

The Corporate Culture Challenge: How to Find the Job That Fits You

By Megan Martin

After searching and countless rounds of interviews, you've finally landed the perfect position: The pay is outstanding, benefits superb, location ideal. What more could you ask for? Ask a career expert and you might be surprised to learn you've forgotten to consider something important enough to make or break your experience--the culture of the company.

In his "Uncovering a Company's Corporate Culture," Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D. defines corporate culture as "...the unique personality or character of a particular company or organization." Culture includes everything from the company's most deeply-held values to on-the-job behavior to dress code.

As a financial professional, you're in demand. If you have the right skill set, you may be showered with phenomenal pay and benefits--and find it easy to overlook the significance of company culture. But, it's something that affects you on a daily basis.

Michael Neece, in his article, "Assess Company Culture to Find the Best Fit," warns: "Working at a company with values inconsistent with yours is stressful, unrewarding, even depressing at times. No matter how great the position and salary, if you're working in a caustic, understaffed and unethical culture, you'll feel unfulfilled..."

So, how do you go about uncovering a particular company's culture and deciding whether it's a good fit for you? A little research and preparation can go a long way.

Decide what values are important to you

"Start by thinking about all the reasons for your last bad fit, [and] develop a better sense for exactly what you want next time," suggest Lisa Daniel and Carolyn Brandon, co-authors of the article "Finding the Right Job Fit."

Each person's set of values will be different. One person's list might include flexible scheduling and a family-friendly company that supports work/life balance. Another may prefer to work as part of a team in a formal, structured environment with lots of opportunities for training and development.

"Rarely will you find a work environment totally aligned with your values," writes Neece. "But you should be able to find organizations where the culture and your values can coexist." Being aware of what's most important to you will help you focus your energies on companies you'll truly fit with.

Do the research

Start by visiting the prospective company's website: Mission statements, annual reports and other communications can offer clues about that company's beliefs and ethics. To get an objective viewpoint, visit independent Web sites where former employees offer honest opinions of companies for which they've worked.

Enlist help

Because recruiters have extensive experience with certain companies, they can often offer unique insights. Most recruiters feel it is their responsibility to ensure that candidates understand what a company is like, even if that means discussing the company's flaws.

"Don't be shy about asking for that person's insights into the true inner workings of the organization," write Daniel and Brandon. "...a bad match hurts everyone--the company, the job candidate, and the placement firm."

Before the interview

If possible, arrive early for your interview and observe the surroundings.

Do employees seem excited about their work? Bored? Stressed out? Do company leaders and employees communicate effectively? Use your observations to determine whether you'd mesh well with the environment.

During the interview

Ask plenty of questions that are specific to your values. While the interviewer may not be the ideal source of insight about the negatives of a company, career experts suggest asking some of the following questions to determine whether you and the company are a good match:

- What skills and personality traits does the company value?
- Do you stress teamwork or working independently?
- What steps do you take to incorporate new employees into the company?
- What attracts employees to the company, and why do they move on?
- What will be the greatest expectations and challenges of this position?

If the interviewers will be your direct supervisors, try to get a sense of their management and communication styles. Trust your gut--how you are treated during the interview, and whether you feel your personality meshes with the interviewer's, can be extremely important.

Hansen writes, "The bottom line is that you are going to spend a lot of time in the work environment--and to be happy, successful, and productive, you'll want to be in a place where you fit the culture. A place where you can have a voice, be respected, and have opportunities for growth."

How to recover from a mistake

If you find yourself in a situation where you've taken the job, but it isn't living up to your expectations, don't give up too soon. Career coach Barbara LaRock says: "Try to give it at least six months...Talk with your bosses to see if they can bring the job more in line with your original expectations."

And, if it turns out it's time to go back to the drawing board, there are a lot of opportunities out there for you now. By doing your research and enlisting the help of a recruiter, you may find the perfect job--one that fits *you*.

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