

Follow Your Inner Compass

*Use your values
to set a course for
a successful career*

BY MARIBETH GUNNER PULLIAM

Our values are one of the most empowering personal and professional navigation tools we possess. They guide our actions, shape our lifestyles, steer our careers, and ultimately define our character. Traits such as honesty, discipline, dependability, justice, and compassion are just a few examples of values that influence our actions and goals. Each of us has our own unique set of values that reflect the beliefs, attitudes, and principles we deem highly important in our lives. They are the qualities we cherish the most in ourselves, and those we revere in others.

Values develop over time—some were likely instilled by parents, relatives, friends, mentors, or religious leaders. Others may have evolved from educational, cultural, work, military, or other life experiences. Regardless of how or where they developed, our values are a central part of who we are and who we want to become.

VALUES AND WORK

As adults, we rely on our values to help direct our actions and decisions, especially when encountering future career choices. In fact, our overall personal convictions contain a vital subset known as workplace values. These include a combination of personal and professional core beliefs that serve as guideposts when seeking meaningful work, establishing career paths, and securing suitable work environments. Job seekers often overlook the important role these values serve in the job search, and instead



solely focus on aligning their interests and abilities with potential employment opportunities.

Knowing what intrigues you about a job and how your strengths correlate are essential factors that require attention. Yet, equally as critical is identifying what is truly important to you—what you value in the workplace. All the interests and skills in the world will not guarantee success and satisfaction if you are in a job that is not congruent with your core beliefs.

For example, if you value time at home with family during leisure hours, will you be satisfied or fulfilled if you accept a job that matches your credentials but requires 80 percent travel? Or, if you highly value and pride yourself on providing excellent customer service, would you enjoy working for an organization where the only priority was profit, not people? Sure, you could most likely sustain these situations for awhile. However, over time, working in a position that is personally disagreeable can lead to dissatisfaction, lack of motivation, denigration of your self-image, loss of integrity, and in short, unhappiness. The nature of your work should never make you feel like you are compromising who you are or what you value.

KNOW YOUR WORKPLACE VALUES

Awareness of your workplace values provides tremendous insight and a strong framework for career planning and decision making. To gain more clarity of your workplace values, the first step is to identify them. Start by creating a personal list of the qualities and characteristics

you seek in a work environment. Think about past experiences when you were confident, satisfied, and felt pride in your work. What factors contributed to those feelings of fulfillment? If you get stuck, try the contrast approach: think about what you would not want to encounter in a job setting. This will likely lead you to more positive preferences you would embrace, and the corresponding convictions you stand for.

In addition to creating your own personal list, there are also several online workplace values inventories that can assist (see Related Resources). These brief, targeted inventories not only increase awareness of your values but also help prioritize them. Ranking them can help tremendously when faced with career conundrums such as an unexpected transfer, revised responsibilities, or job loss. A well-defined hierarchy of your workplace values will help to assess the elements of a job you can be flexible about, and those you are not willing to compromise.

HONOR YOUR VALUES

Once you clarify and validate your workplace values, how can you determine that they are commensurate with a potential employment opportunity?

Begin by researching the job and employer. Review the organization's website. If you value access and communication in a work environment, look to see if its mission and history are clearly stated. Is the employer forthcoming with information about the institution? Is contact information easily accessible? Also be sure to examine the job description. What qualifications are required? Does it specify a need for a candidate who is a team player, an independent thinker, ambitious, or dedicated? Does the job description highlight the same qualities you aspire to achieve? If you know someone who is presently employed at the organization, ask them pertinent questions that target your core values. If you value security, inquire about the turnover rates. If you value self-direction in your work, ask how much independence they have in their job. There are also online resources that can assist with your research; Vault.com and Glassdoor.com offer company profiles and reviews, some of which are relayed by previous employees.

A good understanding of your values makes you well equipped to articulate them in a resume, cover letter, or job interview. Employers also seek certain values in their future hires. By conveying your workplace values through your written correspondence, you have a better chance of engaging an employer that holds similar ideals and beliefs. If you land an interview, continue vetting your workplace values. When you arrive for the interview, pay close attention to the surroundings.

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Do staff members seem engaged in their work? Is the atmosphere tense or relaxed?

In the interview, ask questions that will yield information about the work environment. Does the company provide professional development opportunities? Is there room for innovation and creativity? Also note the type of questions you are asked by the interviewer. Are they insightful questions that show interest in who you are and what you have to offer? Employing each of these tactics will help you decide whether your values correlate with the job and employer. Of course, realistically, not every value can be met at all times in your job or career. However, you can strive to achieve the majority of what you deem most important.

SCHEDULE REGULAR VALUES CHECKUPS

Awareness of your workplace values is a continuous process. Although these values are generally stable, it is important to recognize that some may change over time. For example, at the onset of your career, financial gain and status may be a top priority. However, later in your career, family and work-life balance may become of higher value. Maintaining the pulse of your current workplace values throughout your career trajectory will help you to evaluate which jobs and work environments are most advantageous. Grounding career decisions in well-defined values also ensures any future plans align with your personal and professional priorities. ■

RELATED RESOURCES

Access many additional career-related links at the [Excelsior College Career Center](#). All workplace values inventories noted in the article are located under the [self-assessment](#) section of the Career Center. Questions? Email careerinfo@excelsior.edu. Also, check out the career center on [Facebook](#).

Maribeth Gunner Pulliam, MS Ed, is the director of career services, Center for Online Education, Learning, and Academic Services at Excelsior College.