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MANAGING YOUR CAREER

By ERIN WHITE

Savviest Job Hunters Research the Cultures Of Potential Employers

HAROLD L. MAURER got a jolt of corporate-culture shock when he joined a Chicago advertising agency a few years ago.

The communications executive had spent most of his career in the more traditional world of manufacturing. "Business casual" there meant pressed slacks, a button-down shirt and a tie. But the ad agency was much more relaxed. His co-workers wore Hawaiian shirts, flip-flops and shorts to work nearly every day in the summer.

To fit in, Mr. Maurer dropped his ties and fished a Hawaiian shirt out of his closet. But he never felt at ease wearing super-casual clothes to work. "I'm much more comfortable in a more formal environment," the 57-year-old executive says.

Mr. Maurer spent about two years at the ad agency. Today, he does marketing work in the Washington, D.C., area, where office cultures tend to be more traditional.

Corporate-culture clashes are an increasingly common predicament these days. People are switching employers more often, hopping back and forth among

companies with radically different attitudes toward everything from dress to management style and conflict resolution. As a result, the ability to gauge a company's culture has become an important skill for job applicants, says Marc Cenedella, president and CEO of TheLadders.com, an executive job-search service based in New York.



YET MANY JOB seekers pay little attention to a prospective employer's culture. Rather than considering how they will mesh with their new colleagues, they focus on their likely duties, salary and boss.

That's a mistake, recruiters and career consultants say. Culture clash is one of the biggest reasons that new hires fail. Even when a cultural mismatch doesn't cost you your job, it can still make your life at the office a struggle.

While figuring out a potential employer's culture can seem daunting because it's so intangible, there are ways to measure cultural fit during interviews. Mr. Cenedella suggests asking: Who are the company's star employees? And what are they like?

If stars run the best teams and foster a sense of team spirit, the company probably has a collegial culture. But if they boast about individual accomplishments—being the top salesman, for instance—the company may be very competitive.

Other good questions to include: How are conflicts resolved? How are decisions made? And how does the boss communicate?

Gary Peeples wishes he had asked more questions about his new employer's culture before taking a management job at a small, consumer-products consulting firm in the late 1990s. He had previously worked at large corporations where he enjoyed ample autonomy. But at the family-owned consultancy, the owner was a hands-on micromanager.

Hired as the national sales manager, Mr. Peeples took charge of selling the firm's consulting services. But the owner meddled in his negotiations. "He wanted me to fax these things down to him so he could look over everything before I did it," says Mr. Peeples, now 51 years old and living in Birmingham, Ala. "You'd have to report every little thing you do. That's not how I perform."

REALIZING HE needed a less restrictive environment, he quit after about a year. During his next search, he queried prospective employers more closely. He liked what he heard from one would-be boss at a large food distributor in the Southwest U.S. "He said he was very hands off, and he would lay out the parameters, but you had free rein within those parameters," Mr. Peeples recalls. In interviews with other executives there, Mr. Peeples again asked about the boss's management style and about the corporate culture, and he was able to confirm the boss's self-assessment.

As a result, Mr. Peeples accepted a job as a divisional sales manager at the company, staying there almost seven years. He now owns a Birmingham food sales and marketing business himself.

Even when you ask about the corporate culture before accepting a job offer, it can be difficult to get a really clear picture until you arrive. A sales executive in Mill Valley, Calif., quizzed her boss-to-be during interviews at a U.S. unit of a Japanese office-hardware supplier. He said the company had some quirks, such as requiring lots of paperwork, but assured her that she could manage.

Once she started, though, she realized her new employer was more bureaucratic than she had thought. The company required exhaustive expense reports, for instance, and she had to make sure meetings listed on her expense report exactly matched the ones programmed into her electronic calendar. She also had to tell higher-ups where she would be six weeks in advance. "That's impossible for a salesperson to know," she says.

She complied with all the rules, dutifully forecasting her travel plans and synchronizing her expense reports. But after about a year, she got fed up and quit. She soon found a sales position at an American company that sells office products to schools. Her new employer's culture values independence, she says. "In the end, you want to be your own person."

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