

How to Tell if a Company's Culture Is Right for You

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- SUMMARY



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Congratulations, you got the job! Now you have to decide whether to take it. You've done your research and know the ins and outs of the company's public profile, but how can you assess cultural fit — and if you'd actually be happy working there? Should you reach out to former employees? Or ask to spend a day at the office?

What the Experts Say

During the interview process, you had a singular goal: to get an offer. Now that you have one, you need to assess whether the job and organization are a good fit. It isn't necessarily a straightforward task, according to Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, a senior adviser at Egon Zehnder and the author of [It's Not the How or the What but the Who](#). After all, you've probably been in your potential new office only a handful of times and met potential colleagues when everyone was on their best behavior. "Interviews end up being a conversation between two liars," he explains. John Lees, the UK-based career strategist and author of [How to Get a Job You Love](#), agrees that it's important to do further "due diligence" on the company and its people to make sure it's a place you want to work. Your goal is "to decode the organization and find out where the bodies are buried," he says. Here are some ways to do that.

Interview your prospective colleagues

Presumably you already researched the company during your candidacy, but now that the [clock is ticking on a decision](#), you need to focus your efforts. Your first port of call should be your prospective colleagues. "Talk to as many people as you can," Lees says. In particular, get to know the coworkers with whom you'll form "your key working relationships." Then "just chat. Ask, 'What are you working on at the moment? What are





you hoping to achieve? And what gets in the way?” Their answers will be revealing. “Is it market factors? The economy? The CEO? Internal backbiting?” Pay close attention to the kinds of people you’re meeting. “If you identify talented, motivated people who have been there a long time, that is a very good signal.” Your mindset should be “simultaneously positive and optimistic but also cynical,” he says. Don’t betray any skepticism or negativity, however. “You must constantly communicate that you are pleased to have received the offer and delighted at the prospect of working there.”

Do a test run

It’s worth asking if you can come in and spend a few hours with your prospective team for a group meeting or brainstorming session, Lees says. Doing so will give you a sense of how people interact with each other, what daily life is like, [and how you might fit in](#). Observe “how they bounce ideas around,” he says. “Are they supportive or obstructive?” Your objective, Fernández-Aráoz says, is to figure out whether the organization has a “highly collaborative culture or a more individualistic one.” But, he warns, bear in mind that this trial won’t be entirely indicative of reality. “Most people will be putting on a good show,” he says. And don’t forget that even though you have an offer, your potential colleagues will be watching your every move. “They get to see how you perform, too.”

Get to know your boss

Your job satisfaction can hinge on your relationship with your boss. Particularly at [startups](#) or small, private, family-owned companies, employees who don’t get along with their managers are “as good as dead,” Fernández-Aráoz says. So, before you sign on, you need to develop as deep an understanding as possible of what makes this person tick and what it will be like to work for them. Lees suggests trying to have a good and lengthy conversation with your prospective manager “about their vision for the organization.” Try to “project forward,” he says. “Ask, ‘What does success look like here?’ And say ‘In my six-month review, what do you want to be congratulating me on?’” If your potential boss shies away from having this conversation and getting to know you better, consider it “a danger signal. It means that he’s already bored of you.”

Interview outside sources

In addition to speaking with current employees and your potential boss, you need to do some “behind-the-scenes” research by speaking with “people with [recent, objective, and unbiased knowledge](#) of the organization and its culture,” Lees says. Reach out to your network to identify former employees, as well as others who know the company, such as consultants, auditors, lawyers, contractors, and suppliers. Once you’ve found these people, “invite them out for coffee” and pepper them with questions, Lees advises. You needn’t be cagey. “Say, ‘I am trying to get a fuller picture.’ And then ask, ‘What is this organization like to work with? Where is it succeeding?’ What kinds of people do well in this organization? And what kinds of people leave?” If you can, “ask about turnover and find out what happened to the last person who did the job.” Fernández-Aráoz recommends also inquiring about “challenges the company is facing,” such as planned integrations or changes in





strategy. If nothing more, consider what you find out “immunity against frustration” later down the road.

Think beyond the initial offer

It’s also important to [consider opportunities at the organization](#) beyond the contract on the table, Fernández-Aráoz says. Talk to the hiring manager about potential paths. “Ask if you are able to move into other functions and other roles as your career progresses. Ask about opportunities for training and development. And find out what kind of high-potential programs the company offers,” he says. Lees advises against speaking to folks in HR, since they probably won’t be able to provide you with much useful information — “And you’re just opening yourself up to another sales pitch,” he says. During this evaluation stage “you need to have a healthy mistrust of corporate spin.”

