



PERMANENT
EQUITY

Finding Fit: Talent's Guide to Big or Small

Consider a scenario: You're reentering the job market. You may have a few years under your belt or many years of experience, may or may not have a family, have some flexibility about where you want to work, and are trying to set yourself up for personal and professional success. Whether you're an accountant or recruiter, CEO or marketing specialist, you're trying to identify your next challenge and understand where you'll add the most value and what you need to thrive at work. You have the luxury of picking from more than a few options and recognize that each person has their own definition of success. You'd like competitive compensation with long-term upside, but also the opportunity to network and skill build in order to maximize your lifetime earnings power.

If this scenario sounds familiar, one of the key questions you are going to have to ask and answer is whether you want to work for a large, well-resourced brand name company or a smaller, less structured, high potential operation that runs a little leaner.

Two Roads Diverge

Large vs. Small is only one way to frame your search, but we think it's an important one. We're a small firm ourselves, and we invest in small businesses, so we're frequently championing small over big. Put simply, we're a team of people who all chose to work for a small company that buys and invests in small companies, so we self-selected into small. That said, there are many valid and right reasons for choosing to work at a BigCo, challenges involved in working at a SmallBiz, and vice versa. And that calculation looks different for everyone, regardless of whether you're an entry-level worker or a CEO. Size drives a lot of the differences between companies that end up being most meaningful on a day-to-day basis.

The real work, then, is triangulating where you best fit. And that requires a lot of introspection and self-knowledge about what you value, what you're good at, and where you want to go. It's important to know yourself – is a defined role really a benefit for you or a tendency towards bureaucracy really a problem for you?

Career decisions are difficult because they're never really just about the job. They're about how you see yourself, how you want to see yourself, the environment you want to spend at least a third of your life in, how you find meaning in work, and how you provide value and impact.

Which Has the Better Claim?

In the spirit of that messy middle, we've built a question set to aid in figuring out where you might find your best fit based on your skills, mindset, preferences, and goals. The answers are a sliding scale between one extreme and the other. One side is generally more common in large companies and the other is generally more frequently seen in small businesses, although of course nuances and outliers exist everywhere. While these questions may not seem exceptionally brilliant or groundbreaking, we do think they're questions worth asking.

If you're seeking contentment and purpose in work, don't game your answers because you think you should want to work somewhere or other (this is one reason among many why pro/con lists are less than effective – your pros tend to be aspirational and your cons delusional). Honestly assess what matters to you now and what matters to where you want to go. As in most things, you'll tend to fall somewhere in the middle.

We're including some commentary with each question – in essence, the bulk of the article is contained inside. Ultimately, these are deeply personal considerations, and they're heavily dependent on your values, life/career stage, and goals. A deep understanding of how you work and why you work is critical for understanding where you'll prosper. Everyone has a right seat, whether it's at the right hand of David or on the shoulder of Goliath.

Take the Quiz

Do you see yourself as a specialist or a generalist?

Specialists want to dive deep into their subject matter, carving out a particular area of expertise and learning skills to deal with nuance and complexity – getting deep into a codebase or shipping new features, developing a targeted skill set for SEO optimization, tackling sales enablement for a specific product set, or honing in on audit prep. Generalists pick up skills like a magpie, collecting a wide toolbox. If you're drawn to the generalist mindset, you get energy from wearing different hats that switch based on need. In the generalist camp, you'll value being good enough at a lot of things and being able to jump into varied tasks that add value.



Do you like to follow instructions or do you prefer to have tools and time?

How much room for creativity and self-direction do you want at work? It's the difference between a role that is already established and has clear boundaries for expectations and success and one that was created based on need and determining how to allocate your time and figure out what will add the most value, whether that's in the job description or not.

On a day-to-day level, you might ask yourself what proportion of your work tasks, assignments, projects, and deliverables do you want to be given to you by a supervisor or team member? Are you excited about opportunities to generate your own projects through observation, problem solving, collaboration, and determining how to best add value? If you identify primarily as an executor, you may want a workflow that comes from a defined organizational hierarchy. If you're also strategy-minded, you might prefer a workflow that requires you to take initiative more often to develop your own tasks and projects.

