

How Job Seekers Can Evaluate Organizational Culture

By Robert Half April 16, 2018 at 12:00pm

Whether you work for a small firm or a large corporation, how you fit in with the company's organizational culture can have a big effect on your overall job satisfaction and, in the long term, your career path.

No two companies are exactly alike. And likewise, no two organizational cultures are exactly the same. What is organizational culture? It's created from the beliefs and values the individual leaders hold, which are then translated into goals, policies and behaviors that trickle down through the entire company. It can be as formal as a mission statement or as informal as a water cooler chat. Even the smallest companies have a corporate culture, whether they know it or not.

Working for a business with an organizational culture that matches your workstyle fosters creativity and productivity so you can do your best work and grow in your career. When you find the right fit for your personality, values and goals, you enjoy going to work every day. If the culture of a company isn't a good match for you, the job can be a grind — or worse. So when weighing a new job offer, consider the new employer's culture — and whether it's a good fit for you — as carefully as the job's responsibilities and [salary range](#). Here's what to look for and ask about.

Cornerstones of corporate culture

Knowing your must-haves when it comes to corporate culture is vital when evaluating a new position. Perhaps you don't mind burning the midnight oil, but you can't bear disorganization. Or maybe you're looking for a regular schedule with a manager who promotes work-life balance. Or perhaps your top priority is working for an organization with a mission you're truly passionate about and coworkers who enjoy collaborating. Assess these areas of an organization's workplace culture as you consider employment opportunities:

- **Basic job satisfaction** — How happy are existing employees? Is the company cultivating loyalty and respect? Or is there high turnover from an unhappy workforce? Check reviews on sites like Glassdoor and LinkedIn to see what current and former employees are saying.
- **Work-life balance** — How does management encourage work-life balance for its employees? Do supervisors respect a regular work schedule, or routinely expect you to work overtime? Is there flexibility with hours or remote working? Are part-time or job sharing options a possibility? Does the organization make up for overtime with extra time off (if it's a salaried, exempt position)? Do they offer perks such as on-site day care or concierge services?
- **Collaboration and productivity** — In a good organizational culture, teammates value collaboration and understand how to work well together. Communication is clear, transparent and honest, from the top down and among team members. Does the manager you interview with speak with respect about their subordinates? Are goals clearly communicated? Are employees set up for success?
- **Leadership that walks the walk** — A company needs to be unified by a common set of values, beliefs and goals that support productivity and innovation, with management that lives by those values. Look for signs that the leadership adheres to its own corporate ideals. Do managers trust employees to make decisions? Are people — including supervisors — held accountable for following through on tasks?
- **Effective work environment** — The office space is an important part of organizational culture, and it greatly affects how people do their jobs. Be sure you'll be comfortable in whatever workplace you

choose, whether it's an office where you can bring your dog and play pinball at lunch or a quieter, more professional environment. After all, you'll be spending a sizable chunk of your time there.

Asking about corporate culture

Finding a company that brings out your best traits and inspires you to do your best work isn't always easy. The [job interview process](#) itself can give a lot of insight into an organization. Is it chaotic and disorganized? Your experience probably isn't an anomaly. Is it very by-the-book, with no corners cut? The company might be bureaucratic and slow-moving or have little leeway for individual personality. When you're interviewing for a position, be sure you have prepared questions for the interviewer that cover company culture in addition to the nitty gritty of the new position. Here are six critical questions to ask:

1. **What do you like about working here?** Ask team members you'd be working with what they like about the organization. This helps you determine whether employees support each other and have opportunities to grow. If there's no chance to have discussions with your future coworkers during the interview process, that also says something about the culture of the business.
2. **What time do people generally come in and leave for the day?** The official schedule might be 9 to 5, but the reality could be quite different. This casual question should give you a lot of insight about work-life balance and how management handles busy periods.
3. **What traits could have helped the last person in this position succeed?** This question can be very revealing. Not only will you learn what traits the hiring manager is prioritizing, but you'll see whether they hire for cultural fit and how they talk about past team members.
4. **What do you wish you'd known before starting here?** This can be a revealing question to ask a hiring manager or a potential coworker. It gives them a chance to reflect on their time in the company and what they've learned about adapting to the workplace — and it helps you avoid mistakes others have made in the past.
5. **How is this organization different from the competition?** This might seem like a softball question that lets the interviewer sell you on the company, but it also reveals a lot about how the company views itself and its values. What are employees proud of? What does the leadership prioritize above all else?
6. **What would you change about this company if you could?** This question is subtle and insightful. Rather than asking "What do you hate about this company?" you're asking for an individual's ideas on how to change it for the better.

In addition to asking these probing questions, observe the surroundings while you're there and quietly consult people in your network to learn about the company's reputation and realities before accepting a job. [Doing your own research](#) helps you see the full picture of a workplace, not just the one management wants to present.

When it comes to evaluating organizational culture, there's no one-size-fits-all metric. Knowing your own individual priorities, working style and goals is paramount to determining whether you'll succeed in a company. Keep your eyes open, ask questions and listen to your gut as you evaluate a new workplace and you'll be able to make a fully informed decision about your next step.

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