

CULTURE VULTURE

Connecting with the culture of an organization is just as, if not more, vital for job satisfaction and employee engagement as making the big bucks.

By Jessica Pryce-Jones



When I was in my early 20s, I landed what everyone—including me—thought was a dream job: prestigious organization, upmarket central London location, and a great salary. Yet I hated every minute of it. I didn't connect with the mission of the organization or my colleagues; their values, hopes, aspirations, and ambitions were all absolutely alien to me. During the year I worked there I felt just about as comfortable as you do turning up to an event wearing the wrong clothes. Because I was so unhappy, I was unproductive, too, so I wasn't building my career or contributing to the business either.

Now, I'd be much more able to avoid falling into such a terrible trap.

That's because as CEO of iOpener, a human asset management consultancy that works globally, my team and I have spent years consulting to organizations of every shape and size, so we've got the war stories and we've got the data, too. In the past five years, we've been running a large-scale study involving about 4,500 people involving

productivity at work and its strong link to happiness. And we can see that culture plays a massively important role in determining people's performance. It's not culture per se that makes people happy and productive at work, but rather the feeling that they fit in.

Culture fit

So how can you find out if you fit? There are two important things to examine: the place and the people.

Let's think about the place first. The real culture of any organization isn't connected to what's on their website or the vision, mission, and values statements that hang on the walls. You'll feel the real pulse by looking at the employees' parking

lot (not the visitors'), the office working areas, the greeting the receptionist gives you, the lighting that's provided, and the pictures on the walls. Are they clean and tidy? Do they send a message that someone cares? Are there differences between the C-suite and everyone else's workstations? Big differences should sound some warning bells.

Don't forget to use your gut instinct when trying to assess the culture of an organization. One former Goldman Sachs senior partner, Sylvain Hefes, told me during one of the 90 interviews I did last year for my book, *Happiness at Work: Maximizing Your Psychological Capital for Success*, that he sensed the culture of the place from the way the newspapers and chairs were arranged in reception. Another, Vice Admiral Paul Boissier, said that as COO of the Royal Navy, he knew the culture of a boat and how it operated within 10 seconds of stepping onto it. Your judgment is informed by your experience: Don't discount it.

Once you've checked out the place, then you can start to look at the people for more information. And a great starting point is the language that's used. It will speak volumes about any workplace. Who's on the front line? Or out of action? Working out new tactics? Revising the strategy? Who is spearheading or, even more scarily, executing a campaign?

Military language used without thinking sets a tone that affects culture enormously. And it's something that becomes so ingrained that employees don't even hear it anymore. Now clearly lots of people who work in the military do a fantastic job in tough circumstances. But lots of other people don't, and when times are tough and the pressure is on, if people are going to do their best, they want to feel supported, not threatened.

Then there are the other small indicators that tell you a lot about the norms and behaviors that are acceptable. Is chewing gum at a client meeting fine? And when I say fine, I mean fine for you. Nothing is intrinsically wrong or right—it's all about fit.

If you're like me, you'll like the kind of organization where leaders lead by

example. Take, for instance, Bob Cohn. Bob is an amazing man, raconteur, entrepreneur, and founder of Octel, the organization that commercialized voicemail. He said to me that long after he'd sold Octel someone came to him and told him that they'd taken a job there and stayed for many years because of something he did. When he asked what it was that he'd done, Bob was told, "you walked by when I was interviewing and someone said, 'that's our founder.' And you bent over and picked up a piece of popcorn that someone had dropped on the floor. 'The CEO picks up popcorn?' 'Sure, why not.'" He told Bob that any CEO who did that was someone he wanted to work for. It's those small things that tell you how the culture is set from the top.

Culture assimilation

Once you can identify and understand culture you need to think how to make it work for you. Once you're in a job, your feelings about the culture and how you fit will depend on these five important elements:

- relishing your job
- liking your colleagues
- appreciating the values the workplace stands for
- having a fair ethos at work
- feeling in control of daily activities.

If you don't experience any one of these elements, keep going: Lacking two or more items makes it tough. Looking through the list you can see that some of them are more stable than others. You'll experience regular ups and downs with the first two elements on the list and those swings will add some emotional variety to your job. But when you continuously dislike your job or your colleagues, it will be really hard to keep going. If this is the case for you, the way you can connect more to your job and your co-workers is by looking for similarities rather than differences and trying to assess shared values you may have. This will increase your resilience and capacity to cope in the short term.

The last three elements on the list are more stable. The one thing that

has changed since the recession is that people are feeling a significantly reduced sense of control. That's because when things get tough managers tend to get into micro-mode, wanting to check everything and have more data to justify decisions. So workload increases from the top down—and from the bottom up too.

In fact, managers would be more successful if they handed some of the tougher work to their teams, who would feel more empowered too. This would do wonders for the larger culture they create around them. Of course doing so involves risk, and taking a risk involves confidence—which is why we can see that culture and confidence are so closely linked in our data. Right now employees are telling us that their confidence is at an all-time low. That too will have a negative impact on culture and on what gets done.

Culture assessment

This is why assessing what works and doesn't work for you is so important. If you want an in-depth personal assessment of how you feel about your culture at work and the impact it has on you, go to www.iopener.com/report and complete a questionnaire. You'll receive a free personal report with some hints and tips. Taking these steps to ensure that an organization's culture is the right fit and making the effort to adapt to that culture is essential for any employee's job satisfaction and engagement at work.

Jessica Pryce-Jones is author of *Happiness at Work: Maximizing your Psychological Capital for Success*, published by Wiley Blackwell; www.iopener.com.

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