Put another way, how much of your role do you want outlined in a preexisting playbook and how much do you want to create yourself?



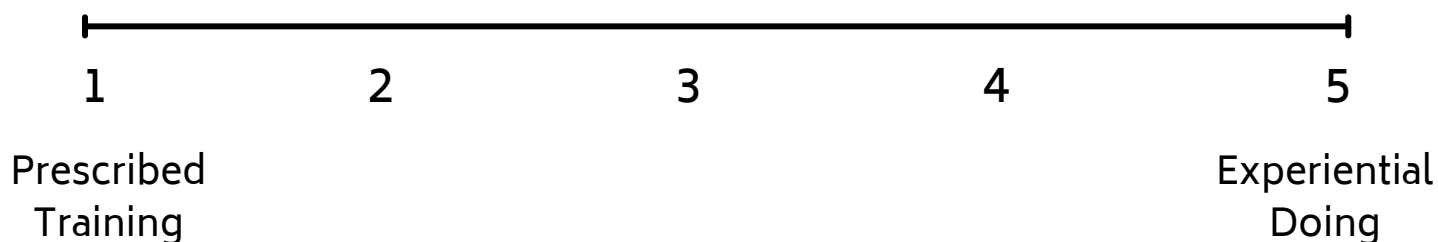
Do you prefer to execute tasks or own outcomes?

Executing tasks means taking a part of a larger plan that falls in your wheelhouse and delivering on it. On this tactical end of the spectrum, you're dealing with immediate and short-term activities with narrow and focused goals. If you get a real thrill from checking things off a to-do list, you're likely a more tactical thinker. Outcome ownership is more closely tied to big picture thinking. Strategic planning and decision-making zooms out to long-term goals and the "why" driving your work. Those goals then translate into achievable steps and, ideally, a tactical, workable plan for getting there. You may never do a purely tactical job or a purely strategic one, but consider how much you care about having input in the larger goals and directions of a company.



How do you learn best?

Upskilling, mentorship, and professional development come in a wide variety of flavors. Your learning style may be best served by targeted training, robust onboarding programs, online courses, or formal continuing education. These types of resources can be helpful when you need to level-up your specialized expertise or learn a specific skill. On the other side, you may value a more hands-on, dive-into-the-deep-end approach. Or maybe you like the idea of a more structured learning opportunity, but only if you've identified it yourself and done the legwork to know that the course or conference or certification fits your needs and provides immediate value and tangible skills you can put into practice.



Are you more comfortable in a structured environment or a flexible one?

Do institutionalized systems and publicly defined things like org charts, training programs, benefits, incentives, and workflows bring you a sense of stability and comfort? Do you read systems as rigidity and bureaucracy or as built-in layers of protection and more professionalization? Perhaps instead you'd rather opt for flexibility, agility, and adaptability. A more flexible framework might include more risk but can pivot faster, personalize incentives, and tolerate new and more creative ideas better.



How much risk can you/do you want to tolerate?

This question is a complicated one because there's no getting away from some level of risk. One way to analyze decisions is through asking three questions: 1. What if everything goes wrong? 2. What if everything goes right? 3. What if things get weird? Under that rubric, even the most solid, conservative, steady company might have trouble making payroll or hand out pink slips to an entire department or get squeezed out by unforeseen new technology or have a fly-by-night moonshot that turns into a steady bet. Or a global pandemic could happen and turn routine on its head.

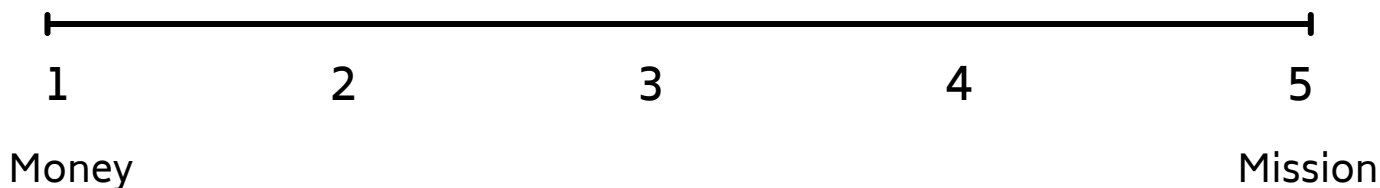


So you might think instead about how much you value and require predictability and the capacity to plan. Do you prioritize layers of protection that insulate against rough seas or agility and the ability to pivot and incorporate new information and pursue new ideas, even if that requires more risk?



