
Finding Your Fit: How to Uncover a Company's True Culture



By [Claire Harbour](#) , [Capiès](#); [Antoine Tirard](#) , [NexTalent](#); and [Graham Ward](#) , [INSEAD](#)

Eight tips to evaluate if your next role is right for you.

We are relatively cautious about what we buy when the stakes are high. But do we apply the same level of scrutiny to the most important investments of our lives – choosing a partner or a career path? Divorce and turnover rates suggest not.

While we won't weigh in on the complexities of marriage, as career advisors and coaches, we know that cultural misalignment is the primary reason why people leave their jobs. This mismatch can stem from hiring errors or a gradual realisation of incompatibility. The financial implications are substantial: Replacing an employee often costs several times their annual salary.

In contrast, a strong company culture can significantly reduce employee turnover, according to [recent research](#) by Sukti Ghosh and Victoria

Sevcenko from INSEAD and Arianna Marchetti from London Business School. They found that stronger cultures make employees feel connected to each other, improve teamwork and encourage the development of unique skills and knowledge that are specific to the organisation. This makes employees more valuable and less likely to leave for opportunities elsewhere.

While it is clearly critical to find the right cultural fit, uncovering a workplace's culture can be challenging. Beyond gathering data and "intelligence" about your potential next employer, you need to trust your instincts and look out for red flags during the recruitment process.

We've worked with numerous people who have, to their detriment, either misjudged a company's culture or neglected to assess it before joining. Our conversations with three professionals highlight key factors to consider before making the leap.

Eight tips to evaluate a company's culture

1. Understand the company's values - and your own

Be clear about your personal values and aspirations and ensure that the company's culture aligns with these. Look for signs of a supportive and inclusive environment where your contributions will be valued and your growth supported.

Nassim knew he needed to find a better cultural fit. After years of prioritising others' expectations and taking on "safe and sensible" jobs, he yearned for a role that aligned with his own values and ambitions. Everything began to click into place when a former colleague informed him about an interesting strategy role at a small venture.

Through a candid conversation with the CEO, Nassim gained valuable insights into the company's culture. The CEO took the time to listen to Nassim, encouraging him to share his ideas about the business. This open discussion led to an offer to become the strategy director – a role that was specially created to fit Nassim's talents and aspirations.

2. Dig deeper (don't just take their word for it)

Make a conscious effort to find out what the new culture is, beyond what the website says. Ask how things are typically done and understand that how you do things may end up being more important than what you do.

Nassim wasn't afraid to ask tough questions about the company's standards, safety protocols and processes. After discussing his lingering concerns with his former colleague, he better understood the challenges the company faced and how he could address them. Nassim felt empowered to make a significant impact in this new role.

3. Insist on meeting your new team

Getting to know your future teammates in relaxed settings can reveal a lot about a company's culture. Consider meeting them both individually and as a group. If possible, collaborate on a small project together.

When Nassim met his future team, he was reassured by the fact that there was no sense of mistrust – just a group of people who seemed keen to explore how the organisation could grow and improve. They listened to him, included him and made him feel valued. Since joining the company, Nassim has flourished in this innovative and supportive environment.

4. Find multiple reference points

Speak to people at different levels in the new organisation and, if you can, those who know you and your old environment. Grill them and investigate anything that seems strange.

Grazia was thriving in her HR leadership role at a large scale-up. The company culture was built on trust and respect, with plenty of room for innovation and mistakes. But an attractive offer to join an ambitious start-up was too hard to resist.

While Grazia did extensive interviews with the recruiter and the HR director, who promised her his role within a year or two, she did not contact former colleagues she knew were now working at the new company. From her first day on the job, she was stunned by the team's immaturity, disorganisation and blinkered worldview. This stark contrast to her previous experience leading a diverse, global team made it clear that the new company wasn't the right cultural fit.

5. Sniff out any subcultures

Understand that your new manager might lead a subculture of their own that differs from the overall company culture. Figure out what that is.

Grazia quickly realised that the hidden culture of the company, despite promises to the contrary, was that of an **old boys' club**. She soon discovered that much of the dysfunction **stemmed from her boss**. She wasn't alone in her concerns; three female board members confided in her that they were barely holding it together and not far off from resigning.

Grazia's attempts to initiate change were mostly dismissed by her manager, who had no intention of relinquishing power. He continued to gaslight her and play terrible mind games, making it clear that he would never welcome nor accept her power.

6. Ensure you have the support you need

Cultivate a support system and prioritise self-care when transitioning into a new role. Regular reflection and seeking external perspectives can help you stay grounded and effective in your new environment.

Grazia became so overwhelmed by the ongoing abuse and harassment that she began having dark thoughts. During one morning commute, she found herself wishing she could be in an accident to avoid going to work. Unfortunately, the harassment wasn't limited to her; it was systemic, permeating the entire company from top to bottom.

Even six months after resigning, Grazia's former boss was asking her to return, completely oblivious to the reasons for her departure. Grazia is understandably taking her time to find her next role and will ensure she is surrounded and guided by the right people.

7. Constantly tap into your network

Strong networks not only open doors but can also be points of reference when you need insight into a new organisation.

Sade was used to being the only person of colour in her professional circles, including her senior position at a global life sciences company. While she was thriving, she was also aware that she might be stuck in this role for longer than she would like.

At this point, her interest and talent in **networking** proved invaluable. Friends and connections facilitated several conversations, including one with

another global life sciences company. This organisation stood out as the talent team took a long-term view, presenting her with a series of potential roles for exploration until the right one came up. Before signing on, Sade strategically leveraged her network to gain insights into various leaders at the new company.

8. Assume you will need to “learn” a new culture

Even if you think you'll fit in well at a new company, it will still take effort to adjust to the new culture. Your network can provide valuable support and guidance.

While Sade knew that the job was a perfect technical fit, an informal team-building activity allowed her to connect with her future team and gauge the company's culture. She came away from the event with a clearer picture of how the organisation valued continuous improvement and stakeholder relationships. Sade was confident she that could “learn” and adapt to this culture over time. After four years at the company, she still believes she made the right choice.

10 questions to unmask corporate culture

Company culture isn't always obvious. To uncover it, consider asking these questions during the interview process:

1. What do you like about working here?
2. How is this organisation different from the competition?
3. How would you describe the company's core values? How are they reflected in day-to-day operations? What are some examples of how the

company's leadership team embodies the company's stated values?

4. What are the unwritten rules or informal norms that are important for someone new to the company to understand?

5. What are some examples of how the company's culture has evolved over the past few years, and what prompted those changes?

6. What do you wish you'd known before starting here?

7. What would you change about this company if you could?

8. How would you describe the leadership culture in this department? How are team members recognised for their success?

9. How does your organisation address failure?

10. How does the organisation handle conflict or disagreements among team members?

Starting a new job is like starting a new relationship; you first need to assess compatibility. Just as you wouldn't commit to a partner without knowing who they really are, don't sign on to a new role without doing your due diligence.

Taking the time to evaluate a company's culture isn't just a step in the hiring process – it's an investment in your long-term happiness, growth and career success. By asking the right questions, trusting your instincts and prioritising alignment, you can ensure that your next role truly fits who you are and where you want to go.

Read an extended version of this article [here](#).

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/finding-your-fit-how-uncover-companys-true-culture>

About the author(s)

Claire Harbour is a global talent expert, focused on coaching and consulting across borders, and stirring up disruption.

Antoine Tirard is an international talent management consultant, trainer and coach to large global organisations.

Graham Ward is an Adjunct Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD and Programme Director of **The Challenge of Leadership**, an executive education programme for senior leaders.