

“Would This Job Be a Good Fit?”

Assessing Company Culture



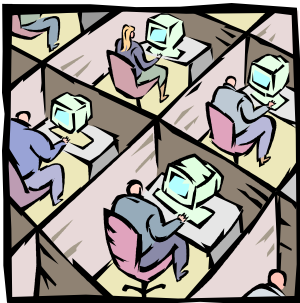
Re-Printed from *Career Connection*,
Minnesota WorkForce Center

Ever had that sinking feeling *after* you began a job? There's no greater let-down than to realize your new job is a mismatch. For both your and the employer's sake, it's important to research company culture to assure that you and the company are a good match.

What is Company Culture?

What does “company culture” mean to you? The company's personality? Fit? Personal chemistry? Whether you can play your favorite MP3 or wear favorite outfits at work? What about, “How are things done around here?”

Dig Beneath the Surface Company culture exists at different levels. On the surface are superficial yet significant clues such as company websites and mission statements; how people dress; job titles; working hours; technology and methodology; and printed job descriptions direct from HR.



Beneath the surface dwell deeper things: *real-life* job descriptions (often far different from printed versions); management styles; relationships among employees and departments; company policies; and company politics. In the sociology of organizations how people talk — jargon and terminology — can vary greatly. Is this crowd Mac Lovers, or PC Users?

Kate Lorenz, editor of CareerBuilder.com, points out the importance of knowing “the real needs, values and aspirations of the other party.” What's important to the employer? Is where *they* want to go the direction *you* do? Whatever the values of a work group may be, groups tend to accept others they perceive as having similar values, and reject those they regard as having opposing values.

The most significant aspect of company culture, the company value system, lies at the deepest level and can be the most difficult to fathom. How genuinely and intelligently does this company practice customer service? How strong is the company ethics system? (Where does this company fit vis-à-vis *Miracle on 34th Street*?) To be accepted, does a newbie need to be of certain political persuasion, or join in after work at the sports bar?



Why is Awareness of Company Culture Important?

Reasons are boundless: to avoid disruptive conflicts; to avoid distraction from the work that needs to be done; to gain satisfaction and avoid misery. If you affiliate with that new employer will you find support, or be a castaway among people who don't really care? Will you feel welcomed and valued? Will you discover a helpful environment for your work and your career? Compatibility with company culture has a lot to do with whether you'd be perceived as an enemy or ally to the company's agenda, an outsider or insider.

Company culture can affect success and morale on the job, impacting not only financial well-being but even mental and physical health. Links between workplace compatibility and both physical and mental health are well established. Most reasonable people consider a toxic work environment not worth the cost. If you're shopping for an employer, you have a large stake in whether or not you and the company culture are a good fit.

How You Can Determine the Culture of a Company

Detective Work 101 Visit your target company. Be observant! Do people smile? Do they look at you and give you a warm greeting? How do co-workers relate to each other? Do employees appear on task and serious about what the company hired them to do? What emotions do you sense — do people look stressed or at ease? Do you hear any laughter? How is the place decorated? What equipment is there? Are cars still in the lot at 6:00 because employees want to, or have to, be there?

Ask for information from customers, competitors, suppliers, trade or professional associations, and past employees.

It's All About People Good research and detective work include but go beyond the Internet and printed information. *People* are your best information source — people who work for or who are in a position to know the company. Most people are helpful if asked for advice. So ask for information from customers, competitors, vendors and suppliers to your target company, trade or professional associations, and past



employees you locate through associations or your network. Current employees *may* be candid, but only to the point they feel safe.

Intimate, personal information at the core of company culture is more easily gotten when you've established relationships and a basis for sharing. Getting below the surface to discern people's attitudes, how they interact, and company politics requires trust. This requires sincerity, in other words, *effective* networking.



Key Questions After you have established solid relationships you can pursue issues such as these to base your employment decisions. Generally open-ended, focused questions work best. Ask questions like:

- What is a typical workweek like here?
- What is really the most important work at this company?
- To what does this company allocate its resources?
- What tools, budget, and workspace do people have to do the job? Do they feel their resources are adequate?
- What does this company give back to the community?
- How does this company treat its employees? (Do they walk the walk, or just talk the talk?)
- What is the management style? (Mostly top-down, or more collaborative?)
- Do people here feel their level of authority matches their level of responsibility?
- What would the *most satisfied employees* say about working here?" What about the *least satisfied employees*?
- How well does the company comply with safety standards?
- What kind of people fit in well here? Who doesn't?
- Why did the incumbent person in this position leave?
- How do people get hired here?
- What advancement opportunities are here? Who tends to receive them? What leads to promotions here?
- In what direction is this company going?
- How do company staffing and hiring practices match up with your values? Are employees hired, retained, promoted and compensated fairly?
- What training opportunities exist?
- How is creativity encouraged here?

“ Position yourself by the employee doorway at closing time, and watch employees as they leave. Are they mopey and dragging, or do they look like they want to come back tomorrow ? ”



- How do people feel about the tempo of activity?
- Do you consider relationships here more cooperative or more competitive?
- What do people do here for fun and gratification?

Don't Miss Your Target!

Company culture can vary even between different units of the same company. Cross from one aisle of a cube field to the next and you might enter a

radically different work culture. Similarly, new management can bring stark changes in the way a group operates. Be sure to focus your inquiry on not only the larger company, but on the work units inside.



DISCUSSION EXERCISES

- (1) Describe a company where you've worked before. Identify characteristics you liked about it, and characteristics you didn't like.
- (2) List key criteria important to you to have at your next place of work.

Example — While no workplace is 100% ideal, these are some characteristics which a group of WorkForce Center clients used to describe a desirable workplace:

Professional	Energetic
Business-like	Encouraging
Busy	Pushing to improve
Organized	Positive
Supportive	Affirming
Caring	Clean
Safe	Flexible
Up-to-date methodology	A class act
Self-esteem booster	Does good & does well

- (3) How important is it to you to assess the culture of the next organization you think about working for? Which methods would you use to make your assessment?
- (4) Can the culture of a company workplace be changed?
- (5) What responsibilities do all members of an organization have to promote a desirable, healthy, well-functioning workplace?

— By Steven Chirpich and Paul Sears,
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