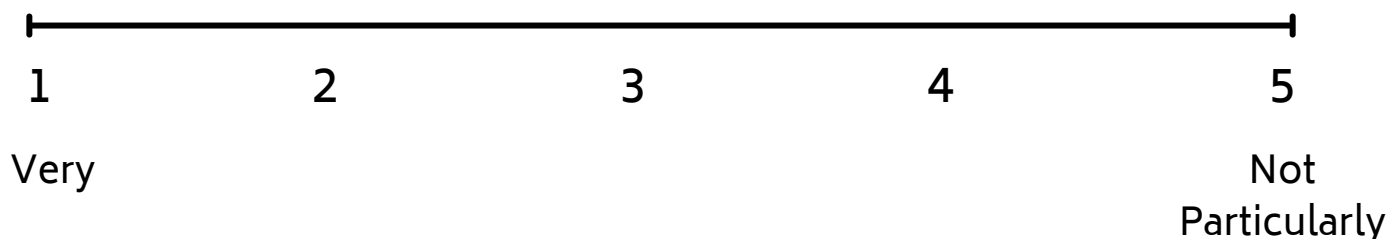
How do you define reward?

Obligatory caveat: We all want to be paid fairly and well for our work and have access to benefits that allow us to live and work without fear and with more and better capacity. The distinction here is whether you are inclined to define the reward you gain from work explicitly and exclusively in terms of compensation, benefits, and monetary incentives or if you think of reward in a broader context around meaningfulness of work, ability to form bonds with coworkers, outcome ownership, and intellectual challenges.



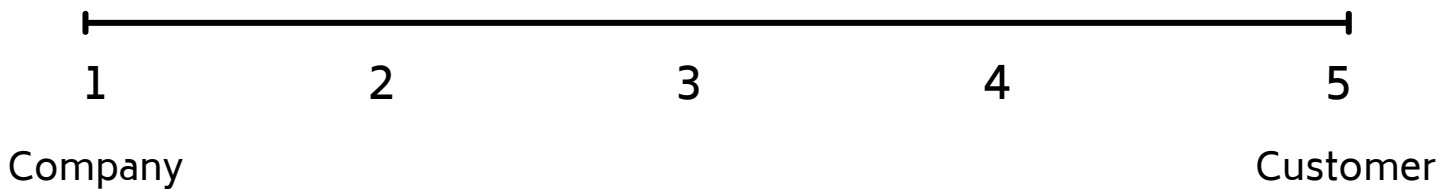
How important are job titles to you?

Job titles and clear org charts provide more validation points and distinct career ladders. This is particularly important if you want a documented, benchmarked path from junior to senior to manager to director (it's also easier to articulate the process to external parties like spouses or parents). If you're less concerned with titles, timelines, and validation points, you might instead prioritize diversifying your skillset and preparing for a wider range of opportunities. In this case, you're probably comfortable with expanding the sphere of your responsibilities, whether they're associated with a job title or clear "next step" or not.



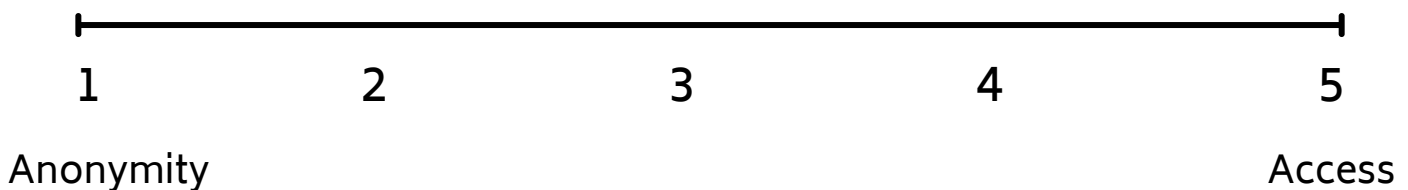
Where do you want your impact to be?

