

Q&A Column
Author: Mark Swartz

Email Subject Line: Finding a Socially Responsible Employer

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Headline: Locating An Employer That's Ethical

Summary:

Question: I recently left a company because I couldn't tolerate their unethical behaviour anymore. Just last month they were written up in the local press for illegally dumping chemical waste into a nearby creek. Is there a way for me to locate an employer that doesn't stoop to such practices?

Name and city withheld by request, Nova Scotia.

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Headline : Locating An Employer That's Ethical

Dear Mark,

I recently left a company because I couldn't tolerate their unethical behaviour anymore. Just last month they were written up in the local press for illegally dumping chemical waste into a nearby creek. Before that they prevented a union from forming so they could keep wages down. This is not the kind of place I wanted to be associated with. Is there a way for me to locate an employer that doesn't stoop to such practices?

Name and city withheld by request, Nova Scotia.

Dear Ethically Concerned,

You're not alone in being fed up with working somewhere that regularly challenges your values. Fortunately the notion of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is gaining some ground in the workplace. It's known by a number of names: Being a good corporate citizen; doing well by doing good. Basically it means an employer has more than just profit as their overriding goal.

Toby Heaps, co-founder and president of Corporate Knights magazine, has his own definition of accountability. His is the only Canadian publication dedicated to CSR and he describes a socially responsible firm as one that "balances financial returns with the concerns of its main constituencies: shareholders, employees, customers, citizens and nature."

What should you look for when seeking an accountable employer to work for?

Heaps suggests that you search for a company with a reputation for community involvement, positive employee relations and diversity policies, product safety, solid business practices, environmental concern, plus strong international and corporate governance.

You could also "look for unionized companies for a genuine say and protection against arbitrary treatment," says Jim Stanford, Economist at Canada's largest private sector union, the CAW.

Watch out, however, for companies that trumpet their responsibility programs too loudly. Those are often the ones who have skeletons in their closet. Also, avoid employers who have great

corporate citizenship but poor financial returns. The Body shop is an example of a firm known for its admirable governance, but which has struggled financially.

Locating a socially responsible company is becoming a little easier, thanks to the proliferation of media reports on the topic. Beyond the Corporate Knights Global 100 "Most Sustainable Corporations in the World", Hewitt Associates publishes an annual ranking of Canada's 50 Best Employers. The not-for-profit Canadian Business for Social Responsibility has a membership roster you can check out. Another source is Canada's Social Investment Organization's catalog of responsible mutual funds. Select any of the funds covered and you'll find a number of companies whose stocks are in that particular portfolio. EthicsCentre Canada also has relevant information.

So after all is said and done, is it really possible to work for an employer you can feel good about? As things stand, it's all relative. No organization does everything right all of the time. Then again, you don't want to be toiling away for a firm that makes cigarettes if you're a virulent anti-smoker. There's always government, not-for-profit and academia, of course. But these options have their own built in limitations and they're not for everyone.

The trick is to settle on an employer that you believe in for the most part. One that reflects your key values. Then keep your eyes and ears open to ensure they're staying on the right track.