Be introspective

Once you have all the information, it’s time to do some soul-searching. Think about whether the organization is a place where you will thrive and be challenged. Lees recommends asking yourself, “How do I fit in here? How do my skills complement what this organization is trying to achieve?” Remember that you’re never going to have perfect data, and beware analysis paralysis. “It often [comes down to instinct](#),” he says. “There comes a time when you need to trust your judgment and make a decision.” It’s not as scary as it may seem. “Most decisions are about 80% right anyhow,” he says.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Adopt a mindset that is positive but also skeptical.
- Reach out to your network to identify people who know the company and who can give you the unvarnished truth about it.
- Make a special effort to get to know your potential boss; a good relationship with your manager will be critical to your job satisfaction.

Don’t:

- Discount the idea of doing a trial at the company to get a sense of how your prospective team works and how decisions get made.
- Ignore red flags. If your boss doesn’t seem interested in getting to know you, consider it a bad sign.
- Succumb to analysis paralysis. Trust your judgment and make a decision.

Case Study #1: Talk to outside sources and observe culture firsthand

A few years ago Brad Neuenhaus was invited to join a company that was being incubated out of a large teaching hospital in Boston. “Joe,” the CEO of the new company, asked Brad to come on as chief strategy officer.





“I knew Joe personally and quasi-professionally, but I hadn’t worked closely with him before, [so] I wanted to get the nitty-gritty of what it was like to be on his team,” Brad recalls.

He identified several people in his network who had worked with Joe in senior roles and had in-depth conversations with them about the CEO’s ability to set goals, allocate resources, and trust and manage employees. “The gist of all those conversations was: What is it like to work with Joe?” he explains.

Brad also “had a rich, strategic conversation” with the COO. “There were a lot of operational changes taking place in order to scale the business,” he says. “It was going to be a disruptive time, and so I wanted to gauge her feelings about the [situation].”

Finally, Brad asked Joe if he could visit the office in the afternoon and “do some wandering around” to get to know some of the employees. “I wanted to meet the rank-and-file workers and have candid conversations,” he says. “I wanted to know: What do they do? How do they do it? I wanted to get a feel for who they were.”

Brad also seized the opportunity to observe the culture. “I wanted to see what happened at the end of the day — did everyone blow out at 5 PM, or did people stick around?”

When it came time for Brad to determine whether to accept the offer, he “added up the pros and cons — and there were some in each category,” he says. Ultimately, he didn’t think the job was the right cultural fit and he was concerned about the health of the business. “In the end, it came down to my assessment of the likelihood of this incubator succeeding.”

Brad decided not to take the job, which he says was the right decision. Joe ended up leaving the company less than a year later.

Today Brad is the chief business officer of MindEdge, the corporate learning company based in Waltham, Massachusetts.

Case Study #2: Spend time with your potential colleagues, and then go with your gut

Three years ago Jason Guggisberg was offered the role of regional vice president at Adecco USA, the employment services company in Chicago. Before he took the job, he wanted to make sure the company was right for him.

“Cultural fit was my number one priority, as many of the staffing firms I’d worked at previously were driven by business rather than culture,” he says. “In my previous positions, I felt that something was missing at work.”

After he got the offer, he had long talks with prospective colleagues, including his potential boss, the vice president of operations, and a national sales team member. “I asked them why they enjoyed working at Adecco, what drives them to get up in the morning, and why





they had been at the company so long,” he says. “Hearing their stories gave me a more well-rounded picture.”

He also flew in for an in-person lunch meeting with the company’s president — and that’s what finally sealed the deal. “I saw that she was a leader who cared about people and cared about what she did, which is putting thousands and thousands of people to work every day,” he says. “I left her office that day [having seen] that culture and passion mattered from the top down at Adecco, and I wanted to be a part of it.”

Jason says that deciding whether to accept a job is a “gut decision” that ought to be driven by fit. “You can look at the Great Places to Work stats, charitable giving numbers, or benefits packages to learn more about the company, but at the end of the day you want to feel that the company and people — especially leadership — resonate with your core values,” he says.

Jason took the job and hasn’t looked back. Today he is the regional vice president of Adecco’s Manhattan branch.

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