

Straight From the Source: Feeling For Fit.

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An interview with Saloni Ahuja Shah, Director of Full-time Recruitment, Retail Division at 24 Seven.



Q: Why has making a culture match become so central to the employment process?

I think it's actually the most important thing to interview on, now more than ever. Matching culturally matters more today because I think on both sides of the employment process, people are concerned with balance. We spend so much time at work, I think everyone wants to be associated with colleagues that they can relate to. What's on the paper isn't the essence of the individual – the resume is just their professional and functional accomplishments. What is the most authentic measure of the individual is the actual interaction with the person, and as a recruiter, evaluating this against my client's culture is one of the most important services I provide.

Q: What questions do you ask to gauge someone's fit?

I try to make this an easy, ice breaking conversation. I'll probe around extracurricular interests. If they appear to be a physically fit person (maybe they have a SoulCycle bag with them), I'll ask what kind of fitness programs they love. Another tactic I use is to mention a trip I might be taking to see if they're a traveler too. This is especially useful information if I'm seeking candidates for a start-up, entrepreneurial company. Avid travelers tend to be more curious, open and broad-minded – so the excitement and ambiguity that comes up with a start-up culture might appeal to them. I also try to get at the kind of people they surround themselves with personally and professionally. I'll ask them to tell me about their favorite boss, or their worst colleague. This gives me insight into the kind of people they'd mesh well with.

Q: How do you get a new client to articulate their culture so that you're accurately identifying and screening talent for them?

It begins with an on-site visit of their company as soon as possible. This is a great way to verify what the client has told us about their organization. Plus you notice things that they might no longer see about their workplace – additional features and details that will help to paint a picture for the candidate. Once there, one can tell, by the energy and the dynamic, what people are really like. Are people smiling? Is it quiet? Is there music playing? Are people socializing? Will your outgoing candidate stick out like a sore thumb? Will your introverted candidate feel intimidated here?

Q: What conversational clues do job candidates give you that help determine a culture that's most suited to them?

The simplest approach is to have them tell me about the culture of their current job. I pay attention to how they describe aspects of it and what makes them light up or dim down. Someone who says "Oh, it's great. There's a lot of structure. You know exactly who you're reporting to and my boss has thirty years of experience," isn't someone who'd be happy in a start-up environment. But if they describe it in a constricting way, then I know they might be open to a cultural switch.

Q: How important is the feedback from job candidates to the process of assessing cultural fit?

We love to get feedback from candidates post-interview because their insight helps us develop a more realistic view of what the company culture is like. It's also helpful for the client to hear how an onlooker experiences their culture versus their own impression. Based on what we hear, we can refine how we screen candidates so that we improve the accuracy of the match, so that's a win for both sides.

Q: What would you recommend that a candidate ask of the client?

Job candidates should ask about the team dynamic and more specifically who would be on their team. Ask for the team leader to describe the members and what they're like. This will be very telling as to the energy and cohesiveness of the group. Job candidates should also ask the prospective manager questions about their own career path and how they landed where they are. This is a great way to vet the manager's leadership style. Often, this provides clues as to expectations of success. Is work their life? Do they have balance? The expectations they set for themselves will often be what's expected for the people under them, too. Some other specific questions to ask include "What's a typical day like?" "Why is the position open?" "How does the team celebrate accomplishments?" You can tell a lot by how the manager responds to these questions. Defensiveness, rigidity, appearing flustered - these are not good signs. Excitement, enthusiasm, transparent answers, authentic reactions – these are positive indicators.