrupting another's workflow, which is important because nobody likes an attempt at positive change when it results in chaos. Be a team player and don't let your desire to take initiative mess up someone else's routine.

## Here's some career advice to consider as you take initiative:

- **Don't pester.** It's one thing to remind people about a conversation, but it's something else to ask on a daily basis. If you mention something more than three times with no real progress on the matter, leave it alone for a while.
- **Don't try to beat someone else at their job.** Being ambitious doesn't mean making an example of someone else. Be the kind of coworker you want by staying in your lane when the urge to achieve kicks in.
- **Don't badmouth.** Sure, it's nice to complain about people once in a while, but getting cocky and comparing yourself to others is a bad look that won't get you very far (in most companies—looking at you [Microsoft](#)). Remember your place in the team.

## **Do it or don't**

As a proactive employee, it's important to know that you can actually finish a job. Say you notice some dust on a ceiling fan and decide to clean it up. Great! Way to be mindful of your work environment. Just make sure you know the best solution to the problem. If you fail to think things through, you could end up stranded or dealing with a broken fan. Basically, don't start something on your own unless there's a clear path to the end.

Why? Because sometimes, failing to finish a job will have serious consequences. Say you decide to reorganize company files but stop halfway through to do some other task. If no one else knows what you were doing, you'll leave coworkers/managers with a huge headache. People have been fired for these kinds of mistakes. (For the record, if nobody asked you to reorganize company files, don't.)

If a task requires that you learn a new skill, consider waiting for someone to show you the ropes before getting started. In short, it's better to get a little less done today than to dive headfirst into something with no real chance of completing or advancing it.

## **Plan first!**

One task that doesn't get enough credit is planning. You may not end up with a finished product, but writing a plan down is an excellent way to take initiative at work. If your team is stuck somewhere, throw your hat in the ring by offering suggestions. Not only will you receive excellent feedback about how to improve your approach, but you may even introduce helpful new ideas.

Writing out a plan doesn't have to be a formal undertaking — just some observational notes can showcase your problem-solving skill, even if they don't seem useful at the time. Writers use outlines. Actors use cue cards. Builders use blueprints. All of these are plans that, on their own, aren't finished products. Used properly though, they yield outstanding results.

Imagination is how to create something out of nothing. If you're unsure about how to do something, dedicating some time to thinking it out can give you an answer. Start writing and the ideas will come. From there, you can always approach your supervisor with your thoughts and get feedback on if pursuing them further would be a good use of time.

## **Learn new skills through mentorships**

One crucial step in your career development is learning what your coworkers do. Businesses aren't magic—they rely on a series of decision makers like you to reach their goals, and each person's job responsibilities play a part in that system. Oftentimes, learning about the big picture at work helps to better define your own role while giving you ideas about career goals. It can also reduce burnout.

Job shadowing and mentorships are great ways to show initiative. The fact is, most new hires are content to learn their job and stick to that role forever. Business owners, however, want people willing to take the reins on new opportunities as they arise. By showing interest in new job duties and immersing yourself in the company, you set yourself apart as a good employee with potential leadership skills.

Talk about your career plan during performance reviews and one-on-ones, though make sure they know you're happy with where you're at currently.

## **Talk to other departments once in a while**

Make some friends! Asking to job shadow isn't the only way to show initiative—you can also explore job opportunities by making the rounds at work. Get to know the other people who help your company deliver on its

promises.

People aren't born with one single skill. By exploring other jobs within the company, you'll learn about different skill sets and how they compare to your own abilities. You'll also learn about what kind of work you really want.

Many people want jobs that pay more and have fancier titles, but in reality, they're usually just looking for a new challenge. Who knows? After talking with the right people, you may find that a job you wanted sounds less exciting than you thought. Sure, the pay is higher, but if you dread going into work each day, the mental and emotional toll far outweighs a bump in salary.

If you want to take initiative at work, have more conversations with people from other departments.

## **Moving up doesn't mean sucking up**

We've all met someone whose methods for taking initiative annoy more than help, and while they may get returns early on, relationships are often damaged along the way. No matter how you pursue career growth, always be respectful, kind, and supportive of the people you work with, as getting ahead is much easier when you're seen as a trustworthy ally instead of a cutthroat overachiever.

Taking initiative at work takes some guts, and there will be some who inevitably disapprove of your efforts. Keep your eye on the prize, and remember that you have unique skills no one else possesses. Contributing those skills in the best way possible is what should drive your initiative, not the ability to rub shoulders with the suits while telling people what to do.

So what's the difference between taking initiative and sucking up? The sincerity of your communication. Rather than looking to move up in the company, keep a focus on the big picture and be honest about the role you might play there. Offer ways you can add value, and often the opportunity to advance will eventually follow.

### **Here are some tips on how to have productive conversations at work:**

- Offer observations about ways something could improve.
- Identify problems and offer solutions.
- Give opinions without qualifying or backing off.
- Share insights from things you know personally.
- Volunteer to take projects others don't want.

## **Do your job well**

At the end of the day, taking initiative must not replace what you're supposed to be doing already. It is not a replacement for your regular job duties. Keep yourself engaged as you await more opportunities.

Always defer to management when determining what work you should be doing. Taking initiative is no good when paired with insubordination. If you want to be seen as a mature, reliable contributor, do your job well and listen to those tasked with making decisions.

Take advantage of extra training and make sure to occasionally read up on your company handbook. Sometimes, a little refresher on the importance of your job does wonders for one's professional life.

## **Final thoughts**

Taking initiative is a habit. The more you do it, the more ways you'll find to do it. There'll be plenty of time in your career to shoulder new responsibilities, so be patient. Even in a turbulent job market, promotions take time to obtain, going to reliable team members more often than purely persistent ones (though the two aren't

mutually exclusive).

To sum up what it means to take initiative in two words, “solve problems.” Don’t just do something to be noticed. Let your work speak for you. Browse YouTube and learn what those with experience have to say. Develop a vocabulary for your field. Read. All of these are better activities than doing work no one wants or needs, and they will make you a more well-rounded person in the end.

Great employees have great character as well as refined skills, so keep working toward being a good person. That’s the kind of initiative companies want.