

7 questions to ask a future employer about culture

Deciding if a new job is right for you involves more than the role itself and the salary.

Understanding a company's culture will help you work out whether you'll fit in, enjoy your new role, and thrive in the new work environment.

Culture counts for a lot. Research for SEEK reveals three in four (73%) job seekers say workplace culture is extremely important to them. More than half (53%) say workplace culture is even more important than salary. And half of job seekers say they'd turn down a job with bad workplace culture.

When it comes to building work culture, the research found flexible working hours are the most important, followed by supportive peers and colleagues, and a culture that emphasises mental health and wellbeing.

But how do you work out what the culture is like before you start to work for a company? Word of mouth, other employees and reviewing websites are the key sources job seekers use to gauge if an employer's culture is right for them.

But there's another way, and that's asking the right questions in an interview.

Asking the right questions

In any job interview, you should get an opportunity to ask your own questions

Kristine Tuazon, Director of Good People HR, suggests starting with a broad approach, with questions such as:

- Is there anything you could share about the company's culture?
- What do you enjoy most about working at XYZ company?
- What is the team culture like?

Leah Lambart, career and interview coach at [Relaunch Me Careers](#), suggests drilling down a bit deeper, and thinking about what's important to you about the culture of your workplace.

“Consider what aspects are most important to you about company culture, and then focus your questions around those topics,” Lambart suggests. “For example, if you're more interested in flexible work arrangements, career development, social activities, how the company manages hybrid work arrangements, or how they handle office politics and conflict.”

Lambart suggests these seven questions:

1. What's your company's approach to career development?
2. How would you describe the work-life balance of your employees?
3. What are some examples of your employees with flexible work arrangements?
4. How do you celebrate the success of employees?
5. How do you make sure there's collaboration across the organisation when employees are working in a hybrid way?
6. You mention on the website that you have a culture that's 'family-friendly'. What would be some examples of this?
7. What do you enjoy most about the company's culture?

When to ask questions

If culture is an important factor in your decision-making process, Lambart suggests asking earlier rather than later.

“If understanding company culture is important to you as a job seeker, then you need to ask some questions about culture in the first interview,” she advises. “I'd suggest asking similar questions throughout the recruitment process to see if you receive consistent messages. It may be a red flag if the hiring manager is describing the culture of the organisation in a different way to the HR team. Listen out for consistent themes and don't be afraid to ask for specific examples.

“For example, if the culture is described as being 'family-friendly', 'inclusive', or 'collaborative', then ask for examples of how they demonstrate this in the workplace. If they are not able to provide specific examples, then this could also be a red flag.”

Are any questions off limits?

No questions are off limits when it comes to culture, according to Lambart.

“A job interview should be a two-way street and the job seeker has every right to ask companies the hard questions to assess the company’s culture,” she says. “Most hiring managers or talent acquisition managers will respect a job seeker who is asking pointed questions to get the information that they need to make an informed choice should they be made an offer.”

Tuazon suggests trying to [keep the interview positive](#) and steering away from negative questions.

“This is what the interviewer may remember about you as our brains have a negative bias and remember these more, especially in an interview which can at times be high stakes,” she says. “Focus on what you can contribute, provide excellent relevant examples about your skills and your work and think about how the experience you’re about to gain will benefit you too in the future.”

Self-awareness is key

Every company will have its own culture, [which will suit some but not others](#). A bit of research on a company’s website should reveal its values, which can help you prepare for your interview.

But also important is being aware of what your own values are, and what’s important to you.

“Before commencing your job search, I would recommend undertaking some self-assessment to understand what type of workplace environment you will thrive in,” says Lambart. “For example, do you prefer a social environment that celebrates birthday parties, has weekly morning teas and team functions outside of working hours? Or do you prefer to just focus on work and not necessarily want to be part of so many social engagements and focus on building relationships with work colleagues?”

“If you understand what sort of environment works best for you, then you can ask the right questions to assess company culture based on your own criteria.”

Don’t forget to look for the positives

Tuazon suggests that, while we're conditioned to be looking out for those red flags in interviews, it can help to flip the script and focus instead on searching out a company's green flags.

"Look for genuine honesty, transparency, sincerity and integrity in the hiring manager's answers, actions and body language when these questions are asked," she suggests.

"Try to look for green flags and note what the company is doing well, doing right, and trying to improve on. Look for evidence of employees living the company's values and see if they walk their values."

Source: Independent research conducted by Nature of behalf of SEEK, interviewing 4800 Australians annually. Published January 2024.

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