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What You Need To Learn About Your New Employer Before You Start

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When preparing for an interview, we all know to research the company's website. We look for the basics: what products and/or services does the company sell, and who are their customers.

But, what most aspiring job-changers fail to explore is the company's history and identity. Researching a company is essential for more than just professionalism in the interview. It's vital for making sure that you are really interested in working for the company long-term.

What are the sorts of critical information you should be researching? We talked with the General Manager of Workstream's Career Services Division and three career coaches to find out everything you need to research in order to get up to speed on the companies you're interviewing with.

1. What's it Like to Work There?

Obviously, no one wants to work in a dull environment. Before committing to a job at any company, you'll want to find out whether the people you'll be working with match who you are. "If you're 30 years old or searching for your second job and looking to make great personal contacts that you can hang out with after work, you want to make sure that you're not going into a company where most of your colleagues are 50+," advises Julie Cohen, career coach and founder of Julie Cohen Coaching.

The best way to tap into what the culture is like at any company is to contact its employees. LinkedIn.com is a great resource for this type of outreach. Using LinkedIn, you can connect with current and former employees at the company you're considering by using one of your connections to introduce you. Usually with just 30 immediate connections, you're connected to more than 250,000 people through three degrees of separation. The chances are good that someone within your network works at the company you're researching. "LinkedIn is a fantastic tool because you can punch in a business name and see if you're actually connected to someone that works with that company," says Steve Purello, general manager of career network services for Workstream, Inc. "It may turn out that your friend's brother's uncle's nephew is the senior recruiter for the company you're interested in working for," says Purello.

Even if there isn't anybody that works at the company that you're linked to through your connections, there are other ways to go about establishing a link. "Often people forget about their alumni resources," says Dawn Quesnel, career coach and founder of Career Life Balance. Quesnel suggests looking at your alma mater's alumni network. "You should easily be able to access fellow alumni who are either working or previously worked at the employer you're considering," says Quesnel.

Another great way to learn about what's it's like to work at the company you're considering is Vault.com. "It's a place where people can go and gossip about what's going on in their company, privately," explains Quesnel.

In the end, nothing beats personal experience. "Find out if you can visit the office in a less formal setting after you've gotten the job offer so you can get the vibe of the place," says Cohen. "Ask to have lunch in the company cafeteria to meet some of your possible colleagues before you sign on the dotted line."

2. What Do They Sell?

If a company is selling shoes and that's just not your thing, you're wasting your time with that company. In order to be happy at any job, you have to be passionate about what you do and what the company sells. Any good company will expect you to know it's product and/or services inside out; maybe even live and breath them. That will be nearly impossible if you don't have any interest in what they are selling. "What the company is doing must be in the realm of your passion, or at least passion you can conjure up for any duration, in order for your job to work," says Christy Miller, career coach and founder of Career Management Partners.

Just as important, if you want to stand out in the interview process, really learn their product or service lineup well. "When preparing clients for interviews, I always tell them to check the news or PR section of the company's website and read as much as they can, especially the press releases," says Quesnel. "I also advise clients," explains Quesnel, "to learn as much as possible about the problems the company is in business to solve and who their customers are."

Using Google Alerts is also a good idea. "It's a huge tool to use in the weeks leading up to the interview," says Purello. "Google Alerts allows you to put in key words, such as a company name, and then receive news alerts about anything going on with that company."

3. What's Their History?

Before approaching any company, it's a good idea to know what their history is. Some companies have a more exciting history than others, but you'll impress employers by knowing about their roots. Even if you're applying at a relatively new company, there's always a history about how the company was formed, even if it's just a few lines long. Research into it and dig deep. Google is the best resource here. "You're going to sound a heck of a lot smarter if you know about what's going on in that company and how it got started," says Purello.

4. What's Their Financial Situation Like?

Is the company well funded? Is it public or private? What are the economic trends of it's industry? These are just some of the questions that you should be researching. Yahoo! Finance is an indispensable tool in this regard. You can get the financials of most public companies and any economic news related to the specific industry. "Be sure to read the letter to the stockholders," says Quesnel. "Look for key words such as except or despite which sometimes could indicate problems. Also, check the stockholders' equity and the long-term debt of the organization, along with the income statement for consistency of net sales."

If the company is private, you're going to have to do some other things. "Try to find out from their website who their customers are," explains Purello, "and then call some of their customers."

5. Who Are Their Competitors?

Before your first day at any company, or even before the job interview itself, it's important that you know who the competitors are in the industry, what's happening in that industry, and what the trends are. "I recommend Hoovers.com to all of my clients for researching competitors," says Quesnel. "Without even paying a subscription, you can get the basic information and look at the competitors of almost any company. Then, of course, using Google you can further investigate those competitors."

6. Who's Calling the Shots?

If you don't get along with your boss, it's going to be very difficult to do your job. "So," Miller says, "one of the most important things you should do when researching a company is research your boss; Google his or her name and then look him up on LinkedIn—see if he has recommendations from anyone who has worked with him in the past." Secondly, you'll want to research the executive team of the company and find out what their background is. Also, find out how long has its present management been in control.

7. What Are Their Numbers?

The number of employees and locations are both telling statistics. The amount of employees working at a company will tell you such things as how large a company is and around how many divisions they have. If the organization has multiple locations, this could offer you an opportunity to stay with the company by transferring to another office should you decide to move cities. Other important facts to research include the number of media articles written about the company and the amount of new products or projects they come out with annually, as this will give you a good idea as to how creative and risk-taking the company is.

8. What Do You Want?

Above all, the most important thing you need to do before any job search is internal research. This is the process of determining what is most important to you as you consider taking a new position. Some of the questions you'll want to ask yourself are: What are my professional and personal priorities?, Do I want work/life balance?, A high salary?, Great benefits and perks?, A merit based career progression?, Great colleagues and social environment?. "Only once you define what is important can you go about researching whether or not the organizations you're considering possess your priorities," explains Cohen.

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