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Look Before You Leap: Using the Interview to Assess Corporate Culture

Most professionals in transition focus on details such as job responsibilities, salary and benefits, and who their next boss will be when evaluating whether to accept a new position. While these are all important considerations, of course, job seekers often neglect to evaluate another critical factor: the corporate culture of their prospective employer.

For legal administrators, corporate, or workplace, culture can be described as the “personality” that prevails in a law firm or legal department. As such, it permeates all aspects of everyday work life, from management style to how staff members interact with one another and how decisions are made. And even if every other aspect of a new employment situation feels right, if your values and personality don’t mesh with a prospective employer’s culture, you probably won’t be content in a new position.

Although it can be difficult to accurately assess a firm’s work environment before accepting an employment offer, it’s not impossible. These strategies can help you size up corporate culture during the interview stage:

Use your powers of observation. You should be able to glean valuable cultural clues from your first contact with a prospective employer. For instance, if you’re asked to interview with numerous staff members, from individual attorneys to the heads of the information technology department and secretarial pool, you might assume that the firm has a consensus-driven decision-making style. You also can get a sense of the firm’s culture simply by being observant during your on-site visit. Some things to look for include:

- What impression do front-line personnel, such as receptionists and executive assistants, convey? If they exhibit a professional demeanor and upbeat attitude, this may be a sign that the employer is able to attract good employees and that staff members are content in their positions.
- What is the physical office environment like? Does it seem cramped and outdated, or aesthetically pleasing and modern? Although you can’t always make assumptions based on appearances alone, an appealing office environment suggests that the firm cares about its employees and wants them to be comfortable at work and well-equipped to carry out their responsibilities.

- Do employees seem formal or casual in their interactions with one another? Seemingly comfortable relationships between attorneys and support staff could be a sign that the culture is not overly hierarchical.
- How are offices arranged? If attorneys' offices are segregated from other staff members or considerably nicer than other work areas, this might suggest that the firm's culture is based on a boss-subordinate model.

By taking note of these points and trusting your instincts, you should be able to draw some conclusions about the tone and style of the office and how staff members relate to one another. You can then use the interview process to confirm or disprove your observations.

Ask about culture. Besides observation, you'll also need to ask some direct questions about what it's really like to work for this employer. Here are some points to explore during the interview:

- What is the daily work environment like? (e.g., fast-paced, stressful, subdued?)
- How do attorneys and other staff members relate to one another? Is the atmosphere one of collaboration or competitiveness?
- What is the management style like? How are decisions made?
- What policies, benefits and incentives are used to motivate and reward staff?
- How would your prospective boss characterize his or her management style?
- What are the firm's core values or guiding principles?

Look for signs that the interviewer is receptive to answering your questions and offering examples of how the firm's culture is reflected in everyday work life. The best interviewers will attempt to be completely candid, balancing the positive and negative elements of the culture. For example, if the firm has a rigid or high-pressure environment, an interviewer truly interested in attracting the right people will present the situation honestly, while also pointing out the rewards. This increases the likelihood that prospective employees can make an informed decision about whether an opportunity is right for them. After all, it is in the employer's interest as well as yours to ensure a good cultural fit.

Tap your network for information. Seek out others who can further illuminate aspects of the potential employer's culture. Ideally, the interviewer will invite you to talk to other staff members to gain additional perspectives. Assuming this is possible, ask questions to verify what you've been told about the firm's values and the workplace environment. For example, if your interviewer acknowledged that there are long hours

required of everyone leading up to a trial, you might ask potential colleagues about the effect of these crunch periods on productivity as well as their personal lives.

Also try to identify former employees or individuals who work in other areas of the legal field who may be able to offer insights about the prospective employer's reputation and culture. Professional groups such as the Association of Legal Administrators (ALA) may be able to point you to individuals who can give you inside information. Some of what you hear may not be based on first-hand accounts, but if you come across recurring themes, there may be something to the comments.

Although there is no substitute for on-the-job experience to get an accurate read on a company's work environment, these strategies for revealing a prospective employer's culture can yield some insights. By directly asking about culture, working your network to get inside information and merely being observant, you should be able to go into your next job with greater confidence that you know what to expect.

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