

DuckDuckGo Culture: How We Work

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Building a Culture of Trust

Our company culture is built around our values — build trust, question assumptions, and validate direction. They're central to everything we do.

Building trust influences the decisions we make both externally and internally, from protecting people's' privacy, to doing right by our staff, vendors, partners, and community. By questioning each other's assumptions, we reject bias and create a more inclusive culture. Through continually challenging the conscious and unconscious biases we bring to work every day, we're validating our own direction constantly, ensuring that the culture and processes at DuckDuckGo remain productive and empowering.

Our commitment to embracing diverse perspectives and empowering all team members is exemplified by the fact that we place equal value on all functional expertise and expect any two people at the same professional level (e.g., a Site Reliability Engineer and a Copywriter at the same level) to make similar impact in terms of value added to company objectives. Everyone grouped at the same professional level and in the same global region earns the same annual compensation, regardless of functional team, educational background, years of experience, or other factors. As such, we do not negotiate compensation.

Similarly, we don't use external titles internally or follow a vertical chain of command. Internal communication lines aren't limited by professional level or team, so anyone can collaborate directly across teams and levels (yes, it's okay to ping our CEO directly at any point).

Since we welcomed our second team member in 2012, the team has grown to over 250 members in 2023 and team member retention has held steady at 95% over that period. These numbers are only one measure of our company values in action. Read on to learn how company culture at DuckDuckGo is built, sustained, and will continue to evolve through application of those same values.

Working in the Open

For a distributed company, with employees in nearly 30 countries and with complete freedom and flexibility to organize our individual work schedules, working according to our values depends on transparency.

At DuckDuckGo, day-to-day transparency happens in Asana — our company-wide source of truth. There, you'll find every project going on at the company listed in one place, organized by company-wide objective. You can participate in any company initiative if you choose to do so, regardless of professional level, team, physical location, or the working hours you keep. While anyone can follow any project, we have set procedures to tell everyone about significant updates even if you don't.

Want to know what happened in the last Board meeting? Review our monthly revenue numbers? Or catch up on takeaways from a teammate's kick-off call? Not only is that information available to everyone in the company, but simply by being on the team, you're invited by default to ask questions, share an opposing viewpoint, or clarify areas of uncertainty.

Of course, not all conversations can happen asynchronously. We use Zoom for must-have meetings (like our weekly all-hands, team sync-ups, kick-off calls, and one-on-ones) and rely on Mattermost for direct messaging. We generally treat synchronous communication as an auxiliary to Asana. In fact, we actively encourage fewer meetings. We don't schedule standing meetings on Wednesdays or Thursdays, and we proactively share meeting agendas and notes in Asana.

How We Socialize

In combination, Asana, Zoom, and Mattermost allow our distributed team to collaborate across timezones. Together they're also the channels we use to socialize and bond.

Day-to-day banter happens in Mattermost. How else would we share cute photos of our pets, alert each other to the latest tech news of interest, or critique each other's DIY kitchen makeovers? In chat channels from Gardening to Gearheads, you'll find opportunities to connect with like-minded colleagues across the organization.

Our more structured social clubs (called "Guilds") bridge Asana and Zoom. The "Writers Anonymous" Guild meets on Zoom for weekly write-ins, where members make progress on their novels, comic books, or short stories. The "Random Acts of Learning" Guild hosts monthly meetings, inviting subject matter experts (both internal and external) to speak about their work or field of study.

It's not as easy to meet new people or connect with those whose interests may differ from your own at a distributed company. We offer employees the option to join a weekly 30-minute "Neighbors" call with four or five randomly assigned colleagues to talk about anything except work. Similarly, a weekly "Know Your Company" thread in Asana invites everyone to share opinions, photos, and experiences on a particular topic. These topics might range from your favorite music to relax to, your current reading list, epic travel stories, or a pet showcase.

Finally, at the All-Hands call on Fridays, we update everyone on progress toward company-wide objectives, share demos, celebrate milestones, and share what we're most excited or anxious about at the moment.

Team Structure

There are two types of teams at DuckDuckGo: Functional Teams and Objective Teams. Unlike other companies, these teams are not instruments for a chain-of-command management but part of a non-hierarchical system that enables empowered project management and sustains distributed collaboration.

