

Understanding Corporate Culture without going to Finishing School

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Many students apply, interview and accept a job without first exploring the culture in that particular company. But isn't a job just a job? Or is there a difference between, let's say, performing market research duties in one company over the next? What makes one organization more desirable over another depends on the person, however, it is a great idea to have an idea what type of culture you think would suit your needs.

What is Corporate Culture? According to Dr. Randall Hansen at QuintessentialCareers.com, *"Corporate culture is a broad term used to define the unique personality or character of a particular company or organization, and includes such elements as core values and beliefs, corporate ethics, and rules of behavior. Corporate culture can be expressed in the company's mission statement and other communications, in the architectural style or interior décor of offices, by what people wear to work, by how people address each other, and in the titles given to various employees."*

Whether a company adheres to a Suit and Tie policy or encourages Jeans on Friday reflects its corporate culture. How approachable upper management is to the staff reflects corporate culture. Even the hours you are expected to work per week reflects corporate culture.

Uncovering and understanding a company's corporate culture is what will make that particular workplace environment desirable or merely tolerable. And I'd like to note that for larger companies, or companies with de-centralized or regional management models, the corporate culture will be largely influenced by the group manager.

For example, throughout the years, IBM's reputation was that of stolid respectability: white shirts and blue ties. However, during the early 90's in order to attract more creative programmers who were flocking to Silcone Valley, IBM built innovation centers in which people were encouraged to come to work in jeans, a ping pong table was provided and hours were flexible.

Looking for Clues

There is no sure fire way to uncover the corporate culture of a company, but you can do some research, and ask some key questions during the interview. A good website to check is Vault.com in which employees self-report on corporate culture. Don't forget to check out your career and alumni offices and see if any alumni work at that organization who can give you the scoop. Finally, check out the website and read both the annual report and marketing materials for the organization. As Corporate Culture becomes more of a recruiting tool for companies, you will often find a blurb of what it's like to work there on their website.

While Interviewing

I know you'll be nervous during your interview, but that will be your best opportunity to check out your surroundings and see how the employees in that organization interact. Do you see happy people exchanging ideas or do you see task oriented people intent on getting the job done? As you pass by, are the work spaces uniform or do you see individual touches displayed? During the interview, ask questions designed to get a feel for the corporate culture. For example:

- Can you tell me how corporate direction is typically communicated to the staff?
- How open is management to new ideas and what is the best way to communicate them?
- What is the typical career path of employees in this position?
- What is the turnover like within this department?

If you are interviewed with other employees, don't be afraid to ask them

- What's it really like to work here? Do you like it here?
- Do you have fun?
- Describe your typical day? Week?
- Do you think that employees are valued by this company? By the manager?
- Do you feel as though you know what is expected of you?
- Do you know people in other departments? What is that interaction like?
- Do people get promoted?
- Is there a recognition process? What gets rewarded?
- Do you feel you work from your strengths?
- Do you feel as though you know what's going on? How well does management communicate?

The Culture Matters

Ultimately, you may like the job, but hate the culture. You will be spending so much of your waking hours at the workplace, make sure the culture agrees with you!