Impact ownership takes many forms. This could look like the difference between work that impacts your co-workers rather than impacting customers. Or it could look like the difference between work that has a more targeted impact and lower risk versus work with a broader impact and greater potential set of outcomes. Also involved in this calculus is whether you want your work to be geared towards the wants, needs, and expectations of customers or shareholders.



Do you value anonymity or direct access to leadership?

Your feelings on anonymity and access are closely related to how visible you want your work to be within an organization. This, in turn, is dictated by both the nature of your work and the structure of an organization. If you're more comfortable in work environments that allow for less visible, more anonymous contributions, you might value the protection and buffers that layers of personnel between you and the C-Suite provide. However, if access to leadership and visibility and ownership of results are important to you, you'll also want fewer doors between you and decision-makers.



Do you prefer layers of redundancy or individual accountability?

This question is most immediately applicable to more entry level roles where you might consider if you prefer having co-workers that are doing the same or similar jobs or being the one person tasked with your role and function. But there's a broader way to think about this scale that does translate to more advanced career stages. For a role you're considering, think about how painful it would be to your colleagues if you left. Is there a lateral position that could cover your role or someone a step down the ladder that could step up relatively quickly and painlessly? Or would it be difficult to replace you? Then determine what situation gives you more utility or pride.



Do you want to climb the ladder at an established company or nurture your entrepreneurial spirit?

What does your ideal future look like? If you're trying to increase your marketability at another big company, a high level of expertise can translate to moving up the ladder you're on or jumping onto a higher rung in a new, but fundamentally similar, ladder. If you want to nurture an entrepreneurial spirit, long practice with a broad set of skills will serve you better. 10,000 hours spread across many different operational areas may not make you Tiger Woods, but it will make you good enough at a lot of things, which can make you better suited to identify and seize market opportunities in the future.



Total Score: _____

Generally speaking, if your answers trended toward the left side of a scale, your fit is more likely to be found in a larger company. If your answers skewed toward the right side of the scale, you're probably going to find more satisfaction in that area at a smaller business. Running the numbers, if your total score is under 20, consider big; over 40, think about small; between 20 and 40, you'll have to do some digging on the specifics of role, company culture, team dynamics, and you.

Of course there's nuance, and this scale doesn't hold true in all cases for every employer. Plenty of large companies have axed full departments on a Friday and more than a few small companies have developed rigid hierarchies. If you take the general trends, though, and figure out where your skills, goals, and priorities lie, you'll have an orientation to guide your decision-making.

You Can Do Both

There's also a big asterisk on all of these questions. You're allowed to change your answers.

"Right fit" might also change over the course of your career. In fact, it probably will as your priorities, goals, and time horizon shift. Your answers can change with money, time, health, priorities, kids, pets, hobbies, burnout, and bandwidth. And you're allowed to try both.



We all know someone who started out ready to take on the world at a mission-driven bootstrapped organization with long hours and great camaraderie who found themselves looking for more stability, better benefits, and a clear work schedule. Or someone who set out to make money and train up their skills who decided they were ready to move to the C-suite, but wanted an environment with more responsibility and fewer constraints. Operators who have done both tend to be well-rounded – and they can identify positives and draw from experiences at both types of companies.

And know, too, that any industry, role, or geography can be found in both BigCo and SmallBiz. Cheerleaders and mentors and assholes are sprinkled throughout organizations of all types and sizes. There are small businesses that offer up opportunities to spend time abroad and big companies that never let you leave campus. If you take these questions about fit as your starting point, you're on the path to understanding whether you want to be a part of scale or contribute to meaningful alternatives.

So we hope these questions are useful as a resource, a reminder, and a jumping off point to better understand how your goals, expectations, and values intersect with company size and structure. We also, as always, hope you'll **consider small**. But only when it's the right fit.

