

Finding a Workplace Where You Fit

Figuring out what the daily work environment will be like is an important consideration for graduate students in accepting and applying for jobs, advises Natalie Lundsteen.

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Exploring graduate career options and determining potential career paths is tough enough, but that's just what gets you started in the graduate job search. Once you've found some target industries and occupations, sent a few applications, and are possibly getting invited to interview, you'll need to dig deeper and examine what differentiates one workplace culture from another before committing to a new role.

Ensuring that you know the type of environment where (and the colleagues with whom) you'll do your best work is an often-overlooked part of the job search process. In fact, starting a workplace culture investigation early can help you put together stronger cover letters or query emails, because it will demonstrate that you understand the organization and what matters to employees (and managers) there. It can be challenging to think about finding a "perfect" place to work when you are feeling pressure simply to get invited to an interview or just really need to find a job, any job. But it's important to consider the culture and practices where you'll be working and also to understand the type of colleagues you'll be working with. It doesn't make sense to find a role that aligns with your skills and preferences but is in a workplace where you just don't fit.

What is Fit?

Consider the idea of company culture and workplace fit as the values, principles, beliefs and behaviors that guide (whether tangibly or implicitly) decisions and activities at work. Or to put it simply: it is the way day-to-day work happens in an organization. This culture usually comes to employees from the top down -- through the influence from the personality of a CEO or other leader -- or can be instilled throughout the organization over time. Think about Disney, Google or Uber. Even if you have never interviewed or worked for those places, you have some idea of the culture and probably know whether you'd enjoy working in that kind of culture or not. The tricky part is learning about culture of organizations you might not have heard of. Keep in mind culture exists in both the for-profit and nonprofit worlds, and you probably have already experienced or observed different work cultures within academe.

Some of the simplest examples of culture I have experienced in my career include places where employees are encouraged to work flexibly, celebrated regularly for accomplishments with public praise or, on the negative side, limited in their participation in training and development activities. One of my previous employers only allowed employees to attend a single professional conference once every two years. Graduate career development, where staying up-to-date with employment trends and information is crucial, wasn't a place where I wanted to stay long term to succeed in my career -- and thus, it was not a good fit for me.

How Do You Learn About Culture and Fit?

You will learn the most about a culture by experiencing it firsthand, which is why internships and experiential learning opportunities are so valuable. However, without the time or opportunity to undertake internships, you can also learn a lot about culture by checking out the organization's official

Ask not just what a typical day is like in terms of tasks and activities, but also what the day-to-day *feels* like. During an interview, you want to be able to picture yourself working at the organization, but you might also find that you can't imagine it -- which is a sign you might not be a good fit for that workplace. (And that's OK!) Both during an interview or in informational discussions ahead of time, you can learn about the working environment by asking about whether the institution offers support for flexible working arrangements. Ask how many employees have children/families and how they arrange their work time, or ask current employees to describe how they view work-life balance at this organization.

You should also find out how current and past employees would describe their motivation for work. Ask them:

- What makes you excited to come to work every day?
- If you could change anything about this organization, what would it be? Or alternatively, what things would you never change about this place?
- What are the organization's values or company mission?
- How do those values show up in the day-to-day work here?

In addition, learn how and when communication happens in this organization, both formally and informally. You can find out a lot about the pace and style of work when you ask about daily workplace interactions. Ask those employees:

- Is there a lot of collaborative work, or is interaction between departments or work groups limited?
- Do people generally ask questions about work face-to-face, or do they email everything?
- Is there any kind of internal IM or chat system for speedy interactions? And is that kind of fast-paced communication the norm/expected?
- How about employee engagement?
- Are there hosted social events or activities to build the team?
- What are the expectations for participation?

Finally, consider how you will develop and grow professionally at this workplace. Ask:

- What are the opportunities for career growth and professional development, and what does that look like?
- What about mentorship?
- Are employees here encouraged to join any professional organizations?
- How and when is feedback given to employees? Do managers deliver it differently than peers?
- How are raises and promotions determined?
- What about travel expectations, and are people who limit travel not eligible for promotion to certain roles in the future?
- How often do senior roles/opportunities for promotion become available?

No matter the amount of preparation you undertake to learn about an organization's culture before an interview, once you physically step into the workplace, you will have your greatest opportunity to assess that culture by seeing real-time interactions and sensing the general atmosphere and vibe. After your interview, compare what you've experienced with what past or current employees had to say. Only you will know if the fit is right for you.

Read more by [Natalie Lundsteen](#)

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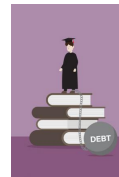
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