



Internships: Company Culture 101

Recognize what makes a company tick for a better fit.

It's easier to swim with the current.

Internships are a great way for employers to determine if you, the intern, are a good fit for their company. By looking at your work performance, degree of education, and personality, employers can decide if you complement their company's culture and will enhance the business.

So what determines a company's culture and why is it important to understand? Each company's culture is unique and is defined by the values, ethics, and behaviors set by its leaders and demonstrated by its employees. It's more than just appearance and dress codes. It includes the level of formality within the organization, communication style, and general beliefs; it's "how things are done." Culture can be comprised of larger ideals, such as honesty and respect, or consist of small notions such as the last person to use a coffee pot should be the one to clean it. The more your values, attitude, style, and expectations align with the company's, the more comfortably you'll fit in, and the more smoothly things will run.

Stranger in a strange land.

To minimize culture shock, here are some tips to help you quickly determine a company's culture and adapt to a new environment.

When in doubt—ASK! With plenty of unknowns to tackle, syncing with your manager begins with asking the right questions early on. Communication is key. For example, ask "What's the best way to reach you if I have a question? Should I send you an email or knock on your door?" Some companies communicate strictly via email, and promptly. Other companies have a culture where employees shout from one cubicle to another, and an email response by the end of the day is sufficient. Your manager may request that you email for general questions, but knock on their door if you feel something is urgent. Look to your supervisor to set the tone and guidelines.

When it comes to break time behavior, ask what people usually do for lunch. You'll find out if most employees eat at their desks, use the cafeteria, or

go out. You'll learn if there are set times for breaks and if it's okay to socialize. If you bring your own food, inquire if there is a communal refrigerator.

When it comes to time management, some companies will start their days at 7:00 a.m., while others will begin at 11:00 a.m. and work later. Your manager might want you to stay late one day and come in late the following morning. It's a good idea to ask your supervisor, "What will my general daily hours be?" so you can meet expectations.

Get to know people. Meet as many people in the organization as possible. This is not only good for networking, it will also give you insight as to what character traits are valued by the company. Are the employees generally outgoing and assertive? Or, are they more mellow and introverted? Do they have a positive attitude, and are they motivated by their work? Plus, by meeting staff from other departments you can also determine if you are a better fit in another department within the organization.

It takes two to tango. Finally, understand that your internship is a two-way street. It enables your employer to evaluate your compatibility, while allowing you to determine if you want to work for that organization full time. You might find if you intern at a large firm that you would actually prefer working at a small start-up. Or, you may realize by interning at a non-profit that you're more suited for a fast-paced corporate environment.

In the end, understanding a company's culture allows you—and those around you—to better focus on generating results and meeting goals as a unified team. Once you're familiar with the lay of the land, ask yourself if you would enjoy working there long term. If so, you're now better equipped to pursue and fill a more permanent position.



i n a nutshell:

The sooner you familiarize yourself with the company culture, the better for everyone, including yourself:

- **Don't be afraid to go to your manager; ask questions**
- **Determine the preferred styles for communication, lunch habits, and work hours**
- **Network; observe; look for insight from other employees**
- **Assess your own likes and dislikes regarding work environment and duties**
- **Don't expect the company to adapt to you; remember, you're the guest**

Not everything that decides company culture is found in the corporate manual, so pay attention. The more you fit in, the more they'll want you to stay when your internship is over.