Functional Teams contain people with related functional skills (e.g., Backend Engineering or Finance) and provide a consistent space to share best practices and navigate specific workflows. Functional teams host virtual or in-person meetups annually to enrich team culture, reinvigorate comradery, and support professional development. When you join, you'll automatically become a member of a Functional Team with people who specialize in the same kind of work you do. Since primary functional skill delineates these teams, Functional Teams rarely change.

Each Objective Team supports one of many company-wide objectives (or cross-functional efforts that together support a common company goal) and ultimately our mission to show the world that protecting privacy is simple. While your Functional Team is your home-base, you'll more likely find yourself collaborating with members of your Objective Team day-to-day.

Unlike Functional Teams, Objective Team composition changes based on the current needs of projects within a given objective. For instance, one of your functional teammates may be working on a new search engine feature while you're simultaneously responsible for a new feature in our browser extension. People often move between objectives, and we try to match up personal interests as much as is possible and practical.

Empowered Project Management

At DuckDuckGo, we believe that the most effective way to achieve our mission is by allowing every team member to propose and contribute to initiatives. While this does not mean anyone can execute anything of their choosing, it empowers people to influence strategy and direction across the organization, allowing any team member to push projects and objectives forward.

The underlying concept is that good things happen when individual people are directly responsible for things, which is why we don't have an explicit Project Management team at DuckDuckGo. Instead, we have one Directly Responsible Individual (or DRI) for every objective, project, or task. We've documented DRI expectations for every role and built-in advisory roles at the personal, project, and objective level. Along with members of their Functional and Objective Teams, DRI's have ongoing support from Career, Project, and Objective Advisors.

Your Career Advisor will be an ever-present guide to help develop your strengths, identify your motivations, understand your weaknesses, and set goals. Weekly 1:1's with your Career Advisor will serve as a forum for day-to-day professional coaching and long-term career management.

While Career Advisors are constant, Project Advisors change project-to-project based on the needs of each individual project and DRI. You might have an advisor with a high degree of skill in a functional area you're less familiar with, or an advisor who can help avoid duplicated effort because they've done the same type of work before. Whether you're developing a new unit testing harness or designing a new onboarding experiment, your Project Advisor will be there to guide you whenever uncertainty arises in the task at hand.

Objective Advisors serve a similar function as Project Advisors, but provide support across the projects within a company-wide objective. They proactively question the assumptions of the Objective DRI and help validate direction every step of the way. With perspective across objectives, they help ensure that collective work progresses smoothly.

Professional Growth

Elsewhere, you may have found that you'd need to give up an individual contributor role to enter management or take on a new leadership role. At DuckDuckGo, we don't believe leadership roles are effective when limited to two tracks.

Here, there are many different types of leaders and combinations of leadership roles possible. While we all lead projects, you can seek additional leadership roles by DRI-ing an Objective, owning a unique product area, developing and maintaining a new internal process, seeking Career, Project, or Objective advisory roles, and more. We have written expectations for all roles, so it is always clear what you are responsible for.

In keeping with our values, performance expectations are transparent across levels. There's no mystery around what you need to do to be promoted, and our review process isn't reliant on single decision-makers. When promotions are considered (every twelve months), your peers are consulted, so the collaborators, stakeholders, and advisors you've worked with directly will speak to your work and impact at the company.

Summary

We hope explaining a bit about how we operate gives you a better sense of whether DuckDuckGo might be a good fit for you. Here's a quick overview of what makes our culture so special at DuckDuckGo:

- Our values are central to everything we do:
  - By building trust, we do right by our users and our staff
  - By questioning assumptions, we reject bias and elevate the quality of our work
  - By validating direction, we grow fast and sustainably
- Everyone at the same professional level and in the same global region earns the same compensation, so we don't negotiate salaries
- Collaboration happens across teams and professional levels, not in a vertical chain of command
- We have complete freedom and flexibility to organize our own schedules
- We work in the open and constantly seek ways to increase transparency
- In combination, Asana, Zoom, and Mattermost allow our distributed team to collaborate, socialize, and bond
- We empower everyone to influence strategy and direction across the organization
- We believe that good things happen when individual people are directly responsible for things, but you won't go it alone:
  - Career Advisors will support your professional growth
  - Projects Advisors will help you navigate uncertainty in your work
  - Objective Advisors consult to ensure that collective work progresses smoothly
- There are many types of leaders and combinations of leadership roles possible here
- Performance expectations are transparent across levels