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MARKETING THE LAW FIRM

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Professional Development: Firm Culture: Part of the Equation In a Career Move

By Sharon Meit Abrahams

I have been conducting exit interviews for over 20 years. It's amazing what can be learned about a law firm or legal department by asking those who have left about their experience. Everything from personnel issues to systemic malfunctions have been uncovered, but most important is the organizations' culture. When you are looking to make a career move, be sure to learn about the potential employer's culture before you accept an offer. It is important to select not only a great place to work, but a place that is the right choice for you as an individual.

There are many definitions to "culture." In a *Harvard Business Review* article, John Coleman describes the six components of a great corporate culture as vision, values, practices, people, narrative and place. While it's easy to observe components of culture such as people, practices and place, it's more difficult to see the intangibles such as values, vision and narrative. Arguably, the intangibles are the important factors for you to understand as these are what will drive your success. (See, "[Six Components of a Great Corporate Culture](#).")

While culture includes the values of an employer, it is not the values written on a poster or webpage. It is the values the lawyers feel on a daily basis. It is the assumptions lawyers make when making decisions. It is the history they have experienced. It is the real behaviors that fuel the organization's success and serves as a competitive advantage. This is what you will want to understand during the recruiting process.

Even before an initial meeting or job interview, scan a firm's or company's online presence. A website is a key starting point, but so is a blog, LinkedIn page, Twitter feed, etc. Look beyond content produced by the employer by reading reviews on Yelp and Glassdoor. The content included can propel a potential employer to the top of a short list if it aligns with your values or remove it completely. Similarly, you should constantly gather information from interactions with them. For example, if "great service" is a key cultural value of the organization, then determine if you are experiencing great service during the recruiting process.

Once you have been selected to move to the interview stage you should start developing the questions you want to ask. Ask all potential employers and every individual you meet the same questions so you can compare responses. Here are a few questions to get you started but be sure to create questions that reflect your values.

- What do you like best about working for this organization (company, firm, etc.)? Listen for comments that reflect values, collegiality, and working environment. Are they similar among those you speak with or are there differences depending on the department or group the individual is a part of? If different, this can signal issues with a lack of consistency across the firm or legal department.
- What do you think are the most important qualities for someone to excel in this role? Listen for statements related to expectations and requirements. Ask about performance reviews. If you hear that one department's expectations are higher (or lower) than another's this can lead to frustration and resentment among lawyers.
- What does success look like? The answer to this question can be all over the board as lawyers measure personal success in a variety of ways. If, however, you hear consistent comments then the employer has done a good job in spreading values and communicating what success does look like within the organization.
- Describe the culture of the organization (company, firm, etc.). There should be no hesitation when answering this question. If there is, then the firm or company does not have a defined culture. Even more important is if you receive different answers from people within the same organization.
- Ask about lawyer growth & development. If the answer is focused on "when there is an opening," this means there is little opportunity to move up or even laterally as your skills and knowledge grow. When an organization supports lawyer development and growth everyone will share this information with pride.

At the interview stage, be sure to listen to what is not being said. It is important to listen to how your questions are being answered. Are the people you meet happy to answer your questions or do they seem hesitant? Do they pause before answering? Do the answers feel rehearsed? Do the people you are talking with emphasize perks rather than share their experiences? This can be a signal that culture is lacking.

Another tip is to arrive early for your interview and look around. Observe interactions between colleagues. Do they appear happy? Are they smiling? Or do they look rushed or downtrodden? Body language can reveal a lot about a person's demeanor.

And finally, before you accept a job offer ask yourself, "Do I feel like I belong here?" If your gut says, "go for it," then you have your answer about the cultural fit.

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