

Q&A Column

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Email Subject Line: Finding Out The Truth About Potential Employers

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Summary:

Question: A few months ago a recruiter advertised a position with a firm "voted one of the 25 best companies to work for". I applied - and was hired. What I have found is that this is anything but a desirable place to work and the morale is abysmal. Could I have avoided this?

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Dear Mark,

Question: Several years ago I was let go from a job, no reasons given just a hefty severance pay. I am now looking at changing jobs from my current employer and I have come across the issue of "reason for leaving" on application forms. I have no problem with any former employment until I get to the one where I was essentially fired. Could you advise what I should write as the reason for leaving for that job? Thanks.

Michele, Hamilton, Ontario

Dear Greg,

It must have been quite a jolt to discover the truth about your new workplace. Here you are, after a determined work search, only to find yourself in an unexpected bind.

Could you have somehow foreseen this disappointing outcome? It's an important question because you want to avoid having it happen again. (Imagine accepting a job at Enron or Worldcom thinking they were ethical places to work).

So how might you have better approached your decision to accept this job offer? It really boils down to a part of the work search that's frequently overlooked: doing as much research as possible *beforehand* to find out what it's really like to work there.

Your path begins with a trip to the employer's website. Look for the "About Us" or "Investor Relations" sections and try to find press releases or news items. Keep in mind that a website is part of the employer's marketing arsenal. Treat any claims you see there just as you should the boasts of a potentially biased recruiter: with a healthy dose of enlightened skepticism.

Next up is your network of colleagues, friends and family. See if anyone you know, or people in their circles, have connections to the firm in question. What you're looking for is insights into that employer's true corporate culture.

Better yet, if you can find someone who currently works there, or is a former employee, get the scoop directly from them. Ideally you'd get several different viewpoints for a balanced picture.

Other places to go for info? Relevant trade publications for one, often available in your nearest reference library. Also try your library's online databases— including full-text newspaper and magazine articles—all for free when you sign up. Plus there's Google's new "News" feature.

Jumping ahead to interview time, keep your eyes and ears open for anything that might raise red flags, like when an interviewer once kept me waiting 30 minutes outside her office while she made social plans for her weekend! You can also ask to meet with a few of the people you'd be working with, though not all employers will oblige. And if they do consent you're still meeting employees who may not reveal the whole truth in order to protect themselves.

The upshot, Greg, is that the onus truly is on the work seeker here. It's our role to suss out the truth about potential employers. Not that you'll ever know the full story beforehand—but even picking up a fact or two here and there is better than relying on a single, possibly biased source.



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